

# THE WAR OF ATTRITION

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The War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel from March 1969 to the restoration of the cease-fire on August 7, 1970 has not been generally recognized for the major confrontation that it was. Its inconclusive outcome has led observers to overlook the fact that it was not a limited war in any sense of the word, since both the combatants had objectives which, if they had been successful, would have caused a major upheaval in the area. The Egyptian intention was eventually to achieve the capability of crossing the Suez Canal in strength and reoccupying Sinai; the Israelis not only aimed at preventing this and re-establishing the cease-fire, but seriously attempted to undermine the Egyptian regime through military pressure. Both sides, furthermore, used the major proportion of their military strength in the conflict (either directly or as a part of the "static" situation), and the confrontation, although centered on the Suez Canal, was not limited to that particular area and indeed has to be seen in the light of concurrent conflicts conducted on Israel's other fronts. The war was, in short, of considerable significance, and it is the purpose of this article briefly to describe the course of conflict and to examine the light it throws on the strategic thinking of the participants in the aftermath of the Six Day War.

An attritive war may be *adopted* as a strategy (rather than *be forced* upon the combatants as a result of the failure of more direct means, as in World War I) when one side is weaker than the other or when it cannot foresee a quick decision over the other. But in launching such a war, the weaker initiator must seek to prevent his stronger opponent from escalating the conflict and bringing the full weight of its military superiority into play. If he can do this, then his objective is not to strike a decisive blow to his opponent's strength, but to exhaust through attrition his enemy's *will* to continue the fight without making concessions.

Such was, substantially, the strategy adopted by Egypt in 1969, in res-

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ponse to the political conditions prevailing after the Six Day War. The militarily decisive Israeli victory of 1967 had proved far from politically decisive: the Arab will to resist did not collapse and the capitulation that Israel's leaders expected did not materialize. This political inconclusiveness appears to have led the Israelis to revise their priorities such that their plans came to encompass a long-term occupation of the conquered territories with the goal of realizing a more radical peace settlement than that which would have been obtained in 1967. Thus the politically indecisive nature of the 1967 war might well turn out in the long term to be more of a liability than an asset to the Egyptians. Such considerations may well have been operative in the Egyptians' decision to launch some sort of offensive to prevent an "ossification" of the situation along the Canal.

Egypt's options in attempting to shake the security of Israel's presence in Egyptian territory were necessarily limited after the 1967 defeat. It is very probable that one of the main reasons why Egypt chose attrition as a strategy was precisely because it seemed to suit the geography of the area of confrontation and that an inherently static military situation such as that prevailing along the Suez Canal would put Israel at a major disadvantage. The war of 1967 had demonstrated her unassailable superiority in the tactics of fast-moving armoured warfare; the Suez Canal which lay between the opposing forces thereafter prevented such large scale movements and constituted in effect a massive and highly effective anti-tank ditch protecting the Egyptian forces from the ravages of Israeli *blitzkrieg*. It would, for instance, have been difficult to consider a static military posture in an area where large-scale armoured movement is possible, such as the Sinai desert. A positional attritive war where large-scale offensiveness can take place, such as the Western Front in 1914-1918, remains totally implausible in these days when armour and air-power form the basic elements of modern warfare.

### 1. THE COURSE OF THE WAR: THE FIRST STAGE

Only a brief outline of the course of the war is feasible here. In describing the developments between March 1969 and August 1970, I have chosen to emphasize what appear to me to be the options available to the combatants at each stage and the strategies they adopted, rather than enter upon a detailed description of the actual fighting.

In the period following the Six Day War the Egyptian front was relatively quiescent until the Egyptians had sufficiently rebuilt their forces to re-engage in operations. However, from June 1968 limited engagements began to take place, and on August 27, 1968<sup>1</sup> Israel announced that the first Egyptian unit

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<sup>1</sup> *Yearbook of the Palestine Problem for 1968* (in Arabic) (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1971), p. 646.

had crossed over to the East Bank of the Canal since the 1967 war. Having recovered a degree of defensive strength, the Egyptian command appears to have decided to embark on limited operations with the object of warning Israel that Egypt was not prepared to contemplate a gradual acceptance of the post-1967 *status quo*. The Israelis seemed reluctant at this stage to escalate the conflict by replying with the full weight of their fire power, either through artillery reinforcements or increased deployment of air power. Their response therefore to an exceptionally heavy surprise artillery barrage on October 26, 1968<sup>2</sup> was rather to resort to "psychological" warfare with the object of undermining Egyptian faith in their defensive capacity. And so, on November 1, 1968 an Israeli commando unit struck at the electric transformers in the Nag Hamadi area, some 200 kilometres inside Egyptian territory. The action was accompanied by a statement from Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to the effect that the operation "was intended to demonstrate the capacity of the Israeli forces to respond to Egyptian aggression."<sup>3</sup>

The artillery attack of October 26, however, had another and far-reaching result. The heavy losses sustained by the Israelis led them to commence the fortification of their positions along the Canal in a defence line that came to be called the "Bar-Lev line" after the then Chief of Staff. It was this fortification that led to the real commencement of the War of Attrition, for the Egyptians saw the transformation of the Israeli positions along the Canal into a permanent and concentrated presence as the very development they wished to avoid; namely, an impregnable Israeli stance in Sinai that would only result in the "ossification" of the post-1967 *status quo* to the detriment of Egypt, and the conversion of the cease-fire line into a permanent *de facto* frontier.

