The Six-Day War Revisited

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Abstract: Based on recently declassified US and Israeli documents, and on memoirs of key contemporary actors, this paper argues that the Six-Day War was the outcome of miscalculation by the Egyptian leadership about developments of the May-June 1967 crisis on the one hand, and a subtle coordination, not a conspiracy, between Israel and the United States on the other. It also argues that the Soviet Union and Syria acted deliberately to incite Egyptian involvement in the crisis for their own political purposes.
Table of Contents

Introduction ..................................................................................................................5
Conspiracy vs. Inadvertent War .................................................................................6
Egypt’s War ..................................................................................................................7
Israel’s War ..................................................................................................................14
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................19
References ...............................................................................................................21
Introduction

The origin of the Six Day War in June 1967 dates back almost two decades when the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948 concluded with the establishment of the State of Israel in historical Palestine, and with armistice agreements on the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian fronts, supervised by the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). In 1956 Israel deepened its enmity with Egypt when it invaded the Sinai in cooperation with Britain and France in reaction to President Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal. The Suez War ended with two principal arrangements: the establishment of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) along the Egyptian-Israeli border, but stationed only on Egyptian territory, and the Egyptian approval of the free passage of Israeli ships in the Gulf of Aqaba - leading to the Israeli port of Eilat - through the Straits of Tiran.

In the aftermath of the Syrian-Israeli clashes in April 1967, a crisis erupted when Syria and the Soviet Union reported to Egypt on Israeli mobilization preparatory to an attack on Syria. Nasser vowed to come to Syria’s aid and decided on a series of escalatory steps: mobilizing Egyptian troops in the Sinai on May 14, requesting the withdrawal of UNEF on May 16, and declaring the Straits of Tiran closed to Israeli shipping on May 22. Responding to the ostensible Egyptian threat, Israel waged a general war on June 5, overcoming the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and occupying the Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Four decades later, and with the exception of the Egyptian Sinai, the Middle East is still coping with the repercussions of this war and occupation.

Two major explanatory models have been employed to understand what led to the Six-Day War: “conspiracy” and “inadvertent war.” The scope of this paper cannot be a full analysis of the May-June 1967 crisis or a comprehensive review of the relevant large body of literature. It rather focuses on certain aspects of the crisis, with the aim not to construct a new theoretical framework but to reassess these two models in the light of new evidence. Based on new evidence from US and Israeli declassified documents, as well as memoirs of key contemporary actors, this paper argues that the Six-Day War was the outcome of miscalculation of the developments of the crisis by the Egyptian leadership on the one hand, and a subtle coordination, not a conspiracy, between Israel and the United States on the other. It also argues that the Soviet Union and Syria acted deliberately to incite the Egyptian involvement in the crisis for their own purposes. The first section of the paper outlines the debate over whether the war was a conspiracy or broke out inadvertently. The next two sections analyze the behavior of the two main belligerents (Egypt and Israel) and their allies respectively. The paper concludes by drawing out some
inferences on how the outbreak of the Six-Day War can better be accounted for.

**Conspiracy vs. Inadvertent War**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines conspiracy as “an agreement between two or more persons to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible... [a] harmonious action or effort.”¹ In this sense, history demonstrates that conspiracies do exist, though they are hardly ever documented – the Treaty of Sèvres, signed in Paris on 24 October, 1919, between Britain, France and Israel to attack Egypt is a rare exception in which the conspirators wrote their intrigue down. As Martin Parker put it, “conspiracy is predicated on uncovering a specific form of order and structure. Once we inhabit the elevated universe of conspiracy, there can be no unexplained residues, everything has a cause, everything has meaning and nothing can be left out.”² Distinct from the concept of “conspiracy,” is conspiratorial thinking that Mark Featherstone regards as a “pathological effect of the dissolution of social recognition, a paranoid form of non knowledge.”³

The “conspiracy theory” model contends that the June 1967 War was a result of a premeditated conspiracy by Israel and the United States to topple Nasser’s regime. The earliest claim to a Western conspiracy could be attributed to Nasser himself. Shocked by the collapse of his forces, Nasser, in a phone call with King Hussein of Jordan on 6 June, asked: “[w]ill we say that the U.S. and Britain [are attacking] or just the United States?” to which Hussein responded, “United States and England.”⁴ Conspiracy theory advocates justify their case by the special relationship between Israel and the United States, the US President Johnson’s advice to Nasser to exercise restraint, and US-Israeli communications prior to the Israeli strike.⁵ Notably, the US-Israeli conspiracy theory is paralleled by another theory

