



## ISRAEL'S DECISION TO GO TO WAR, JUNE 2, 1967

Ami Gluska\*

*This article is adapted slightly from Ami Gluska, The Decisive Meeting in Planning the 1967 War, (Taylor and Francis, 2006). It appears in the series on military and strategic issues edited by Barry Rubin. Reprinted with permission. To order this book, [click here](#).*

*This article discusses the deliberations of Israeli government and army officials in the days preceding the beginning of the Six Day War. It illustrates the conflict and divide between the political and military echelons and the army's mistrust of the civilian leadership. While the IDF pushed for preemptive offensive action, feeling this was a military must given the circumstances, the government was hesitant. Such delays were viewed by the IDF as potentially disastrous. Israel's security policy, whose supreme aim had been deterrence and prevention of war, thus failed, resulting in the crisis and war in May-June 1967. However, good military planning and preparation won the war itself.*

On Friday, June 2, 1967, at 9:25 a.m., the expanded Israeli Ministerial Committee on Security met with the Israeli General Staff forum in the Pit war room. The government had decided five days earlier to hold off on a military response to the crisis created by the withdrawal of UN forces from the Sinai, the closing of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, and the Egyptian military build-up. The intention was to give the U.S. leadership a chance to solve the crisis diplomatically. The second meeting of the week between the military and civilian echelons (after the stormy General Staff meeting with Prime Minister Levi Eshkol on May 28, 1967) also developed into a confrontation between the two sides. What the generals had to say instantly dispelled the celebratory mood of the ministers, who only the evening before had raised their glasses to the establishment of a government of national unity.

They were now faced with the demand for an immediate decision to send Israel to war. Before the meeting, the prime minister appeared relaxed and told the ministers

“that for the time being things are going to ease up.”<sup>1</sup> However, by the end of the encounter, the general feeling was that the die had been cast.<sup>2</sup> Two days later, the Israeli government voted by a large majority to go to war the following day.

### **THE UNITED STATES WILL NOT CONSTITUTE THE MAIN OBSTACLE TO OUR ACTION**

The chief of staff, Yitzhak Rabin, opened the June 2 meeting and said that the aim was: “To display the picture to the government as it appears to the IDF [(Israeli Defense Forces)].”<sup>3</sup> The chief of intelligence, General Aharon Yariv, read out the main points of the evaluation drawn up by the Intelligence Research Department on May 31, 1967. Then he analyzed the American stand on the basis of reports from the Israeli embassy in Washington and from media sources. His conclusion was that the United States had no intention of taking serious action to lift Egypt's maritime blockade of Israel's port of Eilat by force,

and, in fact, there was an increasing American awareness that Israel must act alone. The Americans had no desire to become entangled in regional hostilities, and many members of the American administration would consider Israeli action as a convenient solution to the problem. In the United States, unlike in France, Israel could wield influence on the administration.<sup>4</sup> The chief of intelligence concluded, on the basis of “hints,” that if Israel acted judiciously and speedily, the “United States will not constitute the main obstacle to our action.”

Rabin described the situation in all its gravity. He distinguished between the problem of keeping open the Straits of Tiran, which allowed Eilat to function as a port and whose significance lay in the effect on Israel’s deterrent capability, and what he saw as the main problem, “the military and political situation evolving around us, in which time is not on our side.” He spoke in terms of a dynamic process of growing military forces on the Egyptian and Jordanian fronts and increased inter-Arab cooperation. He anticipated the possibilities of Egyptian attacks, terrorist action, renewal of the water diversion work, and even prevention of the passage of the fortnightly convoy to Mount Scopus. “This forum, and I first of all, and I am convinced that most of the officers as well, don’t want war for its own sake,” Rabin stressed, but, he added, the noose was tightening around Israel, the enemy had announced that their aim was the annihilation of Israel and time was on their side. The country’s leaders could not afford to wait until the enemy had gained decisive superiority, which would have placed Israel’s survival at grave risk. It was crucial to act immediately and to inflict “a resounding blow” on Nasser, which would completely transform the situation in the Middle East. The implications of taking

the initiative, particularly where the Israeli Air Force (IAF) was concerned, would be critical for the outcome. Provided the decision was made on that same day and not postponed, Rabin declared, the IDF could still do the job on the Egyptian front, even if forced to limit its actions and suffer some damage on the Syrian and Jordanian fronts.

In response to a question from Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Rabin reiterated that every additional day of inaction “impedes the implementation [of the IDF plan] and makes it more costly.” The commanding officer of Southern Command illustrated this viewpoint by sketching three situations: the situation on the day the Egyptian blockade was announced (“if we had taken the offensive on that day it would have been a picnic”); the situation “on the day it was decided [by the government on May 28] not to carry out the attack;” and the present situation. Still, General Yeshayahu Gavish, head of the Southern Command, explained, “An attack tomorrow would have a different significance to an attack in four days time when the situation will be much more serious.” Yariv backed Gavish, noting that “Cairo is urgently cramming forces into Sinai.... There are cases where for 48 hours the troops have neither food nor water because the urgency and disorder are so great. That’s not bad for us and again it’s a question of time.”