It is clear from the Egyptian strategy when fighting resumed in March 1969 that their plan envisaged essentially four stages. Firstly, artillery bombardment was to destroy as much as possible of the Bar-Lev line, not only to counter the political implications noted above, but also to enable Egyptian forces to undertake crossings of the Canal. The second stage, to begin once the Israeli fortifications had been largely destroyed, was a series of limited crossings by Egyptian commandos with the object of storming the Israeli lines, engaging the Israeli army, and withdrawing after a period of time. Thirdly, other units of the Egyptian army would carry out more extensive operations across the Canal in order to train as many men as possible in such techniques and develop coordination between various sectors of the armed forces. Finally, a full-scale crossing operation would be launched with the object of liberating specific areas or sectors of the East Bank of the Canal, and remaining in them with a view to strengthening Egypt's position in any future talks regarding

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<sup>2</sup> Fifteen Israeli soldiers were killed and thirty-five wounded. *Ibid.*, p. 664.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 668.

Israel's withdrawal from the Arab territories. The successful crossing and holding operation would of itself serve to break the deadlock that had set in since 1967.

The implementation of the Egyptian plan was timed to start in March 1969 when the Egyptian air force would have completed its retraining and rebuilt its strength. At that time some 300 pilots returned from training missions in the Soviet Union<sup>4</sup> and the Egyptian command estimated that the air force would be able to achieve superiority, or at least parity, over the front.<sup>5</sup> Thus on March 8, 1969 the Egyptian artillery carried out a concentrated and violent bombardment of Israeli positions east of the Canal, commencing in the late afternoon as the sun set behind the Egyptian lines dazzling Israeli artillerymen, and continuing into the darkness to ensure no intervention by Israeli planes. The bombardment continued through the following day and was resumed for a further two consecutive days later in the week during which the Egyptians are estimated to have fired some 40,000 shells.<sup>6</sup>

This was the pattern of Egyptian operations throughout March and April. On May 1, Nasser announced that 60 per cent of the Bar-Lev line had been destroyed by artillery fire and Egyptian reports gave out that the first stage of the plan was completed.<sup>7</sup> It is clear now that the Egyptians seriously overestimated their success in damaging Israeli positions since the Israelis had taken every precaution to ensure that their fortifications would withstand heavy artillery bombardment. Detailed information in the Western press confirmed that the Bar-Lev line had substantially withstood the battering.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Egypt decided to pursue its strategy and embark on the second stage of its plan. As from April 19, Egyptian commando units began crossing the Suez Canal regularly and attacking the Israeli fortified positions. On April 25 an Israeli military spokesman stated that Egyptian forces had crossed the Canal five times in the preceding week.<sup>9</sup> Israel's response seems to have been composed of three elements: to ensure the fortification of the Bar-Lev line in order to resist Egyptian raids and artillery bombardment; replying to Egyptian artillery with sustained artillery bombardments of their own on both military and civilian or economic targets (demonstrating to Egypt the cost of sustaining military action); and carrying out reprisal raids by airborne troops inside Egyptian territory and attacks on targets considered sensitive

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<sup>4</sup> Zeev Shiff, "Wings over the Nile," in Rashad al-Shami (ed.) *Insha' wa Tatwir Silah al-Jaou al-Isra'ili* (*The Establishment and Development of the Israeli Air Force*) (Beirut: Dar al-Auda, 1972), p. 251.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Ahram*, May 5, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, March 11, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, April 26, 1969.

from the psychological and military points of view. Thus the latter two tactics were at least partially concerned with sapping the Egyptian will to continue its attacks.

The Bar-Lev line showed itself capable of withstanding Egyptian bombardment, and so from March onwards Israeli forces commenced shelling targets inside Egypt. The town and oil refineries of Suez, and the cities of Ismailia, Port Fuad, Port Said and Port Tewfiq were all shelled at least once in April and May, causing considerable Egyptian civilian casualties.<sup>10</sup> The psychological reprisal raid, meanwhile, is a tactic that the Israelis have frequently employed against Egypt in the past. When Egypt officially announced the abrogation of the cease-fire on April 23, Israeli commando forces carried out a raid on the Nag Hamadi area in the Nile valley in "retaliation."<sup>11</sup> Israeli raids in response to Egyptian attacks culminated in an unprecedentedly extensive operation on July 20 when air, land and sea forces occupied Egyptian positions on Jazirat al-Khadra (Green Island) in the Gulf of Suez for an hour before withdrawing.<sup>12</sup>

The same day (July 20, 1969) there also occurred the first major aerial clash of the war, when Israel claimed to have shot down five Egyptian aircraft for the loss of two of its own (the Egyptians claimed seventeen Israeli aircraft). The beginning of the war in the air marked a new stage in which the initiative passed to Israel and attrition gave way to counter-attrition. The decision to deploy aircraft in strength was not an easy one for the Israeli command. According to Shiff, one of the fundamental reasons why Israel had hitherto been reluctant to commit its strength was that by doing so it risked frittering away aircraft in relatively inessential operations instead of saving the aircraft for a major conflagration.<sup>13</sup> Moshe Dayan in particular thought that the only justification for bringing in the air force would be an all-out Egyptian attempt to cross the Canal, or some other large-scale operation in which Israel would be obliged to make a preventive strike.<sup>14</sup>

But the fighting in June and July had inflicted losses on the Israelis; according to the Israelis themselves casualties rose from fifty-one (including thirteen killed) in May, to eighty-nine (including seventeen killed) in June, and 112 (including thirty-one killed) in July. Nor did the Egyptians appear to be daunted by Israeli counter-raids: on July 10 Egyptian commandos effected a crossing in the Port Tewfiq area and claimed forty Israeli casualties killed and wounded, the destruction of five tanks and an observation

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<sup>10</sup> *Al-Ahram*, April 9 and 10, 1969, May 8 and 12, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, May 2, 1969.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, July 21, 1969

<sup>13</sup> Shami, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

post and the capture of a prisoner.<sup>15</sup> As Shiff says: "The shock was severe; this was the greatest success achieved by the Egyptians... The heavy losses on the Israeli side... provided an incentive to reach a rapid decision."<sup>16</sup>

