

Israeli History, Politics and Society

THE US, ISRAEL, AND EGYPT

DIPLOMACY IN THE SHADOW OF ATTRITION, 1969–70

Yehuda U. Blanga

Translated from Hebrew by
Lenn Schramm and Ben Bokser



The US, Israel, and Egypt

This book deals with the diplomatic triangle of Israel, the United States, and Egypt during the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal in 1969–70. Considering the Egyptian president's political positions and outlooks on the Arab–Israeli conflict and the pan-Arab sphere, relations with the United States, the study reviews the internal disagreements between the State Department and Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor in the White House.

The study demonstrates that the United States and Egypt worked together to thaw their relations after the severance of ties in June 1967, motivated by a desire to protect and advance their interests in the Middle East. The book is based chiefly on textual analysis of political and historical events in the domain of international relations, but with the same attention to internal policy as well. In addition, the research draws chiefly on primary sources that have only recently been released to the general public and that have not yet been the subject of serious analysis. The lion's share of the work is based on qualitative content analysis of documents from the National Archives in Washington and especially of the US State Department.

Providing a reading that is new, comprehensive, and complete, both with regard to the scope of the sources as well as the analysis of developments in the relations between Egypt and the United States, this book is a key resource for students and scholars interested in the Arab–Israeli conflict, political science and diplomacy, Israeli studies and the Middle East.

Yehuda U. Blanga is a senior lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University. His research focuses on the military and political involvement of the superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, in the Middle East and on Egyptian and Syrian policies (regime, military, and society).

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of Attrition, 1969–70

Yehuda U. Blanga

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Lenn Schramm and Ben Bokser**

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**To my beloved parents
Refael and Esther Blanga**



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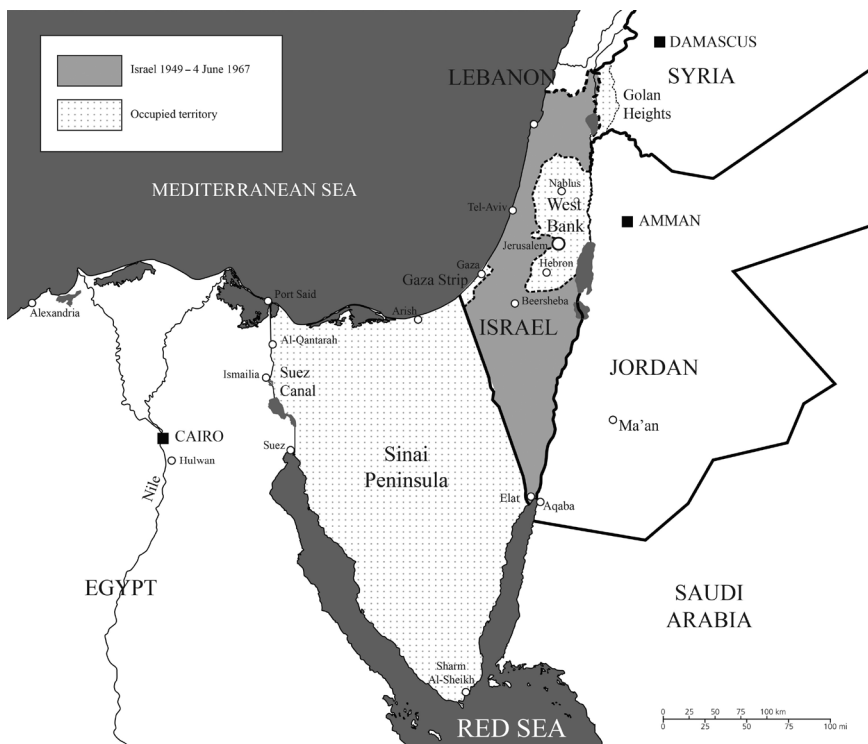
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Introduction

On the afternoon of October 23, hours after his return from an urgent trip to Moscow, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger convened the team that was handling the ongoing crisis of the Yom Kippur War. Kissinger surveyed the course of the conflict—mostly from the diplomatic perspective, with an occasional look at the military side, highlighted the American strategy that had been worked out following the renewal of active combat in the Middle East, and reviewed the achievements registered by the United States against a list of the objectives it had defined for itself. He also updated those present on the agreements reached with the Soviets about the cease-fire that was supposed to lead into a diplomatic process when the shooting stopped.

One of the understandings reached in Moscow, Kissinger explained, was reaffirmation of Security Council Resolution 242. That document was the political outline crystallized through American–Soviet cooperation six years earlier, in November 1967, after the Six Day War, an outline that had been intended to lead to peace between Israel and the Arabs: “We affirmed Security Council Resolution 242 which has been on the books since 1967,” Kissinger said. Then, in the same breath, he added while laughing, “and while it asks for the immediate implementation, this is impossible even with good will, since no one knows, except Joe Sisco [the Assistant Secretary of State], what 242 means.” To which Sisco replied, also laughing, “and I won’t tell.”¹

The Six Day War was a watershed in the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Until 1967 the Arabs had believed that they could liquidate “the Zionist entity in Palestine” by military means, but the lightning war that had occurred in June made it clear to them that Israel was a *fait accompli*. Now the question was, inside what borders? On the surface, the answer to this was provided by Resolution 242, which proposed a lasting peace between Israel and the Arabs in return for an Israeli withdrawal “from territories occupied in the recent conflict” and “a just settlement of the refugee problem.”²