Rabin summed up this section of the meeting: “Mr. Prime Minister, we have presented the matter to you. The question is, what does the Prime Minister want to happen here at this forum?” Eshkol did not reply, and an open discussion ensued in which the senior command again voiced their demands unrelentingly and imperatively. Minister of the Interior Moshe Haim Shapira, in a desperate attempt to gain time, further exasperated the generals

when he posed a question that seemed to rebut all their explanations: If in any case the Egyptians had already concentrated almost all their army in Sinai, “what difference can there be [if we launch an attack] now, in a week or ten days?... On the other hand, we are liable to lose the political campaign... if we act immediately.”

**SHARON: “WHO IS MORE QUALIFIED THAN WE TO TELL YOU THAT THE ARMY IS READY FOR WAR?!”**

Brigadier General Avraham Yoffe, the first speaker in the discussion, emphasized the need to take the initiative:

I have been sitting in the Negev for 14 days with the units and the reserve forces.... Our feeling there... is that we have failed to take the initiative all along the front.... We must snatch the initiative from the Egyptians. If we obtain the initiative by diplomatic means well and good ... but all our initiative has taken is in the form of the Foreign Minister’s trip to the United States....

Yoffe did not rule out the idea of confining action to an IAF attack without bringing any other forces into play. The main thing, he said, was “to do something, to exploit our initiative and to change this situation where we can see the clouds gathering and approaching and we are sitting idle.”

Yoffe’s minimalist approach was anathema to Ariel Sharon. He started out by declaring that “the IDF forces are readier than ever before in their ability to destroy and to repel an Egyptian attack.” The objective, Sharon clarified, “is no less than

total annihilation of the Egyptian forces.” The gravest issue, as he perceived it, was the loss of Israel’s deterrent capability, which was weakening day by day because of “the hesitations and foot-dragging [of the government].” He tried to persuade the ministers, who were afraid that the number of casualties would be great, that due to the situation’s gravity, “there is moral justification for the decision-making echelon to approve an operation which will entail more losses.” Sharon objected in particular to Israeli dependence on the superpowers. He said:

Any link-up on our part with other powers is a mistake of the first order. Our aim is to make sure that in the coming ten or twenty years or generation or two the Egyptians will not want to fight us. Any link-up on our part with other powers or action against marginal objectives [that is, to be content with attacking Egyptian airfields, conquering the Gaza Strip, and the like] instead of the central objective of destroying the Egyptian army will prove that we are weak. That was the main damage caused by the Sinai Campaign. We could have gone it alone. The fact that we linked up with others showed us up as helpless.

Sharon emphasized that only a resolute stand in defense of Israel’s rights, one of which was freedom of shipping, could guarantee the state’s long-term survival. He alluded mockingly to Foreign Minister Abba Eban’s mission: “Our scurrying about—and I won’t use the word *‘shtadlanut’* [begging for help from rulers]—among the superpowers and pleading for rescue are not part of our stance in protection of our rights.” Sharon rounded off his remarks by promising that

the IDF was ready for action, equipped with a sturdy fighting spirit and decisive superiority for directing an attack. “Who is more qualified than we to come and tell you that the army is ready for war?!” he asked. He warned that any attempt to postpone the date of the attack in hope of receiving more tanks and aircraft would be a grave error. “Today nothing can have any effect except for a rapid and courageous, timely decision on the part of the government. The rest can be left to our forces. I can assure you that it will be carried out in the best possible fashion.”

Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan then took the floor. He said little, but it was evident that he was siding with the General Staff, although, ostensibly, he confined himself to a “technical explanation.” He explained to Moshe Haim Shapira the connection between the enemy’s consolidation and the high number of casualties to be anticipated in any attack on their fortified positions. Dayan claimed that the IDF would have limited time at its disposal until an anticipated international intervention to halt the fighting. The greater the Egyptian entrenchment, the more time would be needed to defeat them. Dayan added that even if everything went well, there would still be need for a second stage to conquer Sharm al-Shaykh and open the Straits, since this could not be achieved earlier. If the first stage was drawn out because of the Egyptian entrenchment, there might not be enough time for the second stage, and the Straits would remain blocked when the cease-fire was imposed.

**MATI PELED: “WE ARE ENTITLED TO KNOW WHY WE ARE SUFFERING THIS DISGRACE”**

The chief of the Quartermaster Branch, Brigadier-General Mati Peled, was the

bluntest of all in his attack on the government. For two weeks—morning, noon, and night—he said, the army had been asserting that time was working against Israel. Yet the General Staff had not received a single word of explanation for the wait. “I can understand that we are waiting for something to happen. If so, let us in on the secret and we will know why we are waiting!” Peled denied the importance of international action for lifting the blockade: “We have heard something regarding Tiran, which lost its significance long ago. It was not important to start with and is even less important now.” The entry of an Egyptian force into Sinai was nothing new for the IDF, having been anticipated and planned for in various exercises and war games. The only surprise, he stressed, was Nasser’s audacity, since it was well known that his army was not ready for war. Peled had an explanation to offer for Nasser’s moves:

In my opinion he was relying on the hesitation of the Israeli government. He acted in confidence that we would not dare to hit at him.... Nasser moved an army which was not ready to the border and he derived full advantage from the move. One thing is acting in his favor and that is the fact that the Israeli government is not ready to act against him.