From the shape of the operations, Israel's strategy is fairly clear. It seems to have been intended to expand the area of fighting so that Egypt would have to spread out its forces within Egypt and reduce the concentrations along the Canal; to strip the Canal front of its air defences and open an "air corridor" to permit the Israeli air force to make deep-penetration raids into Egypt; and to draw the Egyptian air force into unequal battles which would lower its morale and reduce the scale of its operations. Thus the first strike against Egypt's Canal ground-to-air missile sites took place on July 24;<sup>17</sup> ground targets all along the Suez front and inside Egypt were subject to continuous Israeli attack from July 20. The follow-through on the ground was exemplified by an airborne armoured assault on September 9 which landed in the Gulf of Suez and for ten hours stormed Egyptian positions from Bafayer to Ras Za'farana. Commenting on the attack, an Israeli officer said: "... in a war of attrition the initiating party tries to impose his conditions on the other party. We must create difficulties for him. We prefer to choose the time and the place of the battle ourselves."<sup>18</sup>

The Israeli attempt to seize the initiative was given further impetus with the arrival of the first F-4E Phantoms at the beginning of September and the intensive raids on the Suez air defences which reached their climax during late September and early October. According to the Israelis, they managed during this period to destroy all the Egyptian SAM-2 ground-to-air missile sites along the Canal and most of the radar stations; after about six weeks, the Egyptians were without any air defence potential along the whole Suez front.<sup>19</sup>

At this stage it must have been clear to the Egyptians that they were being forced into a defensive war which they could not afford. In effect, a defensive war negated the fundamental objectives implicit in Egypt's launching of the campaign. But while the Egyptians maintained their pressure on the front with the ground, air and naval attacks on Israeli positions in Sinai (even extending to a frogman assault on ships in Eilat harbour),<sup>20</sup> they were reluctant to engage the Israeli air force directly, either because they felt their own air force was unprepared or because they were retaining their strength for a

<sup>15</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, July 11, 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Shami, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

<sup>17</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, July 25, 1969.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, September 12, 1969.

<sup>19</sup> *Ordnance*, May-June 1972.

<sup>20</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, November 18, 1969.

later stage. The original Egyptian plan, however, had become "frozen" at its third stage (see p. 62), that of crossings by the regular army preparatory to a full-scale assault on Sinai. Instead, they were forced from this point on to abandon any thoughts of an immediate crossing in strength and concentrate on combatting the Israeli threat.

In October, the Israelis shifted their air attacks from the Canal zone to the Gulf of Suez. By December, they were once again making daily attacks on the Canal front. Their most spectacular operation here was the seizure of a Russian manufactured radar station at Ras al-Charb, which they abducted to Israel by helicopter.<sup>21</sup> By the year's end, in fact, they had virtually ensured that no effective Egyptian ground opposition could be mounted against Israeli penetration of their air-space along the Gulf of Suez and the Canal zone.

## 2. THE COURSE OF THE WAR: JANUARY 1970 TO AUGUST 1970

If the commencement of the air war in July 1969 was one turning point in the War of Attrition, the beginning of deep penetration raids in January 1970 was another. Attacks on the Egyptian hinterland had, as we have seen, already taken place, but now they were mounted as part of a concerted campaign in a new stage of the war. Between the end of the June War and December 1969, the Israelis had flown no less than 2,700 sorties over Egyptian territory, the majority of them since July 1969.<sup>22</sup> Israel now turned to exploit the breaches thus made in Egypt's defences, whilst maintaining pressure on the Suez Canal and Gulf of Suez fronts to ensure that Egypt would have to disperse its forces defensively (thus reducing the possibility of crossings), and to inhibit its rebuilding its air defences. Israel's objective was two-fold: firstly, to convince Egypt that it would never be able to carry out its intended offensive in Sinai, and secondly, to concentrate on the psychological aspect of the war. Writing in the *New York Times* on January 18, James Feron said that the psychological war had two aims: "to bring the war home to the Egyptian people," and "to undermine the Egyptian leadership and create divisions within it, which could have positive consequences for Israel...." Indeed, it appears that Israel aimed at trying to bring Nasser himself down: Golda Meir later frankly stated that she did not think there was any chance of peace so long as Abdul Nasser was in power.<sup>23</sup> On February 8, Golda Meir held a press conference at which she said that the war had proved the failure of Nasser's policy. Asked if Nasser's fall would bring to power a leader more amenable to negotiations in his stead, she replied: "He cannot be less ready

<sup>21</sup> *Al-Nahar*, January 4, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> *Palestine Diary* (in Arabic), (Beirut: PLO Research Centre, 1971), vol. 11, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Palestine Diary*, p. 32.

and he must be different. When Stalin died, a new Stalin did not take his place..."<sup>24</sup>.

The first of the deep-penetration raids was launched on January 8, 1970 on targets about thirty miles from Cairo.<sup>25</sup> On January 18, Israeli aircraft attacked military installations five kilometres north of Helwan and a military base near Cairo International Airport. Simultaneously, other aircraft were bombing targets in the northern and eastern sectors of the Suez front around Qantara and the town of Suez.<sup>26</sup> Four days later another radar station was seized by an airborne force that landed on Shadwan island in the Gulf of Suez.<sup>27</sup> Thus the regular pattern of Israeli activity continued until April 1970.