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arguing that the war resulted from premeditated Soviet and Egyptian strategies.\(^6\)

Conversely, proponents of the other model maintain that the Six-Day War is a textbook case of “inadvertent war.” This refers to a war caused by misperception and/or miscalculation, as none of the belligerents has an intent to make war at the onset of the crisis. Unlike the conspiracy theory, the “inadvertent war” explanation is prevalent outside the Arab world. Analyzing the May-June crisis, Charles Yost, the Middle East expert serving in the US Embassy in Cairo in 1967, concludes on the note that “no government plotted or intended to start a war in the Middle East in the spring of 1967.”\(^7\) Janice Stein, in a more rigorous study, proposes two scenarios to what she calls the “miscalculated escalation” in 1967: either Nasser, misperceiving the Egyptian capabilities, provoked a war that Israel had wished to avert or Egypt misread the defensive posture of the mobilized Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as offensive.\(^8\)

**Egypt’s War**

We are not titillated by flatters who incite us to dangerous, ill-advised acts, and we aren’t goaded into going along if somebody provokes us with denunciations instead.\(^9\)

King Archidamus of Sparta

Though it is always uncertain to identify the starting point of a crisis, it can be said that the crisis was instigated on 13 May by the Soviet warning to Egypt that Israel was mobilizing 10 to 12 brigades on the Syrian border in a plan to attack. The Syrians had passed a similar report to President Nasser earlier in the month. The genesis of the Soviet report is still

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contentious but this information proved to be untrue. Of course, it is highly unlikely that the KGB could not verify the truth of Israeli troop concentrations, taking into consideration the opposing reports by the Israel-Syria Mixed Armistice Commission (ISMAC), UNTSO, and General Fawzi, the Egyptian Chief of Staff, upon his visit on 14/15 May to Syria to survey the situation. A rare document, found by the Israeli historian Ahron Bregman, records a conversation of a Soviet official explaining to a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent why the Soviets released this false information:

The USSR wanted to create another trouble spot for the United States in addition to that already existing in Vietnam. The Soviet aim was to create a situation in which the US would become seriously involved economically, politically and possibly even militarily, and would suffer serious political reserves as a result of siding [with the Israelis] against the Arabs.10

This interpretation corresponds to Isabella Ginor’s argument that the report was a “part of a plan approved at the highest level of Soviet leadership to elicit Egyptian action that would provoke an Israeli strike. Soviet military intervention against the ‘agggressor’ was intended to follow.”11 Though her theory fails to explain why such an intervention did not materialize even after its pretext had been met, Ginor vividly authenticates the deliberate Soviet action through declassified Soviet and East German documents. Speaking to the Politburo on 20 June, Brezhnev said: “In mid-May ... The Politburo resolved to bring this information to the attention of the governments of the UAR and Syria.”12 According to Ginor, the report was probably made within the 1967 KGB-STASI Operation Marabu, according to which “the KGB will undertake measures in Arab countries ... around documents manufactured by the [Stasi] and verbal information, exposing the policy of West Germany and the USA against these countries and the common actions of West Germany and Israel against Arab interests.”13

On another account, Michael Brecher argues that the Soviets did so “in a vain effort to activate Egypt and thereby to shore up the Damascus [leftist] regime.”14 Galia Golan makes the same argument; pointing out that since May 1966 the Soviet Union had been releasing reports to the same effect, probably drawing upon the experience of the 1960 Operation Rdam in which the Egyptian mobilization in the Sinai deterred an Israeli strike on

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11 Isabella Ginor, “The Cold War’s Longest Cover-Up,” 34.
12 Ibid., 36.
13 Ibid., 38.
Syria. However, Golan rejects the argument that the Soviet Union planned to provoke a war, demonstrating that no preparations were made for such a scenario, and that the Soviet military movements in the Mediterranean were intended to give credibility to the Soviet “warning messages to both Israel and the United States, informing the latter that Moscow would not stand by idly if Egypt were attacked.”