Peled interpreted the questions the ministers had raised during the meeting and on previous occasions as manifestations of a lack of confidence in the capability of the IDF. “What has the IDF done wrong to deserve these doubts as to its capability? What more does an army need in order to win the confidence of the government but to win every battle?!”

As the officer in charge of logistics, Peled permitted himself to brandish the economic argument and the impact of the deteriorating economic situation in the morale of the troops:

The economy is in an intolerable condition. Food supplies scarcely manage to reach the places where they are needed. How long will it be before our soldiers in the frontline are affected by the situation in the home front?!... How long can they sit there when everything we left behind is collapsing?!... The State of Israel does not have infinite stamina. The IDF will be able to beat the enemy in three weeks time as well, but I don't know what will happen within.... It is not clear to me if the government has an accurate picture of what is going on internally. Meetings with directors of government ministries are now almost routine for me and their representatives know what is going on internally. If you only knew ... you would ask why we are not acting faster. The enemy is digging in and growing stronger and the economy is growing weaker and all this for an aim which nobody can explain to us.

Peled concluded on a sharp note: "We deserve to know why we are suffering this disgrace. Perhaps, on this occasion, we will receive an explanation. Why are we waiting?!"

The prime minister hastened to sum up the discussion and to defend the government. It was abundantly clear that Sharon and Peled had infuriated him. Having already resolved to send the IDF into action, he did not want to be misunderstood. Hence, he began by declaring: "What I am about to say is not

intended to explain what we are going to do tomorrow or the next day."

First he replied to Sharon, who had denoted the diplomatic efforts to be "scurrying about." He lectured Sharon: "Everything we have vis-à-vis the material strength of our army came as a result of this scurrying about. Let us not forget that and let us not regard ourselves as Goliaths as a result. Bare-fisted, unequipped and unarmed—we have no strength." He was reluctant to place unqualified faith in the army's evaluations. "With all the evaluations and data of Intelligence there are several things of which it can be said that they could end in this way or that," in particular what the Soviet Union was liable to do.

In a country of two million citizens, he told the generals, a man needed to think to himself:

Let us assume that we break the enemy's might today. Tomorrow we need to start building up our power anew, because we too will have lost forces ... and then, if every ten years we need to fight we will have to consider whether we have an ally who can aid us.... Sometimes the difference of a day and an hour can be decisive in the sense that there will be some in the world who will not be among those who attack us like wolves.

Eshkol noted in particular the importance "of whispering in [U.S. President] Johnson's ear that he should not claim that we cheated him because we may still need him. Please God, we will not need him in the middle of the fighting." At the same time Eshkol hinted that there was a limit to waiting, and the hour of action was close at hand.

The prime minister was apparently deeply hurt by Peled's remarks and retorted:

I permit myself to think that you know no more than we do about what is going on in government ministries, what we have in this country and what our reserves are... in the civilian sphere. I don't think we are less equipped now than ten years ago [during the Sinai War] and perhaps even more. Therefore, it can be said that two days more or one day less will not decide the campaign.<sup>5</sup>

The prime minister, as the most knowledgeable on economic matters, insisted that the Achilles heel was not the economic situation and that it was important to preserve Israel's relations with its friends throughout the world so that the IDF's strength could be built up after the war. A military victory would not end the dispute, "because the Arabs will still be here," he argued.

Rabin hoped that the government would convene that same day and arrive at a decision, but Eshkol declared that a government meeting would be held, as usual, on Sunday. This was a similar concluding note to that of the meeting in the Pit five days earlier. Eshkol may have wanted thereby to express his resentment at the IDF's pressure, but in fact he had resolved to wait no longer.

At noon, Eshkol conferred with a limited forum consisting of Dayan, Eban, Yigal Allon, the director-general of the PM's office Yaakov Herzog, and Rabin. It was decided unanimously that the time had come to go to war. Dayan and Allon favored an immediate attack,<sup>6</sup> as did Rabin. Eshkol was already leaning in this direction, and Eban voiced no objections.

The impact of the meeting with the General Staff had decided the issue. However, it was agreed that the attack would not begin "before Monday [June 5]."<sup>7</sup>

### **THE ARMY'S INFLUENCE: LEGITIMATE, BORDERLINE LEGITIMATE, OR ILLEGITIMATE?**

At this point, it is important to sum up and evaluate the role that the army commanders played in persuading, or perhaps forcing, the government to decide to go to war. Was the pressure they exerted beyond the bounds of the legitimate constitutional framework, or did the IDF act within the permissible framework in accordance with the rules of conduct in a "mature democratic political culture?"<sup>8</sup>

In order to answer the question, it should be noted that, as has been shown, the military perceived the situation as acute. They feared that they were liable to face the difficult choice between constitutional loyalty, which dictated full submission to the elected civilian authority, and a higher loyalty to the very existence of the Israeli state and their duty to protect it and the lives of its citizens. Such a situation was liable to evoke activist symptoms even among a professional officer class.<sup>9</sup>

