Paving the Road to the War: Israeli Diplomacy and the 1967 War

It took three weeks of waiting and six days of fighting in early May 1967 to change the face of the Middle East. Besides the remarkable victory, scholars also concentrate on the three weeks of waiting, which they see as days that “convey the sense of anxiety and indecision then prevailing in Israel.” The anxiety refers to the sense of danger emanating from the amassment of forces along its borders, and the signing of military pacts between Egypt and Syria, and Egypt and Jordan. The indecision relates to the internal debate that took place between the military and the government about Israel’s reaction to the entry of Egyptian forces into the Sinai on May 14, 1967. The debate, which on some occasions was sharp and heated, and the appointment of the former IDF Chief of Staff, Gen. (res.) Moshe Dayan to the Ministry of Defense instead of Prime Minister Levy Eshkol, strengthened the notion of a weak government blindly seeking a way out of the crisis in the face of militant and demanding military officers and a worried public. This notion though misses the true nature of the Israeli government’s conduct, as the waiting period was not a time of hesitation and stumbling, but an essential necessity. This was for two reasons: war at that time served no Israeli interest, and the waiting period was used by the government to allow time for diplomacy to overcome obstacles that otherwise would have annulled any achievement on the battlefield.

The Israeli government did not want a war, as Israel’s geostrategic environment significantly improved in the decade that followed the 1956 Sinai Campaign. The infiltrations from the neighboring countries, which during 1949-1956 were endemic and quite disturbing, ceased. While during the first years of independence, Israel had difficulty in procuring arms, things changed during the second half of the 1950s, and it had no problem buying all the weapons it needed, first from France and later from Britain and other Europeans states. In August 1962, another strategic breakthrough occurred when the Kennedy administration agreed to sell to Israel ground-to-surface Hawk missiles. This was the first time that the United States was ready to sell a major weapons system to Israel. The Johnson administration continued the trend, selling Israel combat-planes, thus laying the groundwork for turning the United States into Israel's major arms supplier. During this period, Israel gradually came out of its regional and diplomatic isolation. The United States and Britain accepted Israel’s perception that the West needed to counter the pro-Soviet camp, lead by Egyptian President Jamal Abed al Nasser. This argument was instrumental in the establishment of clandestine, yet active, relations with non-Arab Middle Eastern states like Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia and even

1 Aaron S. Kleiman, Israel and the World After 40 Years (Washington, 1990), p. 74.
Sudan, in what became known as the “Peripheral Alliance.” To these one should add the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel by more and more third-world countries from Asia and Africa. Internally, Israel was occupied in this decade with absorbing the more than one million immigrants who flooded the country since its establishment, and attempting to stabilize its dwindling economy. War, at that moment, seemed the least desired event.

However, it was not only the feeling that war was inexpedient which led the government to reject the military’s demands for immediate action and instead chose the policy of waiting. It also adhered to one of the fundamental principles of Israel’s security perception, which was stipulated at the time by former Prime Minister David Ben Gurion: Israel should not go to war alone without a great-power ally, or in this case, to make it allies to understand that unless the crisis defused, Israel had no alternative but to go to war. Diplomacy was the tool with which the Israeli government hoped to defuse the crisis, and alternatively, to create the conditions that would allow the IDF to carry out its war-plans, which called for a preemptive strike on the Arab armies. Israeli diplomats acted in various world capitals to that end, but the main theater of activity was undoubtedly the United States. The significance of the American role in Israel’s decision to go to war was well recognized, and William Quandt describes in length and depth the process which resulted in President Lyndon Johnson abandoning “the policy of making an all-out effort to prevent war,” and giving Israel a “yellow light” to launch the war it was seeking at that stage. However, bringing Johnson to give the “yellow light” demanded not only strenuous diplomatic effort, but also forced the government to sustain heavy attacks by internal opposition circles and the Israeli army. Senior officers tagged the government’s decision, sometimes in a very brutal language, as a sign of weakness. The prime minister and some of the other ministers though saw beyond the immediate crisis, an insight that determined the nature and direction of the government’s activities during the waiting period. Based on declassified Israeli documents, this paper will introduce the role Israeli diplomacy played during the crisis, and will show how it worked to make war possible by bringing President Johnson to admit that the United

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States had no real answer to the crisis initiated by Nasser, and thus led to the “yellow light”, which allowed Israel to strike first without losing the gains of a military victory afterward.