The debate over whether the Soviets were practicing brinksmanship or intentionally provoking a war is also represented in the mixed signals they delivered to Egyptian officials during the crisis, reflecting a schism within the Soviet leadership. The visit of the Egyptian Minister of War, Shams Badran to Moscow on 25 May is a telling example of this schism. On the one hand, Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin told Badran: “[w]e are going to back you, but you have made your point and won a political victory … It is better to sit at the negotiating table than to wage a battle by the sword.”

On the other hand, Soviet Defence Minister Marshal Grechko said to the Egyptian official that “if America enters the war we will enter it on your side … I want to confirm to you that if something happens and you need us, just send us a signal. We will come to your aid immediately in Port Said or elsewhere.”

The silence of official Syrian sources on reports of Israeli troop mobilization notwithstanding, the position of Damascus could still be discernable. General Fawzi upon his return to Cairo reported not only that there were no signs of Israeli concentrations but also, and more importantly, that the Syrians themselves were not mobilized. A widely accepted explanation for this paradox of Syria - reporting on enemy troops mobilizing on its own borders while not taking the precautionary measure of counter-mobilization - is that the Ba’athists in Syria knowingly transmitted this information to bolster their regime. In 1966, the CIA evaluated the relationship between Nasser and the Syrian regime by stating: “[t]he Ba’athist movement in particular, which not only controls Syria but has branches in most of the Arab world, will resist any effort by Nasser to reassert his domination of Pan-Arab nationalism.” Also, King Hussein had advised Nasser, through an oral message delivered by General Riad,

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16 Ibid., 11. Emphasis added.
19 Quoted in Ibid., 125.
Chief of Staff of the United Arab Command, on 28 April that the Syrian regime is penetrated by foreign intelligence services, and would entrap Nasser in a war through igniting tensions on the Syrian-Israeli border. Building upon similar notions, Ernest Dawn offers an insightful elaboration on the Syrian rationale:

A spectacular Israeli raid, it was feared, might prepare the way for a successful uprising by Syrian dissidents aided by Jordan. Charges of Israeli, and Jordanian, troop concentrations had the potential of undermining the Syrian opposition and the conservative Arab regimes, as well as favouring the Ba'athists over Nasser ... The charges, finally, might persuade or goad Nasser to take action that might deter the Israelis.

Unaware of or distrusting King Hussein’s advice, Nasser vowed to come to Syria’s rescue and decided on a series of escalatory steps: mobilizing Egyptian troops in the Sinai on 14 May, requesting the withdrawal of UNEF on 16 May, and declaring the Straits of Tiran closed to Israeli shipping on 22 May. Moshe Gat explains the Egyptian President’s decisions as “part of a carefully calculated plan, designed to achieve a single and clear-cut strategic goal: war.” Gat considered that “Nasser was too sober-minded, too rational and too prudent a leader to take hasty, ill-considered measures” and that Nasser “had never done anything without carefully thinking through the consequences of his actions.” Therefore, Gat argues, Nasser had repeatedly turned down calls from his fellow Arabs to go to war against Israel during the 1960s, and insisted on specific preconditions for war. In the Arab Summit of January 1964, held after Israel’s diversion of the Jordan River water, Nasser detailed these preconditions which Gat summarizes as follows:

[War] ... was not a matter to be approached lightly and before the Arab states could even think of waging war on Israel they must first attain and secure Arab unity. They must also reform and expand their armies to the point where they were bigger, stronger and better than the IDF. Finally, they must ensure Israel’s diplomatic isolation. As none of these preconditions were in place, the Arab states would have to challenge the Israeli water diversion by other means.

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23 Parker, ed., Six Days of War, 155.
25 Ibid., 631.
26 Ibid., 615.
Challenging Gat’s supposition of Nasser’s rationality, Egypt’s moribund union with Syria (1958-1961), and the Egyptian debacle in the Yemeni Civil War (1962-1970) illustrate how Nasser’s decisions were not always cautiously made. If, for argument’s sake, Nasser was deliberate about such a decisive battle against Israel in 1967, why did not he follow any of his own preconditions for war that Gat acknowledges?