Although the Americans and Soviets had reached an agreement then, and even gained broad international support for a diplomatic formula that would lead to peace, an acute disagreement about the interpretation of the resolution emerged almost at once. Was Israel to withdraw from *all* of the territories occupied or only from *some* of them? Were the contacts between Israel and the Arabs to

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be direct or indirect? Must peace include normal relations between Israel and the Arab countries? What was a “just solution to the refugee problem”? And was there a defined timetable for implementing the resolution? So even though a formula for peace had been set forth, there was no clear mechanism for its implementation. As Kissinger quipped, no one really knew what the resolution meant. Thus the diplomatic process in the Middle East went nowhere. For President Nasser of Egypt, the frozen situation was tantamount to acknowledging his defeat, while also giving Israel valuable time to establish facts on the ground that might work against the eventual return of the entire Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

In addition to the political crisis, after June 1967, Egypt faced many challenges both at home and abroad. Nasser had had to put the pieces back together and lead his country after its second defeat in just more than a decade. But this time, unlike 1956, there was no joint American–Soviet support for an end to the fighting and a return to the status quo ante. On the contrary, in June 1967 the Egyptian president had to deal with a distinctly unsympathetic American position and an enemy entrenched on the other side of the Suez Canal. Nasser consolidated a new strategy and for the next three years endeavored to maintain the military tension across the Canal, in order to keep the Middle East issue from dropping off the international agenda. That was precisely the goal of the War of Attrition he launched against Israel.

Here we should note the differences between the periodization of the war by the Israelis and by the Egyptians. Even though the present study begins with a brief background review of the situation in Egypt right after the June 1967 war, and American–Egyptian relations then, it focuses on events between March 8, 1969, and August 7, 1970—the months that Israel knows as the “War of Attrition,” when the clashes across the Suez Canal became a daily occurrence and escalated in intensity, and which ended only when the two sides concluded a cease-fire agreement.

On the Egyptian side, however, there are multiple and divergent perspectives on the years between 1967 and 1973. In Nasser’s definition, the Egyptian armed forces were to prepare themselves for a long struggle, divided into four stages: steadfast resistance (*sumud*), preventive defense (*dafa’ al-waqa’i*), deterrence (*al rada’*), and liberation (*tahrir*). He did not specify the timetable for each of these stages, though, and this left room for various interpretations. We will mention two of them here. Mahmoud Fawzi, the War Minister (1968–71), divided the hostilities into three stages: steadfast resistance (*sumud*), July 1967–March 1968; confrontation (*mu’ajahat*), March 1968–March 1969; and provocation and deterrence (*al-tahdi w’al-rada’*), April 1969–July 1970.³ Differing with Fawzi, three Egyptian scholars—Hassan el Badri, Taha el-Magdoub, and Mohammed Dia el-Din Zohdy—divided the period from the end of the Six Day War in June 1967 until the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 into steadfast resistance (*sumud*), June 1967–August 1968; active defense (*dafa’ al-nasht*), September 1968–February 1969; attrition (*istinzaḥ*), March 1969–August 1970; and cease-fire (*waqf atlaq al-nar*), August 1970–October 1973.⁴

The present work traces the diplomatic process spearheaded by the United States during the War of Attrition—a round of the Egyptian–Israeli conflict that

has not received adequate scholarly attention and has been more or less pushed out of the Israeli historical memory. It begins with the arrival of the Nixon administration in January 1969 and the outbreak of the War of Attrition that March. It goes on to survey the diplomatic and military developments that followed the start of the fighting, tracks the several peace initiatives and their failures, and winds up with the cease-fire agreement in August 1970, its violation by Egypt, and Nasser's death a month later.

In practice, this book deals with the triangular relationship among the United States, Egypt, and Israel while the fighting was going on. One leg of the triangle refers to the United States after Nixon's inauguration in January 1969. Even though the new administration's priorities were focused on Vietnam, relations with the Soviet Union (especially in the context of nuclear weapons), and the opening of diplomatic relations with China, Washington did not ignore the Middle East. Consequently, an additional layer of this study refers to the formulation of the Nixon's administration's Middle East policy, including the ongoing conflict between Egypt and Israel, and the rebuilding of the relations between the United States and Egypt. Although on the surface it might seem that during the War of Attrition the Nixon administration functioned as a single entity vis-à-vis the Middle East, this study reviews the long series of internal disagreements between the State Department under William P. Rogers and Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor, which in practice undercut the American efforts to achieve an agreement between Israel and Egypt.

The second leg of the triangle relates to Egyptian foreign policy, as it applied both to the conflict with Israel and to the ties between Egypt and the United States. Here our starting point is the Egyptians' awakening to reality after the trauma of June 1967 and launch of the campaign to "eliminate the results of the aggression." From there we proceed to Nasser's political stand and outlook vis-à-vis the United States and its peace initiatives, against the background of the War of Attrition and the close and extensive ties woven between Cairo and Moscow.

Finally, no discussion of the relations between the United States and Egypt can omit Israel. Hence the third leg of the triangle examines Israel's policy and positions in reaction to the developments between Egypt and America relating to the conflict and its resolution. We will go into some detail about the diplomatic clash between Israel and the United States during the War of Attrition, its highs and lows, and its impact on the relations between the two countries.