**The Background**

With the wisdom of hindsight, it is possible to decide today that the countdown to war started on April 7, 1967, with the shooting down of six Syrian MiGs by the Israeli Air Force. The incident was the culmination of a series of violent incidents along the Israeli-Syrian border, which was the result of several factors. One was Syria’s challenge to Israel’s claims of sovereignty over disputed pieces of land across the common border, which Israel insisted on cultivating. The agricultural value of the pieces of land was almost nil, but nevertheless, Israel was not ready to give up what it considered to be its territory by lawful right, even if the price was armed clashes and mutual bombardments. Tension was further heightened by Syria’s attempts to divert the sources of the Jordan River, the major source of water for Israel, and the IDF’s destruction of the diversion equipment in retaliation. Another source of friction was the hospitality the Syrians showed toward the Palestinian organizations, which had been launching a terror campaign against Israel since January 1965. The growing intensity of the tension led the Israeli government and IDF high command to seek an excuse to inflict a heavy blow upon the Syrian forces. The opportunity arose when Palestinian guerrillas blew up a water pumping station in northern Israel on April 1, 1967. Prime Minister Eshkol instructed the IDF chief of staff, General Yitzhak Rabin, to plan a harsh and painful attack in response. On April 7, Israel provoked an incident along the border. Syria’s response led to a large-scale exchange of fire, which culminated in the Israeli Air Force operation. The planes paralyzed the Syrian fire position on the Golan Heights and shot down six Syrian MiG jets that tried to interfere with the IAF operation.\(^5\)

The incident was followed by heated declarations against Syria by senior Israeli officials, adding incendiary to the already overheated situation. In an interview to the media, General Rabin made a clear threat against Damascus, whose “authorities are behind the terrorists”, hinting that Israel’s actions against Syria aimed to bring about the overthrow of the regime.\(^6\) The prime minister, while scolding the chief of staff, added to the turmoil by claiming “the last 14 incidents might lead us to take measures no less harsh than those taken on April 7th.”\(^7\) The Arab response came from an unexpected place: on May 14, 1967, Egyptian military forces crossed the Suez Canal and amassed forces in the Sinai Peninsula. Shortly afterwards, Nasser demanded that the UN general-secretary, U Thant, remove the UN Emergency Forces from their positions along the Israeli-Egyptian border. The UNEF had been posted along the Israeli-Egyptian border after the Suez war to ensure that the border would remain quite, with no infiltrations or shooting from Egypt into Israel, as happened before the 1956 war.

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\(^6\) Haber, op. cit. p. 146.

\(^7\) Haber, op. cit. p. 147.
First Stage: Diplomacy Prevails

The entry of Egyptian forces into the Sinai came as a surprise to the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) Intelligence Branch. The predominant assumption was that, since 1963 Egypt was entangled in the Yemenite Civil war, Nasser would not open a new front against Israel. Nevertheless, the improbable happened and now it remained up to Israel to guess what Nasser’s intentions were. Although General Aharon Yariv, head of the IDF’s Intelligence Branch, still postulated that Nasser did not want an all out war with Israel, he assumed that Egypt intended to exhaust Israel, or might even initiate a limited military action. Yitzhak Rabin, the IDF chief of staff, reiterated the same themes in front of the cabinet, noting on May 22, that the Egyptian formation was defensive and there were no signs that Nasser was intending to go to war with Israel. The common feeling in the government was similar.

The reasons for Nasser’s offensive step have been a source of debate ever since. It is agreed that in early May, Soviet officials in Cairo and Moscow told the Egyptians and the Syrians that Israel had amassed military forces along its border with Syria in order to attack it. Trying to bolster his personal position, which was at a low ebb after the setbacks the Egyptian army suffered in Yemen, Nasser responded to the Soviet message in an act that was aimed to support the Syrians. He was especially bound to do so in light of the Syrian-Egyptian defense treaty signed on November 4, 1966. Others explain that the entry of the Egyptian forces into the Sinai was a well-calculated action by Nasser, who sought to launch a preemptive strike on the Israeli nuclear plant in Dimona. The reasons for the Soviet message have also remained a source of debate. Israeli diplomats placed their interpretation of the Soviet action within the Cold War context, claiming that the Soviets wanted to create a counterpoint to Vietnam, and to induce the United States to rearrange world order in a Yalta-alike arrangement.