In spite of the Arab unity discourse, Nasser was engaged in fierce inter-Arab rivalry over regional domination, better known as the Arab Cold War.\textsuperscript{27} This culminated in the Yemeni Civil War in which Nasser intervened militarily to support the revolutionary vis-à-vis the Saudi-backed royalist forces - an involvement that proved to be a great drain on Egypt’s financial and military resources. At the end of 1963, according to Gat, Nasser “was not willing to risk a military confrontation with Israel while thousands of Egypt’s soldiers were in Yemen enmeshed in a seemingly endless civil war.”\textsuperscript{28} Consequently, to argue that Nasser in May 1967 was planning to attack Israel when Egypt was at the peak of its involvement in Yemen with 75,000 troops on the ground is unreasonable. Moreover, the American contacts with Egypt in addition to high-level US-Israeli coordination during the crisis, as explained below, indicate that Israel was by no means diplomatically isolated. On the whole, the silence of Gat’s analysis on the details of the alleged “carefully calculated plan” by Nasser, combined with the failure to offer concrete evidence of how Nasser’s preconditions for war were met before the crisis, leaves a crucial gap that questions the very existence of such a war plan.

A more plausible explanation of Nasser’s escalation is that it was an attempt to restore his dominant leadership status before the Arab masses in the mid-1960s, because “[he was] no longer the only Arab nationalist leader capable of facing up to the West, of getting aid from the Soviets, and of carrying out major social reforms.”\textsuperscript{29} Notably, he had probably planned to achieve this goal through emerging victorious from a crisis rather than initiating war against Israel. In fact, it was Nasser’s policy, which he let the Americans know, to “keep the Israeli issue in the icebox.”\textsuperscript{30} Here, the Suez War of 1956 was particularly relevant. It was a military defeat but a political victory for Nasser who had established his role as the leader of Arab


nationalism ever since; Nasser was adored by millions of Arabs who found in him a charismatic hero able to challenge Western imperialism. The significant effect of the Suez War on Nasser’s calculations during the May-June 1967 crisis is elaborated by Salah Nasr, the Egyptian Chief of Intelligence at the time:

In the back of Nasser’s mind was the milieu of the 1956 Suez War and its international context, and Nasser declared that Israel would not be able to wage a war on two fronts unless Israel depended upon the power of the West at least to provide air cover like in 1956. Nasser also thought that if the West did that, the Soviet Union would not stand aside and its reaction would be influential. Thus ... [Nasser] hoped, in the case of Western and Soviet involvement in the military situation, in the emergence of an international crisis that both sides would be willing to avoid.31

This perspective was similar to that of the Soviet Union. Yevgeni Pyrlin, a senior member of the Egypt desk in the Soviet Foreign Ministry at that time, wrote in his memoirs: “it was possible to hope and to count on the fact that the distribution of political forces in the Middle East would be considerably changed due to this war, and that events will take place similar to post-1956 events when the whole chain of revolutions took place in the Arab world, and a number of regimes which were pro-Western were replaced by nationalistic regimes.”32 This similarity in perspective is important not for being an evidence of Soviet-Egyptian coordination, since the Soviets were patently reporting false information to the Egyptians, but for illustrating the (mis)perception that Nasser could lose the battle but still win the war. This is not to say that Nasser was intent on initiating a war, since he rejected the advice of his military commanders to start the hostilities, and opted for waiting the first strike from Israel. This (mis)perception could, in turn, explain why Nasser did not seriously consider ample intelligence warning against the risks of escalation and indicating the Israeli intentions for a pre-emptive strike.33

On close inspection, Nasser’s key decisions in the crisis back up the following thread: Egypt was neither willing nor planning to go to war against Israel. First, a substantive principle of war in itself is “surprise” 34 that basically involves the covert mobilization of forces. In other words, a state preparing to launch an attack on a formidable enemy is not expected

33 Nasr, Mozakerat Salah Nasr (Memories of Salah Nasr), 251-274.
to go publicizing such an intention, unless this state just flexes its muscles and hopes that the attack can be averted. To the contrary of the principle of surprise, the mobilization of Egyptian forces and move to the Sinai were announced publicly and the army marched visibly to the Sinai desert.

