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THE JUNE 1967 WAR: SOME MYSTERIES EXPLORED

Richard B. Parker

NO one seems to have expected a Middle East war in the spring of 1967. There was serious trouble and tension along the Syrian-Israeli border, and the Israelis were talking ominously about retaliation, but, as in the case of Iraq and Kuwait in 1990, people did not expect those tensions to erupt into a general war. Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasir had said both publicly and privately that the Arabs were not ready for war, and the Egyptians had assured the Americans that they would not let the Syrians use their November 1966 mutual defense agreement to drag them into one.

War without Egyptian participation was unlikely, and the Egyptians were thought to be so tied down in the Yemen—where one-third of their armed forces were maintaining order—that they would have no taste or capability for confronting Israel militarily. Meanwhile, the Israelis, under Prime Minister Levy Eshkol, who did not project a very warlike or resolute image, did not look like a people about to launch a war. There may have been Israeli hawks who maintained that a preemptive strike was necessary from time to time to keep the Arabs off balance, but they were not in control of the government.

When the crisis came, it ballooned very quickly and got out of hand within a few days. It seems to have been a total surprise to everyone, except possibly the Egyptians. We can only speculate as to what Nasir and his military commander, Abd al-Hakim Amr, had in mind. The official record may clarify this some day, but, as of now, it appears that they took their secrets with them to the grave, and

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we have to rely on the accounts of their former associates, which are sometimes contradictory.

It seems likely, however, that Nasir and Amr were reacting to events and that they stumbled into the crisis rather than provoking it deliberately. This was the view of the Washington intelligence community at the time.¹ Once the crisis had begun, however, they pushed it to its fateful conclusion with such determination that one could be forgiven for thinking they had planned it all along.² Some Egyptians, on the other hand, think they fell into a well-laid US-Israeli trap.³ Others have argued with apparent conviction that it was all the result of a Soviet plot to discipline Nasir.⁴

It can be argued that a clash was inevitable, sooner or later, and that the timing was merely incidental. That does not relieve the parties concerned of their responsibility for the disaster, because war was avoidable and unnecessary at that particular time (although later events showed that the situation before mid-May 1967 was more explosive than people realized).

ORIGINS

While many aspects of the events leading to war await clarification, the general outlines of what happened are clear. Disputes over activities by both parties in the demilitarized zones along the Israeli-Syrian border had been endemic since the 1949 armistice agreement,⁵ but the temperature went up markedly with the installation of a radical leftist regime in Damascus in February 1966.

The new Syrian leaders talked of launching a people's war of liberation to solve the Palestine problem and began to follow a forward policy along the border, encouraging rather than suppressing infiltration and sabotage operations in Israel. The Israelis reacted somewhat perversely by attacking the Jordanian village of Samu', near Hebron, on November 13, 1966. This led to no improvement in Syrian attitudes, and incidents along that border continued, culminating in an air

1. For a well-reasoned and thoughtful essay supporting the view that Nasir and Amr stumbled into the war, see L. Carl Brown, "Nasser and the June War: Plan or Improvisation," in Samir Seikaly et al., eds., *Quest for Understanding: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Malcolm H. Kerr* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1991).

2. This was the view of this author and that of many other diplomats in Cairo at the time.

3. This thesis is developed in elaborate detail in Mohamed Heikal, *1967: Al-Infjjar* (1967: The explosion) (Cairo: Markaz al-Ahram, 1990).

4. For an exposition of this view, see Ali Abdel Rahman Rahmy, *The Egyptian Policy in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 232-5.

5. These zones were areas west of the old Palestine border that were evacuated by the Syrian troops who were holding them when the fighting ended in 1948. Under the armistice agreement, neither side was to engage in military activities in the zones, but this was honored more in the breach than the observance, particularly by the Israelis, who frequently used armored tractors to cultivate disputed properties in spite of Syrian objections. As a result, shooting frays were common.

battle over Damascus on 7 April in which six Syrian aircraft were shot down.⁶ The Syrian government, nevertheless, continued to encourage cross-border sabotage activities. The Israelis, seriously concerned by these actions, began making statements to the effect that they would take military action if the Syrians did not stop the infiltration. The Syrians, for their part, rejected the charges and said they could not be expected to control the Palestinians. Given that attitude, by mid-May the question was not whether the Israelis were going to strike at Syria, but when and with how much force.

At this critical juncture, on 13 May, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo, Dmitri Pojidaev, delivered to Ahmad Hassan al-Feki, the undersecretary of foreign affairs, a warning that the Israelis were massing 10 to 12 brigades on the Syrian border and were about to attack Syria. On the same day, Soviet officials told Anwar al-Sadat, then speaker of the Egyptian National Assembly, during a brief stopover in Moscow en route home to Cairo from North Korea, that “ten Israeli brigades had been concentrated on the Syrian border. When I arrived back in Cairo I realized that the Soviet Union had informed Nasser of this.”⁷

The Syrians had given Cairo a similar report a few days earlier, but the Egyptians had not taken it very seriously because they did not trust the Syrians. They took the Soviet report seriously, however, because the Soviets were serious people and because the tension between Syria and Israel, and the statements of Israeli leaders—particularly a threat to occupy Damascus, allegedly made by Israeli chief of staff Yitzhak Rabin on 11 or 12 May, a statement he denies making—made it plausible.⁸

The Egyptians responded by mobilizing their troops on 14 May and sending them into the Sinai. Two days later, they requested the partial withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) stationed on their side of the Egypt-Israel armistice line. When UN secretary-general U Thant replied to the effect that the Egyptians would have to keep all of UNEF or none, they responded on 18 May by requesting its complete withdrawal.

The Israelis meanwhile had begun limited mobilization on 16 May in response to the Egyptian moves, which they initially dismissed as sabre rattling. They became seriously concerned when they learned of the request for UNEF redeployment, and more so when the secretary-general acquiesced in the Eryp-

6. Although Samu' reportedly was the source of infiltrators crossing into Israel, the Jordanian government had been following a policy of suppressing infiltration for some time. It was seriously embarrassed by the poor showing of its army in the Samu' raid and one of its defensive responses was to verbally attack the Egyptians for not coming to its aid. This, plus Syrian criticism of Egyptian failure to respond to the Israeli air attack of 7 April, was one reason for Egypt's decision to act as it did in May 1967.