All three sections of the research rely on a textual analysis of diplomatic and historical events, which falls into the realm of international relations, but also makes some inroads into domestic policy. In general, the organization is chronological, with occasional reliance on a thematic approach. The research is based overwhelmingly on primary sources that were recently released for public scrutiny and have never been thoroughly studied. The lion's share of this volume is based on qualitative content analysis of documents, especially those produced by the State Department, from the National Archives in Washington. Despite the severing of ties with Egypt and closure of the embassy in Cairo, the

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United States continued to have an active Interests Section housed in the Spanish Embassy there, run by Donald Bergus. Because Israel was the third leg of this triangle, which imposed a heavy strain on the diplomatic give-and-take between Washington and Cairo, I also examined documents from the Israel State Archives. These often cast a somewhat different light on events and the political developments in the Middle East theater.

Memoirs and autobiographies are another primary source. On the American side, we should note the memoirs of the then-National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, and *Decade of Decisions*, by William Quandt of the National Security Council. Among the Israeli participants, we have the books by Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban (*Autobiography*) and by Yitzhak Rabin, the ambassador in Washington in 1968–73 (*Memoirs*), which provide a fascinating look at Israeli diplomacy as it related to the United States during those years. Given the lack of access to official documents, the Egyptian perspective on the War of Attrition and its military and diplomatic aspects must be extracted (with full awareness of the selective and subjective presentation) from the memoirs of the major players: three volumes by Nasser's confidant Mohamad Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, *The Road to Ramadan*, and *Autumn of Fury: The Assassination of Sadat*; Field Marshal Mohamed Abdel Ghani el-Gamasy's *The October War*, and War Minister Mahmoud Fawzi's *Harb al-Thalath Sanawat* for the military aspect; and then-Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad's *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* to complete the picture from the diplomatic side.

As stated, unlike the other wars between Israel and the Arabs, historical research into the War of Attrition is still in its infancy. Even though the present study is based almost exclusively on primary materials, I employed other sources where it was necessary to fill in missing pieces of the puzzle.

Dan Schueftan's *Attrition* (Hebrew) is the most exhaustive, objective, and penetrating study of that war. It focuses on Nasser's strategy vis-à-vis the super-powers and Israel after the debacle of 1967 and relates to almost all of the political and military aspects of the period March 1969 to August 1970. In English, Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov's *The Israel–Egyptian War of Attrition, 1969–1970*, is the major study of the military developments during the War of Attrition, including from the theoretical perspective.

Three new studies of the War of Attrition have appeared in Hebrew in recent years. Avraham Zohar's *War of Attrition 1967–1970* surveys the theory of attrition warfare, the course of the war, the notable military operations, and stories of the fighters. Whereas Schueftan examined the war from the Egyptian perspective Yoav Gelber's *Attrition: The Forgotten War* does so from the Israeli side, including its political, social, and cultural impact. Gelber's advantage over other studies in Hebrew is his extensive use of archival sources. Also noteworthy is Dima Adamsky's *Operation Kavkaz: Soviet Intervention and the Israeli Intelligence Failure in the War of Attrition*, a trailblazing look at the Soviet Union's direct involvement in the war and how it took Israel and the United States by surprise.

The dominant tendency in scholarship today is to address the Middle East crisis of 1967 to 1973 from the superpower perspective, without much attention to the Egyptian and Israeli facets. This category includes David A. Korn's *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and the Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967–1970*. Korn served in the American embassy in Tel Aviv from 1967 to 1971, first as a political officer and then as chief of the political section. His book lays a solid foundation for the diplomatic efforts by the two superpowers, especially the United States, in the Middle East during the years covered by this volume. Two other important works are Craig Daigle's *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1969–1973*; and *The Soviet–Israeli War, 1967–1973*, by Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez.

By integrating all of these sources, both primary and secondary, I sought to produce a comprehensive new look at the topic, both with regard to the volume of sources drawn on and the analysis of the events. The reliance on these sources demonstrates that the United States and Egypt worked together to thaw their relationship after the rupture in June 1967, out of a desire to maintain and enhance their interests in the Middle East. The United States wanted to preserve stability in the region, to check Soviet expansion there, and to bring the Arab–Israeli conflict to an end. Egypt wanted to turn the wheel back and especially regain the Sinai Peninsula. Nasser hoped to accomplish this without making any overt commitments, knowing that only with American assistance could he reach a political solution and get the Sinai back. When Nixon entered the White House in 1969, the new administration evinced a desire for a balanced policy in the Middle East between Israel and the Arabs. Nasser identified the opportunity and the new climate in Washington and accordingly worked to achieve his objectives.

Throughout these years Israel, the third leg of the triangle, endeavored to frustrate all the attempts to promote an agreement with Nasser, because he refused to conduct direct negotiations and because of his stubborn insistence on employing the military option and using it to leverage his influence on Israel and the United States in the diplomatic arena. But after June 1967 Israel also believed that the status quo served its interests. It saw no need to make concessions or accept compromise proposals as long as the terms offered did not satisfy its security needs and terminate the conflict through a binding mutual peace agreement. Another round of violence, the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, was required before Egypt and Israel would find themselves on the road to peace.

Earlier versions of several chapters have been published in English, as follows:

- Chapters 1–2: “Nasser’s Dilemma: Egypt’s Relations with the United States and an Agreement with Israel, 1967–1969,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 51:2 (2015): 301–26.
- Chapter 3: “‘Why Are They Shooting?’: The American View of the Events at the Outset of the War of Attrition,” *Israel Affairs* 18 (2012): 155–76.

