

suffice. Nasser said it wouldn't. Nearly all the Palestinians insisted on going home; they would continue to insist even if offered compensation.

Nasser said he wanted friendly relations with the United States. He reemphasized that he was in no sense a communist, despite Egypt's ties to the Soviet Union. He criticized American policy for being unduly influenced by the large Jewish vote in the United States.

After the meeting, Anderson cabled his impressions to Johnson. On the crucial question of Nasser's willingness to go to war, Anderson wrote: "He kept reassuring me that he was not going to start a war, but that he was not responsible for all groups, and that he would intervene in any actual conflict begun." As to whether Nasser might modify his current position, Anderson commented, "For the time being I think he will remain firm."

Anderson had stopped in Lebanon on the way to Egypt. In Beirut, he had sought out acquaintances from other countries of the region. He had discovered, significantly, that even Saudis, Kuwaitis, Lebanese, and Iraqis who opposed Nasser on most issues were now rallying to his cause. Nasser knew this, of course, and the Johnson administration must bear it in mind in formulating U.S. policy. With the backing of nearly all the Arabs, Nasser would probably resist attempts to force passage into the Gulf of Aqaba. "I believe he would regard any effort to open the Straits of Tiran as hostile," Anderson said.<sup>14</sup>

Anderson's message reinforced the Johnson administration's belief that Egypt wouldn't initiate an armed conflict, but it afforded little hope beyond that. Nasser's words suggested that the Egyptian president was unwilling to try to control the Syrians and the Palestinians, either of whom might happily provoke a war. Egypt would then join the fray, with the same result as if Nasser had started it.

Nonetheless, Johnson worried more about Israel than about the Arabs. On Eban's visit to Washington, the Israeli foreign minister had indicated less confidence in Israel's ability to defeat the Arabs than U.S. officials thought conditions warranted. The Joint Chiefs of Staff predicted an Israeli victory within five to seven days. If Israel struck first, the briefer prediction would hold, and Israel would suffer fewer casualties. If Egypt or Syria got in the initial blow, the war would last a few days longer and would exact from Israel a higher price. But by no means was the essential security of Israel at risk.

<sup>14</sup>Anderson to Johnson, June 2, 1967, *ibid.*

Yet the Israeli government thought so, or at least the Israelis chose to give the appearance that they did. Perhaps they were simply building a case for teaching the Arabs a lesson. Whatever the reality, Johnson felt obliged to restate his commitment to Israel's safety, in hopes that this would ease the pressure for preemption. On June 3, he wrote Eshkol congratulating the prime minister and his associates for their "resolution and calm in a situation of grave tension." Johnson affirmed two basic principles of U.S. policy pertinent to the current crisis: support for the territorial integrity and political independence of all countries of the Middle East, and support for freedom of the seas. He added explicitly that the United States judged the Aqaba Gulf to be an international waterway.

In the same letter, Johnson once more urged Eshkol to refrain from hasty action. The United States was seeking international cooperation in formulating measures to lift the blockade, the president declared. American representatives at the United Nations and in foreign capitals were working around the clock to gain this cooperation. But their efforts required time to yield results. Israel must provide the time.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. THE JUNE WAR

But Israel couldn't wait. On the morning of June 5, it attacked Egypt. The Israeli air force struck by surprise, destroying more than 300 Egyptian planes in the first three hours of the war and losing fewer than 20 of its own. Shortly thereafter, the Israelis flew against Jordan, eliminating that country's air force in minutes. Syria received similar treatment early in the afternoon. Israel's victory in the air essentially guaranteed victory on the ground. Israeli armor, supported by Israeli jets, invaded the Sinai, severing Egyptian lines and advancing rapidly toward the Suez Canal. Israeli forces occupied the West Bank and seized the Old City of Jerusalem.

Johnson learned of the outbreak of fighting at 4:30 A.M., Washington time, on June 5. He immediately wanted to know who had started it. Walt Rostow, on the other end of the telephone line, couldn't say for certain. The Israeli defense ministry was claiming that Egypt had moved first; U.S. officials in the area couldn't confirm or deny. Abba

<sup>15</sup>Johnson to Eshkol, June 3, 1967, *ibid.*

Eban repeated the cover story in a call to the State Department. The administration refused to accept the tale, believing that Nasser wasn't foolish enough to tempt fate so egregiously. Johnson's spokesman George Christian told reporters that the White House was investigating the matter.

