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1967: a war of miscalculation and misjudgment

Few foresaw the 1967 war and none guessed that it would create a profound upheaval across the Middle East. The defeat of Egypt's Nasser and of Arab nationalism led to the emergence of political Islam and encouraged Palestinian resistance.

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Few foresaw any major risk of renewed armed conflict between Arabs and Israelis early in 1967. True, tension had risen after Israel began diverting the Jordan river in 1964 and Syria countered with its own diversion plan, backed in principle by Lebanon and Jordan. But its support was only verbal and Israeli bombing forced Syria to cease its construction work.

Both Israel and Gamal Abdel Nasser's United Arab Republic (UAR, the 1958–61 union between Egypt and Syria which ended with a Syrian coup) were in an arms race that stressed their economies. It is likely that Israel publicly overestimated the Egyptian threat to get its first major arms delivery from the United States, plus a guarantee of support in the event of an Arab attack.

There was wide division in the Arab world, then in full cold war confrontation between "progressives" and "conservatives" (or "reactionaries" according to the progressives). This, with Israel's clear military superiority, led experts to believe that though peace might be impossible, war was unlikely.

There were three main theories for the short crisis between 13 May and 4 June. The first, almost universally accepted at the time, was that Egypt intended to destroy Israel — an irrational explanation given the military balance of power. The second was that the Israeli government had laid a trap and successfully manipulated both western and Arab governments to boost its diplomatic position before launching a new phase of Zionist expansion. (As with all conspiracy theories, this supposes one party to be inordinately intelligent and the other extremely stupid.) The third explanation was a series of misjudgments by both protagonists and a shared blame for subsequent events.

The political rebirth of the Palestinians, endorsed by the creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1964 and Fatah's first military operations in 1965, was a new factor. Palestinian leaders took the Arab leaders' hawkish declarations at their word and wanted to force them into war. The start of the Palestinian armed struggle had been relatively insignificant — 15 Israeli dead, most of them soldiers, between the first Fatah attack on 1 January 1965

and 5 June 1967. But it was the first challenge to the Israeli victory of 1948–1949, seen as a *casus belli*.

The leftwing neo-Baath party that took power in Syria in 1963 supported the Palestinians and challenged that fragile *fait accompli*, Israeli sovereignty over the demilitarised zone between Israel and Syria,¹ because it was the least accepted by the international community. The result became the "Syrian syndrome", referring to Yitzhak Rabin's aggressive policy when he was Israeli army chief of staff and attempts to consolidate advances into the demilitarised zone and force Syria to abandon the Palestinians. At the time Rabin was not aiming for another war. He believed a show of force, backed by tacit support from the US, would impose Israel's will on Syria, now abandoned by Egypt. His military plan was to take the battle directly to enemy territory. This vision was purely practical, for Israeli territory was ill suited to defensive action. Accordingly, any Arab territory captured by Israel would not be returned before a full peace agreement was signed and truce lines would have to be redrawn — one can guess in whose favour. So, in the presence of the Israeli prime minister, Levi Eshkol, Rabin and his officers drew up the ideal borders that would ensure Israeli security once and for all. These included the Litani river, the Jordan valley and the Suez canal. Eshkol was not enthusiastic — except about the Litani because Israel's water resources were already a problem. All agreed that such an ambitious programme would not be feasible without international support.

Following Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, the US was a vigilant defender of the territorial status quo and demanded that the Israeli army evacuate Gaza. After that the US increased its aid considerably but continued to respect that status quo. The problem was not the Israeli army's capacity for conquering territories but the state's ability to hold on to them.

Two military actions by Israel preceded the crisis of May–June 1967: a raid on the West Bank village of Samu on 13 November 1966 to "punish" villagers for helping Fatah: and the humiliation of Syria on 7 April 1967 when Israel shot down six Syrian MiGs. The Samu incident convinced King Hussein of Jordan that Israel intended to destroy his kingdom to take over the West Bank, and the MiGs revealed Nasser's lack of action. The Israeli army, built up tensions but stopped short of war. It had no compunction about threatening Syria with further military action. On 13 May 1967 the Soviet Union warned Syria and Egypt of an impending Israeli invasion of Syria, based on information leaked through the tension-building strategy.