It is not entirely clear what plan Egypt made to confront the Israeli threat. On the one hand, the politico-military situation demanded that Egypt continue the attrition offensive regardless. On the other hand, the strategic situation dictated that Egypt give top priority to strengthening its defensive position. Concretely, Egyptian tactics during this phase were to mobilize the home front to counteract the psychological impression of the Israeli raids (Sadat announced the formation of "Citizens' Committees for the Battle" throughout Egypt on January 18)<sup>28</sup> and to continue as far as possible with offensive operations through air attacks on the Israeli positions and commando raids into Sinai. Thus, on January 24, Egyptian aircraft raided Sinai three times, one group actually penetrating as far as al-Arish in the most distant air attack since the 1967 war.<sup>29</sup>

But the only way out of Egypt's dilemma was to turn to the Soviet Union for aid. In January Nasser made a secret visit to Moscow, which was not revealed until July.<sup>30</sup> The Israelis meanwhile were not taking the prospects of Russian intervention very seriously. Ezer Weizmann, then one of Golda Meir's closest advisers on security matters, said at the time that: "There is no great danger of Soviet intervention in the Middle East."<sup>31</sup> But less than a fortnight later, on February 19, 1970, the *New York Times* reported that Egypt had started to receive Soviet equipment and experts and that no less than 1500 Soviet personnel had arrived with consignments of SAM-3 missiles. The paper added that such a step was inevitable after Israel had started to

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<sup>24</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, February 9, 1970

<sup>25</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, January 8, 1970.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Nahar*, January 19, 1970.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, January 23, 1970

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Ahram*, January 19, 1970.

<sup>29</sup> *Palestine Diary*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Al-Ahram*, July 24, 1970

<sup>31</sup> *Davar*, February 6, 1970



bomb the Egyptian hinterland. The military significance of this new presence was considerable; by the spring of 1970 the USSR had sent to Egypt a large number of advisers and pilots, fully equipped, at the same time supplying Egypt with missiles and modern electronic equipment to confront the constant Israeli raids.

Deep Israeli raids meanwhile continued unabated, though two particular operations provoked adverse world comment. On February 12, two Phantoms bombed Abu Za'bal in the Delta killing seventy and wounding 100 civilians.<sup>32</sup> On April 8, the Bahr al-Baqr area was attacked; thirty children were killed and forty wounded when a bomb hit a school. "Perhaps the Egyptians leave children in military installations," remarked Moshe Dayan.<sup>33</sup> And then on April 13, the Israeli raids suddenly ceased. It is difficult to determine the reasons for this unexpected turnabout in policy, especially since a few days previously David Eleazar, then head of operations on the Israeli General Staff, said that the army's plan for 1970-1 included maintaining the air offensive against Egypt along the Canal and in depth.<sup>34</sup> Thus it would appear that the decision was made in haste and contrary to the long-term plans the Israelis had in mind. It would seem likely, however, that they had come to realize that continued raids in depth might lead to a dangerous escalation with Egypt, especially after the first indications of Soviet military aid. Embarrassment by the reaction aroused as a result of the Abu Za'bal and Bahr al-Baqr raids may also have been a contributing factor. Politically, too, the raids had failed to achieve their political objectives, since no dissensions were apparent in the Egyptian leadership and Nasser's regime was in no way undermined (although it must be borne in mind that the deep-penetration strategy had only been operative for three months). Militarily as well, although Egypt's ground-to-air defence system was in ruins, the Egyptians had succeeded in persevering with their own attacks: a review of Egyptian air operations during this period shows that they were carried out in greater strength than in any equivalent period in the previous stage.

The last phase of the War of Attrition (from the cessation of the Israeli raids into the Egyptian hinterland up to the cease-fire of August 7, 1970) was marked by a reversal of the situation and the passage of the initiative once again into Egypt's hands. From April onwards its stance was once again fundamentally offensive. This was primarily due not so much to the military weight that the Soviet Union placed at Egypt's disposal, considerable though this was, but to the political presence of the Russians in Egypt. It is clear that the USSR had decided to take the Egyptian strategic depth under its protec-

<sup>32</sup> *Palestine Diary*, p. 116

<sup>33</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, April 9, 1970.

<sup>34</sup> *Davar*, April 7, 1970.

tion, so that it was impossible for Israel to penetrate that depth without thus constituting an open challenge to the USSR. Such a challenge would not only have had considerable local repercussions but also would have had dangerous implications on the international level, particularly in terms of a possible American-Soviet confrontation. Thus the Soviet defence of Egyptian depth gave Egypt the opportunity to concentrate all its forces in the area of direct combat with Israel along the Suez Canal. Egyptian air and land attacks consequently attained a higher level of intensity, while at the same time Israeli attacks on the Canal increased and the conflict entered its most crucial phase.

Egyptian strategy in this last phase was marked by a concentration on the Canal zone, an escalation of raids by land and air on forward and rear positions of the Israeli army, and the movement of SAM missiles into the area of direct confrontation to neutralize Israeli air supremacy. As regards the Israeli-Egyptian confrontation through the remainder of 1970, it was the deployment of Egypt's ground-to-air missile system that proved to be the most significant factor. Deployment of SAM sites *behind* the Canal zone would seriously impede Israeli air raids over Egyptian positions; deployment of missiles *in* the Canal zone would challenge Israeli air superiority over their own positions, where the range of Egyptian missiles would allow for strikes at Israeli planes between twenty and thirty kilometres into occupied Sinai. Movement of Egyptian missile sites into the battle area would thus have had important consequences for Israeli control of the local airspace and Egyptian ability to effect a crossing in strength over the Canal. The Israeli military command were well aware of the potential threat of the Egyptian missiles. Yigal Allon early on commented on the menace posed by the SAM missile sites and outlined Israel's attitude. Israel, he said, would make every effort to prevent the expansion of the Egyptian air defence network; without Israeli air superiority, Egyptian artillery would enjoy overwhelming superiority in fire power and Egyptian aircraft would be able to strike relentlessly at Israeli positions: "We shall continue our bombing of the present Egyptian defence system and of other military installations, and we shall prevent the establishment of new defence systems or the repair of old systems that have been destroyed."<sup>35</sup>

Egypt was indeed making attempts to move its missiles into the battle zone. According to Western press reports, Egypt was building "primitive" bases to which the missiles could be moved with great rapidity. "If Egypt succeeds in building missile bases in the Canal area in spite of repeated Israeli attacks," read one report, "Israel's security situation will be weakened, because the missiles can be moved to their bases overnight."<sup>36</sup> In fact, it

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<sup>35</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, April 1, 1970.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, April 18, 1970.

seems that if such Egyptian moves were taking place, they were successfully frustrated.