7. Anwar Sadat, *In Search of Identity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 171–2. Sadat says he was met by Vladimir Semenov, the deputy foreign minister, “accompanied by the Speaker of the Soviet Parliament,” apparently a reference to Nikolai Podgorny, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

8. Conversation with Feki, Alexandria, Egypt, June 5, 1989. Rabin's alleged statement was carried by United Press International on 12 May.

tian request for complete withdrawal of UNEF. The Israelis, nevertheless, took the position that there would be no war unless the Egyptians interfered with their shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba.

On 23 May, while U Thant was en route to Cairo hoping to reduce tensions, the Egyptians announced the closure of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping and cargo. The Egyptians took this step in full awareness of the Israeli position, but evidently thought that while the Israelis might undertake a punitive strike, they would not launch a general war, and, that if they did strike, the Egyptians would be more than a match for them. It was a tragic miscalculation on their part. The Israelis struck with overwhelming force on 5 June and demolished the Egyptian air force within a matter of hours. Routing the Egyptian army took a little longer, but it was all over by 8 June.

Meanwhile, Jordan had unwisely decided to respond to the Israeli attack on Egypt by shelling targets in Israel. The Israelis retaliated with a swift campaign that left them in possession of Jerusalem and the West Bank by noon on 8 June. They then turned their attention to the Syrians, who had been shelling sporadically and had attempted small-scale and ineffective air and ground attacks on 5 and 6 June. The Israelis quickly seized the Golan Heights in violation of the UN cease-fire of 8 June, which the Syrians were then observing. In six days, the Israelis had delivered a crushing defeat to Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and were undisputed masters of all of Palestine, plus substantial portions of Egypt and Syria.

THE SOVIET REPORT

The available evidence confirms Israeli assertions that the Soviet report that Israel was massing 10 to 12 brigades on the Syrian border was not true. To begin with, active Israeli military strength at the time was two brigades. Twelve brigades would be roughly half the country's total *mobilized* strength during the June war, which was an estimated 25 brigades. The mobilization of 10 brigades and their deployment to the border was something that could not have been hidden from diplomats and journalists in Israel, nor could it have been hidden from the observers of the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO); the observers frequented the border area daily and at least one of them lived on the Israeli side of the line, in Tiberias. Following expressions of concern by George Tomah, the Syrian permanent representative to the United Nations, and by the Syrian delegate to the Mixed Armistice Commission, General Odd Bull, the chief of staff of UNTSO, reported to New York on 15 May that his organization "had no reports of any build-up. I should point out, however, that Israel does not have to concentrate her forces in any one area in order to mount an attack."⁹

9. Bull to Deputy Secretary-General Ralph Bunche, Telegram 803 of May 15, 1967.

There is confirmation of Bull's report from other sources. The assistant US naval attaché, Lieutenant Commander L.P. Blasch, was resident in Haifa and toured the border area regularly. He reports that he did so again at the time of the Soviet alarm and saw no unusual troop activity.¹⁰ Most importantly, the Egyptians sent their chief of staff, General Muhammad Fawzi, to Damascus on 14 May to coordinate with the Syrians, and he reported back that there were no unusual troop movements and that, strangely, the Syrians, who had sounded the alarm in the first place, were not in a state of alert that would have indicated that they were expecting an attack.¹¹

No countervailing evidence that the Israeli concentrations were actually in place has been presented to date, and, with few exceptions, officials and scholars in Moscow today admit that the report was not true. For years the question has been, if the report obviously was untrue, why was it given to the Egyptians? The conventional answer in Washington has been that the Soviets manufactured it for one of a variety of reasons. The most commonly accepted thesis is that they were trying to manipulate the Egyptians into rallying around the Syrians, who were headed for difficulty because of their activist policy on the border. This assumes that the Soviets valued their relations with Syria—because it had a radical, leftist government—more than they valued relations with Egypt. This proposition underestimates the importance the Soviets attached to Nasir, the anchor of their position in the region.

In September 1990, this author went to Moscow at the invitation of the Institute of Oriental Studies to discuss this issue with Soviet researchers and retired officials. There is not space here for details, but during discussions a pattern of near unanimity evolved regarding several points:

- The Soviets would not want to risk their relationship with Egypt for the sake of the radicals in Syria, whom they considered irresponsible.
- They had not invented the report, which was the result of improperly evaluated intelligence.
- They had not thought the report all that important, and they had not intended to precipitate a crisis.
- They were not consulted in advance on any of Egypt's moves.
- They had not given the Egyptians any official commitment of military support in the event they got into trouble.

There are some problems with the third and fifth assertions. The Soviets may not have intended to precipitate a crisis, but they did not handle the report as though it were unimportant. By sending their ambassador to the Foreign Ministry, where he read off the report carefully—while the Egyptians took it down in writing—and by giving it the same day to Sadat when he transited Moscow on his

10. Telephone conversation with Blasch, January 2, 1990.

11. Muhammad Fawzi, *Harb al-thalath sanawat* (The three-year war) (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1980), pp. 71–2.

way home from Pyongyang, the Soviets signaled that this was no local initiative or casual passing of information. It is hard to believe that they did not realize that passing the report in this fashion would be taken by the Egyptians as evidence of its seriousness.

Georgy Kornienko, formerly first deputy foreign minister, commented that it was normal for governments to pass intelligence reports of this sort to one another, even if they were not 100 percent certain they were true.¹² That is correct, but it is also customary to append a caveat when the information is not confirmed. Furthermore, it is one thing to pass a report to the Egyptians at the working level to the effect that the Israelis may be planning a military action, but it is something else to specify to senior officials in both capitals that the Israelis have *x* brigades in position and are prepared to attack on a D-day (17 May, according to Nasir in a speech given at Bir Gifgafa on 22 May¹³).