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8 Haber, op. cit. pp. 54, 95.
11 The most fervent advocate of this thesis is Shlomo Aronson and Oded Brosh, The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East (Albany, 1992), pp. 107-111; a counter opinion on this matter see Avner Cohen, Israel and the Bomb (New York, 1998), pp. 260-265
However, even if the Egyptians did not plan to launch an attack, its massive build up in the Sinai forced Israel to be prepared. Opinions were divided over what to be prepared for. The prime minister thought that the crisis was related foremost to inter-Arab affairs, and hence Israel should adopt a wait-and-see policy. Foreign Minister Abba Eban claimed that since it seemed that winds of war were blowing, Israel should increase its diplomatic activity in an attempt to calm the Arabs down. Abraham Herman, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, went one step further when he suggested seizing the opportunity to demand from Syria and Jordan a full and strict compliance to the 1949 Armistice Agreements, and to demand the curbing of the terror attacks launched from their soil. The government accepted Eban’s proposed line, which did not necessarily contradict Herman’s suggestion. The decision at this time though was that the main effort should be the defusing of the crisis. Eban then instructed the Israeli representatives in Washington, Paris, London and Moscow to call upon the respective governments to explain to Nasser that Israel had no intention of attacking Syria and to exert pressure on the Egyptian leader to pull his forces out of Sinai. The Israeli foreign minister invited the Soviet ambassador in Tel Aviv to visit the border area and to see that the allegations on Israeli military build-up along the border with Syria were baseless. The ambassador declined the invitation. Israeli diplomats also acted to prevent the redeployment of the UNEF away from the Israeli-Egyptian border. U-Thant refused to accept any limits on the UNEF actions, and threatened to totally withdraw the UN forces from the Sinai - a step that the Egyptians did not ask for. The American and the British representatives to the United Nations registered their governments’ objection to his decision to withdraw the UNEF from Sinai, and the Israeli diplomats acted to prevent U-Thant’s compliance with the Egyptian demand. Nevertheless, U Thant instructed the UNEF to withdraw from the Sinai.

The nature of Israel’s response was decided not only by what the Israeli government considered logical, but also by the response of its allies, foremost the United States. Calls were made to Israel to show restraint and not to be the first to strike, but it was President


14 Telegram 952 from FO, Jerusalem, to Israel’s Embassy, Washington May 16, 1967, FO 4078/4; Telegram 117 from Israel’s Embassy, Paris to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 17, 1967, FO 4084/2; Telegram 83 From the Office in Tel Aviv to the Office in Jerusalem, May 18, 1983, FO 4080/50. The telegram is a report of a conversation between Foreign Minister Eban with British Ambassador Michael Hadow; Message from Foreign Minister Eban to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, H. Brown, 20 May 1967, FO 4091/23.


Johnson who set the direction of Israel’s action for the coming days. In a message sent to Eshkol on May 17, the president expressed “sympathy and understanding” for Israel in the face of the crisis, but asked the prime minister to refrain from any military action without prior consultation with the United States. The president reiterated this point in a later personal letter he sent to the Israeli prime minister, adding: “I am sure that you will understand that I cannot accept any responsibility on behalf of the United States for situations which arise as the result of actions on which we were not consulted.” At this time Israel did not yet consider seriously the possibility of war, but nevertheless these words were a clear message to Israel to act carefully, even at the later stages of the crisis when war seemed inevitable. However, Johnson’s admonition was also promising, as it implied that under certain circumstances the United States would back up an Israeli military action.

Israel was especially sensitive to Johnson’s messages, since it was hoping to complete the tilt in US policy toward Israel that was evident since the late 1950s. Israel had been trying since its establishment to bring the United States to make clear commitment to its security, but the Truman and the Eisenhower administrations consistently rejected these requests. Israel found a substitute in France, which since 1954, became Israel’s main ally and major arms-supplier. However, Israel’s feelings toward France were mixed, as the Israelis realized that the alliance was the result of a unique situation and did not reflect a genuine French national interest. France’s traditional interests laid in the Arab world, and its strategic association with Israel was the result of the Algerian revolt, as the French believed that Nasser fomented the rebellion and assisted the rebels. It was hence assumed that the Israeli-French link was one of expedience, arising from a momentary French interest. Therefore, Israel should rely on the United States, whose interests in, and ties with, Israel transcended ephemeral considerations. In the wake of the July 1958 crisis in the Middle East, a change in American attitude toward Israel had been evident, and the security relations between the two states became closer. Kennedy’s decision in August 1962 to provide Hawks ground-to-air missiles and Johnson’s decision in 1966 to supply Skyhawk combat aircraft were the most striking examples of the constant strengthening of security relations that Israel so desired.