Second, Nasser’s original request to the UN was only a partial withdrawal of the UNEF from observation posts along the border. Nevertheless, when the position of the UN Secretary General U Thant was that partial withdrawal was unacceptable, Salah Nasr explains, Nasser “had to make a choice out of two: first, to pull back on the [UNEF] forces withdrawal request … and lose his reputation and be under attack from the opponents; second, to risk [a complete] UNEF withdrawal and fill the void with Egyptian forces and be vulnerable to an armed clash with Israel … Nasser decided to choose the second option.” In the words of Michael Brecher, “the most conspicuous was the taunting of Nasser for ‘hiding behind the UNEF skirt,’ with charges of cowardice, dishonor, and fear unworthy of an Arab leader. Jordan took the lead, but Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and the Palestinians also engaged in harassing the Ra‘is [Arabic for President].” That Nasser’s decision to request withdrawal of UNEF was directly influenced by the above-noted propaganda campaign is corroborated by considering that he could have actually started the fighting without such a request.

Third, during the war, an Israeli naval force landed and captured Sharm el-Sheikh not to relieve the blockade but only to control the Straits. This is because, according to Ahron Bregman, “although Nasser declared to the entire world his intention to impose a blockade on the Straits, and this was indeed the casus belli for Israel to go to war, in reality such a blockade was never imposed.” Consequently, Nasser’s decisions could be better accounted for by his desire to appear as the tenacious leader whose resolve should not be tested, and against the background that he was preoccupied with his prestige in the Arab world; which was under severe attack at that time by his fellow Arabs. Moshe Dayan, the then Israeli Defense Minister, confirms the same view in his memoirs: “[t]he Six Day War broke out because the leadership of Abd-el-Nasser was put to the test.”

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36 Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, 324.
38 Quoted in Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, 345.
Israel’s War

When strong, appear weak. Brave, appear fearful. Orderly, appear chaotic. Full, appear empty ... In one place, appear to be in another.\textsuperscript{39}

Sun Tzu

The “inadvertent war” model asserts that Israel was provoked by the Palestinian guerrilla operations and infiltrations from the Syrian border and, later on time, by the Egyptian mobilization in the Sinai and the closure of the Straits; it was a defensive war waged by Israel to deter an existential threat.\textsuperscript{40} As Brecher put it succinctly, “[a] component of the commonly shared attitudinal prism [between Israeli leaders] was the Holocaust Syndrome, the fear that Israel’s survival was threatened.”\textsuperscript{41} Nonetheless, the memoirs of Israeli leaders and the recently declassified Israeli and US documents tell another story. Indeed, it was the Israelis who were intentionally igniting the situation on the Syrian front. Moshe Dayan explains:

It used to go like this ... We would send a tractor to plow some place of no value in the Demilitarized Zone knowing, in advance, that the Syrians would start shooting. If they refrained, we would instruct the tractor to keep on advancing, until the Syrians lost their temper and started shooting. Then we would start firing artillery and, later, also send our air force.\textsuperscript{42}

A number of UNTSO observers concluded as well that “nine out of every ten incidents were provoked by the Israelis [who were] rather sharper than the Arabs, being careful to record every Arab violation and complain to the UN, whereas the Syrians didn’t bother, so when the written record was looked at in New York it seemed clear that the Arabs were principally to blame.”\textsuperscript{43} Israel could not have perceived a security threat from the border tensions since Israel itself was initiating them.

As for the perceived Egyptian threat, two Israeli leaders who were directly involved in the Israeli decision-making process during the crisis put it bluntly. According to Menachem Begin, the then Minister without Portfolio, “[i]n June ’67 we again had a choice. The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really

\textsuperscript{41} Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy, 333; Oren, Six Days of War, 134-6.
\textsuperscript{42} Bregman, A History of Israel, 105.
\textsuperscript{43} Parker, ed., The Six-Day War, 253.
about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack them.”44 In the words of Mordechai Hod, commander of Israeli Air Force (IAF) at the time: “Sixteen years of planning had gone into those initial eighteen minutes. We lived with the plan, we slept on the plan, we ate the plan, constantly we perfected the plan.”45