Judging by Nasir's public and private statements, whatever the Soviets might say about having given no official commitments of support—such as a readiness to intervene with military forces—the Egyptian leadership appears to have thought it had such a commitment. Thus, on 29 May, Nasir informed the National Assembly that the minister of war, Shams al-Din Badran, had brought back from Moscow the day before a “message from . . . [Alexi] Kosygin saying that the Soviet Union supports us in this battle and will not allow any power to intervene until matters were returned to what they were in 1956.”¹⁴ He made the same statement to three of his old Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) companions on the same day.¹⁵

Badran himself said in an interview with *al-Hawadith* in September 1977 that Nasir had distorted his message. In addition, the accounts of two of the other participants in Badran's 25–28 May visit to Moscow—Feki and Salah Bassiouni—agree with Badran that the Soviets spent most of their time urging caution on the Egyptians. This was undone, however, by the remarks of Marshal Andrei Grechko, the minister of defense, as Badran departed.¹⁶ There has been dispute over what Grechko said, but in his 1990 book, *1967: Al-Infjar* (1967: The explosion), Mohamed Heikal, a Nasir confidant and former publisher of *al-Ahram*, includes a photocopy of the Egyptian memorandum of this conversation prepared by Feki and Bassiouni on their way back to Cairo. It reads in part:

I want to make it clear to you that if America enters the war we will enter it on your side. Do you understand me? . . . I want to confirm to you that if something happens

12. Conversation with Kornienko, Moscow, September 4, 1990.

13. As translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Daily Report—Middle East, Africa, and West Europe*, May 23, 1967, p. B-2.

14. As translated in FBIS—Middle East, Africa, and West Europe, May 31, 1967, p. 68.

15. Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, *Mudhakirat* (Memoirs) (Cairo: Al-Maktab al-Masri al-Hadith, 1977), vol. 2, p. 274

16. For Badran's version of his Moscow visit, see *al-Hawadith*, September 1977, pp. 18–23. Feki's is in *Akhbar al-Yawm*, April 28, 1979. This author's understanding of Bassiouni's version comes from several conversations with him, starting in 1983.

and you need us, just send us a signal. We will come to your aid immediately in Port Said or elsewhere.¹⁷

It was this conversation that Nasir seemed to have in mind when he said he had a commitment from Kosygin.

Earlier, in *The Sphinx and the Commissar*, Heikal quoted Grechko as having told the Egyptian ambassador, Murad Ghaleb, that his remarks to Badran were just “one for the road.”¹⁸ Ghaleb’s report of this amplification, however, was not received in Cairo until after the war had begun.

Asked about this exchange, Kornienko said that Grechko was a military man new to the bureaucracy. He had not been in the job long, and his remarks reflected his inexperience and did not really mean anything. No single official, he noted, had the authority to commit the Soviets to military intervention. The Egyptians, nonetheless, can be pardoned for not understanding that Grechko was simply making conversation.

According to Heikal in *1967: Al-Infjjar*, on the second day of the war, Marshal Amr summoned the Soviet ambassador, Pojidaev, and told him there was a general opinion among his officers that they were the victims of a US-Soviet conspiracy and then asked, “Where are the promises which Marshal Grechko gave to . . . Badran? The Americans have entered the battle on the side of Israel.” Pojidaev replied that if he received confirmed and reliable information to that effect he would transmit it immediately to Moscow, which would appreciate its importance and react accordingly.¹⁹ Heikal’s account does not show Amr as responding directly to the request for proof, but as complaining that the Americans gave the Israelis better equipment than the Soviets gave the Egyptians.

Hearing of the Amr-Pojidaev meeting, Nasir then summoned Pojidaev and asked him to send a message to Kosygin expressing his thanks for Soviet efforts to date and telling him that the United States was behind Israel with all its weight, that the Sixth Fleet and US bases in the region were playing a major part in the operation and that, as they both knew, Israel was executing a US-Israeli plan. Nasir did not ask for Soviet military intervention,²⁰ but he did ask for the immediate supply of aircraft. The Soviets replied a few hours later that they were sending all types of aircraft immediately, but they would be in boxes, and, in order not to upset the Americans, they would be sent to Algiers for onward forwarding to Egypt, either in boxes or reassembled and flown. This would have meant a delay of days, or even weeks, and the battle was already lost (although Nasir did

17. Heikal, *1967: Al-Infjjar*, p. 625. The photocopy of the Egyptian report of Grechko’s remarks is on p. 1,024.

18. Mohamed Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 179–80.

19. Heikal, *1967: Al-Infjjar*, pp. 728–9.

20. At least, no such request appears in Heikal’s account, which he says is drawn from the official memorandum of conversation. According to this author’s Moscow contacts, Nasir did ask for Soviet intervention and was turned down.

not seem to realize that at the time, judging by his remarks to Pojidaev about the course of the war).

THE EGYPTIAN REACTION

The issue of the Soviet report aside, the second major question is why the Egyptians choose to react as they did. The decision to mobilize and send troops into the Sinai was a rational response to the Soviet report—if the Egyptians believed it. They had done something similar in 1960, at the time of an incident at Khirbat Tawafiq in the Israeli-Syrian demilitarized zone. On that occasion, they had moved troops quietly into the Sinai to dissuade the Israelis from attacking Syria, and it had worked. In 1967, however, they elected to undertake similar action but with maximum publicity. The troops moved through Cairo so ostentatiously that people compared it to a parade, and there was a general belief among Egyptians, as well as foreigners, that it was simply a show of force to deter the Israelis from moving against Syria. The withdrawal of UNEF changed all that.

The Withdrawal of UNEF

UNEF had been created as a peacekeeping force following the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956. It was stationed along the armistice demarcation line separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, at five observation posts along the international border that extended from Rafah down to Taba and at Sharm al-Shaykh, which controlled the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba through the Strait of Tiran. UNEF's total strength in 1967 was about 3,400. Indians, Canadians, Yugoslavs, and Swedes provided the principal contingents.²¹

UNEF was intended to be a trip-wire, a psychological rather than a physical barrier that would inhibit military adventure by either side. It had served its purpose admirably for 10 years and had absolved Egypt of the need to be belligerent during that period. Precisely for that reason, in the slanging matches of the Arab Cold War between Egypt and the conservative Arab states, Nasir was frequently accused of hiding behind UNEF. While the Egyptians shrugged this off, it seems clear in retrospect that it bothered Nasir and Amr more than was generally realized.

Egyptian troops had been pouring into the Sinai in large numbers for two days when, at 10:00 P.M. on 16 May, a letter from General Fawzi, the Egyptian chief of staff, was delivered by two Egyptian brigadiers to General Indar Jit Rikhye, the Indian officer commanding UNEF units in Gaza. The letter read:

21. Indar Jit Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1978), p. 209.

Commander UNEF (Gaza)

To your information, I gave my instructions to all UAR [United Arab Republic] armed forces to be ready for action against Israel the moment it might carry out an aggressive action against any Arab country. Due to these instructions our troops are already concentrating in Sinai along our eastern border. For the sake of complete security of all UN troops which install OP's [observation posts] along our borders. I request that you give orders to withdraw all these troops immediately. I have given my instructions to our commander of the Eastern Zone concerning the subject. Inform back the fulfillment of this request.