Egyptian air and ground raids, however, continued. Once again, Egyptian aircraft penetrated as far as al-Arish, also attacking the Israeli settlement of Nahal Yam in northern Sinai, about 100 kilometres east of the Canal.<sup>37</sup> Bombardment and commando attacks along the Canal also increased; on May 4 Israel announced that in one week there had been 304 incidents on the Egyptian front as against 164 during the previous weeks, and that 1000 shells had been fired on Israeli positions in one hour.<sup>38</sup> A fortnight later, Israeli sources estimated that Egypt had over 900 guns concentrated along the Canal and that Egyptian shelling had become heavier and more effective.<sup>39</sup> Israeli losses rose correspondingly: in March, Israel announced nine killed, in April twenty-seven, and in May thirty-one. Israel's response was to increase its air-raids on Egyptian positions, and from the middle of May until the cease-fire in August the Israelis flew daily sorties over Egyptian positions. According to Muhammad Hassanain Haikal, the Israeli air force averaged 180 missions a week during the first four months of 1970, but by the middle of May they had reached a record of 526 in one week, including one day in which 183 sorties had been flown.<sup>40</sup> Haikal also reported at the same time that Egypt had succeeded in covering its strategic depth sufficiently to limit Israeli attack to the battle zone; it would appear from reports in the authoritative American *Aviation Week* that this was substantially due to Soviet assistance, since the USSR had begun to carry out air patrols in the Egyptian hinterland.<sup>41</sup>

The Soviet presence was indeed increasing at a rapid rate. On May 29 Nasser stated in a speech that "we now have Soviet advisers in Egyptian units... I repeat that they are with our forces everywhere."<sup>42</sup> This appears to have been very near the truth; *Aviation Week* reported the presence of 150 Russian pilots and 100 advanced model interceptor MIG-21J's in twenty-four combat units stationed on four bases early in May, alongside forty to fifty SAM-3 batteries.<sup>43</sup> A week later the same journal reported accurate information according to which there were 15,000 Soviet advisers in Egypt and no less than eighty SAM-3 batteries.<sup>44</sup> Slightly different estimates were published in 1971 by the Institute for Strategic Studies in London

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<sup>37</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, April 24, 1970.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, May 5, 1970.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, May 18, 1970.

<sup>40</sup> *Al-Ahram*, May 22, 1970.

<sup>41</sup> *Aviation Week*, May 4, 1970.

<sup>42</sup> *Al-Ahram*, May 30, 1970.

<sup>43</sup> *Aviation Week*, May 11, 1970.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, May 18, 1970.

(Table I), but the trend of increasing Soviet involvement was unmistakable nevertheless.

TABLE I  
THE SOVIET PRESENCE IN EGYPT, 1970<sup>45</sup>

<i>Date</i>	<i>No. of Pilots</i>	<i>No. of Missile Experts</i>	<i>No. of Army Experts</i>	<i>No. of Missile Bases</i>	<i>No. of Planes</i>	<i>No. of Airfields</i>
January	Nil	Nil	2.5-4,000	Nil	Nil	Nil
April	60-80	4,000	2.5-4,000	22 SAM-3 bases	Nil	1(?)
July	100-150	8,000	2.5-4,000	45-50 SAM-3 bases	120 Mig-21 G	6
October	150	10-13,000	2.5-4,000	70-80 SAM-3 bases	150 Mig-21 G	6
December	200	12-15,000	4,000	75-85 SAM-3 bases	150 Mig-21 G	6

Benefitting from this Soviet cover, Egypt proceeded to intensify its attacks on the East Bank of the Canal. On May 30, Egyptian units succeeded in killing thirteen and wounding four Israeli soldiers and capturing four others in the course of a raid across the Canal.<sup>46</sup> The Israeli reply to such attacks was equally heavy: three days of aerial bombardment on Port Said, during which 4000 bombs were dropped, cut off the city from the rest of the west bank;<sup>47</sup> according to Haikal, the Israeli air force flew 400 sorties in one day at the end of May.<sup>48</sup> At the end of May, Israel also admitted its first losses of two aircraft to Soviet-built SAM-2 missiles; Egypt claimed five more in the next week.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, at the end of June, Egypt had succeeded in extending its SAM-2 and SAM-3 missile coverage over the east bank of the Suez Canal. According to *Aviation Week*, a lightning operation in the night of June 29-30 had set up the ground-to-air system in an interlocking network to a depth of twenty-seven miles.<sup>50</sup> When Israeli planes detected the system on the following morning, they found it ready for immediate use. The result was an "electronic war" in which the Israelis attempted to "jam" the frequencies guiding the Egyptian missiles, and the Egyptians attempted to overcome Israeli counter-measures initially by rapid alteration of frequencies<sup>51</sup> and then by firing their

<sup>45</sup> *Strategic Survey 1970* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971).

<sup>46</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, June 1, 1970.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, June 4, 1970.

<sup>48</sup> *Al-Ahram*, June 5, 1970.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, June 3, 4, 7, 1970.

<sup>50</sup> *Aviation Week*, July 13, 1970.