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- Chapter 4. “‘Between Two and Four’: The French Initiative and the Multi-
power Diplomatic Initiatives to Resolve the Middle East Crisis,” *Diplomacy
and Statecraft* 27:1 (2016): 93–120.
- Chapter 6. “Full Effort to Avoid Peace: The Failure of the First Rogers
Plan,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, No. 6 (2018): 981–99.
- Chapters 9–10: “The Path that Led to the Cease-Fire ending the War of
Attrition and the Deployment of Missiles at the Suez Canal,” *Middle
Eastern Studies* 48 (2012): 183–204.

Notes

- 1 “Minutes of the Secretary of State’s Staff Meeting,” October 23, 1973, *FRUS*, 1969–
76, XXV, 689–96.
- 2 For the text of the resolution, see [https://undocs.org/S/RES/242\(1967\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/242(1967)).
- 3 Fawzi, *Harb al-Thalath Sanawat 1967–1970*, 215–20.
- 4 Badri, Magdoub, and Zohdy, *The Ramadan War 1973*, 10–14.

1 An internal shock

Egypt after the 1967 war

Ever since his defeat, Israel has become an obsession with him [Nasser]. He took the defeat as a personal failure and will not rest until he can record some sort of victory over Israel.

Prof. Morroe Berger¹

The great disaster

On May 23, 1973, the Israeli Minister in Paris, Yosef Hadas, submitted a report on a conversation with one of his local contacts. It was a routine filing and contained no new and earth-shattering revelations, but its heading attracted the attention of the officials in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem: “A Young Egyptian Defines Nasser.” The French official had told Hadas about his recent meeting with the Egyptian ambassador in Paris, at which he heard his concise and on-target description of the late Egyptian president Nasser. The fellow had said that “Nasser wanted to change the history of the region, but he only changed its geography.”² No one at the Israel Embassy in Paris could have offered a better summary of Nasser’s years in power (1954–70), so Hadas recommended exploiting the phrase—for Israeli propaganda purposes, of course.

Three years after the idolized leader’s death, some Egyptian citizens recognized that he had deceived them. Yes, Nasser had expelled the British and nationalized the Suez Canal. Yes, he had chalked up important political and industrial achievements, such as the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Yes, Egypt had made itself the leader of the Arab world and of the Non-aligned Bloc.³ But the bottom line, when all was said and done, was that he had not been able to unite the Arabs under his baton. The Egyptian economy had not taken off, despite his socialist projects. In slightly more than a decade, the country had gone down to military defeat twice, trounced by Israel in 1956 and again in 1967. So the Egyptian quoted by Hadas was right: Nasser had sought to change the history of the Middle East, as was evident from his book *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, but had only redrawn its map in the wake of the defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in June 1967.

After that debacle, the Arab world began beating its breast: searching within itself for the roots of the failure and proposing diverse solutions of the problem

that had led to it. As time passed the public debate turned into an obsession. The trauma of defeat was burned into the masses and they could not stop thinking about it. But no Arab country had been wounded as deeply as Egypt by the lightning war. In both its own eyes and those of its allies (Syria and Jordan), Egypt bore the main responsibility for the defeat. Having dragged the confrontation-line states into the war, it now had to bear the guilt of the disastrous outcome.⁴ That guilt rested heavily both on the Egyptian people and on its political and military leaders, because the scale of its losses on the battlefield was unbearable.

The fighting, which lasted no more than four days, cost the Egyptians 15,000 dead, 50,000 wounded, and 4,230 prisoners. On top of that, the armed forces had lost nearly 70% of their heavy artillery, 361 aircraft, and 590 tanks. The Egyptian army had been shattered, and the country itself crashed into a reality that dwarfed its leaders' worst nightmares. Not surprisingly, they reacted as if their world had come to an end. On June 8, four days after the start of the fighting on the Egyptian front, there were signs of a general disintegration of the senior military echelons. At 11 o'clock that night, War Minister Shams al-Din Badran asked Nasser to come urgently to the Egyptian General Headquarters. When he arrived, the president found the deputy supreme commander of the armed forces, Field Marshal Muhammad Abdel Hakim Amer, in a state of total collapse and contemplating suicide. Nasser tried to soothe him, accepted full responsibility for the outcome of the war, and promised to resign.⁵

Another leader of the 1952 Free Officers' coup, Anwar Sadat, fell into a deep depression and closeted himself at home for four days. When the war was over, he was tormented by his pangs of remorse and sense of utter impotence ("I ... was completely overwhelmed by our defeat").⁶ Nasser himself, "the man who had been deified by his own countrymen, worshipped by the Arab masses ... [was] thrown upon the mercies of a disdainful Russia, with no army or air force to defend his country."⁷ On June 11, after he withdrew his resignation, he confessed that he had been in such a severe emotional state that he had sent his family out of Cairo and "kept a gun beside [himself] to use at the last minute."⁸ That same day he was informed that there were only seven tanks left to defend the capital. Later, Sadat wrote that

those who knew Nasser realized that he did not die on September 28, 1970, but on June 5, 1967, exactly one hour after the war broke out. That was how he looked at the time, and for a long time afterwards—a living corpse. The pallor of death was evident on his face and hands, although he still moved and walked, listened and talked.⁹