There was also a concrete reason to turn to the United States now, as it was due to American pressure and promises given by the Eisenhower administration that Israel retreated after the 1956 War from the Strait of Tiran and the Sinai. Eban recalled in a “most important

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telegram” to Eugene Rostow of the State Department the commitment the United States took upon itself in 1957 to Israel’s security, “the most explicit and solemn ever done by our two governments in the framework of a US general commitment to Israel’s security and integrity.”19 Israel now sought an American public declaration toward its commitment to Israel’s security, which would counter the Soviet support of Egypt and Syria, and serve as a deterrent.20 The arguments used by the Israelis to extract an American commitment were similar to those used in the past. As had been done during the 1958 crisis, it was claimed again that the current crisis should be viewed not only in the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also in the Cold War context. Foreign Office officials argued that the crisis was a Soviet-Egyptian-Syrian collusion directed not only against Israel, but also against the United States. Another old theme reemerging was the suggestion that the current crisis further strengthened Nasser’s prestige, and hence impaired the pro-Western forces in the region.21

The signals coming from Washington though were confusing. The president and his aides accepted Israel’s basic perception about the origins of the crisis, and Rostow agreed with Israeli diplomats that the Syrian government was to be blamed for the current tension as it did not prevent terror groups from using their bases in Syria to carry out terror attacks in Israel.22 As to Israel’s reference to US commitments stipulated in 1957, he stated clearly: “There is no misunderstanding. The 1957 agreements are alive […]. But they should all be read within the terms of the President’s letter to the P.M. about consultations before you take any action.”23 Johnson’s letter and Rostow’s response meant that the administration demanded what amounted to a right of veto regarding Israeli action, but at the same time it was unwilling to make a public commitment. Instead, President Johnson publicly referred to the May 1950 Tripartite Declaration, which stipulated that the US, Britain and France pledged to prevent, even by force, the violation of the demarcation lines between the states in


20 Report of a Meeting between A. Eban-W. Barbour, Tel Aviv in Foreign Office Tel Aviv to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 18, 1967, FO 4078/4.


the region.\textsuperscript{24} The reference to the Tripartite Declaration worried Israel, and Eban accused the administration of being “insufficiently sensitive to our feelings.” He explained that while past pledges given by Eisenhower and Kennedy implied an active American step, the Tripartite Declaration meant the “mere joining” of others’ initiative.\textsuperscript{25}

However, the Israeli diplomats clearly understood the true meaning of what they heard in Washington. Ambassador Herman was sure that despite the difficulties, the administration would nevertheless stand by Israel, even if it remained alone.\textsuperscript{26} And in spite of Israeli complaints, the two governments maintained an open channel, which was active throughout the crisis. Meetings were held between high-ranking officials from both nations, the Americans keeping the Israelis informed about their activity regarding the crisis. The Israelis increased their cooperation with the administration, a necessary step not only in the immediate context of the crisis, but also because of its potential for the future.

**The Closure of the Strait of Tiran**

The most dramatic point of the crisis was Nasser’s announcement at midnight on May 22, of the closure of the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping. This was so because Israel made it clear that it would relate to such an act as a \textit{casus belli}, and it would be free to take any measure it considered necessary to ensure the strait remained open. In fact, Nasser’s move played to Israel’s advantage, as the real problem at the time was the growing amassment of Egyptian troops in the Sinai. By May 21, there were 80,000 Egyptian soldiers, 600 tanks and 600 cannons. This accumulation of forces compelled the IDF to mobilize 80,000 reserve soldiers. Israel could not sustain such a force for a long time, and it seemed that Nasser had no intention of bringing the crisis to an end. He announced that he would not attack Israel, yet he seemed to fully exploit the gains of his brinkmanship policy without having to go to war.\textsuperscript{27} The problem was that it would be difficult to justify an Israeli preemptive attack in response to the Egyptian military build-up. The blockade of the Strait of Tiran offered a way out, as Israel’s right to free passage through the strait was widely accepted, and when Israel complied with the United Nations’ demand to withdraw from the Sinai on February 2, 1957, Golda Meir stated that Israel reserved the right to self-defense in


\textsuperscript{25} Telegram 211 from Israel’s Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 21, 1967, FO 4078/4; Telegram 67 from FO, Jerusalem to Various Israel’s Delegations, May 21, 1967, ibid.; Eban, pp. 324-325.

\textsuperscript{26} Telegram 217 from Israel’s Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 21, 1967, FO 4078/4.

