



THE JUNE WAR: WHOSE CONSPIRACY?

RICHARD B. PARKER

“ . . . Syria was to serve as the sprat to catch the Egyptian mackerel.”

Patrick Seale

Israel's victory over the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians in June 1967 was so unexpected and sudden that outside forces were immediately blamed for the disaster. As one Egyptian official in the United Arab Republic (UAR) presidency said to me on the morning of 6 June, “Israel could not possibly have done to us what it did yesterday by itself. It must have had help, and the only people who would have given them help are you and the British. Therefore, you must have participated in the attack.”

The belief that there was collusion between the United States and Israel in the fighting, or alternatively (or additionally) that the crisis was plotted by the United States and/or Israel, which were seeking to unseat President Gamal Abd al-Nasir, and that the Egyptians walked into a trap is widespread today, and not just in the Arab world. Another school of thought maintains that the crisis was cooked up by the Soviets in an effort to manipulate the Egyptians into coming to the aid of Syria, or to discipline Nasir. There are many variations on these themes, but they all come down to a fundamental belief that Nasir was the victim of a plot.

Richard B. Parker was political counselor of the American embassy in Cairo in June 1967. This article is based largely on research for his forthcoming book, *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

Patrick Seale, for instance, argues that “the crisis-mongering on Syria’s frontier [a reference to the tensions along the border prior to the war] was no more than a pretext to entrap Nasir, annex Arab Jerusalem and the West Bank and otherwise radically reshape Israel’s regional involvement.”¹ Andrew and Leslie Cockburn quote an unnamed long-serving official at the National Security Agency as saying, “Jim Angleton and the Israelis spent a year cooking up the ‘67 war. It was a CIA operation, designed to get Nasir.”² More personally, an old friend with long acquaintance with the Middle East wrote to me asking if I did not realize that the Israelis had set up the Syrians and Egyptians in order to provoke a war they knew they would win.

An apparently universal human disposition to accept such theories has been accentuated in the United States in recent years by revelations and accusations about unrelated conspiracies, real or imagined, such as Watergate, Irangate, the Kennedy assassination, and the Keating Five. As the probity of the highest officers in the country has become increasingly suspect, conspiracy theory has become as American as the Mafia.

Conspiracy theories about the June war rest on unspoken assumptions of superhuman prescience, monumental cynicism, and appalling recklessness on the part of the Americans, or the Israelis, or the Soviets. People have no difficulty assuming that the CIA, or Israel, or the KGB, or big business, or some vague cabal is willing casually to risk starting World War III in order to achieve a selfish strategic, economic, or political goal. More difficult to accept, the plotters are thought able to foresee with incredible accuracy the reaction of other parties to their necessarily devious scheme. The unlikelihood, given the well-established myopia of governments, that this assumption in particular is valid and the fact that no plots need be invoked to explain the catastrophe adequately do not deter the devotees of conspiracy. Perhaps this is because conspiracy is a more emotionally satisfying explanation than miscalculation and incompetence, even though the latter two may be the obvious key to what happened.

There is ample evidence in the public domain that the Egyptians in 1967 made a decision to confront Israel with their eyes open, and that they did so because of an enormous misreading by their leaders, Nasir and Marshal Abd al-Hakim ‘Amr, of their own, and Israel’s, strength and readiness to fight. It can be argued convincingly that Nasir was propelled into the confrontation by political necessity. The pressures of his role as the leading figure of Arab nationalism—a role in which he was both prisoner and leader of a public opinion that ultimately he did not control—were undoubtedly important. Still, it is difficult to believe he would have acted as he did, no matter what the pressures, if he did not think his armed forces were ready to confront

Israel. The question ever since has been: How could a man as intelligent as Nasir let himself be convinced of that?*

Whatever Nasir believed, or knew, about the armed forces, he closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping knowing that it would make war very likely. His estimate of that likelihood at the time ranged from 50 to 100 percent, depending on the source. He calculated the odds on war correctly, but not the odds on victory and defeat.

The Conspiracies

The following is a summary, composite description of some of the June war conspiracy theories. They are listed in rough chronological order of their appearance in the crisis, the events of which are reviewed first to refresh the reader's memory.

Although there are still some questions about details, the broad outlines of how the war came about are known. At a time of serious tension along the Syrian-Israeli border, the Soviets told the Egyptians on 13 May that the Israelis were massing ten to thirteen (depending on the source) brigades preparatory to an attack on Syria. That such an attack was imminent was plausible because of the statements Israeli leaders had been making to the effect that if the Syrians did not stop sponsoring and permitting cross-border sabotage activities, Israel would be forced to take retaliatory measures. The Egyptians responded by mobilizing on 14 May and sending troops into Sinai, then calling on 16 May first for the redeployment and then (on 18 May) for the total withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) stationed along the border. Five days later they announced the closure of the Strait of Tiran—the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba—to Israeli shipping and cargos. They did so knowing that Israel would consider this *casus belli*. The Israelis responded by attacking Egypt on 5 June. We have been trying to deal with the consequences ever since.