New evidence shows that Israel was coordinating with the United States whose enmity with Egypt was growing because of the increasing Soviet influence in the Middle East during the 1960s thanks to Nasser’s support. No less problematic for the United States were Nasser’s policies of regional domination which threatened the oil-rich monarchies in the Gulf. American concerns were manifested in the 1963 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) which considered that “Nasser is and will continue to be a revolutionary, intent not only on reducing Western influence in the Middle East, but on encouraging the overthrow of rival regimes … as in Yemen, where the struggle threatens to spread and directly challenge US and UK interests in the Arabian Peninsula.”46 President Johnson’s Administration had little doubt that the Arab military buildup served other ends than a military confrontation with Israel. In Feb. 1966, the NIE stated that “the Arab armies have other purposes than opposing Israel; they contribute to internal security and are factors in the inter-Arab contest for power and prestige … Nevertheless, the rationale for the buildup is always Israel.”47

The US Administration was also aware that despite their numerical advantages, the Arab armies were no match for the IDF which enjoyed military superiority over any combination of their forces.48 The NIE of April 1967, produced following the earlier tensions on the Israeli-Syrian front, states:

Rivalries and disputes among the Arabs reduce their chances of doing anything significant about their quarrel with Israel; these rivalries also create some danger of precipitating crises from which large-scale Arab-Israeli hostilities could develop … . [The Israelis] could best any one of their neighbours and

44 Quoted in Ibid., 165.
45 Quoted in Ibid.
47 Central Intelligence Agency, “National Intelligence Estimate No. 36-66: The Eastern Arab World.”
probably all of them collectively. Arab cooperation being what it is, Israel probably would not be obliged to take them on all at once.\textsuperscript{49}

Some might argue that Israel may have believed that it could only win a war if the IDF struck first, and that with Egypt mobilizing in the Sinai there was not much choice left. But the above-noted testimony of Begin in addition to Israeli and American knowledge, as explained shortly below, that the Egyptian mobilization posed no threat to Israel disproves the argument that Israel had to judge upon the facts on the ground regardless of the adversary’s intentions, even if it failed to notice from the foregoing indications of Nasser’s decisions that he was not planning to initiate a war.\textsuperscript{50} Accordingly, Nasser’s bellicose rhetoric and decisions could have misled neither the United States nor Israel, because they knew very well about his, and the Arabs’, intentions and capacities.

In talks held with American officials in Washington on 25 May, Israel’s Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, supplemented his request of American support by an Israeli intelligence account of Arab capabilities that had been handed earlier to the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv. President Johnson called for an immediate meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to be preceded by a briefing by the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.\textsuperscript{51} Accordingly, Willard Matthias, a former analyst at the NIE Board, recalls:

\begin{quote}
[A] small group of us gathered on the evening of May 25 in the office of the chief of the estimates staff, with the Israeli estimate and our own estimate of April before us. We reaffirmed our earlier position ... [Both] had the same conclusion. There was no immediate threat to the Israelis...Israel could defeat any combination of Arab states or all of them at the same time and do it within a week’... I do remember that [Richard] Helms reported upon his return from the NSC meeting that Secretary Rusk had turned to him after the meeting and said, ‘Dick, I hope you are right. But if this is a mistake, it will be a beaut.’\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

At the same time, Meir Amit, Chief of Mossad, recounts his meeting with US Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, on 1 June, by saying:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 223-4; Parker, ed., \textit{The Six-Day War}, 217.
\end{quote}
I told him three things. (1) I gave a short description of the military situation. 
(2) I told him ... our economy is at a standstill. We can't go on living like this. 
(3) I told him that I'm personally going to recommend that we take action, 
because there's no way out .... He asked me two questions, only two 
questions. He said, 'How long will it take?' And I said, 'Seven days.' That was 
our assessment. And then, 'How many casualties?'... I said less than in 1948, 
when we had 6,000. That's all.\footnote{Parker, ed., \textit{The Six-Day War}, 217.}

According to Israeli documents, when Mr. Amit met with President 
Johnson earlier on that day, the latter told him:

Well ... do what you have to but tell us what you want us to do... We cannot 
ask you to stand by while your security is threatened and the Soviets are 
hesitating or divided. We know that you can hit Nasser, but it all depends on 
how strong and fast your action will be. Strength, speed and resolve would 
prevent the intervention of any party you – and we – don't wish to be there.\footnote{Mohamed Heikal, "E'nda Sa'at Assefr" (At H-Hour) \textit{Weghat Nazar} no. 24 (January 2001): 14. My translation.}