\textsuperscript{27} Telegram 65 from Liaison Department/FO, Jerusalem to Various Delegations, May 21, 1967, FO 6447/4; Haber, op. cit. p. 161.
accordance with the UN charter’s Article 51, if the strait was closed again.\textsuperscript{28} Envisaging such an eventuality shortly after the crisis commenced, letters were sent to most West European heads of state and to President Johnson in which the prime minister and the foreign minister recalled Meir’s declaration.\textsuperscript{29} The closure of the Strait of Tiran provided Israel a justifiable reason to go to war at a time when the real need to go to war was the massive Egyptian build-up.

However, Israel’s claims that the closure of the strait was a \emph{casus-belli} put it in a delicate situation, as it now had to go to war. The IDF chief of staff Rabin stressed that point to the government when he said: “What is in question today is not the passage through the Tiran and the freedom of navigation, but Israel’s ability to act on what it declared was its right to self-defense. […] If there is no response, it is impossible to predict the results, as Israel will lose its deterrent capability.”\textsuperscript{30} Hence, this was the time to abandon the policy of restraint and to give the IDF an order -- or permission -- to attack. However, Rabin remained ambiguous when asked if immediate action was essential. Eban set the tone for a decision. He reminded the government that it was essential to achieve “a warm understanding with the United States. […] Otherwise, we might win the war, but once again lose the fruits of the victory.” Consequently, the cabinet decided that it “sees in the closure of the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping an act of aggression against Israel,” but the “decision of the nature of the reaction to this act is to be postponed for 48 hours.” The postponement time would be used “to check the United States’ position toward the new situation.” It was decided that the foreign minister should go to Washington to see President Johnson, despite the fear that it might restrict and compromise Israel’s freedom of action.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{Eban’s Mission}

On his way to Washington, Eban stopped in Paris and London, introducing to Charles de Gaulle and Harold Wilson Israel’s desire to see an international flotilla executing the commitment the powers took upon themselves in 1957 to ensure that the strait remained open. The request was put in such a manner that if it did not happen, the two leaders would accept Israel’s position that it had a right to go to war. De Gaulle was unequivocal in his demand that Israel not to be the first to shoot. He rejected Eban’s demand for an international flotilla, and instead called to discuss the whole issue in a multilateral meeting to be attended

\textsuperscript{28} Mordehai Bar-On, \textit{Shaarei Gaza} (Gaza Gates) (Tel Aviv, 1992), p. 365.

\textsuperscript{29} Message from Prime Minister Eshkol to President De Gaulle, 19 May 1967, FO 4091/23; Telegram 22 from the Office, Jerusalem, to Israel’s Embassy, Washington and Israel’s Delegation, New York, May 19,1967, FO 4078/4; Message from Foreign Minister A. Eban to Foreign Minister H. Brown, May 20, 1967, FO 4091/23;

\textsuperscript{30} Haber, op. cit. p. 166.

\textsuperscript{31} Telegram 125 from Israel’s Embassy, Washington to Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, May 23,1967, FO 5937/30; Eban, pp. 331-333; Haber, op. cit. pp. 167-170.
by the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{32} De Gaulle’s response was ominous, signaling that the Israeli-French special relations were nearing an end. Wilson’s response was much warmer, though reflecting Britain’s power-limit. The prime minister stressed the UK’s determination to join an armada if one was established. He made no comment as to the possibility that Israel would start a war, and expressed Britain’s determination not to let Nasser emerge from the crisis with the upper hand. In any case, he made it fairly clear that Britain’s response was wholly depended on America’s action. Wilson’s response was, in Eban’s judgement, “realistic and mature.”\textsuperscript{33}

The much more important and fateful meeting though was the one with Johnson. To add further importance to this already crucial encounter, while Eban was on his way to Washington the situation in the Israeli-Egyptian front worsened, further increasing Israel’s sense of urgency. The Egyptians had strengthened their build-up, which on May 25 reached four infantry and two armored divisions, bringing the total number of tanks to 800. Troops were called back from Yemen, and the concentration of Egyptian forces was no longer directed toward the strait, but directly against Israel. It now seemed that Nasser was planning an all-out war against Israel, an assumption that was based also on the massive build up of the Syrian army along the border with Israel. Iraqi forces joined the Syrians, and Jordan asked also for Iraqi and Saudi reinforcements. The Egyptian war minister’s visit to Moscow only heightened Israel’s anxiety. As if all of this was not enough, Nasser addressed a meeting of the Arab Labor Association, in which he exposed the unified Arab war aim: the destruction of the State of Israel. On Rabin’s and Yariv’s advice, Eshkol sent a cable to Eban in which he asked him to stress to Johnson that the strait issue had became secondary, as a coordinated Arab attack on Israel was imminent. He instructed the foreign minister to ask the president what practical steps he was planning to take in this dire hour.\textsuperscript{34}