Within hours, the Israeli story fell apart. The Israelis failed to produce evidence of an Egyptian incursion, while the wrecks of Egyptian planes caught on the ground testified convincingly against it. When Eshkol sent a message to Johnson on the afternoon of June 5, the prime minister didn't—quite—say that Israel had responded to an Egyptian attack. Yet he did claim that Israel had acted out of self-defense. "After weeks in which our peril has grown day by day, we are now engaged in repelling the aggression which Nasser has been building up against us." Reminding Johnson of the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis, Eshkol thanked the president for the United States' support of Israel in the past, and said he looked forward to American support in the future. While he indicated that Israeli forces could handle the Arabs, he had a favor to ask the president. "I hope that everything will be done by the United States to prevent the Soviet Union from exploiting and enlarging the conflict."<sup>16</sup>

Such was precisely Johnson's intention. The president appreciated the diplomatic difficulties the Israelis' preemptive attack created for the United States, but he also realized that Israel's swift success at arms had averted a far more difficult scenario, one in which Israel appeared likely to *lose* the war. If the Israelis had stumbled, the administration would have been sorely tempted to go to their rescue. Since the early 1960s, Israel had become almost an ally of the United States; for an American president to acquiesce in Israel's destruction would have been unthinkable.

After the initial hours of fighting, only intervention by the Soviets could have tilted the battlefield odds against Israel. Consequently, Johnson concentrated his attention on Moscow. As soon as he got out of bed on the morning of June 5, the president sent a message to Kosygin expressing the United States' desire to see the conflict end as quickly as possible. He urged the Soviet Union to join in efforts toward this objective.

The Soviet leader replied a short while later. Kosygin concurred with Johnson's judgment that protracted hostilities would raise grave

<sup>16</sup>Eshkol to Johnson, June 5, 1967, *ibid.*

dangers. The Soviet Union would work for a truce, Kosygin said. He hoped the United States would use its influence with Israel to do likewise.

Johnson liked the idea of a truce, but the truce terms Moscow initially sought differed from those the president deemed appropriate. The Soviet delegate on the United Nations Security Council proposed a measure calling not only for the shooting to cease but for invaders—meaning the Israelis—to withdraw behind the 1956 armistice lines. The Israelis, still smashingly successful in the field, saw no reason to comply. They remembered the Suez War, following which they had succumbed to international pressure to give up territory won in fighting. They determined this time to establish and retain buffer zones around their borders. Johnson refused to override the Israelis, and he instructed Arthur Goldberg, his United Nations representative, to seek a ceasefire-in-place.

In the early phase of the war, some U.S. officials believed that the Israeli successes might open new opportunities for solving the Arab-Israeli problem once and for all. According to this line of thinking, an Israeli victory would demonstrate to the Arabs the futility of pretending that Israel could be destroyed; at the same time, the Israelis would win territory they could barter for peace treaties and recognition of Israel's right to exist.

But a comprehensive settlement proved elusive, not least because the Israelis, despite their brilliance on the battlefield, remained touchy on all matters affecting their security. Their touchiness showed plainly on the first day of the war. A spokesman for the U.S. State Department, asked to describe the Johnson administration's policy toward the conflict, said the United States was "neutral in thought, word, and deed." From the reaction that followed, one might have thought that the administration had announced it was about to start sending weapons to Egypt—except that the Egyptians complained too. The statement triggered an instant uproar among Israel's American backers, who expected far more than neutrality from Washington in what they considered a just war for Israel's existence. Regardless of which side had fired first, they contended, Egypt and Syria had provoked the conflict. In Israel's hour of trial, Washington seemed to be reneging on its oft-given promises of support. Blame for the war and pressure to relinquish territory might follow.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>*American Foreign Policy: Current Documents*, 1967, p. 506 n. 67.