In addition to the initial trauma right after the defeat, Egypt was rocked by repeated aftershocks, some of which threatened the pillars of the Nasserist regime and were not much weaker than the rout on the battlefield. The first tremor that struck the Egyptian people was Nasser's resignation, announced in a speech on June 9. The French journalist Eric Rouleau, who was then in Cairo, described a haggard and troubled man whose voice was choked by tears as he read his speech:

I tell you truthfully and despite any factors on which I might have based my attitude during the crisis that I am ready to bear the whole responsibility. I have taken a decision in which I want you all to help me. I have decided to give up completely and finally every official role, to return to the ranks of the masses and to my duty with them like every other citizen.¹⁰

Shocks in the leadership

The president had resigned. The father of the July 1952 revolution, the man who had placed himself at the head of the Arab world and endeavored to unite it, the figure to whom Egyptians had lifted their eyes in the hope that he would lead them to a promising future, had handed in his keys and turned to leave. That was not what was supposed to happen. Egypt refused to accept the defeat; even more so, it refused to believe that Nasser had resigned in its wake. Pursuant to Article 110 of the provisional constitution of March 1964, Nasser named Vice-President Zakaria Mohieddin to succeed him. Mohieddin declined the position.¹¹ No sooner had Nasser finished his speech than shocked crowds poured into the streets. Whether these demonstrations were spontaneous or carefully orchestrated by the authorities, Nasser clearly had regained the people's trust.

On the morning of June 10, Nasser planned to address the National Assembly, but could not reach its building. Thousands of demonstrators blocked the roads between downtown Cairo and Nasser's home in Heliopolis. Thousands more took up stations outside the National Assembly and proclaimed they would not allow him to enter until he withdrew his resignation. Many demonstrators carried placards declaring that the Egyptian people were behind Nasser and there was no one to take his place. Around noon, after many delays, the National Assembly was finally gavelled to order. Nasser, as mentioned, could not attend, so Sadat, the Assembly president, delivered a statement on his behalf, whose essence was retraction of the resignation:

I have decided to remain in my post and to stay where the people want me to stay, until the period is over when we can all eliminate the traces of the aggression.... Now, my brother citizens, link your arms together and let us begin to [realize] our urgent task.¹²

The second shock struck along with the first. On June 9, at a meeting attended by Nasser, Amer, and War Minister Badran, Mohieddin said that they all shared responsibility for the defeat and its ramifications, and not just Nasser (even though, while the war raged, the latter had accepted full responsibility for the fiasco); hence all of them should resign. Badran objected and said that only Nasser should resign. He did so, as we have seen, but with an unexpected twist. Although Amer, as first vice-president, should have stepped into his shoes, Badran was astonished to hear that instead the choice had fallen on Mohieddin, the second vice-president.

This slight deepened the rift between Nasser and the military High Command, especially Amer and Badran. On June 11, after Nasser withdrew his resignation, he began a purge of his opponents in the senior echelons of the armed forces. The first to be forced out, not surprisingly, were Amer and Badran, followed by army commander Gen. Abd al-Mohsen Kamal Murtagui, Air Force Commander Lt. Gen. Mohamed Sedky Mahmoud, Admiral Suleiman Ezzat, and other top officers, mainly those who had been Amer's protégés. Nasser published a list of new appointments, including Gen. Mahmoud Fawzi as Commander of the Armed Forces, Gen. Abd al-Munim Riad as Chief of Staff, and Gen. Madhkur Abu al-Ezz as Commander of the Air Force. This amounted to a clean sweep of the veteran command echelon, identified with Amer, and its replacement by Nasser loyalists.

This was not the end of the affair. Amer, Badran, and many of their colleagues resolved to take steps against the regime, in order to put a halt to the arrests of senior figures in the officer corps and force Nasser to return them to their commands. Badran began organizing his supporters in secret and stockpiling weapons in one of Amer's residences, in the Cairo suburb of Giza. The house soon became a veritable fortress; as Badran later testified at his trial, there was enough weaponry to defend an entire city. Initially, the conspirators planned to abduct Nasser, but when they realized this was impossible they decided on a military coup. On August 25, 1967, two days before the plot was to be launched, Amer, Badran, and 50 other senior officers and government figures were arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the government. After protracted interrogation in the presence of Nasser, Mohieddin, and Sadat, as well as a long stretch of house arrest, Amer committed suicide on September 14. The precise circumstances of his death remain unclear today.¹³

The third shock was produced by the ensuing show trials of the commanders of the 1967 war. Even though the people had suppressed the trauma of defeat during the turbulence that immediately followed it and Nasser had regained their confidence, the masses could not forget the "June defeat" (*naksa huzaran*). Nasser needed to provide a swift response to the public's demands. As a result, 50 senior officers and members of the ruling elite went on trial on January 22, 1968. The indictments cited crimes related to national security and included charges of plotting to overthrow the regime. The accused denied these charges and exploited the trial to attack the regime and its head. They claimed that Nasser led a corrupt government that systematically suppressed the Egyptian people and their freedom. Rage and frustration spread among the citizens, on top of the feelings of inferiority and helplessness that followed the Six Day War. In late February, the masses took to the streets for the first protests of their kind in the history of the Nasser regime, demonstrating against their venerated leader.¹⁴

On February 20, the Cairo court-martial found four senior officers of the Air Force responsible for its collapse in the initial hours of the war and sentenced them to prison terms of ten to 15 years. Two others were acquitted of all charges. The next day, many workers, incited by activists of the Arab Socialist Union, poured out of the military industries in Helwan to protest the light sentences.