The Syrians

Conspiracy buffs tend to overlook the Syrians, but there have been allusions—one by Muhammad Heikal, the publisher of *al-Ahram* and a close confidant of Nasir, in his 1967 *al-Infjar*—of Syrian plotting to provoke a war. This theory could be plausibly constructed as follows: Frustrated by their internal problems and aspiring to a leadership position in the Arab world, the Syrians had been promoting sabotage operations against Israel by Palestinian paramilitary groups. They were seeking to enflame the Arab world

* See for instance the account by Marshal Abd al-Ghani al-Gamasy in *Oktober* (28 August 1989) of the report prepared by the Egyptian G-3 (director of plans and operations) in December 1966 that Egypt would not be ready to confront Israel militarily as long as one-third of its forces were tied down in the Yemen. The report was given to 'Amr, who apparently did nothing with it. The G-3's estimate was shared by American and Israeli intelligence, but not the Soviets, according to former Soviet officials. Soviet misjudgments of Egyptian military strength may have reinforced 'Amr's and Nasir's.

and to drag Egypt into a confrontation with Israel. They had no illusions about their own strength but were propelled on their tragic way by the dynamic of the Arab cold war. They talked loudly of a people's war and had completely unrealistic ideas about Arab capabilities in that regard. One Syrian told Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Barkovsky, for instance, that they planned to emulate the Russian partisans of World War II. When reminded that the Russians had forests to hide in and that there were none along the confrontation line with Israel, the Syrian replied that they would hide in the gardens.³

The Egyptians were well aware of the risks that Syria could drag them into a war, but signed a mutual defense pact with it anyway, making it clear that they would not feel obliged to honor it unless Syria was subject to a full-scale attack, and not just a retaliatory raid, by Israel. The Syrians, to trigger an Egyptian response, deliberately provoked the Israelis, then concocted the story of the Israeli troop concentrations and sold it to the Soviets, who dutifully reported it to the Egyptians.

The Egyptians

Various observers at the time raised the possibility that the Egyptians were waiting for a pretext to have a confrontation with Israel over UNEF and the Gulf of Aqaba. Under this theory, the Egyptians were hoping thereby to bolster Nasir's sagging image and divert attention from Egypt's internal difficulties. Nasir's public statements were cunningly designed to (1) prepare the public for a confrontation with the United States, and (2) surprise it with an easy political victory at Israel's expense. Everything had been carefully planned, but the plans went awry because of Nasir's misreading of Israeli capabilities and intentions.

The Soviets

According to the theory, since the Soviets could not possibly have believed the report of Israeli troop concentrations, which was patently untrue, they must have fabricated it. Their purpose in doing so, depending on the commentator, was to make Egypt come to the aid of Syria, or to get Nasir to withdraw his troops from Yemen, or to provoke a defeat of Israel and the United States (which was too tied down in the Vietnam War to respond effectively), or to get Israel to administer a defeat to Nasir which would increase his dependence on the Soviet Union. One frequently offered explanation for this reckless Soviet behavior was that Moscow was enamored of the leftist government in Damascus and preferred it to the government in Cairo, because the latter was repressing communists.

Explanations for the source of the Soviet report vary. Nadav Safran in *From War to War* (pp. 276–77), for instance, suggests that the Soviets had obtained an Israeli contingency plan for a large-scale operation against Syria and gave it to the Egyptians without revealing that it was a contingency docu-

ment. Their purpose was to incite the Egyptians to make a military demonstration to deter the Israelis from attacking.

Jacques Derogy and Hesi Carmel claim in *The Untold History of Israel* (pp. 213–15) that the document in question was a plan prepared by Yuval Neeman in 1957, and that Sami Sharaf, the director of intelligence in the UAR presidency, was instrumental in convincing Nasir that it was genuine. They claim that Sharaf was a KGB agent, which is pretty farfetched. Both these books have the Soviets cynically using the document to mislead, knowing that it was not a plan for immediate action.

The Americans

The American role was more pervasive and complex. Many more details are available for constructing a plausible conspiracy hypothesis than is the case with the Soviet Union because of the wealth of memoirs and official papers now in the public domain. The most exhaustive single account of the alleged U.S. plot can be found in Heikal's *1967 al-Infjar*. He provides much documentation from Egyptian and American archives, and to support his allegations, draws heavily on publications such as William Morris's *The Hidden Government of the United States* and Stephen Green's *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel*. His first accusations, however, go back to June 1967.

Heikal's weekly columns in *al-Ahram* on 16 and 23 June 1967* discussed what he termed "the clash in which the Arab nation has confronted the U.S. government." This repeated a theme on which he had harped all spring: i.e., that the Arab people and the United States government were on a collision course.

In the first article he notes that it will be years before we know the truth because it was the CIA that directed and concocted the plot of U.S. collusion with Israel. ("The CIA orientates and guides all aspects of U.S. policies.") He goes on to say that, its policies thwarted by Egyptian successes in the Yemen and the Egyptian-Syrian defense agreement of 4 November 1966, the United States decided to escalate the violence, the first plan being to mount a devastating blow at Damascus by the Israelis. To this purpose, massive shipments of tanks and aircraft were made in the spring. This plot being frustrated by the movement of Egyptian troops into Sinai on 14 May, the plotters shifted their target from Syria to Egypt, and the U.S. began carrying out "the biggest operation of distorting facts and of deceit in all modern history." Briefly, they gulled the Soviets and Egyptians into thinking they would restrain the Israelis while sending 200 new aircraft and 1,000 volunteers to Israel. Then they provided air cover over Israel during the attack on Egypt, thus freeing up more Israeli aircraft to use against Egyptian targets. They also flew reconnaissance missions with U-2 aircraft and satellites while the Sixth

* The texts can be found in the *FBIS Daily Report* for those dates.