Eban did so, but he knew that in his talks with Washington he was on a safer ground if he addressed the strait issue, rather than the less convincing argument about the amassment of Egypt’s forces and the threat of war. In a brief to the president on the eve of his meeting with Eban, Secretary of State Dean Rusk suggested rejecting the option of “unleashing them.” Instead, he recommended taking “a positive position, but not a final commitment,” on the British proposal, which called for a declaration by the maritime powers that they were

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\textsuperscript{32} Eban-De Gaulle Memo of Conversation is in Telegram 426 from Israel’s Delegation, New York, to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 25,1967, FO 4078/4.

\textsuperscript{33} Eban-Wilson Memo of Conversation is in Telegram 121 from Israel’s Embassy, London to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 24, 1967, FO 4080/50; Telegram 131 from Eban, London to Eshkol, May 25, 1967, FO 4080/50; Eban, pp. 335-343.

\textsuperscript{34} Telegram 358 from Eshkol, Tel Aviv, to Eban, Washington, May 25, 1967, FO 6445/6; Nasser’s speech in Telegram 287 from FO/Research to Various Israeli Delegations, May 26, 1967, FO 6445/6; Y. Rabin, \textit{Pinkas Sherut} (Service Notebook) (Tel Aviv, 1979), i. pp. 160-161.
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ready to enforce free passage through the Strait of Tiran.\textsuperscript{35} And indeed the general assumption in Washington at the time was that war was not inevitable. When Eban told the president about Eshkol’s estimation that “Nasser is ready for an imminent all-out attack together with Syria,” Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted that “we see neither the capability nor the intention of imminent offensive action” by Nasser. Johnson went further, claiming that even if Israel was attacked, “our judgement is that the Israelis would lick them.”\textsuperscript{36} But other than that, Johnson agreed that Israel should not be banned from the strait, and that it had a right to self-defense. However, as much as he stood by Israel, he had to gain US and international public support for this position, and that could be achieved only after diplomatic activity had been exhausted. He encouraged Eban to recruit more and more congressmen to side with Israel, and in the meantime, the president would do all he could to establish an international armada. Even if the effort was doomed, it had to be tried. He approved military cooperation and intelligence-sharing between the two states and concluded: “I must emphasize the necessity for Israel not to make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities. Israel will not be alone unless it decides to do it alone. We cannot imagine that it will make this decision.”\textsuperscript{37}

Zaki Shalom concludes that the Eban-Johnson meeting did not bear the expected fruits.\textsuperscript{38} His conclusion is supported also by critics who charge that Eban misled the government about Johnson’s exact phrase regarding America’s commitment to assist Israel in this time of crisis.\textsuperscript{39} The accusations reached a climax with the exchange of letters between Eshkol and Johnson after Eban’s return. In his letter to Johnson, Eshkol wrote: “I welcome the assurances that the United States will take any and all measures to open the Strait of Tiran to international shipping.”\textsuperscript{40} The phrase was an accurate citation from Eban’s report of the words used by the president in their meeting. Johnson responded to this paragraph, stating


\textsuperscript{36} Notes of a Meeting with President L. B. Johnson and Foreign Minister A. Eban at the White House, May 26,1967, FO 5937/30; The American protocol is in Memo of Conversation, May 26,1967, LBJL, NSF, NSC History, ME Crisis, Vol. 2, Tabs. 43-59.

\textsuperscript{37} Notes of a Meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson and Foreign Minister A. Eban at the White House, May 26, 1967, FO 5937/30.

\textsuperscript{38} Zaki Shalom, “Foreign Minister Abba Eban Meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson On the Six Days War Eve,” Yahadut Zmanenu, Vol. 11-12, 1998, pp. 314-318. Shalom is also wrong when he claims that President Johnson tried to evade the meeting with Eban. Ibid., pp. 313-314.

\textsuperscript{39} See the implied criticism by the prime minister’s military adjutant: Haber, op. cit. p. 201. Eban also refers to the criticism directed against him: Eban, pp. 368-370.