However, these workers had an ulterior motive: they were afraid that the regime might try to restore the military's primacy in Egyptian society that it had enjoyed before the defeat in 1967.¹⁵

Soon workers from other factories in the area joined the protest. Violence broke out when police units summoned to restore order opened fire on the demonstrators. Inspired by the events in Helwan, students took to the streets of Cairo and Alexandria on February 24.¹⁶ At first there were mainly denunciations of the "traitors," meaning the convicted Air Force officers; but as the protests grew more heated, the students, rather astonishingly, changed their tune and began protesting against Nasser and his regime. In particular, they demanded new trials for the officers, the start of a process of democratization in Egypt, free parliamentary elections, the elimination of press censorship, and freedom of expression. In an attempt to calm the situation, the students' representatives met with Sadat, the president of the National Assembly, in the Assembly building. At the meeting, the students criticized the heads of the regime and their hedonistic lifestyles, at a time when so many citizens were impoverished. No compromise was forthcoming. That night the Minister of Interior published an order banning demonstrations "for whatever reason." Despite the official ban, the students continued their protests the next day. The security forces intervened and, just as in Helwan, opened fire on the demonstrators. On February 26, after two days of stormy protests, the Egyptian authorities decided to close down the universities and other institutions of higher education. It was also decided to quash the verdicts and grant the Air Force officers a new trial. This put an end to the protests.¹⁷

Something in Nasser's steel regime had cracked. The February 1968 riots were ignited by recognition of the severe blow to Egypt's status among the Arab states as well as the damage to the Egyptians' self-image. Moreover, their belief that they could experience progress and become part of the modern world had been undermined. The July 1952 Free Officers' coup had been a source of pride and hope for a brighter future in Egypt—a future that included prosperity, success, and respect; but the military's utter collapse on the battlefield, 15 years later, burst the bubble of the Egyptian dream. Suddenly it seemed that all of the revolution's achievements had come to naught. The vision of pan-Arab nationalism and greatness, under Egypt's scepter, an idea that bordered on messianic fervor, was disintegrating. The loss of the Sinai Peninsula and control of the Suez Canal, and the evacuation of the cities on its bank, became a sort of monument to Egyptian weakness; while the situation persisted, it highlighted the dead-end into which Egypt had run itself.¹⁸

The difficult situation soon gave rise to slogans parroted by the country's leaders and people: "wiping out the results of the aggression" and "what was taken by force can be recovered only by force." These slogans came to epitomize the Egyptian-Nasserist aspiration to solve the problem of the 1967 fiasco—to eradicate the failure by force of arms and turn the wheel back, to the extent possible, to the status quo ante.

Egypt needed change and Nasser knew it. He also understood that he would not be able to unite the Egyptian masses around himself unless he promised to

provide the changes they demanded, or at least offered a plan that would realize his own aspirations in the guise of large-scale action for the country's sake. In other words, whereas the people wanted democracy and the elimination of restrictions on individual liberties, the Egyptian president sought to channel his policies in a different direction.

A month after the riots broke out, on March 30, 1968, Nasser presented the Egyptian people with his guidelines for "eliminating the results of the aggression." His action plan had two main elements: First, concentrating all the forces at Egypt's disposal—military, economic, and ideological—for a war against the Zionist enemy, "in order to liberate the land and achieve victory"; second, mobilizing the Egyptian people, with all its abilities and strength, "for the roles of liberation and victory and for the hopes for after the liberation and the victory." Likewise, Nasser wanted to unite the Egyptian nation under his Arab Socialist Union party by holding new elections and establishing a new government. Sadat wrote later that he had seen through this plan from the outset and understood that it was no more than a ploy to divert the masses' attention and to "neutralize the people's feelings of discontent."¹⁹

Eliminating the results of the aggression: defining goals

In the aftermath of the defeat in the Six Day War, Egypt faced a three-fold challenge that would determine its future in the Middle East—in the superpower arena, in the pan-Arab arena, and in the Egyptian domestic arena. In the first, Egypt had to choose between a policy of non-alignment versus siding with the Western or the Eastern bloc. In the pan-Arab domain, it needed to restore its lost status and encourage, even more in the past, the belief in its ability to unite the Arabs and lead them to progress. Finally, on the domestic front, the leadership in Cairo had to direct more resources and effort than in the past to the citizens in general and to the men in uniform in particular. Otherwise, the vision of the July 1952 revolution would collapse, along with the people's faith in themselves and their ability to confront the Zionist enemy. Constrained by these circumstances, Nasser had to revise the country's order of priorities and adopt an overarching strategy to deal with all three arenas.

The "liberation of Palestine" had been on the table for a decade, between the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai in 1957 and June 4, 1967, alongside Egypt's pressing national problems. Nevertheless, on several occasions, Nasser had halted military initiatives to solve the Palestine problem, mainly by Syria. After June 1967 and the Israeli reoccupation of the Sinai, the Palestine problem became even more closely linked to the Egyptian issue. In his speeches, Nasser kept returning to the need to restore the Palestinians' rights to them, supported the campaign by the *fedayeen*,²⁰ and emphasized Egypt's obligation to play a key role in solving the issue of the refugees and the question of Jerusalem.