Fleet jammed Egyptian communications, and the ill-fated intelligence ship *Liberty* was used to monitor Egyptian military traffic for Israel's benefit.

In his second article, he produces the texts of various communications from the Americans, notably a 22 May letter from Lyndon Johnson to President Nasir and a *note verbale* of the same date, both of which were delivered on 23 May. The Johnson letter emphasized his desire for better relations, his concern at mounting tensions in the region, and the importance of resolving the crisis peacefully. He then offered to send Vice President Hubert Humphrey to the region to discuss the situation with Arab and Israeli leaders. The *note verbale* said the United States had no reason to believe any of the parties to the armistice agreements between Israel and its neighbors was planning to commit aggression, warned against miscalculation, called for observance of the armistice agreements, expressed concern at the precipitate withdrawal of UNEF, affirmed support for the mission of UN Secretary-General U Thant (then en route to Cairo), urged the parties to withdraw their armed forces to their normal positions, affirmed the U.S. government's continued adherence to the principle of free navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba, warned against interfering with that traffic, and said that the governments of the region could rely on the United States government to oppose aggression in any form in the area, as it had done over the previous two decades. (The same *note verbale* was presented to the Syrian, Lebanese, Israeli, Jordanian, Saudi, and Algerian governments.) President Johnson reiterated this assurance of U.S. opposition to aggression in a speech to the nation on the evening of 23 May.

Heikal describes the Egyptians' response to these messages and to U Thant's call for a breathing spell as positive. They had agreed not to be the first to open fire, they gave the secretary-general "unlimited" cooperation, and they agreed to observe a period of self-restraint to pave the way for diplomatic action. (This was, of course, after having closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping, which the Egyptians knew the Israelis would consider justification for going to war.)

Meanwhile, according to Heikal, the United States was drawing up a plot,

the details of which President Johnson was following. All possible operations were discussed before him in the presence of the U.S. chief of staff General Wheeler and the CIA chief Richard Helms. This was openly referred to . . . in reports by most U.S. magazines, including, for example, *Newsweek*, which has close connections with the White House.

Further deception was carried out by sending former Treasury Secretary Robert Anderson to Cairo to meet with Nasir, and by agreeing to receive Vice President Zakaria Muhieddin, who was to come to Washington to discuss Egypt's peaceful intentions. Similarly, the Egyptian ambassador in Washington, Mustafa Kamel, was being deceived about U.S. intentions by presidential advisor Walt Rostow. (In fact, Kamel met with Eugene Rostow, then undersecretary for political affairs at the Department of State.)

All of these maneuvers were designed to prevent Egypt from firing the first shot while giving the nod to Israel to do so, according to Heikal. "Nobody in the world, not even a child, would believe that Israel would have ventured upon such an aggression without a signal from and approval of the U.S.A."

This, with variations, refinements, and corrections, has remained the essence of the American plot theory ever since. Heikal later got the two Rostow brothers straight and he and other writers have added a number of details, some relevant and others not, but the basic argument remains that the United States engaged in diplomatic deception, lulling Nasir into restraint while encouraging, or at least permitting, Israel to attack.

In *1967 al-Infjar*, Heikal gives a considerably more detailed account of what lay behind the U.S. plot. He believes a secret government within the United States, directed by National Security Advisor Walt Rostow and including the intelligence agencies, was plotting with the arms and oil industries, the Israelis, and the Saudis to bring down Nasir. They snared him by manipulation and deceit. They created a crisis situation along the Syrian border to force him to respond in Sinai and then, through their operative in the UN secretariat, Undersecretary-General Ralph Bunche, made it impossible for Nasir to have a partial withdrawal of UNEF. In effect, they forced him to occupy Sharm al-Shaykh, which controlled the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, against his will, giving him no alternative but to close the Gulf to Israeli shipping, knowing how dangerous that would be.

Further, to make Nasir let down his guard the Americans deceived him into thinking Cairo had a two-week breathing period when in fact it had none. Once the war started, the U.S. did not honor its repeated pledges to oppose aggression in the area and blocked efforts to have a cease-fire linked to withdrawal. It furthermore helped in various indirect ways in the Israeli attack. (It is worth noting that as early as 16 June, Heikal was not claiming the Americans had participated directly in the attack, as Nasir and Marshal 'Amr had on 6 June. He and others nevertheless felt obliged to explain why the Israelis had flown twice as many sorties against Egypt as the Egyptian military had calculated they could fly, hence the claim that the Americans had flown air cover over Israel to free more Israelis to attack Egypt.)