Yours

Farik Awal (M. Fawzy) COS of UAR²²

The Egyptians subsequently said that what they meant was a redeployment of UNEF away from the posts along the international border to positions in Gaza or elsewhere and that they did not intend for UNEF to leave the Gaza Strip or Sharm al-Shaykh.²³ The evidence is contradictory, perhaps reflecting divisions within the Egyptian leadership. Nasir told U Thant on 23 May that his military advisers had noted that if hostilities broke out UNEF would be caught between the opposing forces; it, therefore, should be asked to withdraw from the Sinai, but could remain in the Gaza Strip: "This is the advice I received from my military experts and so I accepted it. Since the military wanted UNEF to vacate the Sinai, being a military matter, I told General Fawzi to write to Commander UNEF."²⁴

A rather different picture is given by Heikal in *1967: Al-Infjar*.²⁵ According to him, the subject of UNEF withdrawal had been in the air since the 1964 Casablanca summit. When the crisis came in May 1967, there was agreement that something would have to be done about UNEF to permit the Egyptians freedom of maneuver in the Sinai, but Nasir and Amr disagreed on the extent of withdrawal. Amr wanted full withdrawal, but Nasir wanted only a redeployment, because he did not want responsibility for defending Gaza and did not want to put himself in a position where he would have to close the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping. Nasir had seen the text of General Fawzi's letter to Rikhye—which, according to Egyptian diplomats, had been drafted by the military without consulting the Foreign Ministry—before it was sent. At the suggestion of Mahmud Fawzi, vice president for foreign affairs, Nasir had asked Amr to change the word *withdraw* to *redeploy*. Amr replied that the courier with the letter was already en route, but he would try to stop him. He called later to say there had not been time to intercept the courier and that the letter had been delivered as originally drafted.

Heikal comments that nothing could be done about it at that time, but Nasir thought it could be taken care of in subsequent contacts and clarifications that the

22. Rikhye, *Sinai Blunder*, p. 16.

23. Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Quartet Books, 1981), p. 18; Rikhye, *Sinai Blunder*, p. 163.

24. Rikhye, *Sinai Blunder*, p. 72.

25. Heikal, *1967: Al-Infjar*, pp. 457–77.

UN might ask from Egypt during the political contacts that would follow. The problem was that the Egyptians did not offer any clarification until the Nasir-Thant conversation of 23 May, and by then it was too late—UNEF withdrawal had been ordered and the Strait of Tiran had been closed.

It would not have made a great deal of difference if there had been clarification, because the UN Secretariat would not have accepted an arrangement under which UNEF, in effect, had responsibility for defending Gaza—which was far beyond its capacity in any case—while the Egyptians would be free to maneuver and attack along the international frontier. Nevertheless, if a temporary redeployment was what the Egyptians had in mind, it is too bad they did not make that clear from the beginning. They would not have seemed quite so hell-bent on confrontation and a more restrained posture would have affected the attitudes of other states.

Furthermore, if Nasir took a cautious view, it was not shared by Marshal Amr, who seemed determined from early in the process on complete UNEF withdrawal. One indication of this attitude was his failure to stop the courier and change the text of the Fawzi letter. Heikal's narrative implies that Nasir asked Amr to do so by telephone on the morning of 16 May. There should have been plenty of time between then and 10:00 P.M. to locate the courier and change the text. It appears as though Amr was either being insubordinate, or did not make much of an effort, which amounts to the same thing.

The two officers who delivered the letter to Rikhye were Brigadier Izz al-Din Mukhtar, the courier and a member of Fawzi's staff, and Brigadier Ibrahim Sharqawy, the chief of the UAR-UNEF liaison staff. Their remarks indicate that they thought full withdrawal was what the letter meant. When Rikhye told Mukhtar he would have to refer the request to the secretary-general, Mukhtar replied:

General, you are requested to order the immediate withdrawal of UNEF troops from al-Sabha [the principal observation post along the international border] and Sharm al-Shaykh tonight. Our supreme command anticipates that when Israel learns of our request to you, they will react immediately. In anticipation of any action they might take, our army must establish control over al-Sabha and Sharm al-Shaykh tonight.²⁶

Rikhye did not comply with this request. He said that as long as UAR troops did not attempt to use force against UNEF troops there would be no clash. After more conversation, the three sat down for coffee, and the atmosphere relaxed somewhat. Rikhye asked the brigadiers if the Egyptians had thought through the consequences of withdrawal, and Sharqawy replied:

Oh, yes, sir! We have arrived at this decision after much deliberation and are prepared for anything. If there is war, we shall next meet in Tel Aviv.²⁷

26. Rikhye, *Sinai Blunder*, p. 19.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Others in the Egyptian military may not have shared Mukhtar's and Sharqaw'y's certainty. According to General Abd al-Muhsin Kamil Murtagi, the commander of the eastern front, Marshal Amr had told the senior commanders on 16 May that the withdrawal of UNEF had become necessary because of the troop movements in the Sinai, but no thought had been given yet to Sharm al-Shaykh. On the following day, in response to a request from Operations for orders regarding Sharm al-Shaykh—which UNEF planned to evacuate—the Marshal had ordered the commanders to look into the request and give him a recommendation that evening. The commanders had met and discussed the question and had then recommended against occupying that post. Amr had accepted their recommendation, but two days later the High Command, nonetheless, issued orders for occupation of Sharm al-Shaykh.²⁸

General Fawzi has a different account. He reports the deliberations of the senior officers on 17 May, as related by Murtagi, but says he gave Amr their recommendation against occupying Sharm al-Shaykh on the morning of 18 May. Amr had replied that the decision to close the strait had been taken the previous day, and it was now up to the military to implement it.²⁹

If, as it appears, whatever Amr may have said to his senior officers, he was set on total withdrawal of UNEF and closure of the Strait of Tiran from the beginning, it is still not clear to what extent Nasir agreed with him. If Nasir did not agree, why did he not exercise his authority to slow down the rush to confrontation? Part of the answer may rest with the Nasir-Amr rivalry, which is discussed later in this article.