\textsuperscript{40} L. Eshkol to L.B. Johnson, May 30, 1967, FO 4091/23.
that this was not an accurate quote of what he said, as he was not authorized to make such a commitment.\textsuperscript{41}

The difference laid in what was already noted as a discrepancy in approach between the two governments: Eshkol’s citation implied the Israeli government’s expectation for an American action, even independently. Johnson implied that the United States would join others in the effort to keep the strait open, but would not act alone. However, these differences transcended to a little bit more than semantics. What Johnson was referring to in his correction to Eshkol was the attempt to avoid an appearance of Israeli-American “collusion.” The Israelis got what they wanted: while not getting direct permission to open war, the president did lay down in quite precise language the terms for a possible Israeli action. He agreed that Israel was right in its disposition, but explained that diplomatic activity should be exhausted before resorting to other means. If this order were kept, the administration would be able to stand by Israel. The administration also implicitly accepted the time limit set by Israel, and it acted on the basis of the assumption that there was only “a week or two” -- in Eshkol’s words to Johnson-- to organize an international armada. The president regarded the timetable as a working thesis, not as a threat, and the Israelis were methodically informed about the administration’s activities and difficulties.\textsuperscript{42} During the next days the administration was busy with the attempts to build an international task force, while at the same time it asked Israel mainly not to give any appearance of cooperation, or even worse, of collusion, with Israel. Toward that end, the administration told Israel not to make public references to American commitments given to Israel, and rejected Israel’s request to establish a military liaison between the two states.\textsuperscript{43} On the other hand, in an attempt to make it easier for Israel to maintain restraint, Johnson decided to provide Israel with a special assistance package that would relieve the burden that the mass Israeli mobilization imposed on Israel’s economy.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{43} Telegram 334 from Israel’s Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 27, 1967, FO 5937/30.

\textsuperscript{44} Telegram 402 from Israel’s Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 29, 1967, FO 5937/30. The Israeli implied threat was made to Walt Rostow: Telegram 408 from Israel’s Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, Jerusalem, May 29, 1967, FO 5937/30.
Waiting for the Armada

The response in Israel to the Johnson-Eban meeting was mixed. General Yariv estimated that time was now working to Egypt’s advantage and to Israel’s disadvantage, as Nasser had moved “from a state of reluctance to go to war to a state of reluctance to initiate a war, but readiness to be involved in one.” Consequently, the IDF chief of staff told the war cabinet that “our ability to carry out a surprise attack on Egypt” – a crucial element in the IDF war plans – diminished with the elapse of time.45 Opinions in the government were equally divided between those in favor and against going to war immediately. Some ministers agreed with Eshkol that the diplomatic activity should be exhausted, while others called to strike immediately. Haim Gevaty, minister of agriculture, warned, “if we will not be the first to strike, Nasser will eliminate us.” Other ministers, Yigal Allon and Israel Galili among them, joined him. However, Eshkol insisted to go on with the waiting, and his decision was influenced by a series of telegrams coming from Johnson and the State Department reiterating Israel not to attack, stressing the vigorous and continuous activity by the US to set up the armada. The prime minister announced on May 28 to the American president that the government had decided to prolong the waiting period.46

The decision created a stormy attack against Eshkol by the IDF high command and the public. Eshkol was accused of putting Israel in a grave situation, of exposing its weakness that severely undermined Israel’s deterrence ability, and “destroying the wonderful people’s spirit.” The generals charged that the delay endangered Israel, and even though they were confident in the IDF’s ability to win in any case, they said clearly that a later action would be much more costly than an early one. Eshkol rejected the criticism. Justifying his decision to prolong the waiting period, he said: “All the IDF’s materiel has been gained by our [diplomatic] exertion. We must not forget that, and we should not see ourselves as Goliaths. With unarmed and unequipped fists, we have no power.” And Israel’s ability to get what it needed for its safety and existence was dependent on its link with a great power.47

If that were not enough, things got even worse for Eshkol. Rumors about the harsh meeting spread throughout the country, adding fuel to the feeling of insecurity and apprehension. Added to that was also an incident that took place before a meeting with the IDF general staff. The prime minister made a public address on the radio to explain the situation to the people of Israel. While speaking, Eshkol stumbled, creating the impression of lack of confidence and wavering on his part. On the external front, Jordan and Egypt signed a defense agreement on May 30, which meant that in case of a war, it would not

45 Haber, op. cit. p. 190.

46 President Johnson to Prime Minister Eshkol, May 28, 1967, FO 4091/23; Prime Minister Eshkol to President Johnson, May 30, 1967, ibid.; Telegram 423 from FO, Jerusalem to Israel’s Delegations, May 30, 1967, FO 6444/5; Eban, pp. 364-369; Haber, op. cit. pp. 190-193; Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy, p. 396. Brecher’s description of the government meeting is inaccurate, as the government did not officially vote.

