CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nasser's challenge

The first three months of *1967* were marked by repeated Syrian artillery bombardments and cross-border raids on the Israeli settlements in the north. Israeli air raids against Syrian positions on the Golan Heights would result in a few weeks' quiet, but then the attacks would begin again. On 7 April 1967 Syrian mortars on the Golan Heights began a barrage of fire on kibbutz Gadot, on the Israeli side of the B'not Yaakov bridge. More than 200 shells were fired before Israeli tanks moved into positions from which they could reach the Syrian mortars.

As the Israeli tanks opened fire, the Syrian artillery did likewise. Firing quickly spread along the border to the north and south of Gadot. Then Israeli warplanes - Mirage fighter-bombers purchased from France - flew over the Syrian border and over the Golan Heights, strafing several Syrian strongholds and artillery batteries. Fifteen minutes later Syrian warplanes - Soviet MiG21s - took on the Israeli planes in aerial combat. Within a few minutes, six MiGs had been shot down and the rest chased eastwards to Damascus. The citizens of Damascus could see the Israeli planes between the capital and the snow-capped peak of Mount Hermon, Syria's highest mountain. One Israeli plane was shot down.

Syria protested that Israel was preparing for war. In public, the Soviet Union supported this claim. In private, the Soviet Ambassador in Damascus warned the Syrians to restrain the Fatah raids into Israel. The Egyptian Prime Minister, visiting Damascus to boast of the creation of a common front against `Israeli aggression', likewise warned the Syrian government not to provoke Israel into going to war. For her part, Syria complained bitterly to Egypt that she had not rushed to help her ally, particularly in view of the Syrian-Egyptian defence pact signed the previous year.

It was the Soviet Union that sought, most publicly, to condemn Israel's action (or, more properly, her reaction). On April 26 the Soviet Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Dmitri Chuvakhin, protested to Levi Eshkol that Israel was indeed planning a war, telling the Israeli Prime Minister, `We understand that in spite of all your official statements, there are, in fact, heavy concentrations of Israeli troops all along the Syrian borders.' Not only did Eshkol deny the allegation; he offered to accompany Chuvakhin on a fact-finding trip along the whole Israel-Syrian border. The Ambassador declined. The Syrians took the Soviet claim seriously.

Following the Gadot clash, Fatah renewed its campaign inside Israel, using the Syrian border as a conduit. On April 29 a water pipeline was blown up, and a few days later mines were laid on the main road leading north from Tiberias, damaging an Israeli army truck.

Gradually, during May, President Nasser emerged as a champion of the Syrians - or rather of the Arab world generally, the leadership of which he so wished to assert. Beginning on May 13, Egyptian troops moved in large numbers into the Sinai, from which Israel had withdrawn nine years earlier and which had been demilitarized as security for Israel after her withdrawal. As the Egyptian troops moved forward, Cairo Radio set the tone of a propaganda war that became Egypt's daily barrage: `Egypt, with all its resources, is ready to plunge into a total war that will be the end of Israel,' the radio declared.

Israel then made what has since been judged a psychological mistake. Hoping to assert her peaceful intentions, and to calm the jittery atmosphere created by Arab - and Soviet - accusations of an imminent Israeli attack on Syria, she held her May 15 Independence Day

parade without the usual large numbers of tanks and heavy artillery. The parade took the form of a nighttime military tattoo held in the stadium of the Hebrew University on Givat Ram. The full parade was not held because of an agreed limitation of tanks in Jerusalem, as laid down in the armistice agreement with Jordan, and because Israel did not wish to exacerbate tension on the Jordanian front.

Noting the lack of heavy armour, the Egyptians at once accused Israel of having sent the `missing' tanks and other weaponry to the north. Egypt also named May 17 - a mere two days away - as the day on which Israel would invade Syria.

On the following day, May 16, Egypt acted to raise the temperature in the region still further and to threaten Israel. That day, at ten in the evening, Nasser ordered the United Nations to remove its forces from Sinai. Since 1956 a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) of 3,400 men had been stationed in the Gaza Strip and at Sharm el-Sheikh, at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula, with the internationally approved task of monitoring the Egyptian-Israeli cease-fire. It had been able to take up its monitoring positions on Egyptian soil only with Egyptian consent. That consent was suddenly withdrawn.

Israel expected the United Nations Secretary General, U Thant, to ask at least for a period of time in which to delay. The Egyptians themselves expected that the demand for the withdrawal of the Emergency Force would be challenged by the Security Council. But U Thant did not even call the Council. Instead, he accepted Nasser's demand at its face value and ordered the troops to pull out at once. The troops began moving within twenty-four hours of Nasser's demand, and on May 19, only three days after the demand had been made, the last of the troops sailed away.

Egypt was in total military control of Sinai. Nasser had seen an international organization, hitherto committed to maintaining the cease-fire, turn tail and run. On May 20 Israeli reserves - the basis of the citizens' army - began partial mobilization, leaving their homes and their workplaces and hastening to their camps and assembly points. As the bulk of Israel's armed forces are drawn from the civilian reserve, full mobilization means a virtual stop to the Israeli economy.

That day, May 20, the Egyptian Minister of War, Field Marshal Abdul Hakim Amer, travelled to Gaza to inspect the Egyptian troops that had replaced the United Nations contingent. Alongside the Egyptians were soldiers of the Egyptian-sponsored Palestinian Liberation Army.