Thus, high-level US-Israeli coordination on the attack against Egypt 
becomes obvious. Israel was conferred not only the acquiescence of 
American officials to initiate the war – since the US had a genuine interest 
in targeting Nasser – but also their advice to avoid its undesired effects, i.e., 
a possible intervention by the Soviet Union. Also, American officials 
wanted to have the CIA earlier estimates, which expected \textit{precisely} the war 
course and were reviewed with the Israelis, correct.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to conclude that the US-Israeli 
communications prior to the war were part of a pre-planned conspiracy as 
depicted by the "conspiracy theory" proponents. Three incidents in 
paticular indicate the subtle nature of the US-Israeli coordination. First, in 
However, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded in February that the deal 
would be contrary to the US interests in the Middle East.\footnote{United States, Department of State. "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defence McNamara: Military Equipment for Israel," February 2, 1967, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/index.html (accessed March 21, 2006).} On 17 April, 
US Secretary of Defence officially recommended turning down the Israeli 
request with a view to the US relations with Jordan.\footnote{United States, Department of State. "Memorandum From Secretary of Defense to President Johnson:}
struggled hard to extract from the Johnson administration a commitment to Israel’s security, and later an approval for a pre-emptive strike against the mobilized Egyptian army in the Sinai. For instance, President Johnson, earlier in the crisis on 17 May, warned the Israeli Prime Minister against initiating war as “the United States cannot accept any responsibility for situations that are liable to occur as a result of actions in which we were not consulted”\footnote{Quoted in Gat, “Let Someone Else do the Job,” 139; Oren, Six Days of War, 77.} – the US President had made a similar effort later with Egypt when he, on 22 May, wrote to Nasser advising him to exercise self-restraint.\footnote{Oren, Six Days of War, 104.} President Johnson’s change of position, when on June 1 he condoned the Israeli attack, can be explained by his administration’s willingness, as it clear from the letter to the Israeli Premier, not to get involved in a crisis before being consulted, rather than a rejection of the war against Egypt \emph{per se}. These two cases clearly reflect a friction inconsistent with the notion central to the concept of conspiracy – “agreement.”

The third incident is the Israeli air strike on the American surveillance ship, U.S.S. \textit{Liberty}, on 8 June. The ship’s surviving crewmembers maintain that the attacking Israeli pilots knew that they were targeting an American ship. In 2004 the U.S.S. \textit{Liberty} Veterans Association detailed their case and submitted it to the US Secretary of the Army under a report titled “War Crimes Committed against U.S. Military Personnel, June 8, 1967.”\footnote{USS Liberty Memorial, http://www.ussliberty.org/ .} Interpretations of the Israeli drive vary from the desire to attribute the attack to the Egyptians, to preventing the United States from learning about the impending Israeli attack on Syria on 9 June, an operation the US would have opposed. The United States would probably have opposed such attack since the US interest was, as noted above, to target Nasser’s Egypt and to avoid a superpower confrontation with the Soviet Union in case of a wider Middle East conflict. Conversely, the Israeli version asserts that it was an accident caused by the Israeli pilots who mistook the \textit{Liberty} for an Egyptian supply ship. A comprehensive report by the US National Security Agency on the incident could not determine with certainty whether the Israelis deliberately targeted the ship while knowing it was American, concluding that this remains an “unanswered question.”\footnote{United States, National Security Agency. ““U.S. Cryptologic History Report: Attack on a SIGINT Collector, the U.S.S. \textit{Liberty}” 1981, http://www.nsa.gov/liberty/index.cfm (accessed March 27, 2006).} In either case, the very fact that Israel did not know \textit{from} the United States that the \textit{Liberty} was sailing adjacent to the battlefield demonstrates that the two countries,
unlike the political and intelligence cooperation they had, had not coordinated the military action. In other words, if both parties were involved in a conspiracy, the United States would have at least informed Israel about the ship’s zone of operation.

Considering the conflicting strands of evidence, Moshe Gat has attempted to find a middle ground between the two theories: the US, publicly committed to the principle of free passage through the Straits of Tiran as an international waterway, sought a peaceful solution to the crisis; but when this failed, it gave the “green light” for the Israeli attack in order “to escape this awkward state of affairs by getting someone else to deal with the crisis and so relieve it of this onerous and disagreeable burden.”