47 Haber, op. cit. pp. 194-197, 211; Pinkas Sherut, Rabin, pp. 171-175.
be restricted to Egypt and Syria. Public opinion in Israel was agitated, and readers sent letters to the daily papers comparing Eshkol government’s dealing with the crisis with Chamberlain and Munich. A “Churchill” was called to take “Chamberlain’s” place. The “Churchill” was personified in Moshe Dayan, Eshkol’s bitter enemy and David Ben Gurion’s protege, and the public pressure led to Dayan being appointed defense minister on June 1, instead of Eshkol.49

However, the internal turbulence notwithstanding, the road to war had been already paved. Officials in Washington met with Israeli diplomats on a daily basis, more than once a day, giving them accurate and up-dated reports on the US attempts to launch the armada. The Israeli diplomats also heard that the attempts were futile, that Washington and London had failed to mobilize the marine nations to form a flotilla, and that on May 30, Rostow admitted that “he saw no way out of the crisis, which seemed today as very severe.”50 It became obvious that the administration’s alternative to war -- failed. It was time now to take the final step. Eshkol sent a letter to President Johnson, in which he recalled that Israel adopted the waiting policy and refrained from military response as it waited for the United States to take concrete measures “to meet the challenge of the illegal blockade, the aggressive build-up of Egyptian forces on our southern frontier, and the continuation of terrorist incursions into Israeli territory.”51 What Eshkol said in fact was that with the American failure, Israel’s hands were free.

The director of the Mossad, Meir Amit, was sent to Washington to hear clear admission of the administration’s failure to build an international armada; the implication of such an admission was clear to both sides. Amit met with the Richard Helms, the CIA director, and staff where he presented Israel’s view of the crisis and Nasser’s intentions, and the estimation that the on-going diplomatic campaign would lead nowhere. His hosts concurred. Far more important was Secretary of Defense McNamara’s admission that that was indeed the situation. McNamara responded with skepticism to Amit’s query about the build-up of the Armada, and “read very carefully” Amit’s presentation and estimation of the situation and Israel’s intentions. Amit returned from his mission on the eve of June 3, telling the government that his impression was that there were no signs of an American military or marine build-up, and if Israel had linked the planned military operation to the strait issue, an

48 Telegram 517 from FO, Jerusalem to Israel’s Delegations, May 30, 1967, FO 6444/5.
49 Haber, op. cit. pp. 199-203.
American approval was expected. With Amit’s report, Eshkol and the government felt that Israel could go to war, having the tacit blessing of the US.

**Conclusion**

Tension between diplomats and senior officers was not a new experience for Israelis. The tension was epitomized in the Ben Gurion-Sharett debate in the first half of the 1950s over how to calm relations with Israel’s neighbors. The former advocated a militant line against the Arabs, while the latter favored diplomacy. This time though, while dividing the government, the controversy was not on the principle. The prime minister agreed with the IDF high command that military action was necessary, but he differed with them over the timing. Eshkol, Eban, and some other cabinet members thought that a military victory was only a partial achievement. Of no less importance was the need to convince Israel’s allies that there was no alternative to war, because fundamentally Israel’s security was based, more than anything else, on its association with a great power. The senior commanders and those ministers who disagreed with them overlooked this point when they demanded to go to war regardless of world opinion. Eshkol fought to make a decision that would transcend the narrow military calculations. He and Eban, and to some extent Rabin, believed that it was impossible to ignore Johnson’s warning not to act without first consulting the United States. The diplomats, in the service of the government, acted hence to provide the diplomatic circumstances that would allow an IDF action.

The diplomats identified the weak points in the American arguments and pressed on. At a certain moment the problem was no longer the blockade of Strait of Tiran, but the great mass of military forces in the Sinai. However, in the existing international climate, Israel stood on much firmer ground when it demanded the reopening of the strait. It had a legal basis to make the demand, which was the international commitment it received in 1957, according to which the strait should remain open, and if they were blockaded, an international armada would open it, even by force. American admission of its failure to launch an international armada provided a justification for Israel to respond to the situation it had defined as casus-belli. The American response to the Israeli strike on the morning of June 5 proved that those who advocated waiting were right in their assessments. Even if Washington did not want to see the resumption of the hostilities in the Middle East, it was clear that Israel could not be asked to wait any longer. For Israel at this time, the more threatening issue was the massive Egyptian military build-up in the Sinai. However, the less urgent issue, the closure of the Strait of Tiran, provided Israel the pretext to go to war.

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53 Eban, pp. 388-391; Haber, op. cit. pp. 216-222.