Inside Israel, at the highest level, a fierce debate was taking place. Senior army officers and leading politicians argued for a pre-emptive military strike against both Egypt and Syria. But the Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, and the Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol (who was also Minister of Defence), felt that any such action would be unwise. It was not certain, they argued, that either Damascus or Cairo was determined on war.

As the crisis intensified, the Secretary-General of the French Foreign Ministry, Herve Alphand, visited several Arab capitals. While in Beirut he stated publicly that there was no contradiction between France's recognition of `Israel's existence' and France's friendship with the Arab States. Considering that, eleven years earlier, France had been Israel's active ally and co-belligerent, and was still its major arms supplier, the relegation of France's commitment to the mere `existence' of Israel struck a sour note in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

With each day that passed, the Israeli leaders discussed what they regarded as the terrible prospect of war. On May 21 the Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, asked the Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, what likelihood there was of Egypt trying to close the Straits of Tiran, and thereby denying Israeli ships access to the port of Eilat through this international waterway. 'Rabin was very tense,' Eban later recalled, `chain-smoking all the time. He pointed out that Israel's military preparedness had always been related to the northern and eastern fronts, with little attention to the south. When I asked him what the diplomatic establishment could do to help, he said to me, "Time. We need time to reinforce the south".'

At a meeting of senior Israeli Cabinet Ministers later that day it was agreed that one indication of Nasser's true intent would be if he closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. But that evening, only an hour after the inner Cabinet agreement to treat the closure of the Straits as a cause of war, Levi Eshkol spoke over the radio to the Israeli public, and in a conciliatory speech, stressing Israel's desire not to go to war, made no mention of the Straits of Tiran or the blockade or freedom of passage for Israeli ships to Eilat. Nasser read Eshkol's speech and drew what seemed to him to be the obvious conclusion - the same conclusion that Syria had drawn after the artillery duel at Gadot six weeks earlier - that Israel was not prepared to go to war.

During his speech, Eshkol had difficulty deciphering a word in his script. His stumbled sentence left a terrible impression on his Israeli listeners, who feared that he was breaking under the strain. As a result, there was immediate talk of replacing him as Defence Minister. As Israelis' public confidence in their government fell, Nasser's confidence rose. On the following day, May 22, he

announced that Egypt was reimposing her blockade of the Straits. He made his announcement - which suddenly raised the spectre of war with Israel - at an Egyptian air force base at Bir Gafgafa, in the Sinai, a hundred miles from Israel's Negev border.

Abba Eban, who listened to a recording of Nasser's speech an hour later, described it as offering Israel a choice, `slow strangulation or rapid, solitary death'. Nasser told his pilots, and the waiting world:

> We are in confrontation with Israel. In contrast to what happened in 1956 when France and Britain were at her side, Israel is not supported today by any European power. It is possible, however, that America may come to her aid.
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> The United States supports Israel politically and provides her with arms and military material. But the world will not accept a repetition of 1956. We are face to face with Israel. Henceforward the situation is in your hands. Our armed forces have occupied Sharm el-Sheikh ... We shall on no account allow the Israeli flag to pass through the Gulf of Akaba. The Jews threaten to make war. I reply: 'Ahlan wa sahlan' - `Welcome!' We are ready for war ... This water is ours.

Nasser had committed his nation to war. `Turning his back on a whole decade of prudence,' Abba Eban has commented, `he now uttered a courtly and exultant welcome to the approaching war: *"Ahlan wa sahlan".* It was as if he were greeting the unexpected appearance of a beloved and long-absent guest.'

Israeli ships would no longer be able to sail from Eilat into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Yet this narrow waterway, Israel's commercial lifeline to the east, had been guaranteed by, among others, the United States, Canada, Britain and France. The reaction of the guarantors was immediate, but far from unanimous or clear-cut. French Foreign Ministry officials went so far as to intimate that there were `judicial obscurities' about Israel's position. They spoke, Abba Eban has written, as if Ambassador Georges Picot's speech of 1 March *1957* - supporting free Israeli maritime passage through the Straits of Tiran - `had never been made', and in official talks 'we had been asked if the economic value of our Red Sea outlet was really enough to justify war.'

On the morning of May 23 the Israeli Cabinet and military leaders were summoned to Tel Aviv for an emergency meeting in the Ministry of Defence. As he drove down from Jerusalem, Eban noted that those who greeted him from their cars, or from the roadside, `managed to give their gestures an implication of anxiety'. Only a month earlier, `the national mood had been as close to normalcy as could be expected by a people born in war and nurtured in siege. Now the crisis was upon us. As countryside and townships sped past the window, I was gripped by a sharp awareness of the fragility of all cherished things. For the whole of that day in Tel Aviv, and far into the night in Jerusalem, our minds revolved around the question of survival; so it must have been in ancient days, with Babylon or Assyria at the gates.'

The emergency meeting convened at nine that morning. There were, Eban recalled, `no cheerful faces' around the table. Levi Eshkol had invited the leader of the Herut opposition, Menachem Begin, to be present, as well as the senior military trio, the Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, the Chief of Operations, Ezer Weizman, and the head of Military Intelligence, General Aharon Yariv. Eshkol opened the meeting with a blunt and unemotional statement: `We have heard the news on the political front. I don't know if you have all heard it. It requires consultation and, probably, action as well.' Eban later commented, 'The peril was taken for granted; it stood in no need of rhetorical adornment. The accent was placed on clarity of decision. A great doom was in the making and it seemed to be coming on relentlessly.'