The next day the Egyptian army deployed its forces in Sinai, doubtless to dissuade. Nasser was not only acting in accordance with the Arab political game, isolating Jordan to force it out of the Saudi Arabian camp and into the Egyptian one, he also wanted to revert to pre-1956 borders. On 15 May he demanded the withdrawal of United Nations troops from the international zone. Without Egypt's support, the troops would be considered occupation forces, and so the UN pulled all its troops from Sinai and the Gaza Strip.

Israel stood by powerless as it lost one of the most important gains of the 1956 campaign.² Worse, on 17 May two Egyptian reconnaissance flights above Jordan flew over the Dimona nuclear reactor close to the border without being intercepted. This highlighted Dimona's vulnerability and Israeli leaders became convinced that a preventive raid would meet with international understanding, or even sympathy. This preoccupation lasted throughout the crisis and led to the first call-up of reserves. Far from acting as a deterrent, the Israeli nuclear

programme was vital in the march to war.

Nasser, who wanted to revert to a pre-Suez situation, took the next step on 22 May by closing the Tiran Straits that separate the Gulf of Aqaba from the Red Sea. He would risk war, believing his army could withstand enemy attack. Some of his aides considered a military operation in the Negev to establish a connection to Jordan, but Nasser vetoed the plan. Publicly, he placed Israel on the same level as other imperialists and reactionary forces including the monarchs of Saudi Arabia and Jordan as well as the Shah of Iran.

But Nasser underestimated Israel's strength. He did not think Israel could fight on two fronts or would attack without help. He believed that no European nation, still less the US, bogged down by Vietnam, would commit its forces. What Nasser did not understand was that Israel needed only political support from the US and Britain, not military assistance.

Egyptian propaganda attacked Israel, the imperialists and the reactionaries. Jordan was the first country to rally to Nasser, whose popularity was at its peak. But Nasser, wily manipulator though he was, did not take into account the danger of his propaganda. He could not content himself with his real, if limited, success. His relatively moderate stance (he never mentioned offensive action) was obscured by the radio services. His Voice of the Arabs radio talked about the total liquidation of Israel and its imminent destruction, and other Arab media took this up. Nasser may have wanted to revert to a pre-1956 configuration, but his propaganda machine was going for pre-1948.

Taken by surprise, the Israeli military pushed the government to launch an offensive — but Mossad, Israel's secret service, was hesitant. It could not predict the outcome because the Egyptian government was often contradicting itself. Eshkol preferred a diplomacy, but the Israeli press wrote of a "new Holocaust" and fostered an atmosphere of impending disaster.

The decision was postponed and the Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban, dispatched to Paris and Washington. President Charles de Gaulle assured Eban that he would oppose the first nation to attack. The British and US governments considered the blockade of the Straits of Tiran an act of aggression but neither wanted war. Instead they toyed with the idea of an international naval force to ensure free passage in the Gulf of Aqaba. On 26 May President Johnson told Israel that it would "not be alone unless it decides to go alone" and asked for time to find a political solution.

The Soviet Union supported Nasser diplomatically but asked Egypt to not engage in hostilities. These entreaties only confirmed the strength of Nasser's position and encouraged him to build up troops in Sinai. There was no question of turning back. That would be a setback for the progressive forces that had won the propaganda war and made US military intervention impossible — so Nasser believed — without setting the entire region aflame and leading to the collapse of its western-backed regimes. Then it would only be a matter of time before Jordan capitulated, followed by Saudi Arabia, leading to Iran's isolation. The stakes were no longer Sinai but the entire Arab peninsula, with its vast oil and financial reserves.

Egypt rejected any political solution that granted the Israeli navy passage through the Gulf of Aqaba, and the British and US governments realised an international maritime force was not feasible. They feared the closure of the Suez Canal because of the threat to oil supplies, leading to the withdrawal of

sterling assets by the Arab nations and the collapse of the pound. The stakes had changed. Now it was a question of which cold war bloc, Soviet or western, would gain control of the Middle East and its oil.