The General Staff was entirely convinced that the government was endangering the country. From May 23, 1967, the date on which Nasser proclaimed the closing of the Straits of Tiran, the senior command was united in the belief that there would be no escape from a military confrontation. The government's decision, so it seemed, was encouraging Nasser to act even more audaciously and granted his army time for organizing, consolidating, reinforcing, and reequipping its own army as well as rallying allied Arab armies around Israel's borders. The most feasible

assumption, based on “indicators,” was that Nasser would direct an initial blow at the atomic reactor and IAF airfields. It was feared also that concentrations of population and infrastructure would be bombed, and that the Arab armies, enjoying air superiority, were subsequently liable to launch a coordinated offensive simultaneously on all fronts, thereby forcing the IDF to split its defensive efforts. This nightmare scenario included the possibility of wide-scale terrorist attacks and an uprising of Israel’s Arabs. A situation might be created, the generals asserted plainly, whereby the IDF would not be able to win the inevitable fight.

Moreover, a crisis of confidence now became apparent between the military and political echelons. On one hand, the government’s confidence in the army was shaken, due to the rebuttal of the intelligence evaluation, the collapse of the deterrent capacity, the unexpected downward slide to the verge of war, and Rabin’s hesitations and breakdown.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, and above all, the army did not trust the government to act judiciously and considered it to be confused, panic-stricken, spineless, and incapable of making decisions. It was not only the army that had lost confidence in the civilian leadership, but also the anxious general public at home and the mobilized troops on the front line.<sup>11</sup>

The paternal, anti-charismatic, and irresolute image of Levi Eshkol did not answer the psychological need for confident and persuasive leadership. The frenzied atmosphere in the Arab world—the blunt threats that Israel would be destroyed and its citizens slaughtered—had touched a very sensitive nerve in the Jewish consciousness. Eshkol’s standing was at its lowest ebb due to the economic recession that had created a gloomy atmosphere,<sup>12</sup> the savage criticism leveled against him by the opposition and

the media (and in particular the charge that he was responsible for a “security mishap”), the deterioration of the security situation due to increased terrorist activity, and finally, his stammered address to the nation that appeared to reflect helplessness, a plea for outside rescue, and an affront to the Israeli ethos.

The army believed that it held the solution to the situation, that the nation was pinning its hope on its fighters, and only the government was delaying action and casting doubt on the IDF’s ability to save the country from disaster. Victory depended to a critical extent on the IAF’s ability to achieve aerial supremacy, and this in its turn was conditional on achieving the vital element of tactical surprise. Hence, the government’s “delaying tactics,” and in particular the incomprehensible decision of May 28, 1967, were perceived by the army as potentially disastrous.

During the severe crisis that ensued, the army could have been strongly tempted, in light of its perception of the circumstances, to seize initiative and “intervene” to deliver the nation from danger. *The crucial fact is that this did not occur.* The army was confronted with a supreme test of its loyalty to the laws and constraints of the democratic framework, and that framework was preserved and did not crumble.

Still, what did the army do, and to what extent—if at all—was there ever danger of illegitimate “intervention” on its part?

First, it should be noted that the tension between the military and civilian echelons did not extend through the entire three-week period of the crisis—May 15 to June 4, 1967. It began only after Nasser’s announcement of the closure of the Straits and the dispatch of Foreign Minister Eban on his diplomatic mission to seek support from the Western heads of state. The government’s marathon discussions on May

27 and 28 that resulted in a decision to wait three weeks, in total disregard of the army's view, created a situation that the IDF found unacceptable. The tension between military and government reached its peak during the four days that were marked by two highly charged meetings in the Pit: between Sunday evening, May 28, 1967—when the generals met with the prime minister—and Friday morning, June 2—when they met the expanded Ministerial Committee on Security. Between these two dates, the military echelon took the following steps:

First, immediately after the meeting with Eshkol in the Pit, Rabin ordered that steps be taken to forestall inertia (a slackening of alertness) in the army and to maintain high morale, both through propaganda and through a strict military routine and an intensive training regime.<sup>13</sup> Second, the Intelligence Branch issued a very somber evaluation on the military and diplomatic implications of a three-week wait. Third, several of the generals were recruited for a “propaganda campaign” in order to persuade the political establishment to change the government decision. To this end, several meetings took place between senior officers and political figures.<sup>14</sup>

Of these three activities, only the third appears somewhat problematic, because it seemingly points to IDF intervention in politics, particularly when the demand had been raised to relieve Eshkol of the defense portfolio. However, even if several officers tried to influence the appointment of a new minister of defense, their impact was infinitesimal and in no way undermined the supremacy of the political echelon. The move to appoint Dayan to the post was inspired by pressure of public opinion and the political establishment and not necessarily by the urgings of the senior command.

Yet one may still ask whether there was ever a danger—even if it came to nothing—of improper intervention by the IDF.

Ben-Gurion's dread of unauthorized action on the part of the army as the result of its lack of confidence towards the civilian leadership, an act which would constitute “a stain on the State of Israel from which it will never cleanse itself,”<sup>15</sup> has already been mentioned. It is noteworthy that there is no evidence that at any stage whatsoever the General Staff intended to take action against the government and overrule its decisions. However, the fact that several generals, in the course of charged encounters with the political echelon, felt the need to emphasize that the army was subordinate to the government,<sup>16</sup> and the fact that the prime minister felt it necessary to put the military in its place, indicates that a certain air of fear, however faint.