While the Heikal thesis is the most elaborate, his general charges have been shared and repeated by others. Mahmud Riad, who was foreign minister of Egypt in 1967, for instance, in *Amrika wa al-Arab*, volume three of his memoirs, claimed that Lyndon Johnson was seeking to remove Nasir, who was an obstacle to U.S. domination of the area. When economic measures and subversion failed, his only recourse was external aggression, and Israel was the chosen instrument. Johnson provided Israel with priceless intelligence, set out to deceive Egypt by assuring it the United States would stand against aggression, used U Thant to get Nasir to agree not to start hostilities, and even succeeded in involving the Soviets in the deception, getting them to warn the Egyptians not to strike first. Once the Israelis struck, the Americans

pretended they did not know who started the fighting. They sent the Sixth Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean and used the *Liberty* to monitor and jam Egyptian communications. In the UN, they supported Israeli aggression and threatened to veto any resolution that called on Israel to withdraw.

The Israelis

Patrick Seale spells out a particularly plausible-sounding theory of an Israeli role in his book *Asad* (pp. 117–41). In brief, the contention is that the Israelis were plotting to bring down Nasir and challenged the Syrians in the demilitarized zones along the armistice demarcation line in order to provoke a crisis, knowing that Nasir would have to respond in the south. With an elaborate psychological campaign they convinced him that they were terrified and unwilling to fight, when in fact the Israel Defense Forces were spoiling to do so. Knowing the propensity of the Arabs to become victims of their overconfidence, they let Nasir talk himself into a corner from which there was no escape, and then smashed him. All of the above was done either with the consent of the United States or its active cooperation.

The Evidence

Proving a negative proposition is inherently difficult, particularly when there is an automatic presumption of guilt, as there often is when conspiracy is suggested. In such cases, in the absence of definite proof to the contrary (and sometimes even in its presence), anything is believable, especially during a period of public cynicism, such as that in which we are living today. Disproof is also made difficult by limitations on access to classified material in government archives. This often makes it impossible to determine what actually happened; we rarely have all the facts needed to establish the truth. As a result, some questions about all of the parties are likely to remain forever unanswered. This is particularly true when states that are involved are unwilling to open their files at all.

Nevertheless, let us make a brief attempt to see what evidence there is to substantiate or disprove the various allegations made earlier about each of the parties.

Syria

The Syrians have been even less willing than the Soviets to talk frankly about what happened in 1967 and there seems to be little likelihood that this will change as long as the Asad regime is in power. We therefore have very little to go on. There are a few indications that they might have been up to something, but nothing conclusive.

In addition to the forward policy they were following on the border and their public statements about a people's war to liberate Palestine, there is the fact that General Muhammad Fawzi, the Egyptian chief of staff, who was sent to Syria on 14 May to coordinate military measures, returned to Cairo on the

15th to report to Marshal 'Amr that, among other things, the Syrians themselves were not in the state of alert one would have expected of them if they thought an attack was imminent.⁴ This was in spite of the concern expressed to UN authorities by the Syrian UN delegate, George Tomeh, and the Syrian representative on the Israel-Syria Mixed Armistice Commission that an attack was forthcoming. If, as claimed by some (for example, Eric Rouleau⁵), the report of the Israeli concentrations was first given to the Egyptians by the Syrians, the question arises of whether they did so while not believing it themselves. Were they engaged in a cynical disinformation effort to ensnare the Egyptians? It is possible, but we cannot prove it.

Egypt

Nasir and 'Amr have taken their secrets with them to the grave, and we may never know for certain what they had in mind. The testimony of their associates is sometimes contradictory, but most of it tends to support the contention that they were reacting to events and not following some master plan. Nasir's own words on the subject can be taken to support either contention. At Bir Gifgafa on 22 May, he told the assembled air force officers: "News agencies reported yesterday that these military movements must have been the result of a previously well-laid plan. And I say the sequence of events determined the plan. We had no plan before 13 May" (FBIS *Daily Report*, 23 May 1967). Four days later, addressing Arab trade unionists, he said,

Recently we felt we are strong enough that if we were to enter a battle with Israel, with God's help we could triumph. On this basis we decided to take actual steps. . . . Once we were fully prepared we could ask UNEF to leave. And this is what actually happened. The same thing happened with regard to Sharm al-Shaykh. . . . Taking such action meant that we were ready to enter a general war with Israel. It was not a separate operation. Therefore we had to take this fact into consideration when moving to Sharm al-Shaykh. . . . Actually, I was authorized by the [Arab Socialist Union's] Supreme Executive Council to implement this plan at the right time. The right time came when Syria was threatened with aggression (FBIS *Daily Report*, 27 May 1967).

There were signs and phenomena at the time that persuaded some of us that Nasir and 'Amr had planned their reaction in advance and had been waiting for the occasion. These included the speed and apparent efficiency of the movement of Egyptian troops into Sinai (as seen from Cairo), the overwhelming confidence expressed by everyone from Nasir down to the man in the street, and the evident Egyptian lack of interest in mediation until it was too late. These helped create a widespread impression in Egypt that Nasir knew what he was doing and was not improvising as he went along.

Thus, on 28 May, the American embassy in Cairo commented,

If Nasir's and Heikal's words are to be believed, Egyptians have been prepared for this moment for some time. In retrospect, it may have been as long ago as last summer, when they reportedly decided their fleet was able

to operate without Soviet advisors and could be confident that it would be able to trouble the Sixth Fleet should latter move to assist Israelis. Decision to move when opportunity presented itself probably made some time after UARG [UAR Government] decision last February to withdraw request for [US] wheat and subsequent decision to give up trying to cultivate USG [US Government] following spate of unfavorable congressional statements. . . (Cairo telegram No. 8080, declassified 4 January 1990).