Nasser's dissuasive tactics worked admirably but he underestimated Israel's military capacity, which had increased since 1956. Moreover, the Egyptian leaders had failed to consider the effect of their declarations on western and international public opinion. As Nasser's stance became more radical, the Israeli high command increased pressure on the government. General Ariel Sharon, then army division commander, even suggested there might be a military coup. Jordan's alignment with the UAR precipitated events, since Saudi Arabia was obliged to follow suit. Israel appeared to be living its strategic nightmare: encirclement by an Arab coalition.

Eshkol gave in on 1 June. He set up a national unity government with Moshe Dayan as defence minister and the rightwing leader Menachem Begin as minister without portfolio. Both openly supported territorial expansion. Survival apart, there was unfinished business from Israel's 1948 war — the conquest of the West Bank.

The US government abandoned any hope of a diplomatic solution and allowed Israel to act. On 31 May Meir Amit, head of Mossad, flew to Washington. Next day he met Defence Secretary Robert McNamara and the head of the CIA. Amit adapted the domino theory: if Nasser won this round, the region up to the Soviet border would come under Arab domination. Israel needed US commitment as well as immediate protection against Soviet interference. Amit's US counterparts agreed with his analysis.

That message was transmitted via several channels. In a telegram to US embassies in Middle East on 3 June, Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained the US position: a reasonable solution was not possible given the psychology of an Arab "holy war" and its Israeli equivalent, "apocalypse psychology". He said the US could no longer urge restraint on a country that believed its vital interests to be in jeopardy. Since both Arabs and Israelis were confident of a military victory, one side must have misjudged the situation badly.

On 4 June Walter Rostow, Lyndon Johnson's security adviser, circulated a memo in which he predicted the outcome of the conflict. Taking all the necessary rhetorical precautions to suggest that war, let alone an Israeli victory, was hypothetical, he speculated that all moderate Arabs — all those who feared Nasser's expansionism — would prefer to see Nasser beaten by the Israelis rather than by outside forces. This would generate potential for the Middle East: moderation would allow the countries to focus on economic development and regional collaboration. Then, if a solution were found to the Palestinian refugee problem, Israel could be accepted as an integral part of the region. This, said Rostow, was a moment of historic transition. It was clear that Israel had received all the assurances from Washington and had no need to wait. Its government launched the attack on 4 June.

The Six Day war was the result of miscalculations. The term frequently appears in documents from the time. The legal uncertainty surrounding the 1957 agreement for freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba and the Straits of Tiran made it difficult to define a *casus belli* or an aggressor. Is the aggressor the party that imposes the blockade or the first to fire? On the Arab side the real driving force behind events was the cold war that opposed the UAR and Saudi Arabia. The rapprochement between the US and Israel

provided ammunition for the Arab discourse equating imperialists, reactionaries and Zionists, and accentuated the rhetoric that confused the US and Israel. But the Arabs' rhetoric turned international public opinion against them.

The US allowed Israel to go to war to save Saudi Arabia. US politicians who even then envisaged a "new Middle East" did so in a context of regime change while respecting the territorial integrity of existing states. In this the US gave ammunition to the progressive Arabs, but the US misled itself about its ability to respect territorial integrity after a military occupation.

While territorial expansion was not on the agenda in early 1967, Israel had never legally renounced the whole of mandatory Palestine. Some Israelis still discuss this: many think about it. But they are blinded to the fact that the Palestinian political revival, which gained momentum because of the war, reduced the conflict to its essence — the struggle of two peoples for one holy land.

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- ¹ Israel and Syria signed an armistice on 20 July 1949, which defined two demilitarised zones on their shared borders. The matter of sovereignty over these zones was not stipulated.
 - ² After the 1956 war UN observation posts were set up in Gaza and Sharm al-Sheikh to ensure freedom of movement in the Gulf of Aqaba, and especially around the port of Eilat.

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