

# Why Diplomacy Failed to Avert the Six Day War

Jun 4, 2007



Brief Analysis

On June 4, 2007, Moshe Raviv addressed The Washington Institute's symposium marking the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Moshe Raviv served as an aide to Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban in 1967. The following is the prepared text of his remarks.

Thank you very much for inviting me to address this symposium. As time passes, many remember the Six Day War. However, few recollect the vigorous diplomatic endeavours that preceded the war. Every military battle is meticulously analyzed and lessons are drawn. It is just right to do the same with the three weeks of persistent, relentless diplomatic activity in 1967 that produced no results. I should like now to take you back to the historic three weeks from May 15 to June 5, 1967.

On the morning of May 15 1967, Israel celebrated its nineteenth anniversary. A few hours before the customary Independence Day parade, the Chief of Staff, General Yitzhak Rabin, informed Prime Minister Eshkol that the Egyptian army was in a high state of alert. Some hours later the first reports of movement of Egyptian troops into the Sinai came in.

Similar reports arrived in a cable from our Ambassador in Washington. As political Secretary to Foreign Minister Abba Eban, I was privy to regular assessments of our intelligence and I can state with absolute certainty that neither the government nor the Israel Defense Forces expected such. ominous developments in mid-May 1967.

In the first assessment of the situation at PM Eshkol that afternoon, ministers were puzzled by Nasser's decision to deploy his army in broad daylight. Was it a serious move or, was it just posturing, they pondered. It was clear that Nasser was displaying boldness, playing brinkmanship and testing our resolve. The army took it as a serious threat, and rightly so.

In Egyptian documents that we have uncovered after the War, we found Battle Order number 3/67 issued by the Egyptian High Command on May 18. It read: "An offensive operation is planned for the cutting off of the Southern Negev area and to conquer Eilat," then outlining the army units that would be allocated to the operation. Thus, the Egyptian leadership had a clear vision and a defined objective. To realize the old Nasser dream of cutting off part of the Negev in order to create a contiguous border between Egypt and Jordan.

The next day, May 16, Nasser asked the UN to redeploy the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai to Sharm el-Sheikh, in violation of internationally agreed arrangements that had existed for 10 years.

The UN Secretary General, U Thant, maintained that Nasser could not dictate the deployment of UN forces. Either they would remain in place or, they would be totally withdrawn. Nasser then asked for their full evacuation.

On the same day, Cairo radio further clarified Nasser's intentions, declaring, "The existence of Israel has continued too long. The battle has come in which we shall destroy Israel."

Israel's diplomatic efforts to defuse the crisis started with the first news of the evolving situation on the Egyptian front. Our aim was to prevent the war. Foreign Minister Abba Eban summoned the ambassadors of the U.S., Britain

and France, stressing to them that the withdrawal of UNEF from the Sinai represented a change of the status quo and a breach of the 1957 understandings according to which only the General Assembly of the UN could decide on the evacuation of UNEF. In his conversation with U.S. ambassador Walworth Barbour, Eban stressed the urgent need to de-escalate the situation and to press Nasser to reduce the Egyptian forces in the Sinai. He also advocated a clear signal from the U.S. that if Israel were compelled to act, America would support it.

PM Eshkol informed the Western Powers that if Egypt did not attack Israel, we would not take action against Egyptian forces in Sharm el-Sheikh -- until and unless Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to navigation of Israeli vessels.

A further attempt to de-escalate the tension was made by the PM in a speech to the Knesset on May 22. While reporting to Parliament that the Egyptian forces in the Sinai had increased from 35,000 troops on May 14 to 80,000 troops, Eshkol expressed Israel's readiness to participate in an effort to reinforce stability and advance peace in the region.

Our ambassadors around the world were instructed to make similar representations. The response that we had received from the international community in our diplomatic discourse was very disappointing. It could be summed up in one word: Restraint. Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin offered some erudite advice. In a letter to Eshkol he suggested to resolve the crisis by "non-military means." With every passing hour it became evident that Israel would have to fight alone.

Nasser's reply to Eshkol's peaceful appeal in the Knesset came on May 23. In a fiery and belligerent speech to a group of officers in the Sinai, he announced that the Straits of Tiran would be closed to Israeli ships and to strategic cargoes carried by other ships to Israel, which meant oil. In Nasser's own words, "Under no circumstances can we permit the Israeli flag to pass through the Gulf of Aqaba." Nasser also repeated the false accusation of "huge" Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border.

The Cabinet convened on May 23, faced with the following situation: UNEF was ordered to evacuate the Sinai, a naval blockade was imposed on the Straits of Tiran, and a growing military buildup of Egyptian forces in the Sinai.

In the region, the galloping radical pan-Arabism that Nasser had pursued threatened to engulf the whole Middle East and endangered moderate Arab regimes.