Johnson immediately acted to silence the howling and allay the fears. Obviously, the president couldn't declare American unneutrality, but through his many contacts with the American Jewish community he spread word that his devotion to Israel hadn't diminished. Israel could count on Lyndon Johnson, as it always had. The president had Dean Rusk announce—from the White House rather than from the State Department—a correction to the neutrality statement. Rusk told a news conference that neutrality, while narrowly accurate as a description of American nonbelligerency, didn't cover the American attitude. "Neutrality does not imply indifference," Rusk explained. Without specifying Israel by name, Rusk said the policy of the United States remained unchanged. The American government and people were as committed as ever to the search for a lasting and stable peace in the Middle East, which implied, as Washington had often declared—so often that Rusk didn't need to at this ticklish hour—Arab recognition of Israel's right to exist. "There is the position at law that we are not a belligerent," he summarized. "There is the position of deep concern, which we have as a nation and as a member of the United Nations, in peace in that area."<sup>18</sup>

The Arabs never accused the United States of neutrality; at first, many didn't even believe American claims of nonbelligerency. Upon the outbreak of the war, the Egyptian government charged that planes from U.S. aircraft carriers had taken part in the raids on Egyptian airfields. Cairo found it impossible to accept—or admit, anyway—that the Israelis by themselves could have delivered such a crushing blow.

But after Johnson requested that Kosygin point out to Nasser what Soviet intelligence knew—that American warplanes had been nowhere in the vicinity at the time of the attacks—the Egyptian government shifted its ground for complaint. It alleged that American support for Israel before and during the fighting rendered the United States, in effect, a belligerent. On June 6, Cairo broke diplomatic relations with Washington. Syria and Iraq soon followed suit.

The anti-American movement among the Arabs might have turned into a stampede if the Soviet Union hadn't also set itself up for Arab criticism. On June 6, Moscow altered its position on the issue of

<sup>18</sup>Eshkol message in Rostow to Johnson, June 6, 1967, Johnson papers; State Department *Bulletin*, June 26, 1967.

a ceasefire. Reasoning that the longer the war lasted, the more territory Egypt would lose, the Kremlin voted in favor of a United Nations resolution recommending a ceasefire-in-place. Restoring the status quo, if such ever became possible, would have to wait.

At a White House meeting the next day, the top officials of the Johnson administration examined where they stood. Dean Rusk recapitulated the events of the first forty-eight hours of the war. Rusk said that Nasser had misjudged both the military situation between the Arabs and Israel and the degree to which the Soviets would back him. As a result, he had suffered a "stunning loss." There now existed widespread disillusionment among the Arabs with the Egyptian president. Soviet prestige in the Middle East had plunged on account of Moscow's failure to follow through on earlier professions of support. Israel was riding high. The Israelis' demands would be "substantial."

Richard Helms focused on the Soviet reaction. The CIA director considered the damage to Soviet prestige almost as great as that to Nasser's. Moscow, Helms said, had badly underestimated what it was letting itself in for with Nasser and the Syrians. Its error was even greater than the error Khrushchev had made during the Cuban missile crisis.

Llewellyn Thompson, the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, then in Washington for consultation, thought the Kremlin would be relatively easy to handle despite its present discomfiture. Unlike Khrushchev, the current Soviet leadership didn't enjoy gambling or confrontational diplomacy. Barring a direct Israeli threat against Cairo, the Soviets would probably cut their losses and avoid deeper involvement.

Johnson wasn't so sure. The Soviets would have a hard time walking away from their investment in Egypt and Syria, the president said. The United States must keep a close eye on the Kremlin.

Rusk thought the Israelis would present a bigger problem than the Soviets. Israeli successes, which had saved the administration from one set of problems, created another. The Arabs identified the United States with the Israeli aggressors, as the recent severing of relations indicated. The only way to salvage the situation was to keep Israel's demands within reason. This would require the greatest care. Overt and official pressure on Israel would probably fail, even if political conditions in the United States had allowed it. Instead, the administration must work from the inside, relying on its many direct and

indirect connections to the Israeli government. Administration officials must make themselves "attorneys for Israel," Rusk said.