General Yariv made his report. The Egyptian battle order in Sinai was not yet complete. Although the airfields in Sinai were being made ready for combat, their technical preparedness was `still deficient'. On the Jordan front, no movement of troops had taken place towards the border. The Syrians were not making moves of any particular military urgency. But in many of the cities of the Arab world, vast crowds were demonstrating against Israel, calling for her destruction. Eban recalled the mood of the meeting:

> There was no doubt that the howling mobs in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad were seeing savage visions of murder and booty. Israel, for its part, had learned from Jewish history that no outrage against its men, women and children, was inconceivable. Many things in Jewish history are too terrible to be believed, but nothing in that history is too terrible to have happened. Memories of the European slaughter were taking form and substance in countless Israeli hearts. They flowed into our room like turgid air and sat

heavy on all our minds.

Before my turn came to speak, I noticed that our military colleagues had made no proposals for immediate action.

Rabin was then asked for his opinion. In 1956, he pointed out, Egypt was Israel's only adversary. And Israel had been allied to two major powers. This time Israel would be alone, while Egypt might have Syria, Jordan and contingents from other Arab States fighting with her, as well as the full support of the Soviet Union. Rabin was confident of military victory, but warned that it would be `no walkover'. Ezer Weizman also spoke. `Our military advisers', recalled Eban, 'could make no comforting predictions about the scale of Israeli losses. The candour of their words left a chilling aftermath.'

Eban read out to the meeting a telegram from Washington, reporting a request from the United States that Israel make no decision for war for fortyeight hours, to allow diplomacy to seek a way out of the impasse. In addition, the Cabinet was told, President Johnson `would take no responsibility for actions on which he was not consulted'.

Rabin and Weizman agreed that Israel would lose no military advantage by agreeing to a forty-eight-hour delay before any decision for military action. No one at the meeting made any proposal for an immediate military response. But it was agreed that the occupation by Egypt of the Straits of Tiran should be considered by Israel an act of aggression, and that this should be conveyed to all foreign governments. A formal statement, prepared by Eban, represented the official Israeli stance. It read: `The Government of Israel decides to give effect to the policy which it announced on 1 March 1957, namely, to regard any interference with shipping as an aggressive act against which Israel is entitled to exercise self defence.'

This left it open for Israel to take action as and when it chose, not as an initiating act of war, but as the response to the act of war by another.

There then began a flurry of international diplomatic activity aimed at averting war. On May 24 - within a few hours of the arrival at Cairo International Airport of an armoured brigade from Kuwait, as a gesture of support for Egypt - the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, flew from New York to the same airport to persuade Nasser not to commit his forces to war. Nasser would make no such commitment, and on the following day U Thant flew back to New York, his mission a failure.

On May 24 Abba Eban flew to Paris where President de Gaulle warned him that it would be 'catastrophic' if Israel were to attack first. The dispute must be resolved by the Four Powers, Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States - and France. `Don't shoot first.' When Eban pointed out that in Israel's view the first act of war had already taken place in Egypt's closing of the Straits of Tiran, de Gaulle refused to accept this. He was upset, feeling that if Israel sought his advice, it ought to take it. Opening hostilities meant, in his view, firing the first shot. As for the pledge by Georges Picot that the Straits of Tiran should be kept open, that, said de Gaulle, `was correct juridically, but 1967 was not 1957'. Picot's statement had reflected the `particular heat' of 1957.

From Paris, Eban flew to London. The Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, took a far more pro-Israeli stance; indeed, he seemed to delight in turning his back on the traditional British Foreign Office reserve towards Israel. The Cabinet had just met, and had decided, Wilson told Eban, `that the policy of blockade must not be allowed to triumph'. Britain would work with other like-minded nations to open the Straits of Tiran, and was already in negotiations with the United States to find a common policy, and an effective one.

In the United States, the Israeli Ambassador, British-born Avraham Harman, went on May 24 to see former President Eisenhower at his home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. After the fighting in Sinai in 1956 Eisenhower had made a United States commitment to keep open the Straits of Tiran. Harman was anxious that Eisenhower would continue to support that pledge, and do so publicly, should President Johnson renew it. Eisenhower told Harman (as Eban recounted in his memoirs), `that he was not accustomed to making statements, but if asked by newspapermen, he would say that the Straits of Tiran was an international waterway. This had been determined in 1957. He would repeat the attitude which he and Secretary Dulles had then taken. He would add that a violation of the rights of free passage would be illegal.' Eisenhower went on to tell Harman, `His friends in the Republican Party had already been in touch with him and he was going to tell them exactly what he thought.' Eisenhower then strongly criticized the United Nations role in recent weeks. Referring to U Thant's current conversations in Cairo, he said that Nasser had created 'an illegal position and there should be no compromise with illegality'.

Eisenhower then asked Harman about the positions of France and Britain. Reflecting on the past, he said that he `still regretted that they had not taken steps of a concrete nature in the Suez Canal similar to those which had been adopted with regard to the Straits of Tiran'.

On hearing Harman's report of a speech by President Johnson on May 23 in which he had condemned Egypt's blockade as `illegal and fraught with danger', Eisenhower said that he hoped the President's position `would be strongly maintained'. He said that when he was President, `the Russians tended to believe his strong statements because he had been a military man'. Eisenhower then told Harman, as his concluding words: `I do not believe that Israel will be left alone.'