The UN Response

According to Rikhye's account,³⁰ when U Thant received Rikhye's telegram reporting the Egyptian demarche, he summoned the Egyptian UN permanent representative, Muhammad Awad al-Kony, and asked him what he knew about the request. Kony responded that it was news to him. U Thant then asked if the Egyptians would consider withdrawing the request and reviewing the situation before taking any further action. Kony queried Cairo by telephone and then informed U Thant that Cairo would not be willing to entertain a request to change the content of the letter. Later that same evening, U Thant asked Kony to inform the Egyptian government that the request needed further clarification. If it meant a temporary withdrawal of UNEF from all or part of the line, that would be unacceptable and would be considered as amounting to a request for total withdrawal. If that was the intent, the letter should have been addressed to him and not to Rikhye.

28. Abd al-Muhsin Kamil Murtagi, *Al-Fariq Murtagi yarwa al-haqa'iq* (General Murtagi narrates the facts) (Cairo: Dar al-Watan al-Arabi, 1976), pp. 65–8.

29. Fawzi, *Harb al-thalath sanawat*, pp. 76–82.

30. Rikhye, *Sinai Blunder*, pp. 51–2.

According to Heikal's account, Kony reported that most of the talking on the UN side had been done by Ralph Bunche, the UN deputy secretary-general. In what apparently was their second meeting on 16 May, Bunche had said that if a request for withdrawal were presented, the secretary-general would inform the General Assembly. Kony had replied that UNEF was present in Egypt under the terms of an agreement between the Egyptian government and the secretary-general, not the General Assembly, and, therefore, the government had the right to demand UNEF's withdrawal at any time, and the secretary-general had no option but to withdraw it. Bunche and U Thant agreed with him.

The following day, Kony sent a follow-up telegram in which he suggested that if Cairo were planning to ask for total withdrawal, it delay doing so until the then current meeting of the General Assembly was over, to avoid debate on the matter in that body. His recommendation was not accepted, and he was instructed to ask for a meeting with U Thant and "advise him not to send any appeal regarding the emergency forces in order to avoid its being rejected by Cairo, which would lead to an embarrassment for him, something we do not want at all."³¹ Kony apparently informed U Thant of this on 17 May, effectively closing off any search for clarification.

Heikal says Nasir interpreted Bunche's remarks at his second meeting on 16 May with Kony as an attempt to complicate the affair so that the Egyptians could no longer discuss redeployment, but would have to choose between all of UNEF or none. He thought Bunche knew that the first choice would cause the Egyptians to lose credibility, and the second would be dangerous. Nasir thought it would be best to request total withdrawal, nevertheless, because Egypt had no choice. To fail to do so would enable Bunche to embarrass Egypt, and it was better that the decision be Egypt's rather than Bunche's. Accordingly, Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad was instructed to send a letter to the secretary-general on 18 May that read:

The Government of the United Arab Republic has the honor to inform Your Excellency that it has decided to terminate the presence of the United Nations Emergency Forces from the territory of the United Arab Republic and the Gaza Strip. Therefore I request that the necessary steps be taken for the withdrawal of the Force as soon as possible. I avail myself of this opportunity to express to Your Excellency my gratitude and warm regards.

Mahmoud Riad
Minister of Foreign Affairs³²

The following day, the secretary-general issued orders for the orderly withdrawal of UNEF to begin immediately. U Thant has been much criticized for his ready acquiescence, for not referring the Egyptian request to the Security Council or the General Assembly or otherwise resisting it or, alternatively,

31. Heikal, 1967: *Al-Infijar*, pp. 474-7.

32. Secretary-General's Report of May 18, 1967.

stalling for time or demonstrating more flexibility in his response to give the Egyptians a way out of the dilemma that they seemed to have manufactured for themselves. The Egyptians have contributed to the argument by maintaining that, if only the UN had been a little more flexible about redeploying UNEF temporarily, the crisis would have passed peacefully.

Certainly in terms of diplomatic tactics it seems that U Thant could have been more skillful and drawn the process out. It perhaps was a mistake to confront the Egyptians with so clear-cut a choice so early in the game. By expressing a little befuddlement and asking for further explanations, the secretary-general might have provided more time to deal with the problem. On the other hand, the Egyptians did not appear to be interested in finding a way out. There was no need for them to be so brusque, particularly since they had learned by 15 May (at the latest), that the Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian front that they were reacting to did not, in fact, exist, although they kept claiming that they did. If the Egyptians had wanted a diplomatic solution, they could have acted more tactfully and been more open to requests for clarification.

The comments of two of the senior officers in the UN Secretariat, Ralph Bunche and Brian Urquhart, his deputy, are worth noting for what they say about the Egyptian attitude. According to Urquhart, U Thant did not refer the matter to the Security Council under Article 99—which gives the secretary-general the right to refer any matter to the Security Council that in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security—because he did not want to have a Soviet-US donnybrook there. Nonetheless, in effect, this was what happened. The Soviets were taking a very unhelpful line and the Americans, as usual, insisted on responding to the Soviets more than to the situation. The truth was that if the Soviets and Americans agreed, a problem would get attention; if they did not, it would not.

In any event, regardless of US-Soviet reaction, the Secretariat's position had been totally misunderstood. What Bunche was telling the Egyptians was that the UN could not lend itself to a situation in which they could attack in one sector while UNEF kept the peace in another. The fact that on 16 May the Egyptians were already talking about occupying al-Sabha and Sharm al-Shaykh indicated that they were not interested in a partial withdrawal in any case. Finally, the Secretariat had envisaged a withdrawal spanning four months, during which tensions could be reduced and the withdrawal could be reversed. Unfortunately, however, the Canadians had panicked. They had sent two destroyers into the Mediterranean, reportedly headed for the "Corner"—the southeastern angle of that sea—and the Egyptians had reacted by saying they could no longer guarantee the safety of the Canadians, who had responded by withdrawing their UNEF contingent immediately (placing a severe burden on the rest of UNEF, which depended on Canadian aircraft for logistics support). No other units had left

Egypt—as opposed to positions in the line—before the Israelis struck on 5 June.³³

In the UN archives there is a “Note for the File of July 11, 1968,” in which Ralph Bunche reports a conversation on that day with Muhammad Riad, who was Mahmoud Riad’s senior assistant in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. Bunche told Riad of the two determining factors in U Thant’s decision to agree to UNEF withdrawal:

(a) El Kony’s warning to him that the state of mind in Cairo was so disturbed that there was no possibility that there would be a change. Thus, when U Thant informed El Kony that he was about to send a direct appeal to President Nasser to reconsider the demand for the withdrawal of UNEF, within an hour El Kony returned, saying that he had been on the phone with Foreign Minister Riad who had instructed him to urge U Thant on Riad’s behalf most strongly not to make an appeal to President Nasser because he was fully determined on this matter and that any such appeal would be certain to be met with a “stern rebuff”

(b) The information given to the Secretary-General, which he had not theretofore had, of the meeting of the [UN] Advisory Committee [on UNEF] which was called immediately after the withdrawal demand was received, from the Permanent Representatives of India and Yugoslavia that they and the Representatives of other contingents in UNEF had been called to the Foreign Office in Cairo that very morning [17 May?] and had been informed of the demand for the withdrawal of UNEF and had in turn assured the Foreign Office that their contingents would immediately be withdrawn. In this regard, it was virtually certain that some other contingents such as the Danes and the Swedes would also take the same position, since their governments had always made their contingents available on the basis of their acceptability to the country on whose territory they were to be deployed.³⁴

Finally, there is the secretary-general’s own comment, in a small, handwritten note attached to the draft memorandum of his conversation with Mahmoud Riad in Cairo on 23 May. This was in the morning, before his conversation with Nasir. U Thant began by recounting the developments that had led him to order the withdrawal of UNEF. He had consulted the UNEF Advisory Committee before final action was taken. Brazil, Canada, Denmark, and Norway were opposed to withdrawal and wanted him to refer the issue to the General Assembly at an emergency session. Sweden also did not appear to approve of withdrawal. Only India, Pakistan, and Yugoslavia fully supported his action. Outside these consultations, France’s attitude seemed to be neutral. The United Kingdom and the United States were opposed to withdrawal, but the Soviet Union wanted him to comply with the Egyptian request. The handwritten note indicates that at this point an insertion should be made as follows:

33. Conversation with Brian Urquhart, New York, March 2, 1990. A full description of the Canadian withdrawal can be found in Rikhye’s *Sinai Blunder*, pp. 87–9.

34. UN Archives: DAG 1/5.2.2.1.2:1 Middle East-Cairo Visit 67.

SG [secretary-general] also added that member states could ask for an Emergency Session of the General Assembly under the existing rules, but no member state indicated to him any desire to take such an initiative. *If the members wished they could even ask for a meeting of the Security Council. But no member of the UNEF Advisory Committee, nor in fact no member state ever came up with such a proposal. The blame was put only on him (SG).*³⁵

The italicized portion was lined through and presumably dropped from the final version, but is still quite legible. Reading it, and the rest of the above account, it is evident that mind-set played a major role in what happened. Nasir (according to Heikal) sees Bunche as a malevolent figure trying to entrap Egypt and, therefore, Nasir has no alternative but to take a step he should have known would be suicidal. Meanwhile, U Thant complains that no one volunteered to ask for a meeting of the Security Council or the General Assembly. If that was such a good idea, why did he not suggest that to some delegation himself? One can understand his sensitivity to the blame, some of it quite unmerited, that was allocated to him, but a more assertive performance on his part might have made a difference.

THE CLOSURE OF THE STRAIT OF TIRAN

Up until 18 May, the Egyptians had been in control of the situation. They were making the decisions and issuing the orders in light of what they saw as Egypt's national interests. Once they had called for UNEF's withdrawal, however, it became difficult, if not impossible, to turn back. They had unleashed a current of popular reaction in the Arab world that carried them away, and they had created a new situation on the ground that dominated the decision-making process: UNEF withdrew from Sharm al-Shaykh on 21 May and the Egyptians quickly occupied that position to prevent the Israelis from doing so. They were then in a position to return the situation to what it was before the Tripartite invasion in 1956. They could control traffic through the Strait of Tiran and could no longer use UNEF's presence as an excuse for not stopping ships bound for Eilat, Israel's port on the Red Sea. The various accounts agree that Nasir and Amr felt it was a political necessity to close the strait.

At noon on 22 May, Nasir and Amr, accompanied by other senior officers, went to the forward air base at Bir Gifgafa, in the Sinai. There Nasir spoke to a group of officers and in extended remarks told them that Egypt would be closing the strait to Israeli shipping and cargo, and, if this meant war, so be it. His statement was broadcast over Cairo radio after midnight on 23 May.³⁶

There are differing accounts as to when and how the decision to close the strait was made. In his Revolution Day speech on July 23, 1967, Nasir said it was

35. UN Archives: DAG 1/5.2.2.1.2:1 Cairo Meeting May 24, 1967.

36. The text can be found in *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, 1967* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 490–3.

taken on 22 May. General Fawzi says both Amr and Nasir told him it was taken on 17 May.³⁷ Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, one of the original members of the Revolutionary Command Council says Nasir told him and two other retired members of the RCC—Hassan Ibrahim and Kamal al-Din Hussein—on 29 May that the plan from the beginning had been to remove UNEF and occupy Sharm al-Shaykh.³⁸ Nasir, on the other hand, said publicly at Bir Gifgafa on 22 May that there was no plan. Four days later, however, he told Arab trade unionists that he was authorized by the “Supreme Executive Council [of the Arab Socialist Union] to implement this plan at the right time. The right time came when Syria was threatened with aggression.”³⁹

Anwar al-Sadat, Zakaria Muhieddin, and Hussein al-Shafi'i, also members of the RCC and of the Supreme Executive Council, agree that the decision to close the strait was taken at a meeting of that body, but they do not give a date.⁴⁰ Sadat and Shafi'i also agree that on that occasion Nasir said closing the strait would raise the risk of war to 100 percent, although Nasir himself claimed in his speech on July 23, 1967, that he had put it at 50 percent.⁴¹

What sounds like the most accurate account is in Heikal's *1967: Al-Infjjar*.⁴² He says the meeting of the Supreme Executive Council began at 9:00 P.M. on 21 May and lasted until 12:30 A.M. on 22 May. A limited number of ministers, as well as military experts, attended the meeting in addition to members of the council. Heikal reports Nasir as saying that the risk of war would go up to 50 percent if the strait were closed and that, given the increased danger, the essential risk was the condition of the armed forces. If they were not ready, he could cover for them politically. That would be difficult, but he did not want to put an impossible burden on the armed forces. Amr had replied, in effect, that he saw no alternative to closure of the strait and that his forces were “ready for the situation and had both defensive and offensive plans.” (Sadat quotes Amr as saying, “On my head be it, Boss! Everything is in tiptop shape.”⁴³ Shafi'i in 1968 quoted Amr as saying, “bi raqbiti,” or “on my neck.”⁴⁴) Orders for closure of the strait were issued on 22 May to take effect on the morning of 23 May.