Johnson agreed regarding the delicacy of the task. The administration should try to create "as few heroes and as few heels" as possible, he said. Yet matters could be far worse. "We are in as good a position as we could be, given the complexities of the situation." Significant troubles remained, though. "By the time we get through with all the festering problems, we are going to wish the war had not happened."<sup>19</sup>

A new and flabbergastingly unanticipated problem emerged several hours after this meeting. Out of the—literally—clear blue sky, Israeli fighter-bombers attacked the American intelligence ship *Liberty* off the Egyptian coast. The casualties numbered over two hundred; thirty-four men died. The ship barely escaped sinking. The attack almost certainly wasn't a case of mistaken identity, since the vessel was plainly marked and visibility was excellent. Israeli reconnaissance planes repeatedly flew close overhead prior to the assault.

The most probable explanation for the attack is that the Israelis didn't like the idea of Americans eavesdropping on Israeli communications, a job the *Liberty* was outfitted to do. The war against Jordan had ended on June 7, when Amman accepted the United Nations ceasefire resolution. Egypt was on the ropes and would quit on the day of the *Liberty* attack. Yet the Israelis, predictably full of themselves, had one more goal: the capture of the Golan Heights. The invasion of Syria would commence within hours. If the Americans found out about it ahead of time, they might object and try to prevent the accomplishment of what the Israeli defense ministry considered a vital task. To prevent any such complication, someone in the Israeli chain of command—a subsequent CIA report cited confidential sources naming Defense Minister Moshe Dayan—ordered the *Liberty* destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

The Israeli government shrewdly guessed that Washington wouldn't investigate the incident closely, at least not until too late to do anything about it. The Israelis declared the attack an error. Abba Eban sent Johnson an apology: "I am deeply mortified and grieved by the tragic accident involving the lives and safety of Americans in Middle Eastern waters." Israeli Ambassador Avraham Harman similarly

told the president of his "heartfelt sorrow at the tragic accident to the U.S.S. *Liberty* for which my countrymen were responsible."<sup>21</sup>

American officials believed the "tragic accident" story as little as they had believed Israel's claim that Egypt had started the war. Clark Clifford, formerly Truman's pro-Zionist aide and now an adviser to Johnson, told the president, "It is inconceivable that it was an accident." Clifford called for an investigation that would set forth the facts and demand punishment of those Israelis responsible. Johnson was irate. "I had a firm commitment from Eshkol, and he blew it," the president said. "That old coot isn't going to pay any attention to any imperialist pressures."<sup>22</sup>

Johnson ordered U.S. planes to go to the area of the attack to find out what they could. To avoid alarming the Soviets, he sent Kosygin a message explaining that this deployment had the sole purpose of looking into the *Liberty* incident. The United States had no intention of intervening in the fighting. The president also told Kosygin he would appreciate the Kremlin's cooperation in passing the message to Nasser.

When the U.S. planes added little new knowledge about the *Liberty* affair, Johnson remained angry but decided to take no action against Israel. The middle of a war seemed an imprudent time for an altercation. The president agreed with Rusk's earlier comment that the only hope for restraining the Israelis—short of a politically inconceivable application of major sanctions—was to remain on friendly terms with them. Consequently, he chose to accept the Israeli government's apologies, and he ordered the incident smoothed over.

The June 9 Israeli invasion of Syria initiated the final phase of the war, and produced a final set of problems for the Johnson administration. As the invasion commenced, Arthur Goldberg was explaining to the United Nations the need for bringing the fighting to an end. Israel's attack didn't reflect favorably on the United States: either the United States lacked the will to stop the Israelis, in which case its professions of evenhandedness were a sham, or it lacked the ability, in which case it wasn't much of a superpower.

While the latest Israeli move was embarrassing, the Soviet response to that move was alarming. The Kremlin had been provoked beyond endurance by the humiliation of its allies, and now decided it

<sup>19</sup>Notes of NSC meeting, June 7, 1967, Johnson papers.

<sup>20</sup>Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem* (New York, 1984), p. 265 n.

<sup>21</sup>Eban to Johnson, June 8, 1967; Harman to Johnson, June 8, 1967; both in Johnson papers.