<sup>51</sup> *Ordnance*, May-June 1972.

missiles in large rapid clusters to prevent the Israeli "jamming" apparatus diverting all the missiles at once.<sup>52</sup>

If the war was becoming increasingly intense militarily, diplomatic moves were gathering speed to put an end to it. A renewed cease-fire was first proposed by the US Secretary of State William Rogers on June 24 in the context of a resumption of the Jarring mission on June 24.<sup>53</sup> A month later Nasser announced his acceptance of a cease-fire, saying: "We now feel that our position is strong and that we shall not be taking action from a position of weakness but a position of strength," citing the increased deterrent capacity of Egyptian forces and Soviet aid as the factors chiefly responsible for this situation.<sup>54</sup> Two days later, Golda Meir announced that she was studying the possibility of accepting a cease-fire, on condition that there should be an American guarantee that Egypt and the USSR would not exploit the truce in their own interests.<sup>55</sup> Israel accepted the Rogers Plan and the cease-fire on August 1<sup>56</sup> and the cease-fire came into effect a week later on August 7. Western sources noted at this time that Israel had almost depleted its bomb supply after seventy-nine days of consecutive attacks on Egyptian positions.<sup>57</sup>

No account of the War of Attrition, however brief, would be complete without reference to the role of the front along Israel's eastern borders. Combat on the Eastern front was an implicit corollary in the concept of waging a war of attrition on the Suez front; thus Haikal wrote in March 1969: "It is essential that there should be an Eastern and a Western front, and that there should be complete coordination between the Eastern and the Western fronts."<sup>58</sup>

However, the fundamental problem underlying the Egyptian strategy was not so much coordinating the two fronts as coordinating all the separate forces that operated on the Eastern front. Most of the time, Jordanian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian and Saudi forces acted on their own with a consequent diminution of their combined effect on Israel. At no time did either the Jordanian or Syrian forces (being the largest contingents) on the Eastern front manage to exercise a significant influence on the course of fighting in Egypt. Early in 1969, Israel turned from "reprisal" operations against Jordan for Palestinian resistance attacks to "deterrent" operations, designed to "reduce both our casualties and Arab terrorist activity in our territories."<sup>59</sup> Deterrence

<sup>52</sup> *Davar*, August 19, 1970.

<sup>53</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, June 25, 1970.

<sup>54</sup> *Al-Ahram*, July 27, 1970.

<sup>55</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, July 27, 1970.

<sup>56</sup> *Al-Nahar*, August 2, 1970.

<sup>57</sup> *Aviation Week*, August 31, 1970.

<sup>58</sup> *Al-Ahram*, March 28, 1969.

<sup>59</sup> *Maariv*, April 4, 1969.

consisted chiefly of surprise air attacks on military and civilian bases in Jordan, and pursuit of Palestinian commandos across the cease-fire lines. Throughout 1969, Israel was able to use its aircraft on both the Egyptian and Eastern fronts at once, destroying in the process Jordan's most important irrigation project — the East Ghor Canal — on August 10, 1969. Deterrent operations by aircraft continued over the Eastern front and the only change in the military situation there during the second half of 1969 was an increase in Israeli activity on the Lebanese front (where Israeli artillery and aircraft attacked the Arqub area on August 11, 1969). The Lebanese zone continued in 1970 to be a target of Israeli attacks and on March 19, 1970 the Lebanese announced that Israel had entered Lebanese territory ten times since the beginning of the year, and made forty-four attacks on Lebanese territory in the same period.<sup>60</sup> Jordan also announced on January 9, 1970 that there had been 220 Israeli attacks on Jordanian territory between August 1969 and the end of December 1969, in which sixty-seven soldiers and civilians were killed and eighteen wounded.<sup>61</sup> Syria remained principally the scene of air activity and it was there that Israel admitted to its first loss of a Phantom over Arab territory on April 2, 1970.<sup>62</sup>

It was not in fact until the last stage of the war that the Eastern front came to play anything approaching the role in which Haikal had earlier cast it. It appears from the level of combat that a request from the Egyptian command for Syria to carry out operations (presumably with the object of diverting part of the Israeli war effort from the Canal) was made in late May or early June 1970. Egypt had long since ceased to talk about the Eastern front once the high hopes that had earlier been pinned upon it proved to be illusory. But on June 5, 1970, Haikal once more referred to Egypt's allies: "If the Eastern front... becomes really strong and effective, this will upset the political and strategic balance in the conflict, and have an influence far greater than could be anticipated at present..."<sup>63</sup> At this stage the Soviet-Egyptian SAM operation was not yet assured of a successful completion and the Canal zone was passing through a critical period. Syria responded with artillery and tank battles that soon escalated seriously enough for Israel to commit aircraft.<sup>64</sup> Action continued on the Syrian front until the cease-fire, although it remained at a relatively low intensity from the end of June. On the Lebanese front, repeated Israeli air, artillery and commando attacks culminated in the announcement on May 26 by General Mordechai Gur, the Commander of the Northern Front, that Israel intended to carry out permanent patrols from

<sup>60</sup> *Al-Nahar*, March 30, 1970.

<sup>61</sup> *Palestine Diary*, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, April 3, 1970.

<sup>63</sup> *Al-Ahram*, June 5, 1970.

<sup>64</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, June 9, 1970

between two and three kilometres inside the Lebanese frontiers.<sup>65</sup> Israel meanwhile continued to employ the same “deterrent” raids against Lebanon as it was using against Jordan.

### 3. THE AFTERMATH

On the Egyptian front, the period after the cease-fire of August 7, 1970 was chiefly marked by the successful establishment of Egyptian missile sites within the Canal Zone, the very development that Israeli aircraft had sought to prevent four months earlier. The movements began almost immediately after the establishment of the cease-fire, which expressly forbade all permanent military movements fifty kilometres east and west of the Canal.<sup>66</sup> Although the US State Department’s spokesman referred to Egypt’s acts of violation of the cease-fire — through the continued establishment of new bases, the mounting of missiles in bases previously destroyed, and the transportation of equipment to the prohibited zone — the United States made no attempt to back up Israel’s indignation at the violation of the cease-fire. The United States was obviously unwilling to sabotage the new cease-fire agreement by adopting a frankly pro-Israel attitude. Against the background of continued Egyptian violations of the cease-fire agreement, Israel announced its withdrawal from the Jarring talks on September 6, 1970.<sup>67</sup> Egypt, however, continued to strengthen its position along the Canal.