Thirteen days remained for diplomatic activity until the outbreak of war. These were dubbed in Israel as the agonizing "waiting period" that had a profound impact on the domestic political scene. For it was perceived as a period of procrastination and lack of decisiveness by the government, while the number and strength of Egyptian units in the Sinai was increasing daily. Yet the Eshkol government did not rush into war, although most Israelis concluded by then that war was unavoidable. The government ascertained that the army was prepared for imminent war and, at the same time, continued to explore every possible diplomatic avenue that could avoid war.

One of the perplexing questions was whether the international guarantees that Israel had received in 1957 could be activated. Following the Suez War in 1956, The Eisenhower administration put heavy pressure on Ben-Gurion to withdraw from the Sinai. In order to induce Israel to withdraw, Abba Eban, then Ambassador to Washington, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Ambassador Havre Alphanth, representing the French government, worked out a set of assurances for free passage of Israeli ships through the Straits of Tiran. These assurances were endorsed in the UN General Assembly by the maritime powers. For ten years Israeli vessels navigated freely through the Gulf of Aqaba. Nasser's actions were in clear contravention of these international undertakings.

I accompanied Eban on a rushed trip to Paris, London and Washington to explore whether the Western powers could exert their influence on Nasser to prevent war; also, to test whether there was any value to the international guarantees of free passage in the Straits of Tiran; and, primarily, to ensure the support of the United States in case

Israel will have to fight alone.

We landed in Paris on May 24, twenty four hours after the closure of the straits. Eban went straight to the Elysee Palace to meet General de Gaulle. I have accompanied Eban to many diplomatic encounters and I have never seen him as frustrated and disappointed as after his conversation with de Gaulle. The French president urged Israel not to wage war and insisted that the Four Powers resolve the crisis.

When Eban recalled the 1957 assurances of free navigation, de Gaulle said, "1967 is not 1957," adding that there were no Western solutions in 1967 and that the Soviets must be included in attempts to resolve the conflict. The high principle of freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba that the French advocated in 1957 evaporated in 1967.

The atmosphere in London was very different. Prime Minister Harold Wilson, sympathetic and well informed, had shown great concern. Eban defined our choices succinctly. They were: "To surrender, to fight alone or join with others in an international effort to force Nasser's withdrawal from the present course."

Wilson said that Nasser must not be allowed to triumph and that Britain was firmly supporting free navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba. He was prepared to act in concert with other maritime states to open the Straits of Tiran.

At least we found understanding, but still, it was a far cry from action that could roll Nasser's army back.

We now embarked on the crucial visit to Washington. When we landed in Washington on May 25, the assessment in Jerusalem was that the Egyptian deployment was offensive and an attack on Israel was imminent. Eban was instructed by the prime minister to request urgently an American declaration that an attack on Israel is equivalent to an attack on the U.S. The hope was that such a declaration would deter Nasser from attacking. Within hours Eban was received by the secretary and transmitted the request. Rusk said that the foreign minister had raised questions that involved constitutional decisions. He promised to transmit the request to the president and cautioned against Israel being the first to open hostilities. The U.S. initiated a comprehensive intelligence assessment of the situation and the Egyptian ambassador was invited to the State Department and given a stern warning against attacking Israel.

In the next 24 hours there were constant contacts with American officials at State and at the Pentagon, culminating in Eban's conversations with the secretary of defense and the president. Eban wanted to find out whether, apart from the two options, war or surrender to Nasser's designs, there was a third option. It soon became clear that the 1957 assurances were of no value. The State Department started to probe a British initiative that called for a declaration by the maritime powers reiterating their adherence to free navigation, followed by a joint naval task force that would unblock the Straits.

In his conversation with Eban, the president was very friendly and very concerned with the situation. He wanted some time to test the naval task force idea and repeated the famous sentence coined by Dean Rusk: "Israel will not be alone unless it decides to do it alone."

Eban and I left Washington with a heavy heart. We sensed in our bones the agony of endless waiting while allowing the Egyptians to strengthen their buildup in the Sinai that was detrimental to Israel's security. At the same time, we understood the constraints on the president. With half a million American troops in Vietnam, the U.S. wanted to avoid any potential military involvement. We remembered the president's words in an informal conversation with our deputy chief of mission in Washington, Efraim Evron: "I, Lyndon Johnson, have to get congressional approval if I want to act as president of the United States. Otherwise, I am just a six-foot-four Texan friend of Israel." In the prevailing mood in Congress, it was difficult to envisage endorsement of American involvement in pre-emptive military action.