From the Israeli perspective, all would depend on the attitude and actions of the United States. As Eban flew from London to New York during the morning of May 25, President Johnson publicly denounced the blockade as `illegal' and `potentially disastrous to the cause of peace'. That day, an even more alarming development took place, as seen from Jerusalem: Egyptian armoured units crossed the Suez Canal and took up positions inside the Sinai. In Israel airfields had been put on high alert in case of a surprise Egyptian attack.

From all that Eban could gather, particularly after a late-night talk with the American Secretary of State, Dean Rusk - who had spoken at length with President Johnson - the United States was prepared to take a strong stance in Israel's favour. As Eban reported to Levi Eshkol in Jerusalem:

> In my view, the President was likely to discuss a programme for opening the Straits by the maritime powers led by the United States, Britain and perhaps others. The plan in its present form was based on the idea of a joint declaration of maritime States, including Israel, concerning their resolve to exercise freedom of passage. The second stage, according to what had been said to us, would be the dispatch of a naval task force which would appear in the Straits.
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> Some officials had predicted that the President would make a pledge that the Straits would be opened, even if there was resistance. Some press reports were appearing in the same sense. I told them that after my talk with the President, I would fly home at once and bring the thoughts of the United States government to the knowledge of my colleagues; in the meantime, I had no authority to define any attitude during the present short visit. My efforts were limited to inducing them to make their proposals in the fullest detail, including a timetable and a method of carrying out any plan, so that our government should be able to determine its attitude one way or the other.
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> I had emphasized that in the absence of an immediate plan for opening the Straits, there would, in my opinion, be no escape from an explosion. Since their plan included a certain reliance on the United Nations, I expressed a deeply sceptical appraisal of its effectiveness.

On the evening of May 26, Eban saw President Johnson, who started the conversation with the words, `I am not a mouse from Washington, I am a lion from Texas.' Once it became apparent, Johnson said, that the United Nations could not keep the Straits of Tiran open `then it is going to be up to Israel and all of its friends, and all those who feel that an injustice has been done, and all those who give some indication of what they are prepared to do, and the United States would do likewise. The United States has had some experience in seeking support of friendly states, but Israel should put its embassies to work to get support from all those concerned with keeping the waterway open. The British are willing and the United States is trying to formulate a plan with them.'

Meanwhile, the President added, it would be `unwise' of Israel to `jump the gun'. He stressed this point by repeating three times during the course of his conversation with Eban: `Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone.' It was also the point stressed by the note which Johnson then handed to Eban, setting out the position of the United States. The note was short, and blunt. Regarding the Straits of Tiran, it read, `we plan to pursue vigorously the measures which can be taken by maritime nations to assure that the Straits and the Gulf remain open to free and innocent passage of all nations. I must emphasize the necessity for Israel not to make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities. Israel will not be alone unless it decides to do it alone. We cannot imagine that Israel will make this decision.'

Eban prepared to leave the White House, with this mixed message. The United States would work to reopen the Straits of Tiran, but it did not want Israel to take unilateral action, despite Israel's argument (which Eban had made to Johnson, as to de Gaulle) that it regarded the closure of the Straits in itself as an act of war. As Eban and Johnson walked out of the Oval Office,

Eban asked him: `Again, Mr President, can I tell my Cabinet that you will use every measure in your power to ensure that the Gulf and Straits are open for Israeli shipping?' `Yes', replied Johnson. Eban recounted, `He shook my hand with such a paralysing grip that I doubted that I would ever regain the use of it.'

While the diplomats, Presidents and Prime Ministers took up their respective positions, Nasser was raising the temperature of the crisis. `The battle will be a general one,' he declared on May 26, `and our basic objective will be to destroy Israel. I probably could not have said such things five or even three years go. Today I say such things because I am confident.' In the Security Council the Soviet Union made it clear that it would veto any proposal that might not be in accord with the wishes of Egypt or Syria. Flying from Moscow to Cairo, the newly appointed Soviet Minister of Defence, Marshal Grechko, brought Nasser a personal message of encouragement from the Soviet Head of State, Alexei Kosygin.

Nasser was confident of a military victory that would end the existence of Israel. Golda Meir, reflecting on her efforts after 1956 to convince the Americans that Israel would be in danger if it withdrew from Sinai, later asked in anguish, `Why had it seemed so simple and so obvious to us but so impossible of attainment to everyone else? Hadn't we explained the realities of life in our part of the world properly? Had I made some dreadful mistake or left something crucial unsaid? The more I thought about those months of 1956 and 1957, the more apparent it became to me now that nothing at all had changed since then and that the Arabs were once again being permitted to delude themselves that they could wipe us off the face of the earth.'

This was not merely an Israeli perspective. Following Nasser's speech of May 26, one of his close allies, Mohammed Heykal, wrote in the Cairo newspaper *Al-Ahram* that an armed clash between Israel and Egypt was `inevitable'. It would come because of the inexorable logic of the situation:

> Egypt has exercised its power and achieved the objectives at this stage without resorting to arms so far. But Israel has no alternative but to use arms if it wants to exercise power. This means that the logic of the fearful confrontation now taking place between Egypt, which is fortified by the might of the masses of the Arab nation, and Israel, which is fortified by the illusion of American might, dictates that Egypt, after all it has now succeeded in achieving, must wait, even though it has to wait for a blow.
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> Let Israel begin; let our second blow then be ready. Let it be a knockout.