Under the surface, however, the Egyptian leadership distinguished the territories occupied in 1967, which demanded an immediate solution, from those lost in 1948, whose recovery could be deferred to a later date. In the fall of 1968,

Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad emphasized to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that Sinai was the key issue on the Egyptian agenda. After the defeat, Cairo needed to come up with a new strategy that would permit it to deal first with the catastrophic results of the defeat, and only then to make progress towards a solution of the Palestine problem. Still, great importance attached to Egypt's ability, by both diplomatic and military means, to keep Israel from consolidating its hold on the newly occupied territories. But as we will see later, the picture was much more complex when Nasser deployed both methods in pursuit of his objectives.²¹

The diplomatic alternative

When the fighting ended, and after he withdrew his resignation, Nasser found himself at a critical juncture, with at least two options he could pursue: an arrangement like that of 1957 or a peace agreement with Israel. First, we will consider the feasibility of the former option. As will be remembered, Israel, in league with France and Great Britain, attacked Egypt on October 29, 1956. After five days of fighting, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conquered the entire Sinai Peninsula and Gaza District. But a delay in the timetable of the British and French operation and last-minute vacillation caused the operation to fail on the diplomatic front. The Americans were outraged at the conspiracy fomented behind their backs and the Soviet Union threatened to intervene. In the wake of international pressure and censure by the UN Security Council, Israel was forced to withdraw from the territory it had occupied.

Ten years later, after Israel had again overrun the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza District in a lightning war, Egypt faced an almost identical situation. This time, however, Israel did not have wavering partners; what is more, the international situation was vastly different from that of 1957. A decade after Nasser's great diplomatic victory, Egypt was unable to restart the "international steamroller"—essentially an "American steamroller"—and force a complete Israeli pullback. Unlike Eisenhower in 1957, the Johnson administration of 1967 did not view Nasser as a victim to be rescued but as a party who should pay the price for his rash decisions and actions. Johnson believed it would be wrong to reprise the temporary and hasty settlement of 1957. A number of additional factors contributed to this decision. First, Washington observed how Nasser had won increased prestige in the Arab world after 1957 (thanks to the American diplomatic support he had received) and how the Egyptian president had then taken advantage of his status to harm American interests in the Middle East and threaten the pro-Western countries in the region. Now, ten years after the mistake of 1957, the United States had learned its lesson and was not particularly eager to damage its relations with Israel in order to benefit Egypt. So, the American approach to Nasser after the June 1967 war was identical to the Israeli approach, which held that "Nasser is the main source of trouble in the Middle East and any regime that replaced him would be an improvement."²²

Second, the bind in which Egypt found itself was to a certain extent the Soviet Union's fault, and the American administration wanted to exploit that for

its own purposes. Therefore, if Nasser wanted to begin a diplomatic process, he would have to seek out the Americans, meet their conditions, and renounce the Soviets' ineffectual support. Finally, Washington knew that Cairo now understood that the United States was the key to an agreement in the Middle East. After 1967, Nasser became increasingly aware (and even admitted) that there could be no just and lasting peace in the Middle East without American involvement. Moreover, the State Department believed that the Egyptians were interested in renewing their ties with the United States because they realized that only the Americans could produce a settlement in the region. According to a senior official at its Egyptian desk, Cairo knew that the key to a settlement lay in American hands and that the main thing was to exert pressure on the Israeli leadership.²³

Israel was indeed concerned about a possible change of the prevailing attitude of the American administration, especially after Johnson's announcement in March 1968 that he would not seek re-election. Israel detected an attempt by the United States to draw closer to the Soviet Union and improve relations between the two superpowers, even at the price of American concessions in the Middle East. For example, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, reported that the American administration and public at large might view the political stalemate—in fact, the ongoing crisis—as an Israeli failure and, by extension, an American failure. As he noted in his periodic report in June 1968, the United States had come to the conclusion that the Arab defeat in June 1967 had not produced a single favorable outcome so far as American interests were concerned. First, despite the military defeat, not a single hostile Arab regime had collapsed, nor was there any sign of this in the future. On the contrary, the only regime that seemed to be in danger was the pro-Western regime of King Hussein in Jordan, whose fall would deal a severe blow to the Americans. Second, there was no change in the attitude of the Arab world, and especially of the Egyptian president, towards Israel, or any desire to reach a diplomatic settlement with it. Third, the fiasco of the defeat of its Arab clients had not led the Soviet Union to pull back from the Middle East, but rather to deepen its penetration, expand its influence, and formulate new goals for the region. Finally, many officials in Washington were concerned that the American support for Israel and the overlap of the two countries' positions would harm the United States' interests in the Middle East, especially in countries that were susceptible to American influence.²⁴

Washington took pains to make it clear to the Arabs, and especially to Nasser, that they would be making a mistake if they thought that the United States had the ability to get Israel to change its policy. An Israeli diplomat reported that John McCloy, the chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations and a special advisor to President Johnson, told him that he had informed Arab leaders, in his meetings with them, that "Israel has its own will. And after 1957, unilateral pressure is no longer acceptable. American public opinion will not stand for such pressure unless the Arabs are forced to take complementary steps, which means seeking peace and security."²⁵