While Israel was strongly protesting against alleged Egyptian moves, General Bar-Lev, the Israeli Chief of Staff, announced on September 7 that recent Egyptian moves were “not important.”<sup>68</sup> On September 16 Robert McCloskey, the US State Department spokesman, commenting on press reports of Israeli violations of the cease-fire agreements, declared that America had proof that Israeli planes were carrying out reconnaissance operations outside the cease-fire zone. McCloskey did not affirm that these flights constituted a violation of the agreement in the legal sense, but he did say that by their very nature, they constituted a “disregard” of the terms of the agreement on the freezing of military moves.<sup>69</sup>

On September 28 *Aviation Week* published an inquiry into the new situation on the Canal in which it said that there were eighty Egyptian missile sites in the prohibited zone and that Egyptian missiles periodically occupied between 20 and 25 per cent of these sites.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, May 27, 1970.

<sup>66</sup> *Aviation Week*, August 31, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> *Al-Nahar*, September 7, 1970.

<sup>68</sup> *Davar*, October 10, 1970.

<sup>69</sup> *Palestine Diary* (vol. 12), p. 349.

*Aviation Week* again wrote about the new network on November 16, when it gave the following information: Egypt has moved about 600 SAM-2 and SAM-3 missiles into a strip seventeen kilometres wide and 125 kilometres long along the line of confrontation with Israel, and between August 8 and October 18 the Egyptian and Soviet experts succeeded in establishing twenty-eight SAM-2 and fourteen SAM-3 batteries, with "intercept" and "tracking" radar; these bases were defended by quick-firing four-barrelled ZSU 23 mm. anti-aircraft guns. The SAM-2 and SAM-3 batteries could be moved rapidly from one base to another, which was indicative of their high interchangeability. The range of the SAM-3 rockets is about twenty-seven kilometres, that of the SAM-2's more than forty-two kilometres.

There can be no doubt that Egypt succeeded in appreciably strengthening her defence situation, and in preparing the ground for possible all-out offensive action in the weeks immediately after the cease-fire. It is also impossible to deny the relative deterioration in the military situation as far as Israel was concerned, in spite of the fact that it succeeded in obtaining a large number of Skyhawk and Phantom fighter-bombers to replace those lost in the fighting.

But why then did Egypt prolong the cease-fire in November 1970? At that time there still was a Soviet politico-military "umbrella" over Egyptian territory, and Egypt enjoyed local superiority in the area of direct confrontation on both banks of the Suez Canal. On the one hand the Egyptian anti-aircraft missiles could strike about twenty kilometres inside occupied Sinai, and the Egyptian artillery and armour concentrated on the Canal was assumed to be sufficient to prevent Israel from crossing the Canal to destroy the missile network on the ground. From the political point of view it was clear in November that the American initiative and the Rogers Plan had failed, and Israel's withdrawal from the Jarring talks only confirmed this. Why, then, did Egypt not attempt the crossing it had so long been aiming at?

It seems probable that Egyptian hesitations were due to the fact that it was afraid of Israel escalating the fighting, in the event of the battle being resumed, by challenging Soviet protection of Egyptian depth; the USSR may well have mentioned this possibility in the course of Egyptian-Soviet consultations. On the other hand it is possible that Egypt may have thought that its lack of long-range weapons with which to strike hard at Israeli strategic depth appreciably detracted from its deterrent capacity. But it is more probable that the death of President Abdul Nasser on September 28, 1970, and the internal differences in Egypt after his death, affected Egypt's ability to take clear-cut decisions and prevented the establishment of the unified political leadership necessary for such decisions.



## 4. OBJECTIVES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

In assessing the outcome of the War of Attrition, two considerations are paramount: why did it end when it did?, and what was its effect on the protagonists? In a sense, neither side "won" the war since neither side can be conclusively said to have achieved what may be conjectured as its objectives. Nevertheless, Egypt had distinctly the upper hand at the end of the fighting, and was stronger than ever before in spite of the heavy losses inflicted on the Egyptian army by Israeli air raids.<sup>70</sup> Conversely, the Israeli position was weaker than ever before in August 1970 in spite of the immense efforts made by the Israeli air force to maintain air superiority. This feeling of weakness was reflected in articles which appeared in the Hebrew press, asking why Israel had accepted the cease-fire when for the past three years it had rejected the proposals calling for withdrawal from the occupied territories:

... the American initiative has become a means of salvation, and it has provided the word of salvation: withdrawal. Therefore we must not impede the implementation of this 'blessed' initiative but help the Americans to get us out of the complicated situation we have got into through the Six Day War and the Three Year War. If this is the case, our policy for the last three years has not been one of fine achievements but a series of grave errors which have led to extremely grave consequences for us: the entry into the area of the Soviets, the rise of terrorist organizations, a defence budget of more than a billion dollars and the loss of our friends. In this case it is not the Egyptians who have been exhausted in the War of Attrition, but us, and that is why we have responded to the American initiative.<sup>71</sup>

From the military point of view it is difficult to surmise what Israel would have done but for the cease-fire. It no longer had many alternative courses of action, and it could not escalate any further except by entering an all-out war with Egypt in extremely difficult and critical local and international circumstances.

Thus Israel in August 1970 was faced with three alternatives. It could either continue to squander its air power on the bombing of the Egyptian missiles on the Canal without this having any appreciable practical results; or it could escalate the battle, challenge the USSR and risk creating an international crisis with consequences difficult to foresee; or, finally, it could accept

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<sup>70</sup> Correct casualty figures are hard to estimate because both sides tend to understate their casualties. Official figures for Israel were 659 military and civilians killed, and 2292 wounded between the June War and June 1970 on all fronts. An Arab estimate over much the same period is 2873 Arab military and civilians killed and 4000 wounded on all fronts (Y. Sayegh, *Shu'un Filastiniya*, September 1971). But even a wide differential between the two sides need not be of primary significance to an attrition strategy such as Egypt's.