The Israeli War Cabinet met on May 27 to decide whether or not to take military action against Egypt, using the continued closure of the Straits of Tiran as the reason. The delay requested by the United States to enable diplomacy to work had gone by. In Israel's own inner counsels, a short but intense period of doubt by Yitzhak Rabin had passed. Rabin had regained his confidence that Israel could be successful on the battlefield without a long period of bloodletting.

As the discussion around the Cabinet table continued, it became clear that the Israeli Ministers were evenly divided. No head count was taken, but it seemed that about nine Ministers favoured immediate military action against Egypt, and about nine were keen that the process of international diplomacy should be allowed to continue. Eban, who had just arrived from the United States - he was driven straight from the airport to the Cabinet Room - proposed a forty-eight-hour `disengagement', after which Ministers should meet again and decide on military action or further diplomacy. Levi Eshkol suggested a much shorter pause - enough for Ministers to sleep for the rest of the night, and to reassemble the following afternoon.

The new situation which confronted the Israeli Ministers when they reassembled on May 28 was an apparent strengthening of the resolve of the United States to reopen the Straits of Tiran. The American Ambassador to Israel, Walworth Barbour, passed on the information that the United States and Britain were even then looking into the military and naval aspects of an international naval task force (which later came to be known as the `international flotilla'), in which British and American warships would play a major part. Harold Wilson had been particularly emphatic on British participation, having just made a visit to Canada to enlist wider support. The Canadian and the Dutch governments had both agreed to join in such a force.

The sense of foreign support at this level of seriousness influenced the Israeli Cabinet not to decide on immediate military action. Levi Eshkol proposed a two-week pause, to see what the multinational naval task force could do, assuming that it came into being. The thought of such a long period before Israel initiated action was appealing to most - indeed to almost all - the Ministers. Abba Eban has recalled how `the expectation of victory was overshadowed by fear of terrible casualties'. Zalman Aranne, the Minister of Education, `had spoken eloquently' - Eban wrote -'of the fearful toll of war and of the moral need to do everything possible to avoid it. He

was a man of refined consciousness and strong individualism. He was always, more likely than anyone to give utterance to feelings which other Ministers held discreetly in their hearts. The Minister of the Interior, Moshe Shapira, was in consultation with Ben-Gurion, who also thought that a military challenge by Israel without allies by her side would be exorbitant on blood.'

Only one Minister, Moshe Carmel, the Minister of Transport, argued in favour of an immediate Israeli attack at the Cabinet meeting of May 28. His worry was that with every day that passed the Egyptians would be in a stronger position to launch a surprise attack.

The decision to wait beyond May 28 was not understood by some of the Israeli public, estimated at 24 per cent, who felt too endangered to wait any longer, and had no faith in international - or United States - support. The memories of America's hostility in 1956 were still vivid. Moshe Shapira later defended the decision to delay in the following words:

> If the war came it was essential that Lyndon Johnson should not be against us. If we had not waited we would still have conquered in the field of battle; but we would have lost in the political arena. The United States would not have stood by our side in the way that she did. We must remember that the general mood in those days was that we could not reasonably expect the emphatic victory which ensued.
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> I said then and it is clear to me today that if we had begun war too early, we would have shown a lack of responsibility for our future. This has now been proved. The United States is giving us support such as we have never known before. I believe that a Superior Force directs our history. There is a destiny that shapes our ends.

Eban, who was later criticized for having pushed the argument for delay, wrote in his defence, and that of Eshkol, that both men were `using time as currency to secure ultimate political support'. It was the American hostility in 1956 that weighed on both men, and on many of their colleagues. Johnson's support for a naval initiative could not be allowed to be nipped in the bud. As Eban later wrote:

> Either the multilateral naval action would collapse, in which case the United States would have little right or cause to restrain Israel's independent action, or if it succeeded, Nasser would, for the first time, believe that Israel had political backing as well as military strength. We must remember that our only aims in the Egyptian context were to break the blockade and disperse the troop concentrations.
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> The idea of a new boundary for Israel was not in the air at the end of May; it was only later that the Jordanian and Syrian interventions brought the whole Arab-Israel territorial structure under question. To defeat Nasser's blockade and troop concentrations in May by a combination of military preparedness and political pressures would be no less honourable, and in the long run, no less significant than to bring him low by an actual trial of strength.

The seventeen Ministers who supported the delay were `dominated', Eban added, not by "confusion" or panic but by a mature political calculation'.

Immediately after the Cabinet meeting Eshkol saw the military leaders. He was accompanied, and supported, by Yigal Allon, then Minister of Labour. Some of the army men expressed their fears that unless Israel took military action at once, Egypt would secure the advantage. They were confident of success only if the Egyptians were attacked at once. Eshkol told them, bluntly, `You are exaggerating quite a lot.' This was also Eban's view. `Our military advisers were now fervent in the promise of victory,' he later wrote. `True, their buoyancy was somewhat deflated by the contrary thesis that a brief delay would convert certain triumph to certain ruin. To me it seemed unlikely that we could be assured of utter victory if we acted on May 28 - and of complete rout if we waited a few days.'

That evening, immediately after the seven o'clock news, the Israel Broadcasting Service, transmitted the first of what were to be sixteen daily commentaries by General Chaim Herzog. It was hoped that these commentaries would help to calm the public mind, and they did so. In his first broadcast, Herzog stressed the problems facing Nasser in trying to hold the vastness of the Sinai, should Israel be `called upon to react to an Egyptian attack'. Herzog told his listeners, if one takes into consideration the strength and preparedness of the Israel Defence Forces, the Egyptian commander has his problems.' These were morale-boosting words. They were badly needed.