That message was what we might term informed speculation, not hard fact. There is other, more informed testimony tending to support the thesis, however. For instance, on page 69 of his memoirs, *Harb al-Thalath Sanawat*, Egyptian Chief of Staff General Muhammad Fawzi said,

Both President Gamal Abd al-Nasir and Marshal 'Amr made it clear to me before 1967 that they wanted to seize on any international or regional situation which would permit doing away with that force [UNEF]. . . . That opportunity came when Egypt declared that it was ready to enter battle against Israel if the latter attacked Syria. . . .

Further support for the thesis that the Egyptian leaders were looking for a pretext comes from General Fawzi's account of Marshal 'Amr's reaction when he returned from Damascus on 15 May and told him that there was no sign of Israeli troop concentrations: "I did not note any reaction from him, and from here began my belief that the question of Israeli concentrations, from his point of view, was not the only or the chief reason for the mobilization and deployments we were undertaking so quickly" (p. 72).

If Fawzi was correct in his belief, it would help explain why 'Amr and Nasir continued to act as if the Soviet report was true, in spite of denials from the Israelis, the Americans, and the UN secretary-general, among others, giving the impression they did not want to be bothered with the facts. In the light of these denials, on 15 or 16 May Egypt could have announced that its troop movements had dissuaded Israel from attacking Syria and called off the whole affair with considerable credit to its account. That it did not do so increases the suspicion that someone wanted a confrontation, and that the real question is: Was it just 'Amr or was it Nasir as well?

There is an equally plausible contrary thesis that Nasir and 'Amr blundered into the confrontation, that they believed the Soviet report about Israeli troop concentrations and were simply reacting to events in their usual fashion, that they were carried away by the acclaim that greeted their initial moves and went far beyond what they had originally intended.*

Again, as with the case of Syria, we need more information about Nasir's and 'Amr's thinking at the time. After the war, Nasir told people that 'Amr had misled him as to the state of the armed forces and that in any event he had thought the United States would restrain Israel. Mahmud Riad, however, reported that Nasir dismissed Lyndon Johnson's profession of friendship and

* For an example of this argument, see Leon Carl Brown, "Nasser and the June 1967 War: Plan or Improvisation?" in *Quest for Understanding: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Malcolm Kerr* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1991. Distributed by Syracuse University Press).

American declarations of opposition to aggression as insincere, given Johnson's pro-Israeli proclivities.⁶ Did Nasir nevertheless take Johnson's assurances seriously, or did he make that up after the defeat to rationalize his actions?

The Soviet Union

We will not know with any certainty *why* the Soviets did what they did in 1967 until the Soviet official records are open to researchers, and even then we may never know for sure. Many things are undoubtedly unrecorded and unknowable. At this point we are not even sure exactly *what* the Soviets did. They have published no useful clarification to date, and Egyptian accounts of the warning they delivered are contradictory.

In 1990 I went to Moscow to talk to Soviet officials in an effort to learn what happened and why. Very briefly, they claimed that there was no Soviet plot, that they did not invent the report of Israeli troop concentrations, that there was such a report in their intelligence system. They said that this report had not been properly evaluated and was believed by senior people in Moscow because it fit with their preconceptions about Israel, and that they passed it to the Egyptians as a friendly gesture. They claimed not to have been consulted about any of the Egyptian decisions in the crisis (this seems to be borne out by other testimony). They rejected the idea that they had wanted to provoke a crisis, or that they would want to endanger the regime in Cairo in order to support a regime in Syria that they considered irresponsible.

In other words, the Soviet defense is incompetence. We will need further information before we can decide what to believe, but this explanation is at least as plausible as the conspiracy allegation. On the other hand, there is at least one piece of what we might term direct evidence to support the conspiracy theory. It is a CIA report, reproduced on the following page. It quotes an unidentified "medium-level Soviet official" as saying the Soviets had wanted to create another trouble spot for the United States in addition to that already existing in Vietnam.

It is difficult to know what to make of this report, particularly without knowing more about the source and the conditions under which the information was obtained. Where did the report come from? Was the source working for the CIA, or was he or she talking to someone else? Was it someone in a position to know what he or she was talking about? Was the source drunk or sober? How reliable was the CIA informant who made the report? What was the context? Why was it released? How did the CIA evaluate the report? Its nine-line evaluation was blacked out in the sanitizing process, but the fact that nine lines were devoted to evaluating the source and the information immediately raises questions as to the authenticity of the report, according to a retired CIA official with whom I discussed it. To him, it looked as though an unusual effort had to be made to explain how the "medium-level Soviet official" would have had access to the information in question. In other words, the source was not someone who was close to the center and would

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CIA REPORT OF
 CONVERSATION WITH
 SOVIET OFFICIAL RE
 JUNE WAR.