The generals who led the Israeli army in battle in the June 1967 War are unanimous in their view that there was never danger of a “putsch.”<sup>17</sup> This conviction is clearly verified by what the army did and by what it refrained from doing. Nonetheless, Ezer Weizman was quoted as having said that Israel was never closer to a military coup than on the eve of the Six Day War.<sup>18</sup> According to one source, the American intelligence services estimated that such a danger existed.<sup>19</sup>

That the possibility was contemplated and actually broached out loud at the senior military level, during the tense and frustrating encounters with the political echelon, is attested to by only one member of the IDF General Staff at that time—Ariel Sharon. His exceptional testimony deserves to be quoted in full:

...After the first meeting with Eshkol [in the Pit on May 28]... I must say that



I myself, and I also discussed it with the Chief of Staff, for the first time had the feeling, and this must be admitted, we sometimes asked whether in the State of Israel a situation was possible whereby the army would seize power. Could there be a situation where the army takes decisions without the government... and I always said that it wasn't possible, that in Israel such a thing couldn't happen. And here, after the meeting on [May 28]... I told the Chief of Staff and the other people there that in fact this is the first time where a situation had arisen where this was possible, and it would be accepted positively. That means that for the first time a situation had arisen in Israel where seizing of power [by the army was possible] not for purposes of desire for power but for decision-making. The basic decision [to go to war] could be taken without the government, for the first time. And I don't remember whether he [Rabin] agreed or not, but I think that he saw it like that as well. I don't think that anyone talked of practical matters, whether it was possible to carry it out, but from the viewpoint of the situation which existed... the first meeting on 28 May... we didn't finish discussing the subject. After the meeting on 2 June [with the expanded Ministerial Committee on Security]... we [the generals] stayed behind to talk afterwards, and I said that if we had been at a certain stage, what we started talking about afterwards, we would have stood up and said [to the Ministers], listen, your decisions are endangering the State of Israel, and since the situation is now very grave, you are requested to step into the next room and wait there, and the Chief of Staff will go over to Kol Israel [national

radio] and broadcast an announcement [on a decision made by the army to go to war]... they [the Ministers] would have accepted it with a sense of relief. That was my feeling.<sup>20</sup>

Sharon's testimony could be seen as the expression of an individual line of thought or mood, which he shared with the chief of staff and colleagues in the General Staff. It should be noted that this was not a unique belief, because Sharon raised it in the Pit twice within five days. However, it was an aberrant expression, no more than "thinking out loud." A similar thought may have gone through the minds of other generals, but Sharon was the only one who voiced it. Perusal of the documentation reveals no evidence that there was ever any practical outcome.

The question of the limits of obedience of a soldier to the democratically elected civilian echelon is not a simple one.<sup>21</sup> The existence of some kind of limit is accepted. No soldier is called upon to "obey blindly," and under extreme circumstances he will be fulfilling a higher obligation if he gives priority to moral or professional considerations and to his ultimate responsibility towards the state and the security of its inhabitants.

The outcome of the Six Day War has clouded comprehension of the extreme situation at the time; because Israel enjoyed decisive military superiority—which became evident only *post factum*—the claim of the General Staff that it would be disastrous to wait was disproved. In fact, most of the generals later admitted that the waiting period—in addition to its vast diplomatic advantages—strengthened the IDF, enabling it to complete its operative planning, lay out the logistic deployment, organize and train forces, and transform the reserve forces as well into a kind of regular

army. In retrospect, nobody claimed that the army had been correct in its evaluations. The way in which Eshkol and his government conducted the crisis came to be regarded, in the end, as political sagacity at its best.

This was not the way things appeared before the war. The General Staff, as noted, was convinced that the government was endangering the country. They raged, they exerted pressure, they exhorted, but they did not take illegitimate or provocative action in order to confront the political echelon with a *fait accompli*. There is no way of knowing for sure what would have happened if the government had persisted in its policy of waiting despite the deterioration in the military situation (the entry of Iraqi forces into the West Bank, further reinforcement and consolidation of the Egyptian force in Sinai, and so on) in a manner that would have aggravated the army's dilemma even further. However, there is no reason to assume that even in that case the army would have acted of its own accord and not on the basis of the decisions of the government. It is an incontrovertible fact that the IDF began to release reserve forces and to prepare for a long wait. The shortening of that period from three weeks to one was due to IDF pressure, promoted by the change in the composition of the government, and the "yellow light" from Washington. Yet the most important factor was the Hussein-Nasser alliance and its strategic implications, which tipped the balance.

On May 28, 1967, the Israeli government (with the exception of Moshe Carmel) voted unanimously for waiting. Exactly a week later, on June 4, almost the entire government (with the exception of two Mapam ministers) unanimously decided to go to war immediately. The army had brought pressure to bear and got

what it wanted, even if several days late and only after the existential threat loomed larger. The General Staff did not need to recourse to unconstitutional measures. This possibility, even if contemplated for a moment by one general or another, was never actually on the agenda.