Nasser's second option was to reach a diplomatic agreement with Israel. Slightly less than two weeks after the end of the war, Nasser was offered a

chance to sign a peace accord and recover the Sinai in exchange. On June 16–19, the Israeli Government debated a number of matters related to the ramifications of the war's outcome, including peace feelers to the defeated Arab states. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan held that Israel should go very far to achieve peace, "based mainly on maximum territorial concessions." At the end of those discussions, the Government voted to make Egypt an offer based on land for peace. Two days later, Foreign Minister Abba Eban sent an official proposal to the Americans, who were asked to be the go-between with Egypt, for a peace agreement that would be "based on international borders and Israel's security needs."²⁶

Another element in the proposal was that the treaty would include an Egyptian commitment to free passage through the Suez Canal, the Straits of Tiran, and the Gulf of Suez, and demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula. Until the treaty was signed, Israel would continue to occupy the territories it now held. But Cairo turned down the Israeli proposal, for two main reasons that reflected the situation in the Middle East after June 1967. The first had to do with what it did not include: there would be a full Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, but not from the Gaza District, East Jerusalem, or the West Bank. Egypt would recover the territory it had lost in the war. To put this another way, Israel wanted to disengage its strongest foe from the Palestinian issue and Jerusalem and, as Cairo saw it, split the Arab camp. Had Egypt agreed, it would have doomed itself to long years of isolation and the total loss of its primacy in the Arab world.²⁷

Another reason for the Egyptian cold shoulder related to the very demand for a peace agreement in exchange for withdrawal. Signing a peace treaty with the "Zionist enemy" would be tantamount to acknowledging the military defeat; that is, capitulation to the victorious enemy's terms out of weakness. This negativity was reinforced by Nasser's firm conviction that Israel was more interested in seeing Egypt cowed than in reaching a diplomatic accord with it. Thus, the Egyptian refusal to accept the Israeli offer of peace was in fact a refusal to accept the outcome of the war. It was true that Egypt had lost in the "third round" against Israel, but it had not accepted the results. Another battle had been lost, but the war was not over. As long as Egypt was not forced to sign an agreement, it would not acquiesce in the current situation. So the rejection of the proposal was an Egyptian declaration that Israel might have won a military victory, but not a political one.²⁸

Nasser also had a third option—to reach an accord with Israel through the United Nations. On November 22, 1967, after long weeks of deliberations and consultations (primarily between the United States and the Soviet Union), the Security Council adopted Resolution 242. It was endorsed by the Israelis, Egyptians, and Jordanians and rejected by Iraq and Syria; the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) complained that it ignored the Palestinian problem. The resolution was based on the need for "a just and lasting peace" in the Middle East within "secure and recognized boundaries." In addition, the Security Council called for "a termination of all claims or states of belligerency," "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," "acknowledgement

of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area,” “guaranteeing freedom of navigation through international waterways,” and “a just settlement of the refugee problem.”²⁹

However, another obstacle soon cropped up and complicated the UN mediation efforts: the Israelis and Arabs could and did interpret Resolution 242 in different ways. Egypt and Jordan held to the French-language version of the resolution, according to which Israel had to withdraw “from *the* territories occupied,” meaning all the land that Israel had conquered in the recent conflict. Israel, on the other hand, held to the official English version of the resolution, which called for a withdrawal “from territories occupied,” that is, *some* of the territories, meaning that it would not be required to withdraw to the lines of June 4, 1967. For Israel, the withdrawal demanded by the Arabs meant giving up an important strategic and defensive asset, and this would require an equally valuable concession by the Arabs. On the other hand, the Arabs did not view withdrawal as a concession by Israel, because the latter had conquered territories that belonged to them. Cairo demanded an Israeli withdrawal as a condition for fulfilling the other sections of Resolution 242 and even as a precondition for holding negotiations about an agreement. Jerusalem, on the other hand, insisted on direct negotiations with Egypt, since that would constitute indirect Egyptian recognition of its existence and reduce the chances that the Soviets and the Americans would impose a settlement.³⁰

The Security Council resolution addressed not only the actions that the parties had to take in order to reach an agreement between them, but also the mechanism for doing so. The last two sections of the resolution called on Secretary General U Thant to appoint a special envoy to travel to the Middle East and try to promote an agreement between the two sides. U Thant selected Dr. Gunnar Jarring, the Swedish ambassador in Moscow; he made his first trip to the region in late 1967.³¹

Despite the Israeli and Egyptian declarations that they welcomed the special envoy’s mission, and their statements that they would assist his sincere efforts in every way possible, the two states chose to drag their feet and did not budge from their well-known positions. Israel stood by its demand for direct negotiations with Egypt, at whose conclusion the sides would sign a peace treaty. Nasser demanded an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from all the conquered territories and never specified what concession his country would make in return for the Israeli step. Jarring’s mission failed.³²

The second diplomatic alternative for the recovery of Sinai was the channel opened between Washington and Cairo. On the American side, it was important to hold meetings with the Egyptians, because the American election campaign was at its height and Secretary of State Dean Rusk wanted to lay the groundwork for his successor or the new administration and possibly even to achieve peace in the Middle East. According to him, the situation in the region had reached the point at which conclusive decisions had to be made, “since [where] there is no peace there apparently is war.”³³ Our discussion of the American proposal and the talks will focus on the two meetings between Secretary Rusk and Egyptian Foreign Minister Riad in late 1968.