TDCS-314/08242-67 (ADVANCED) JUNE WAR.
 COUNTRY USSR/UAR/ISRAEL
 DOI JUNE 67
 SUBJECT SOVIET OFFICIAL'S COMMENTS ON SOVIET POLICY ON THE MIDDLE EASTERN WAR.

ACQ [REDACTED]
 SOURCE MEDIUM LEVEL SOVIET [REDACTED]

A OFFICIAL

1. THE SOVIET TOLD [REDACTED] THERE HAD BEEN "MISCALCULATIONS" BY THE SOVIETS AND BY THE ARABS. THE SOVIETS OVERESTIMATED THE ARAB ABILITY TO EMPLOY THEIR SUBSTANTIAL MILITARY STRENGTH AGAINST THE ISRAELIS WHILE THE ARABS OVERATED THEIR OWN STRENGTH AND UNDERATED THE ISRAELI MILITARY CAPABILITY AND DETERMINATION TO WIN. WHEN SOURCE ASKED IF THAT MEANT THAT THE SOVIETS HAD ENCOURAGED THE ARABS IN THEIR HOSTILE ATTITUDE TOWARD ISRAEL, THE SOVIET REPLIED AFFIRMATIVELY, STATING THAT THE USSR HAD WANTED TO CREATE ANOTHER TROUBLE SPOT FOR THE UNITED STATES IN ADDITION TO THAT ALREADY EXISTING IN VIETNAM. THE SOVIET AIM WAS TO CREATE A SITUATION IN WHICH THE US WOULD BECOME SERIOUSLY INVOLVED, ECONOMICALLY, POLITICALLY, AND POSSIBLY EVEN MILITARILY AND IN WHICH THE US WOULD SUFFER SERIOUS POLITICAL REVERSES AS A RESULT OF ITS SIDING AGAINST THE ARABS. THIS GRAND DESIGN, WHICH ENVISAGED A LONG WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST, MISFIRED BECAUSE THE ARABS FAILED COMPLETELY AND THE ISRAELI BLITZKRIEG WAS SO DECISIVE. FACED WITH THIS SITUATION THE SOVIETS HAD NO ALTERNATIVE BUT TO BACK DOWN AS QUICKLY AND GRACEFULLY AS POSSIBLE SO AS NOT TO APPEAR THE VILLAINS OF THE CONFLICT.

2. THE SOVIET THOUGHT THAT NASSER "MUST GO" AND THAT HE WOULD "MOST PROBABLY" BE ASSASSINATED IN THE NEAR FUTURE BY HIS OWN DISILLUSIONED PEOPLE. HE SAID THAT NASSER'S CHARGE THAT US AND BRITISH AIRCRAFT HAD AIDED THE ISRAELI FORCES WAS A DESPERATE ATTEMPT TO SAVE FACE IN THE ARAB WORLD AFTER SUFFERING A HUMILIATING MILITARY DEFEAT AND THAT NO ONE, CERTAINLY NOT THE USSR, BELIEVE THE CHARGE. IN A FINAL COMMENT, THE SOVIET SAID THE WAR HAS SHOWN THAT THE ARABS ARE INCAPABLE OF UNITY EVEN WHEN THEIR VITAL INTERESTS ARE AT STAKE.

3. DISSEM: [REDACTED]

TDCS-314/08242-67. TDCS stands for "Teletype Dissemination Clandestine Services"; DOI stands for "Date of Information," which is some date in June. The Date Time Group, which is the fourth line from the top, seems to be 091912Z, meaning 1912 Zulu or Greenwich Mean Time on the 9th, presumably of June.

be likely to know details about thinking in the Kremlin. This gives rise to the suspicion that we are dealing with someone who should not be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the report needs answering.

As with the other cases, we need to know more. At this point, we can neither prove nor disprove that the Soviets were fomenting a plot, but there is little evidence, as opposed to supposition, that they were, and some of the theories advanced are very weak. Certainly the argument that they preferred Damascus over Cairo is not supported either by the logic of the situation—given the huge Soviet investment in Egypt—or by the remarks made to me in Moscow. Nor does it seem logical that the Soviets would risk a Middle East war to rescue the Syrians or in order to get Nasir to withdraw from the Yemen. It would not be worth the risk.

These arguments start from the premise that the Soviets must have invented the report of Israeli troop concentrations because they could not possibly have believed it. And yet, we may find that they *did* believe it. Stranger things have happened.

For one thing, in May 1967 it seemed clear to others as well as the Soviets (and notably to Western correspondents in Israel at the time) that the Israelis were sooner or later going to attack Syria if it did not start controlling cross-border infiltration, something the Syrians seemed politically incapable of doing. Judging by the public comments of Israeli and Syrian officials, armed intervention was inevitable; it was not a question of whether, but of when and on what scale, the Israelis would strike. In such circumstances it would be easy to believe an intelligence report, no matter what the source, that the Israelis were about to do what everyone expected. This would be particularly likely in an authoritarian society, where open-minded inquiry is not encouraged.

The idea that the Soviets were trying to give the United States trouble while it was tied down in Vietnam is tempting, particularly since it is the sort of tactic the globalists in Washington used to recommend using against the Soviets on occasion. But it implies a degree of recklessness which seems contrary to normal Soviet caution in the Middle East. Moscow's reaction at the time showed that once it realized where events were leading it was no more eager than the United States was to have a war break out—a war that could have incalculable consequences for it, and that could lead to a nuclear confrontation with the United States. We must give the Soviets credit for some sense, after all.