### **RESTRICTING THE POWERS OF THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE**

Once Dayan was appointed, it was necessary to decide on the division of authority between the prime minister and the minister of defense, in particular the restrictions on the latter's freedom to issue orders to the army. The procedures were formulated by Yigal Yadin, a former chief of staff who was trusted by both Eshkol and Dayan:<sup>22</sup>

- a. The Minister of Defence will not act without the approval of the Prime Minister as regards the following:
  1. launching general hostile action or war against any country whatsoever;
  2. taking any military action in the course of war which oversteps the bounds of action as determined by the government;
  3. launching military action against any country which has not, until that moment, participated in hostilities;
  4. bombing important cities in enemy territory if the act has not been preceded by bombing of Israeli cities by that same enemy;
  5. launching retaliatory action in response to incidents.
- b. The Prime Minister can, with the knowledge of the Minister of Defence, summon the Chief of Staff, the Chief of Intelligence, the Director-General of the

Ministry of Defence or the Assistant Minister of Defence in order to receive information.

This hastily drawn-up procedure can scarcely be regarded as a comprehensive series of instructions for defining the subordination of the minister of defense to the prime minister. In any event, all the actions listed in Clause (a) were subject to the approval of the government plenum or the Ministerial Committee on Security. This was not an orderly division of authority. Rather, it was a document aimed at dispelling fears, which were not explicitly expressed, that the minister of defense might make his own decisions and take action after consulting the army, without informing the government and its head.<sup>23</sup> Dayan himself ignored the agreed procedure when he gave direct orders to the CO Northern Command on June 9 to attack the Syrians in the Golan Heights, thereby contravening the government decision of the previous night not to launch such an attack (in fact, at the government meeting of June 8, Dayan was the most vehement opponent of an attack on Syria).<sup>24</sup>

#### **“PRESENTATION OF PLANS” TO THE CHIEF OF STAFF AND MINISTER OF DEFENSE**

That evening, the Southern Command's plans were presented to the chief of staff, and a discussion was held with the participation of the deputy chief of staff; chief of intelligence; CO Southern Command; and southern divisional commanders Israel Tal (85<sup>th</sup> Division), Sharon (38<sup>th</sup> Division), and Yoffe (31<sup>st</sup> Division). An hour later they were joined by the minister of defense, who also perused the plans, took an active part in the subsequent deliberations, and helped

determine the outcome. This discussion was the decisive stage in consolidation of the ultimate operational plan “Nakhshonim,” which was implemented in general lines on the southern front.

It is seemingly surprising that at this late stage, almost three weeks after the crisis had begun and after endless deliberations and planning, the IDF did not yet have a definite operational plan for a ground offensive on the Egyptian front. The reasons lay in the rapid changes in the situation that required flexibility and adaptation of plans as well as allocation of forces and tasks. Within Southern Command, there was an ongoing struggle between the divisional commanders. Ariel Sharon was pressing and demanding expansion of his division's assignments and the aims of the war in general, while Israel Tal, whose division was earmarked for the main thrust, favored more modest objectives. In the end, Avraham Yoffe, who was more passive, was left with a depleted division. His spearhead brigade (200<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade, under Yiska Shadmi) fought in the breakthrough stage in Sharon's sector with a brilliant incursion movement in Wadi Hareidin and should logically have been under Sharon's command.<sup>25</sup>

This was not the first time that operational plans had been presented to the civilian echelon but unlike Eshkol, Dayan—as former chief of staff and the man who had waged warfare in Sinai only a decade previously—had something to say about the planned moves and objectives. The General Staff therefore was now facing a new situation in which it needed to persuade a minister of defense with professional experience and background and to adapt the operational plans to his instructions. Until then, under Eshkol, the chiefs of staff had been “exempt” from all

professional intervention, and the government had never bothered to define the objectives of the war. Its defensive tenet and the ministers' lack of military know-how (apart from Allon and Carmel), had left the General Staff devoid of strategic instruction and without definition of the objectives of the war. In its present plight, the government wanted only for the army to remove the threat. Beyond that, it devoted little serious thought to the tactics of warfare and its possible outcome.

Moshe Dayan issued three basic instructions for the General Staff stemming from the political evaluation. It is noteworthy that they were not deliberated and decided by a government forum but originated in Dayan's own personal perception and were undoubtedly colored by his experience as chief of staff and inspired to some extent by Ben-Gurion. The issues were the Gaza Strip, the Suez Canal, and defining the minimal territorial gain necessary.

### *The Gaza Strip*

The debate between the generals on the need to conquer the Gaza Strip was based entirely on military considerations. Tal feared that "if we do not deal with the Strip it will cause mayhem in our settlements."<sup>26</sup> Gavish was concerned for the fate of the settlements along the border with the Gaza Strip, and Barlev insisted that the 60<sup>th</sup> Brigade should be brought in for rapid action to capture the Strip—where two Palestinian brigades were deployed—within two hours. Rabin, on the other hand, was ready to forego the conquest of the Strip in order to focus the armored effort on the conquest of al-Arish and the destruction of the bulk of the Egyptian force. Ariel Sharon thought that "the Strip will fall in any case," and that there was no need to invest

unnecessary effort for that purpose. Only the assistant chief of operations, Rehavam Zeevi, exceeded the purely operational calculations and commented that "it would be a pity to forfeit the headline: Gaza is ours!"<sup>27</sup>