Starting on May 29, there came a period known in Israel as the *hamtana* (waiting). Without that waiting period, Yitzhak Rabin later wrote, `it is doubtful if Israel would have been able to hold

firm at the cease-fire lines and in the political arena two years after the war.' At the time, however, it was not the eventual political advantage, but the daily fears and anxieties that dominated the politicians and the people. On May 29 Nasser spoke to the members of the Egyptian National Assembly. `The issue is not the question of Akaba, the Straits of Tiran or the United Nations Emergency Force,' he said. `The issue is the aggression against Palestine that took place in 1948.'

In 1948, Nasser insisted, Israeli `aggression' had been carried out with the `collaboration' of Britain and the United States. It was Britain and the United States who now wanted to `confine' the issue to the Straits of Tiran, the United Nations Emergency Force, and the right of passage through the Gulf of Akaba. But, Nasser declared, We are not afraid of the United States and its threats, of Britain and its threats, or of the entire Western world and its partiality to Israel.'

In fact, the multinational naval force which the United States and Britain had hoped to assemble was not coming into being. Even Britain, which was so keen on it, discovered - to Harold Wilson's mortification - that there were no British warships near enough to reach the area for several days. Instead of concerted naval action to end Egypt's blockade, a coalition of a different sort was being created. On the day after Nasser's speech of May 29, King Hussein of Jordan flew to Cairo. In explanation of his journey, the King later wrote, The desire to meet Nasser may seem strange when one remembers the insulting, defamatory words which for a whole year the Cairo radio had launched against the Hashemite monarchy; but from every point of view we had no right nor could we decently justify a decision to stand aside in a cause in which the entire Arab world was determined unanimously to engage itself.'

At the meeting, Nasser produced a file containing the Syrian-Egyptian defence pact which had been signed a month earlier. `I was so anxious to reach an agreement,' the King later wrote, `that I contented myself with a rapid perusal of the text and said to Nasser, "Give me another copy; let us replace the word Syria by the word Jordan and the matter will be arranged.'

Israel was suddenly confronted by the possibility of a war on two fronts - or, if Syria were to honour its pact with Egypt and join in, by a war on three fronts. On May 31, the day after the Egyptian Jordanian pact was signed, troops from Iraq reached Egypt, eager to join the battle. In Israel, it became clear that the two-week respite on which the Cabinet had agreed three days earlier was probably drawing to a premature close. There was an added dimension of danger, and fear, in Israel when Ahmed Shukeiry, the commander of the Palestine Liberation Organization - whose headquarters was in Cairo - flew back to Amman with King Hussein, at Nasser's insistence, and then appeared in Jordanian East Jerusalem to breathe fire and death against Israel. After the Arab victory, he said, those Israelis who had been born elsewhere would be `repatriated'. When he was reminded that more than half of the Israeli population had been born in Palestine and (after 1948) Israel, he replied, `Those who survive will remain in Palestine, but I estimate that none of them will survive.'

From Cairo came a further ominous threat: `The occupation of the Israelis of the harbour of Eilat was illegal.' This was a clear intimation that Egyptian forces, already stationed within a few miles of Eilat, at the Taba border post, intended to occupy Eilat itself, Israel's southernmost town.

There remained the Anglo-American search for an international naval task force to reopen the Straits of Tiran. Eighty countries were asked to support this action, but only two - Canada and Denmark - were willing to do so without equivocation. From Washington, Avraham Harman reported that President Johnson `could see no way out of the crisis'. Five days earlier, Johnson had urged Israel, in no uncertain terms, not to fire the first shot. But on June 1 the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, when asked if the United States would take measures to restrain Israel from precipitate action, replied, `I don't think it is our business to restrain anybody.'

During June 1 the mood in Israeli government circles was changing. If the United States was no longer seeking to restrain Israel, then perhaps the time had come to take the military initiative. This was the view of many of those whose temperament was for conciliation and diplomacy, men like Arthur Lourie, one of Eban's advisers at the Foreign Office. Eban, who had initially proposed the two-week pause, felt strongly that there ought not to be any further delay. In his memoirs he wrote, of the turning point for him on June 1:

> I went to the Dan Hotel for a conversation with the most intimate of my advisers, Arthur Lourie, who urged me strongly along the course which I was contemplating. Both of us thought that the hour was now ripe to pick up the fruits of our patient efforts of the past ten days.
>
> I returned to our Tel Aviv office and asked the Director-General, Aryeh Levavi, to accompany me across the lawn to a meeting with the Chief of Staff, General Rabin, and

the chief of military intelligence, General Yariv. I told them that I no longer had any political inhibitions to such military resistance as was deemed feasible, necessary and effective, and that if we were successful, I believed that our political prospects were good. We would not be set upon by a united and angry world as in 1956.

Eban's account continued, it took but a few sentences for me to say to the two generals what was on my mind. I told them, without specific details, that I believed the waiting period had achieved its political purpose; that its advantage would unfold in the coming days and weeks; that there was nothing now for which to wait; that the need to withstand the throttling grip of Arab aggression was paramount; and that any decision on methods and timing should now be reached on military grounds alone.'