<sup>22</sup>Notes of NSC meeting, June 9, 1967, *ibid.*

had to do something about this most recent outrage. On news of the Israeli invasion of Syria, the Soviets broke off diplomatic relations with Israel. Shortly afterward, Kosygin called Johnson to declare that the situation in the Middle East had reached a "very crucial moment." Kosygin warned of a "grave catastrophe" about to happen, and announced that unless the Israelis halted operations immediately, the Soviet Union would take "necessary actions, including military."<sup>23</sup>

Kosygin's message caught the administration by surprise. Just a day earlier, the State Department had sent a circular to all U.S. diplomatic and consular posts summarizing the administration's understanding of the situation in the Middle East. On the matter of Soviet actions and intentions, the circular explained that the Soviets calculated that any effort on their part to retrieve the Arab military situation "would carry unacceptable risk of confrontation with us." On June 8, the CIA declared flatly, "There is no danger of Soviet military intervention in the Middle East."<sup>24</sup>

Following Kosygin's threat, Johnson responded in two ways. He ordered the Sixth Fleet, hovering off the Syrian coast, to move closer to shore. What the fleet would do when it got there, he hadn't decided; he hoped he wouldn't have to. The point was to convince the Soviets that two could play the brinkmanship game. At the same time, Johnson told Kosygin that his administration was working on getting Israel to accept a ceasefire. An end to the fighting, he said as convincingly as he could, was imminent.

Fortunately for the United States, for the Soviet Union, for Israel, and for Syria, Johnson was right. The Israelis decided they had gained all the ground they needed, and on June 10 they signed a truce with Syria. Fighting continued for some hours afterward, but by June 11 all was still.

With the end of the war, Johnson's Middle East problems moved off the critical list to the merely serious. Until very recently, some administration officials had retained hope that the war's jolting might have shaken loose a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Walt Rostow, the administration's house optimist, thought a settlement was possible, although he conceded that it would require the coincidence of a number of favorable factors. These included concessions from Israel on territory taken, an agreement among the great powers to limit

<sup>23</sup>Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York, 1971), p. 302.

<sup>24</sup>State Department to all diplomatic and consular posts, June 9, 1967; CIA to White House, June 8, 1967; Johnson papers.

arms sales to the Middle East, and a shift in the political center of gravity in the Arab world from radical leaders to moderates. It would also require—this most fundamentally—"a broad and imaginative movement by Israel on the question of the refugees."<sup>25</sup>

Events quickly demonstrated that none of Rostow's conditions were likely to obtain, at least not soon. Israel showed little inclination to give up much of the territory it had seized in battle—Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Old City, and the Golan Heights—or to exercise imagination regarding the refugees. The Soviets, having suffered a severe diplomatic defeat, had almost no interest in collaboration with the Americans to limit arms sales to the region. A moderation of Arab politics would have to await healing of the wounds of the war.

Johnson received a firsthand report on Israel's uncompromising mood. Aide Harry McPherson, just back from Israel, explained that the Israelis were flushed with victory. "The spirit of the army, and indeed of all the people, has to be experienced to be believed," McPherson said. "The temper of the country, from high officials to people in the street, is not belligerent, but it is determined, and egos are a bit inflated—understandably. Israel has done a colossal job." The military wanted to keep all of the territory seized. Everyone wanted to keep the Old City. "Regaining the Old City is an event of unimaginable significance to the Israelis. Even the nonreligious intellectuals feel this way." McPherson sensed room for give regarding Sinai and perhaps the West Bank, among politicians if not among the generals. A demilitarized Sinai, even back in Egyptian hands, might not pose an unacceptable danger to Israel, while trying to absorb the West Bank, with its large population of Arabs, would present problems the Israeli government hadn't figured out how to solve.

But the Israeli government and people were united in opposition to a return to the prewar status quo. "There are constant references and comparisons to 1956. The Israelis do not intend to repeat the same scenario—to withdraw within their boundaries with only paper guarantees that fall apart at the touch of Arab hands." The United States might as well forget about persuading the Israelis to relinquish territory they didn't freely choose to give up. "We would have to push them back by military force, in my opinion, to accomplish a repeat of 1956." Merely cutting off U.S. aid wouldn't do it.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Rostow to Johnson, June 7, 1967, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>McPherson to Johnson, June 11, 1967, *ibid.*