Moshe Dayan was opposed to the conquest of the Strip but not for military reasons. "The Gaza Strip issue is problematic because of the refugees," he said. He was afraid that the capture of the Strip would force Israel to undertake the burden of supporting the refugees, and he preferred to leave this to the UN Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA). Only in one case, Dayan explained, would Israel be obliged to occupy the Strip—if the Egyptians stationed foreign forces there. This would be a total violation of the armistice agreements and an excellent rationale for Israeli action, but in this case as well no action should be taken against the Strip in the first stage of the fighting, only later.<sup>28</sup>

### *The Suez Canal*

The Suez Canal was not defined as an objective in the operative plans submitted by the Command, but reaching it was not ruled out. Dayan now clarified this point: "The Canal is not an objective. We must keep our distance from it after cleaning out the routes leading there. This is because of its value to the entire world, with which we must not enter into conflict."<sup>29</sup> When the head of the operations department commented that "to sit beside the Canal could be a bargaining card for Sharm al-Shaykh," Dayan reiterated his opinion and went on to explain: "A threat against the Canal can only cause us harm. Those who are capable of removing us from Sinai will not be the Egyptians [but the great powers] and it is in their interest that we should not

threaten the Canal. On the contrary, it would be a pretext for action against us.” Dayan, therefore, was contemplating the post-war diplomatic campaign and estimated that Israeli presence on the banks of the Suez Canal or near it would help to intensify pressure on Israel to withdraw from Sinai.<sup>30</sup>

### *Defining the Minimal Territorial Gain Necessary*

Dayan wanted to annihilate as many Egyptian forces as possible, but he was highly aware of the limitations of diplomatic time. He accepted the assumption that within 72 hours, international intervention would enforce a cease-fire and declared that in this period a minimal territorial gain should be achieved—the conquest of northern Sinai as far as al-Arish—even if the blow against the Egyptian armor was not complete.<sup>31</sup>

The discussions in the General Staff that night and the next day consolidated the final operative plan, which was code-named “Nakhshonim.” It was based on Kardom 2—in other words, a main thrust along the northern axis to be executed by the 84<sup>th</sup> Division and the cream of the armored forces but with an additional effort along the central axis, including a complex breakthrough by the 38<sup>th</sup> Division and the penetration of an armored brigade of the 31<sup>st</sup> Division to destroy the forward Egyptian deployment. Of the southern arm, which had been earmarked in Kardom 1 to the main thrust, there now remained only one armored brigade, the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade, facing Shazli’s force.

### **CONCLUSION**

The slide into crisis and war in May-June 1967 was due to the total failure of

Israel’s security policy, whose supreme aim had been deterrence and prevention of war. Rabin considered himself responsible for this failure. However, while there may be some justification for blaming the military leadership for causing the May 1967 crisis, no fundamental defect can be perceived in the standpoint of the military during the crisis and in the pressure it brought imposed on the government to launch a preemptive strike. The subjective sense of existential danger was authentic, and not unjustified. Nasser had crossed the “red lines” and posed an insupportable challenge to Israel’s deterrent capability, which was its main barrier against Arab hostile initiatives to alter the status quo and carry out the proclaimed intention of annihilating Israel. The closing of Arab ranks around Nasser, the ecstatic bellicose atmosphere in the Arab world, and the gradual build-up of forces around Israel’s long borders dramatized this danger and created tremendous psychological pressure on Israel. The many expressions of sympathy and support from world public opinion were no substitute for the absence of military guarantees on the part of the powers for Israel’s security. The diplomatic efforts merely proved that it was impossible to place trust in external support. Under these conditions, the decision to wait seemed disastrous, both because it granted the enemy respite for further troop build-ups, consolidation, and organization, and—and this was the main point—because it left the enemy the initiative for striking the first blow. The critical significance of the first blow under Israel’s geographic conditions at the time was self-evident. The balance of forces between Israel and the Arab states in quantitative terms was considered potentially critical and liable to have a crucial effect on the course and outcome of the war. The desire of the senior command

to act first was, therefore, entirely justified. The war, in the final analysis, bore this out.

To conclude, one might note that the military leadership, to a large extent, “entangled” the State of Israel (to quote Rabin) in escalation, which generated the crisis that culminated in an unpremeditated war, a war which from the outset was unwanted and non-essential. Yet from the moment the crisis erupted and the threat emerged, the military’s advocacy of offensive initiative was correct. During the war itself, the IDF, as is well-known, carried out its mission in the best possible fashion.

*\*Ami Gluska is a lecturer of history and political science at the Hebrew University and the Ashkelon Academic College, Israel. He reached the rank of colonel in the Israel Defense Forces and was aide-de-camp, private secretary, speechwriter, and spokesman to Israel’s fifth and sixth presidents. He has also served in diplomatic capacities and was speechwriter to three prime ministers. He has held senior positions in the ministries of defense and public security and was a member in negotiating teams with the Palestinians.*

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eshkol at a government meeting on June 1, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> The impact of their meeting with the senior command on Friday was evident in the remarks of the ministers at Sunday’s government session. *Minutes of Government Meeting*, June 4, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> The content of the June 2, 1967 meeting of the Ministerial Committee with the General Staff forum as quoted below is based on the minutes of the meeting, IDF

---

Archive 192/74/1201. Compare to Eytan Haber, *Ha-Yom Tifrotz Milkhama* [Today War will Break Out] (Tel Aviv: Idanim, 1988), pp. 204-12.