The United States

The basic premise for the allegations about the United States is that the Johnson administration was out to topple Nasir. That this was the case was an article of faith with the Egyptians by the spring of 1967, and it still is with many of them today. U.S.-Egyptian differences relating to third countries, and particularly to the Yemen and Saudi Arabia, complicated by some off-hand actions of Nasir, such as his famous “drink from the sea” speech in

December 1964, had led to a serious deterioration of relations. The worsening accelerated when the U.S. tried to use its massive food aid program as a political lever to restrain Nasir, starting in 1965. The sad fact was that Nasir and Lyndon Johnson were incompatible. Neither trusted the other, with good reason. Things had come to such a pass by 1966 that Nasir believed the United States was trying to arrange his assassination, and it was impossible to convince him otherwise.

A bitter and somewhat paranoid exposition of the Egyptian view that the U.S. and Egypt were on a collision course because the U.S. was trying to sabotage the Egyptian revolution figured prominently in the above-mentioned series of weekly editorial sermons by Muhammad Heikal in the spring of 1967. They were widely read as a portent of increasing animosity towards the United States on the part of Nasir and some of his associates. The capstone was provided by Nasir's May Day speech that year, much of which was devoted to an attack on the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the so-called Islamic Pact (which was largely a journalistic figment). As a result, American credibility in Cairo was at an all-time low when the crisis came.

There were unquestionably many people in the government in Washington at the time who would have been delighted to see Nasir disappear. Their antagonism toward him had been reflected in a number of decisions regarding PL-480 food aid, which had become a serious irritant in relations, but no credible evidence of a plot to bring him down has surfaced to date. There is a difference between being anti-Nasir and actually plotting against him. The latter had gone on during the Dulles-Eisenhower era, and was widely known in Washington. There was no sign of it in 1967.

That is not to say that the U.S. was not partial to Israel in this affair. The U.S. had no interest in precipitating a crisis, however, and was seriously disturbed by the results. Nor was there any attempt to mislead the Egyptians. They were warned repeatedly that they were playing with fire and that the U.S. could not restrain Israel indefinitely, especially after the closure of the Strait of Tiran, which the Egyptians themselves knew would make war all but inevitable.

The official record shows that the U.S. made a determined effort to restrain Israel and that it succeeded in doing so for a time. Various Israeli memoirs make it clear that were it not for American pressures, the Israelis would have gone to war a week earlier. In addition to repeated urgings from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and others, Johnson sent four separate messages to Prime Minister Eshkol of Israel, the last on 2 June, asking Israel not to begin hostilities. The Israeli decision made on 3 June to strike on 5 June was taken in spite of assurances to Johnson by the Israeli ambassador that the Israelis would hold their fire for another week, and Johnson consistently maintained thereafter that the Israelis had made a grave mistake in going to war.

Johnson nevertheless felt there were limits to his ability to restrain Israel (something that Nasir apparently was unable to fathom) and had evidently concluded by late May that war was coming whatever he did. The Israelis

correctly assumed that he would not oppose their striking. After the war began, he supported the Israeli position that a cease-fire should not involve a return to the status quo ante, and in the subsequent negotiations in the United Nations and elsewhere he supported their view that withdrawal should come only in a context of peace.*

The U.S. position at the United Nations amounted to a failure to honor the administration's repeated commitment to oppose aggression from any quarter, but to many people in Washington, Israel's actions looked like an act of legitimate self-defense, not aggression. The point is debatable. For instance, the office of the legal adviser of the Department of State argued in a memorandum of 29 May that it was doubtful that closure of the Strait of Tiran constituted an act of aggression justifying the use of force against Egypt.** On the other hand, apprehension about Egyptian intentions, Egyptian unresponsiveness to American warnings, and remarks such as that of Nasir to the Arab trade unionists on 26 May that "If Israel embarks on an aggression against Syria or Egypt . . . the battle will be a general one and our basic objective will be to destroy Israel" had created a state of mind in Washington that was very unfavorable to Egypt. This disposition was aggravated by Egyptian accusations of American participation in the attack on the morning of 5 June and by the break in diplomatic relations that followed.

Nasir was a man of great charm and intelligence, but he seems to have lost control in May of 1967. If ever someone poked a stick in a wasp nest, it was he, and he was badly stung as a result. It was in character for him to try to blame the United States for the tragedy, and certainly there were blemishes on its performance, but it did not precipitate the crisis and it did make a serious effort to resolve it peacefully. If the Egyptians had been more helpful and more interested in a modus vivendi with Israel, the United States might have succeeded, but there was no sign on Egypt's part of a willingness to compromise on the vital issue of the Gulf of Aqaba, and that was fatal.†

In the case of the U.S., the equivalent of the CIA report about the Soviets is to be found in the Stephen Green book *Taking Sides*.⁷ He maintains that a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance unit flew missions for the Israelis over the Sinai peninsula and Syria throughout the war. His account is full of authentic-sounding details, including the unit's designation, description of the airfield from which it operated and the missions flown. Green does not mention any names, however, and has refused to divulge his sources. Efforts to confirm the story among former senior officers of the White House, the Department of State, and the CIA have been fruitless.