We landed in Israel on the evening of May 27, and were whisked away straight from the airport to the Cabinet, which was in session. The army was to strike the next morning and the prime minister waited only for Eban's report on his

conversation with the president. Eban faithfully reported on his trip to the three capitals -- concentrating, obviously, on Washington. He recommended that the Cabinet allow the president some time so that he could test whether the naval task force was feasible and could become operative. A heated discussion ensued and continued until the early hours of the morning. The PM then ordered a vote and the Cabinet split. Nine ministers voted for attacking immediately and nine voted to accept Eban's recommendation. The PM supported Eban, and so it was decided to give diplomacy another few days to try and avert the war.

Israel was not alone in its diplomatic efforts to prevent the war. The Security Council was nearly in constant session since the crisis broke out -- with no results.

The secretary general of the UN traveled to Cairo on May 24, trying to defuse the crisis -- no results.

The British foreign secretary, George Brown, went to Moscow, attempting to convince Soviet leaders to work for the return of UNEF to the Sinai. He failed in his mission.

Two special American envoys, Robert Anderson and Ambassador Charles Yost, visited Cairo and returned empty handed. The United States made representations in Moscow and Cairo in the strongest possible terms and at the highest level. They had no effect.

Why did all formal and informal channels to Nasser fail to convince him to stop the escalation to war?

Nasser was driven by his vision of himself as the prime pan-Arab leader. He was intoxicated with the response of the Arab masses to his inflaming rhetoric, and the wild anti-Israel sentiment that they had evoked.

Soviet support and Soviet policies gave Nasser and his generals the confidence that they could exploit the situation and triumph.

The Soviet attitude was a crucial element in the crisis from its very beginning and it is heavily to blame for the failure of diplomacy to prevent the war. It was influenced by their Cold War ambitions; CIA Director Richard Helms has best described their designs in a briefing note prepared for a White House meeting on May 23: "Unrest and tension are and have been exceptionally useful to the Soviets in their attempt to erode Western influence in the Middle East."

They wanted their client, Nasser, to succeed. However, Soviet policy was not uniform. During a secret mission to Moscow by the Egyptian minister of war, Shamas Badran, and other high-ranking officials on May 25-28, some Soviet officials, headed by Kosygin, requested the Egyptians to de-escalate the crisis, but the Soviet defense minister, Marshal Grechko, told Badran that the Russians "would fill all Egypt's requests for arms," "the Soviet Union would enter the war on Egypt's side if the United States entered the war," and "if something happens and you need us, just send us a signal."

On the Soviet role as perceived by Egypt, we can learn from the decree by Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, Deputy Supreme Commander of Egypt's Armed Forces, of 2 June 1967. He wrote to his troops:

". . . In view of the strong position of the government of the Soviet Union and its readiness to intervene immediately if any big power should go to war against Egypt, it is no longer to be expected under any circumstances that the United States government should join in a military adventure on Israel's side. . . . Israel will not be able to bear the burden of mobilization for a long time. Mobilization has already brought total paralysis of the Israeli economy. . . . Accordingly, I have completed my plans and issued my orders for the organization of the operation."

There can be no better illustration of the grave peril that Israel had faced than this order. Indeed, we have later learned that Soviet naval and air force units were ordered to stand by for direct intervention in the war. In a National Security meeting, headed by the president on May 24, Lucius Battle rightly remarked, "Nasser either has some Soviet support that we don't know about, or had gone slightly insane." American firm diplomacy coupled with Israel's speedy victory blocked these sinister Soviet intentions.

Nasser, like many a dictator, failed to understand our democratic system. He construed debate as weakness, reluctance to rush into war as lack of resolve. He knew that the U.S. was embroiled in Vietnam. He also took note of the modest results that our contacts in Washington and in other Western capitals had produced. Hence, Nasser's total obduracy that turned any and all diplomatic efforts to prevent the war into failure.

Effective diplomacy must rest on intensive dialogue, on a minimum degree of mutual trust, and on readiness to compromise. A dialogue between Nasser and the Western powers had existed, but it was devoid of trust and the Egyptian dictator did not show any readiness to compromise.

I know that historic analogies are far from being mathematics. Yet, if we look at three dictators in recent history, Nasser, Saddam Hussein, and Ahmadinezhad, we find many similarities that do not augur well for diplomacy. They are sharing a hefty measure of self-delusion and a gross underestimation of their adversaries. At the same time they strongly believe in their unlimited ability to manipulate the free world. At the end, they fail, but with great cost in human suffering.

In Israel, we had a prudent government, an experienced and reflective chief of staff, General Rabin, and a brilliant diplomat and statesman as foreign minister, Abba Eban. With all the dangers involved, they let diplomacy take its course and did not rush into war. But, at the end, it was a question of self-preservation. Israel could not afford to let Nasser triumph.

On June 5, 1967, after 22 days of vigorous diplomacy, the Six Day War started.

The rest is history. ❖

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