Heikal confirms what Nasir had told U Thant—that an important factor in the timing was U Thant's scheduled arrival in Cairo on 23 May. The Egyptians wanted to have the decision announced before he came so he would not try to dissuade them. (U Thant was, in fact, annoyed to learn of the decision during a

37. Fawzi, *Harb al-thalath sanawat*, pp. 76–82.

38. Baghdadi, *Mudhakirat*, p. 274.

39. As translated in FBIS—Middle East, Africa, and West Europe, May 23, 1967, pp. B2-B3.

40. Sadat's report of the meeting is in *In Search of Identity*, p. 172. Shafi'i's is in *al-Ahram*, February 26, 1968, p. 1. Muhieddin, in a conversation with the author in Cairo on June 3, 1989, said the Sadat version was essentially correct.

41. As translated in FBIS—Middle East and North Africa, July 24, 1967, p. B4.

42. Heikal, *1967: Al-Infjjar*, pp. 514–19.

43. Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p. 172.

44. *Al-Ahram*, February 26, 1968, p. 1.

stopover in Paris and did not take kindly to the Egyptian explanation that they did not want to embarrass him. He told Nasir he thought it made war inevitable.)

Here was a second point at which the Egyptians could have temporized and allowed themselves to be saved from war. It would have been difficult, but Nasir had indicated in the council meeting that they could still pull back. They could have waited until U Thant arrived and allowed themselves to be talked out of closure and into submitting the issue to the International Court of Justice. The Israelis would have opposed this suggestion, but the international community would have supported it. Such action would at least have gained time until the situation on the ground could cool down. Unfortunately, the Egyptians did not seem to be interested in salvation. The impression held by many foreign diplomats in Cairo at the time was that the Egyptians had the bit in their teeth and were headed for confrontation, confident they would win. The public record to date seems to bear this out. Nasir's remarks at the Supreme Executive Council meeting may have been intended to make people think carefully about what they were doing and to absolve himself of responsibility for any military misjudgement involved. They also sound like the last call of a leader about to embark on a perilous undertaking who wants to make sure people are with him.

NASIR AND AMR

Nasir's actions made little sense if he did not think that his army—although much of it was tied down in the Yemen—was ready to take on Israel. The puzzle ever since has been how he could have thought that. As late as 4 March, during US ambassador Lucius Battle's farewell call on him, he had said his armed forces were not ready to fight Israel,⁴⁵ and no one who knew Egypt as Nasir did would have expected that situation to change in a mere three months. Most Western observers—or at least the US intelligence establishment—had no doubt that Israel would defeat the combined Arabs easily, but it is not clear how widely this view was shared.

As noted earlier, generals Fawzi and Murtagi claim there was no enthusiasm among the Egyptian commanders for either occupying Sharm al-Shaykh or closing the Strait of Tiran to Israeli traffic. According to them, the military did not feel they were ready to take on the Israelis, and they were disturbed by the disorganized manner in which the Egyptian response to the Israelis was being handled by Amr and the clique around him. It is not clear to what extent this is an accurate reflection of their feelings in May 1967 and to what extent it is a post hoc exculpation of themselves. Certainly their doubts were not apparent at the time to the public or to the rest of the Arabs. In the words of one Arab journalist who had just attended Nasir's 28 May press conference, the only question in Cairo was at

45. Conversation with Battle, Washington, DC, October 7, 1989.

what point the United States would intervene to save the Israelis from destruction.⁴⁶

Many observers, including Egyptians, have assumed that the Soviets must have known the true state of the Egyptian armed forces, given the large number of military officers stationed in Egypt to administer the Soviet military aid program. Soviet sources in Moscow, however, later told this author that the upper levels of the Soviet hierarchy believed that the Egyptians—equipped with Soviet arms—were more than a match for the Israelis, and that Communist Party secretary Leonid Brezhnev, in particular, had been very irresponsible in telling the Egyptians how strong and capable they were. Soviet officers working with Egyptian units in the field reportedly knew better, but they were discouraged from reporting the facts because such news was unpopular further up the line, where a vested interest in proving how efficacious Soviet aid was may have led people to gloss over obvious failings. If the records of Soviet military aid administration are ever made available to researchers, they may illuminate this question.

Soviet assurances of Egyptian competence may well have misled Nasir and others, but Nasir's own explanation was that he was misled by Amr, who had excluded him from military affairs although he was nominally commander in chief of the armed forces.⁴⁷ There is disagreement among Nasir's former associates as to whether this was possible and as to whether Nasir knew the true state of the armed forces. Muhieddin, who was then second vice president, for example, maintains that Nasir had his ways of knowing what was going on in the military and that his behavior was reckless and out of character. Muhieddin ascribes this to a flareup of his diabetes.⁴⁸

Others maintain that Nasir did not know the state of affairs in the armed forces. He told Abd al-Majid Farid, secretary of the Supreme Executive Council, for instance, that, as Farid knew, he was a good chess player, and that if he had known the truth about the armed forces, he would have acted differently. Farid said that in the spring of 1967 Nasir tried to use the former officers around him, including Farid, to conduct a discreet evaluation of the armed forces through their old colleagues who were still in the services. Amr learned of this and made Nasir stop because it was contrary to a secret agreement between them that Nasir would not attempt to use the former officers for this purpose.⁴⁹

A recurring theme in the remarks of survivors of the Nasir era is the rivalry between Nasir and Amr. A good deal has been written on the subject since 1967, most of it in Arabic. Sources consulted for this article include Abd al-Latif Baghdadi's *Mudhakhirat*, vol. 2, Mahmoud Riad's *Amrika wa al-Arab*, General Muhammad Fawzi's *Harb al-thalath sanawat*, Abdallah Imam's *Nasir wa Amr*,

46. Conversation with the journalist in question.

47. Mahmoud Riad, *Mudhakhirat Mahmud Riyadh* (Memoirs of Mahmoud Riad), vol. 3, *Amrika wa al-Arab* (America and the Arabs) (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1986), p. 39.