<sup>4</sup> Reference was to the Jewish influence on the administration. See Harry McPherson, “Ha-Bayit Ha-Lavan, Yehudei Artzot Ha-Brit u-Milkhemet Sheshet Ha-Yamin [The White House, U.S. Jewry and the Six Day War], *Shisha Yamim, Shloshim Shana* [Six Years, Six Days] (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1999), pp. 137-42.

<sup>5</sup> In practice this was an indirect admission that Israel should not wait more than a few days, even for economic reasons.

<sup>6</sup> There were, however, differences of opinion between Dayan and Allon. The latter favored reaching the canal, conquering the Gaza Strip, and transferring its refugees to Sinai. Dayan objected. See Moshe Dayan, *Avnei Derekh* [Milestones] (Tel Aviv, Idanim, 1977), p. 422.

<sup>7</sup> See Rafi Efrat’s testimony about June 2, 1967.

<sup>8</sup> For characterization of a political culture as “mature,” where the level of military intervention in politics is the lowest, see Samuel Finer, *Ha-Ish al Gav Ha-Sous* [The Man on the Horse] (Tel Aviv: Maarakhot, 1982), pp. 24-182.

<sup>9</sup> See Amos Perlmutter, *The Military and Politics in Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Zeev Schiff, “1967—Ha-Matkal be-Einei Ha-Memshala” [1967—The General Staff in the Government’s Eyes], *Haaretz*, June 6, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Zerah Wahrhaftig, the minister for religious affairs in Eshkol’s government and member of the ministerial committee on security, related that during a tour of the Gaza Strip border he conferred with representatives of settlements and the deputy commanding officer of the 84<sup>th</sup>

Division, Herzl Shafir. Offensive epithets were directed at the government “as if to say: you are fools!” Author’s interview with Wahrhaftig, August 24, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> The economic recession and the deterioration in security in the second half of 1966 and the first half of 1967 affected the public mood and created an atmosphere of depression throughout the country. Many Israelis emigrated to Europe and America, and a popular joke at the time was that “the last to leave is requested to switch off the light at Lod [later Ben-Gurion] airport.”

<sup>13</sup> It was decided, as noted, that in order to prevent slackening of tension, the release of reserve units should be postponed, a decision which was misinterpreted by the Prime Minister’s Office. Haber, *Today War will Break Out*, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Shlomo Nakdimon, “Mered Ha-Alufim 67” [“The Generals’ Revolt 67”], *Yediot Aharonot*, September 15, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Shlomo Nakdimon, *Towards the Zero-Hour* (Tel-Aviv: Ramdor, 1968), p. 184

<sup>16</sup> Remarks of Tal, Narkis, and Elazar at the stormy meeting with the prime minister on May 28, 1967. IDF History Department, *Supreme Command Post A*, pp. 288-89; Haber, *Today War Will Break Out*, pp. 196-97.

<sup>17</sup> In press interviews, Eshkol’s widow, Miriam Eshkol, used the word “putsch.” The members of the 1967 senior command reject her assertion and admit only that there was a “sharp conflict” between them and the politicians, and no more. Nakdimon, “The Generals’ Revolt 67.”

<sup>18</sup> Weizman is quoted as follows: “I don’t believe that a military coup could have taken place, but we were never closer.” See J. Larteguy, *The Walls of Israel* (New York: Evans & Co, 1968), p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Seymour Hersh, *Bereirat Shimshom* [Samson’s Choice] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 1992), p. 125.

<sup>20</sup> Ariel Sharon’s testimony, IDF Archive 192/74/1038. A senior military correspondent heard from a certain general (apparently Sharon) that he thought it was possible to lock the ministers in another room and carry out a clean coup. Zeev Schif, “1967—The Senior Command in Government Eyes,” *Haaretz*, June 6, 1967.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 74-79.

<sup>22</sup> Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 422-23.

<sup>23</sup> Another of Eshkol’s fears, which Dayan tried to assuage, was “beheadings” in the Ministry of Defense. See minutes of meeting of alignment ministers, June 1, 1967. Eshkol Archive. Yisrael Lior describes the situation differently. See Haber, *Today War Will Break Out*, pp. 145-85.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of government meeting, June 8, 1967; Dayan, *Milestones*, pp. 474-75.

<sup>25</sup> IDF History Department, *Supreme Command Post A*, p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* See also Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 423.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> The war did not proceed according to Dayan’s instructions, and he himself approved the seizing of strongholds beside the Suez Canal in order to block the Egyptian escape routes from Sinai. Moreover, after the war, Dayan regretted not having ordered the IDF to hold on to the west bank of the canal (and the east bank of the Jordan). Dayan at a gathering to sum up the lessons of the war, February 28, 1968. IDF Archive 192/74/987.

<sup>31</sup> Avraham Eilon’s notes of June 2, 1967, Archives of IDF History Department.