Eban, Levavi, Rabin and Yariv then discussed `possible times and occasions' when Israel might strike, `all of them close at hand, at which Egyptian pressure would invite total response'. The meeting over, Eban left the generals' room and returned across the lawn towards the Foreign Office building. `My step was lighter than when I had entered,' he later wrote.

Levi Eshkol was waiting on the lawn. When Eban told him that he had told the generals that the next step must be taken and timed on military grounds alone, Eshkol's `relief - Eban has recorded -'was unconcealed'.

The mood in Israel was one of grim determination. Golda Meir has recalled how, at the same time that the soldiers were mobilized, the overage men and women and children of Israel buckled down to clean out basements and cellars for use as makeshift air-raid shelters, to fill thousands of sandbags with which to line the pathetic home-made trenches that fathers and grandfathers dug in every garden and schoolyard throughout the country and to take over the essential chores of civilian life, while the troops waited, under camouflage nets in the sands of the Negev - waited, trained and went on waiting. It was as though some gigantic clock were clicking away for all of us, though no one except Nasser knew when the zero hour would be.' Golda Meir's recollection continued:

By the end of May, ordinary life - as we had known it in the previous montbs - came to an end. Each day seemed to contain double the normal number of hours, and each hour seemed endless.

In the heat of the early summer, I did what everyone else was doing: I packed a little overnight bag with a few essential belongings that might be needed in the shelter and put it where it could most easily be grabbed as soon as the sirens started to wail. I helped Aya make identification discs out of oilcloth for the children to wear and blacked out one room in each house so that we could put on the light somewhere in the evenings. I went to Revivim one day to see Sarah and the children. I watched the kibbutz that I had known from its first day calmly prepare itself for the Arab onslaught that might turn it into rubble, and he met with some of Sarah's friends - at their request - to talk about what might happen. But what they really wanted to know was when the waiting would end, and that was a question I couldn't answer. So the clock ticked on, and we waited and waited.

There were also the grim preparations that had to be kept secret: the parks in each city that had been consecrated for possible use as mass cemeteries; the hotels cleared of guests so that they could be turned into huge emergency first-aid stations; the iron rations stockpiled against the time when the population might have to be fed from some central source; the bandages, drugs, and stretchers obtained and distributed.

And, of course, above all, there were the military preparations, because even though we had by now absorbed that fact that we were entirely on our own, there wasn't a single person in Israel, as far as I know, who had any illusions about the fact that there was no alternative whatsoever to winning the war that was being thrust upon us.

When I think back to those days, what stands out in my mind is the miraculous sense of unity and purpose that transformed us within only a week or two from a small, rather claustrophobic community, coping - and not always well - with all sorts of economic, political and social discontents into two and a half million Jews, each and every one of whom felt personally responsible for the survival of the State of Israel

and each and every one of whom knew that the enemy we faced was committed to our annihilation.

Inside Israel distress at the apparent inability of the government to take a decision had spread throughout the society. Public trust in the government was at its lowest ebb. The tens of thousands of reservists who had been called up felt that there was no leader. There was a growing public call for Moshe Dayan, a former and highly regarded Chief of Staff, to be brought back to serve at the highest level. Eshkol was ready to appoint him Commander of the Southern Front, facing Egypt.

This was not enough for those demanding a clear lead. There were large public demonstrations demanding that Eshkol give Dayan his Ministry of Defence portfolio. Among the demonstrations calling for change was a women's march in Tel Aviv. Most of the marchers were the wives of reserve officers (they quickly became known, in an unusual moment of whimsy during such worrying times, as the Merry Wives of Windsor). Eshkol bowed to the storm and the Cabinet that he then created was one that reflected the public mood and the coming emergency.

The national unity government, the first in Israel's history, was a historic turning point, a consequence of the public trauma of the impending war. Menachem Begin - head of the Herut opposition - was brought into the government as Minister without Portfolio. The ten-member Rafi Party, which had broken away from Mapai two years earlier as a result of the Lavon affair, and been in opposition since then, returned to the government, enabling Moshe Dayan to be made Minister of Defence.

On the first evening of his appointment, Moshe Dayan asked the Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, and the General Officer Commanding Southern Command, Brigadier-General Yeshayahu Gavish (known in the army as Shaike) to present their war plans. The two men were the authors of two very different plans. Rabin had for more than two years been the advocate of a limited war, with Israel restricting its aim to the conquest of the Gaza Strip and using the Strip as a bargaining counter to force Egypt to re-open the Straits of Tiran. Gavish had devised a more ambitious plan, to strike deep into Sinai and to attack and defeat the Egyptian forces there.

As Dayan faced the two generals, Rabin asked Gavish to explain `the plan' to the new Minister. `Which plan?' asked Gavish, assuming that Rabin would press his own more limited scheme. `The second', was Rabin's reply. He had opted for Gavish's more ambitious project. Dayan gave it his approval.

After the seven o'clock news on June 1, the Israel Broadcasting Service transmitted the fifth daily commentary by General Herzog. `Obviously every precaution must be taken,' Herzog told his listeners - who were fearful of an Egyptian air bombardment -'but I must say in all sincerity that if I had to choose today between flying an Egyptian bomber bound for Tel Aviv, or being in Tel Aviv, I would out of a purely selfish desire for self-preservation, opt to be in Tel Aviv.' Rabin later wrote of the importance of these words, their content and their tone, spoken as they were `when hundreds of thousands of mothers in Israel were engaged in pasting protective strips of paper or material on windows, and when their children were busy digging slit trenches in the backyards.'