48. Conversation with Muhieddin, Cairo, June 3, 1989.

49. Conversation with Farid, London, October 3, 1990.

and Abd al-Majid Farid's *Min mahadir ijtima'at Abd al-Nasir*.⁵⁰ The following is a brief summary of points found in these accounts.

Nasir and Amr were like brothers. They had been very close since they were young officers and were the principal plotters of the 1952 revolution. They named their sons after each other and Amr's daughter married Nasir's younger brother. Nasir had had confidence in Amr's loyalty and needed his political skills. He promoted Amr over the ranks of many other officers who were senior to him and much better qualified militarily and made him, in effect, commander in chief of the armed forces, although nominally he was second in command.

There seems to be general agreement that Amr was militarily incompetent. There were many stories about his use of hashish and about the corruption of the clique of favorites with which he surrounded himself. He did not perform well in the 1956 war and was held responsible by many for the breakup of the union with Syria in 1961. Nasir tried to ease him out of his command position on at least three occasions—1956, 1961, and 1962—the last effort being the best known. On that occasion Nasir formed the Supreme Executive Council, which was to include all the active members of the RCC with the stipulation that they would have to relinquish any executive positions they held. Amr refused to accept the appointment if it meant surrendering his functions as commander of the armed forces and presented his resignation in protest.

Subsequently, in a large meeting with military officers, Nasir was taken by surprise by what amounted to a demonstration insisting that Amr should remain in command. Nasir sensed that his own position was threatened and backed down. From then on, there was no stopping Amr, who became a law and a power unto himself. He had absolute authority over the military establishment, including its budget, and he managed to keep Nasir out of military affairs. Nasir complained to his associates about Amr's insubordination and empire-building, but was afraid to challenge him because he was not sure where the loyalty of the officer corps lay.

Had anyone attempted to sell such a story to the US embassy in Cairo in 1967, he would have had little success. To diplomats in Cairo, there was no doubt that Nasir was fully in command and that Amr was a secondary figure basking in the reflected light from Nasir. Now, 25 years later, in assessing blame for what happened, it is tempting to put it all on Amr and to conclude that his headstrong temperament and limited military competence led him to embark on an adventure in which Nasir was dragged along, reluctantly at first, but increasingly willingly, as he was carried away by the wave of enthusiasm across the Arab world.

The truth is probably a good deal more complicated than that. There were many factors aside from Amr that were working on Nasir: Egypt's desperate

50. Abdullah Imam, *Nasir wa Amr* (Nasir and Amr) (Cairo: Ruz al-Yusuf, 1985); Abd al-Majid Farid, *Min mahadir ijtima'at Abd al-Nasir* (From the minutes of the meetings of Abd al-Nasir) (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Abhath al-Arabiyya, 1979).

economic situation; the bitter rivalries that he had helped foster between himself and the conservative Arab leaders; the Yemen imbroglio; his conviction the Americans were out to get him (at one point he claimed that the Americans were trying to assassinate him and did not appear to believe their denials); his paranoid fears of the so-called Islamic Pact, which was largely a journalistic figment; and his misreading of the Soviet commitment and Israeli capabilities and determination. All these factors led him to seize an opportunity to follow an adventuresome course that he might have avoided at other times. Perhaps he felt that he had no alternative to going along with Amr, if he was uncertain about the loyalty of the military, yet he appeared to do so with enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION

The degree to which mindset and random or irrational factors played a role in sending Egypt down the slippery slope in 1967 is impressive. One Soviet source speculated that the Soviet report regarding the movement of Israeli brigades was the result of overzealousness on the part of some Soviet intelligence officer. If so, what a burden of responsibility he must bear, if he exists. Will it ever be known to whom or what he was reacting?

If it is true that Yitzhak Rabin never made the famous statement about occupying Damascus and the story was due to misreporting by United Press International, what a burden of responsibility that agency must bear. By all accounts, that story played a major role in persuading the Egyptians that the Israelis were indeed about to attack.

Then there is the Islamic Pact, a shadowy grouping of conservative Islamic leaders, including King Faysal of Saudi Arabia and the shah of Iran, that figured so prominently in Nasir's rhetoric at the time and which he seemed to see as evidence of an American-inspired plot against him. It had little substance, but Nasir seemed to believe press reports of its growing importance. What a burden of responsibility the journalists who promoted it must bear.

There is also Nasir's reported belief that Ralph Bunche was laying a trap for him, a belief probably promoted by Kony, the Egyptian UN delegate, who thought Bunche was an American stooge. How big a role did this misapprehension play in persuading Nasir to cut his own throat?

What importance should we give to the US failure to have an ambassador on the scene in time to do any good? Ambassador Lucius Battle had left in early March. His successor, Richard Nolte, did not arrive until 21 May, in spite of repeated messages from the chargé d'affaires, David Nes, that we were heading into a critical situation, and he should get there soon after Battle left. Did it make any difference? To those on the ground at the time it certainly seemed to because it meant there was no US diplomat who had access to Nasir at a time when US credibility, or lack of it, was a critical factor in Egyptian acceptance of the Israeli troop concentration report. On the other hand, given that General Fawzi's report

that there were no concentrations apparently had no effect, it is not clear that a US ambassador would have had better luck.

As noted earlier, perhaps it would have made a difference if a more dynamic secretary-general had been at the helm in New York, but how would the Egyptians have responded if U Thant had tried to put them off? It was clear that, whatever he did, the Yugoslavs and Indians would have withdrawn their contingents if Egypt asked them to do so, and that would have gutted UNEF. Furthermore, the Egyptian military was in the driver's seat and looked full of confidence and uninterested in compromise. There was little scope for diplomacy. General Rikhye seems to blame himself for not going to Cairo immediately to discuss the Egyptian request with the authorities there. Would that have made a difference? It is doubtful.

Speculating about "what if" is profitless, but it is clear that the June war came when it did because of multiple human failures to foresee properly the results of various courses of action. While we cannot absolutely exclude the possibility that Nasir and Amr planned the war, it looks to this author more like the result of incompetence than of malevolence.