Nevertheless, Gat’s thesis is founded on flawed presuppositions. While overstating the American commitment to the freedom of shipping, Gat is inattentive to the argument that the closure of the Straits was never actually imposed, as noted above, in the first place. Moreover, if the motivation for the US “green light” was confined to its willingness to open the Straits, it would have approved a limited military action instead of the all-out attack that the IDF launched (in which the whole Egyptian Air Force and the army in the Sinai were virtually destroyed); an attack the US had learned about in advance and the outcome of which it had expected.

**Conclusion**

Both the Soviet Union and Syria were exploiting the Egyptian involvement in the May-June 1967 crisis for their own purposes. On the one hand, the Soviet Union triggered the crisis to create an onerous situation for the United States and its regional ally, Israel; a situation that would eventually bolster the Soviet influence in the region. In the final analysis, unlike the United States which gave a clear acquiescence to the Israeli strike, the Soviet Union was inconsistent in its messages to Cairo during the crisis – some of which urged a political settlement whereas others incited war. This inconsistency reveals that the Soviets, as President Johnson aptly assumed, were either “hesitating or divided.” On the other hand, the Ba’athist regime in Syria had perhaps aspired for a win-win situation: either Nasser takes action and deters the Israelis or he does not, so the Ba’athists would be favored as those challenging the Israelis.

A closer review of Nasser’s actions reveals that he was not following a “carefully calculated plan” for war. Rather, he miscalculated the developments of the crisis. Preoccupied with his prestige in the Arab world, Nasser was incited by the false reports of Israeli troop mobilization and provoked by the antagonist propaganda to start a process of crisis

escalation, which he did in the hope of getting the fruits of a political victory like that of the Suez War of 1956. However, he was to be carried away by these incitements and the developments of the crisis until the fateful defeat.

Israel’s approach to the crisis was quite different. Communications between Israel and the United States prior to the outbreak of the war explicitly indicate both their adequate knowledge of Nasser’s intentions and capacities and an American approval of the Israeli attack against Egypt. Yet since in a conspiracy, as Martin Parker reminds us, “there can be no unexplained residues … everything has meaning and nothing can be left out,” 62 this does not amount to a “conspiracy.” That is because the US Administration’s internal debate over Israel’s arms requests, the Israeli diplomatic struggle to obtain an American commitment to the defence of Israel, and later an approval for a pre-emptive strike, and the IDF attack on the U.S.S. Liberty equally suggest that Israel and the United States did not pre-plan a conspiracy against Egypt in 1967. Therefore, and recalling that conspiratorial thinking is a “pathological effect of the dissolution of social recognition, a paranoid form of non-knowledge,” 63 the spread of “conspiracy theory” in the Arab world could be explained less by concrete evidence of a conspiracy within an inclusive structure, and more by the blow caused by the sudden humiliating defeat against the background of overconfidence, numerical advantage, 64 and the triumphant propaganda.

These communications between the United States and Israel rather demonstrate what could be called a *subtle coordination* that involved their common consideration of the broad aim of the assault on Nasser’s Egypt, but at the same time a divergence on other elements that are basic to a conspiracy, particularly “agreement” and “harmonious action” – in this case joint planning (e.g., the scale and timing of the operation). As such, the term of *subtle coordination* overcomes the long-held irreconcilability between the conflicting strands of evidence. Finally, it is thus plausible to view each of the opposing models – “conspiracy” and “inadvertent war” – in its presuppositions and evidence as telling part of the truth. Indeed, it was only an “inadvertent war” on the part of Egypt, which miscalculated the developments of the crisis and had no intent to initiate a war. And it was less than a “conspiracy” on the part of Israel, which intended to start a war, planned the attack against Egypt unilaterally, and sought to make it in full partnership with the United States, but only managed to realize a subtle coordination.


64 According to the Correlates of War (COW) National Material Capabilities (NMC) dataset, in 1967 Israel had 75 thousand military personnel while Egypt, Syria and Jordan had 220, 80, and 60 thousand respectively. The military expenditure (in thousands of current US dollars) of Israel was 491616, while that of Egypt, Syria and Jordan was 570377, 95812, and 99972 respectively. Correlates of War, http://cow2.la.psu.edu/.
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