* For a detailed and informative discussion of Johnson's views, see William Quandt, "Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color was the Light?," *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992).

** This can be found on page 77 of the so-called "Administrative History" of the crisis in the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas.

† For a discussion of the Egyptian decisions in this crisis, see my article, "The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored," *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992).

The Iran-Contra scandal has shown that there is no inherent limit on the bizarre in the White House, and Henry Kissinger's secret travels show that such activities can be carried out by the defense establishment without the knowledge of other agencies of the government, although one would expect them to leak sooner or later if only because of some administrative failure or problem. It is thus possible that the reconnaissance missions were flown as claimed without being detected by either the CIA or the Department of State. But no direct evidence to support the Green story has turned up so far. In the words of one senior CIA official, "If it is true, it is the best-kept secret in Washington"; it would be remarkable that it has not leaked in this capital of leaks. There are senior ex-officials who believe there is substance to the Green account, but it remains unproven. Nevertheless, like the CIA report, it needs answering, and if it is true it is clear evidence of U.S. collusion in the attack on Egypt. If it occurred, however, the decision would have been made in reaction to the crisis, probably after Johnson decided that war was inevitable, and would not in itself mean that the United States had initiated the crisis as has been alleged.

Israel

Someday the Israeli archives may tell us more, but as of now there is no credible, direct evidence to support the contention that the Israelis had set out to trap Nasir into a military confrontation. The memoirs and testimony of Israelis and others in Israel at the time all point in the opposite direction—indicating that the Israelis were caught by surprise by the crisis and that the army was the only part of the population that was not deeply anxious over the outcome. That the military was confident of its ability to defeat the Egyptians and that some of its leaders welcomed the opportunity to do so says something about the Israelis' training and motivation, and their evaluation of Egyptian capabilities, but their posture did not look like that of someone actively seeking a fight. In any event, the decision was not the military's to make. It was made by a predominantly civilian cabinet, which by all testimony was caught off guard by the Egyptian actions.

The question has always been, however, did the Israelis do something that alarmed the Soviets and the Syrians, intentionally or otherwise? Granting that there were no troop concentrations on the ground, it is possible, for instance, that in an effort to intimidate the Syrians into a more restrained attitude on cross border operations they set up a disinformation campaign that convinced the Soviets they were about to attack. We have noted earlier what seems to be an Israeli thesis that the Soviets somehow obtained an Israeli contingency plan. Was it perhaps planted on them?

Michael Howard and Robert Hunter in *Israel and the Arab World: The Crisis of 1967* (Adelphi Paper No. 41) were among the first to suggest a disinformation campaign as an explanation for what happened. Anthony Nutting in *Nasser* (pp. 397–98) is more specific. He claims that the Israelis

were trying to draw Nasir into a fight and deliberately set out to persuade the Russians and the Egyptians that a major attack on Syria was imminent.

By a clever combination of calculated leakage, for the benefit of the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv, and fictitious radio messages which they rightly assumed would be picked up and relayed to Cairo by Russian ships patrolling in the eastern Mediterranean they made sure that Nasser would be immediately informed that Syria was about to be invaded.

He gives no source for this information (neither do the other writers give sources for theirs, for that matter).

Putting aside the allegation that the Israelis were trying to start a war, the disinformation thesis is attractive because it would explain why the Soviets took their report seriously, but efforts to get confirmation from Israeli sources have been unsuccessful to date. We cannot dismiss it, but we need more information before we can conclude anything about it.

Conclusion

All of the plot hypotheses are theoretically possible. Some are less likely than others, however, and none is proven. We can spend all day spinning more of them, but we do not need a plot to explain what happened. The trail is clear enough, even if some questions about motives and reasons for decisions remain unanswered. The dynamics of the Arab cold war and the inability of the world community to do anything effective about the Palestine question had led to a state of affairs in which a third round between Israel and the Arabs looked inevitable sooner or later, with the emphasis on the later. It came sooner than expected because of the policies of the regime in Damascus, the inability of the Israelis to rise above their retaliation mind-set and to reach an understanding on the demilitarized zones in the north, and to a monstrous miscalculation by the Egyptians and perhaps a lesser one by the Soviets. The most important element of that miscalculation was an almost incomprehensible misreading of Egypt's and Israel's respective military capabilities and will to fight. Failure to communicate, lack of empathy, misperception, diplomatic and military incompetence, intelligence failure, bureaucratic politics, and selective hearing, not conspiracy, were what really lay behind this tragedy.

NOTES

1. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 140.
2. Andrew and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison, the Inside Story of the US-Israeli Covert Relationship* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991), pp. 146-47.
3. Conversation with Ambassador Barkovsky, Moscow, 7 September 1990.
4. General Muhammed Fawzi, *Harb al-Thalath Sanawat* (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbil al-Arabi, 1984), p. 72.

5. Eric Rouleau, *Israel et les Arabes: le 3e Combat* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), p. 5.
6. Mahmud Riad, *Amriha wa al-Arab* (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbil al-Arabi, 1986), p. 41.
7. Stephen Green, *Taking Sides, America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), pp. 198-209.