From Cairo, Nasser continued to exacerbate the situation by his public declarations. On June 2, as a threat to the Anglo-American efforts to create a naval task force, he warned, If any Power dares to make declarations on freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran, we shall deny that Power oil and free navigation in the Suez Canal.'

Israel's military position was, on paper, precarious. On the Egyptian front at least 100,000 troops and 900 tanks were deployed in Sinai. On the Golan Heights Syria had more than 75,000 men and 400 tanks ready for action. The Jordanians had 32,000 men under arms, and almost 300 tanks. This made a total force of 207,000 soldiers and at least 1,600 tanks. A further 150 tanks were moving into Jordan from Iraq, which was determined to join what was being called in the Arab world `the final battle'. Should it become necessary Egypt was able to send from the west of Sinai a further 140,000 troops and 300 tanks into that battle.

Against this substantial Arab force, Israel had, with the full mobilization of the civilian reserves, 264,000 soldiers and 800 tanks. An estimated 700 Arab combat aircraft were also ready for action. Israel had only 300.

During a meeting at the Foreign Ministry on June 2, Eban told his officials that it was his reading of American policy that `if we were successful, the United States would feel relieved at being liberated from its dilemma, and would not support international pressures against us'.

Moshe Dayan spent most of Saturday June 3 preparing Israel's war plan. There was no possibility of a traditional Sabbath day of rest for him, his planners or his commanders. And yet, as is the nature of the Sabbath in Israel, the day of rest imposed its own characteristics. `The beaches and the picnic grounds', Eban has written, `were crowded with officers back on short leave from the front.' This was a deliberate ruse to mislead the Egyptians with regard to the imminent Israeli attack.

During the Sabbath the Israeli Ambassador to Washington, Avraham Harman, flew back to Israel. Driving straight from the airport to Eban's official residence in Jerusalem, Harman reported on his most recent conversation - the previous day - with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. From what Rusk had told him, it was clear that there was `even less international disposition' to act against Nasser than there had been a few days earlier. The most that could be expected was a Vice-Presidential visit to Cairo. Rusk had told Harman that measures to be taken against Egypt by the maritime powers were still under consideration, but that `nothing has been firmly decided'. This, Eban noted, was `a far cry' from Rusk's own statement five days earlier through the American Ambassador to Israel, that the military preparations of the maritime powers had `reached an advanced stage'.

That evening Eban took Harman with him to see Eshkol. An impressive trio of former generals was also there: Dayan, Yadin and Allon, as well as several other senior officers. Unanimity prevailed as to the position of the United States. Harman's `realistic report', as Eban described it, `strengthened our certainty that there was nothing for us to expect from outside' - unlike the Anglo-French cooperation in 1956. `It was now clear,' Eban recalled, `that the United States was not going to be able to involve itself unilaterally or multilaterally in any enforcement action within a period relevant to our plight. But we all felt that if Israel found a means of breaking out of the siege and blockade, the United States would not now take a hostile position.'

Those meeting at Eshkol's house were also clear, Eban wrote, that Israel's military plan was `concerned with Egypt alone; we would not fight against Jordan unless Jordan attacked us'. The meeting then dispersed. `As I walked the short distance to my residence in the still night,' Eban wrote, `I came across groups of workers building shelters near the schools. In conformity with the general mood, my wife, son and daughter had put sticking tape inside the windows of our home, as protection against explosions. Everyone in Jerusalem was doing this, but I had to ask my long-suffering family to spend some hours peeling the tape away since television teams were going to arrive to record interviews with me: I thought that visible evidence of defence preparations in the Foreign Minister's own house would give too sharp a hint of impending war.'

On the following morning, Sunday June 4, the national unity Cabinet met, presided over by Eshkol. For seven hours Dayan set out his military proposals. `The atmosphere was now strangely tranquil,' Eban has written. `All the alternatives had been weighed and tested in recent days; there was little remaining to do except plunge into the responsibility and hazard of choice.' The most frightening factor was the information reaching Israel of the mood in Egypt and throughout the Arab- world. There were reports, Eban recalled, which made clear there was `a higher morale than the Arab world had known in all our experience', and he went on to explain, `The frenzy in the Arab streets belonged to the tradition of hot fanaticism which, in earlier periods of history, had sent the Moslem armies flowing murderously across three continents. Reports were reaching us of Egyptian generals and other leaders straining hard against the tactical leash which Nasser had imposed upon them. His idea of absorbing the first blow and inflicting a "knockout" in the second round was receding before a simpler impulse which told Egyptian troops that a first-blow victory was possible and that there was no need to "absorb" anything.'

That the Arab `street' was clamouring, and eager, for war was clear. Dayan then presented his war plan. Israel could win a war, he told his ministerial colleagues, if it were to embark on it sooner rather than later. Every day saw the Arab forces gaining in strength and readiness. For Israel, the `optimum moment' had arrived. He had one, overriding request: that he be allowed to send the army into battle at a time to be chosen secretly by himself and Eshkol. When Eshkol asked the Cabinet for a show of hands, there was no dissent.

After the Cabinet broke up, Dayan saw Eshkol alone. The time he proposed to launch an Israeli attack was, Dayan said, 7.45 the next morning, Monday June 5. Eshkol agreed. Israel would take the military initiative against those who were threatening her annihilation.