<sup>71</sup> *Davar*, August 14, 1970.

the cease-fire and depend on American military and political aid. It chose the third alternative, which must have seemed to be the best at the time. It is difficult to estimate what Israel's reaction would have been had Egypt not accepted the cease-fire, but it is most likely that, in such a situation, it would have risked challenging the USSR and tried to resume the bombing in depth of specific sensitive targets. On the other hand, it may also be conjectured that it would have adopted a less dangerous solution and tried to cross the Canal and attack the Egyptian missiles on land. All this demonstrates that the Israeli position in August 1970 was extremely grave, and the Rogers Plan might well have seemed like "salvation" at the time.

It is certain that Egypt appreciated the gravity of the Israeli position when it accepted the cease-fire proposal, and decided that, whereas it was taking action from "a position of strength, rather than a position of weakness," a continuation of military activity might have led to a reversal of this situation and the possibility of a grave international crisis.

In assessing the outcome of the war, however, a different approach is required. What were the aims that each side tried to achieve in the War of Attrition, and did either side succeed in achieving them? As we have seen, Egypt was the Arab country that played the leading role on the Arab side, while the other Arab countries played a secondary supporting role. We must therefore outline the aims of the initiating party (Egypt) and try to assess the results it achieved. We shall also assess the aims of the responding party (Israel) and assess what it, too, achieved.

At the beginning of 1969, President Nasser specified Egypt's aims as follows:

... The first priority, the absolute priority in this battle is the military front, for we must realize that *the enemy will not withdraw unless we force him to withdraw through fighting. Indeed there can be no hope of any political solution unless the enemy realizes that we are capable of forcing him to withdraw through fighting...*<sup>72</sup> [My italics]

This speech clearly defines Egyptian goals as follows: firstly, the achievement of a *political solution* (although this is not explained in the speech it appears to be a reference to the resolution adopted by the UN Security Council (Resolution 242) in November 1967); secondly, the realization of this political solution either through forcing Israel to withdraw or by building up sufficient military strength to convince Israel that she would have to withdraw if the fighting was prolonged. Again the limits of the requisite withdrawal are not specified and although Nasser did refer to "liberation" in later speeches, a more limited aim such as the occupation of the east bank of the Suez Canal was probably a more likely objective.

<sup>72</sup> *Al-Ahram*, January 21, 1969.

But how did Egypt envisage the strategy that would achieve these goals? On March 7, 1969, Haikal gave expression to some important ideas about the "next war with Israel." This article appeared at the same time as the first phase of the War of Attrition began. Although it is a mistake to regard Haikal as the official spokesman for Egypt, there can be no doubt that his thinking reflected the position of the political and military leadership to a great extent. In this article Haikal said:

The first step is up to the Arab armies for several reasons:

1. Israel does not need to attack again, for it has already achieved the most secure possible lines under the circumstances.
2. Israel will think twice before it attacks again because any advance beyond the point it has reached will precipitate its forces into the dense seas of Arab population.
3. It is the Arab armies that must attack so as to dislodge the Israeli army from the positions in which it is now firmly established in the territory of the Arab countries and to prevent the establishment of a new status quo along the present cease-fire lines... <sup>73</sup>

Haikal then discussed the best method for the Arabs to achieve this:

1. The method of lightning war suits the enemy because of the nature of his territory, his limited population resources, his preparedness, his dense training, and the limited resources of his economy. *Logically, this means that this method does not suit us, on the principle that anything that is the distinguishing characteristic of one of the parties in a conflict cannot be the distinguishing characteristic of the other party.*
2. *To the same extent and by the same token, the method of a protracted war suits us because of the depth of our territory, our unlimited population, our lack of sufficient preparedness, and because of our unlimited economy. [My italics]*

Haikal explained how, in practice, this principle meant the following:

If the enemy succeeds in killing fifty thousand of us in battle, we shall nevertheless be able to continue fighting, because we are capable of replacing manpower.

But if we succeed in killing ten thousand of the enemy, he will be forced to ask for a cease-fire, because he is not capable of replacing lost manpower.

With regard to the factor of time, Haikal said:

It is the opinion of all experts, and they are supported by figures for active and combatant forces in Israel, *that if the Arabs succeed in making their war with Israel last from seven to eight weeks, Israel will lose the war, however much territory Israel occupies on the field of battle... [My italics]*

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<sup>73</sup> *Al-Ahram*, March 7, 1969.

Finally Haikal specified the Arab parties that must enter the battle, and stated that protracted war required a plurality of fronts so that the enemy could not concentrate on a single front. Thus "the establishment of the Eastern front has a definite role to play, and its real function is to provide a vital safeguard without which the confrontation with the enemy cannot achieve all that is required of it...."

Similarly, the method of protracted war would enable "one of the most important forces brought into existence by the Israeli challenge to perform its role" — meaning the Palestinian resistance.

Let us now recapitulate Haikal's views and consider their theoretical framework. What Haikal required is the following: that *all Arab forces*, including the Eastern front and the resistance, should make a *coordinated effort* in a *comprehensive battle that will last not less than six weeks* during which they will inflict losses of *ten thousand soldiers killed*.

We can see here how many faults there are in Haikal's assumptions and his logic. It is certainly not the case that whatever is a "distinguishing characteristic of one side cannot be a distinguishing characteristic of the other." This view disregards the possibility that any two parties can have similar advantages (or disadvantages) in any given situation. Thus the suitability of protracted war for the Arabs cannot be justified on the assumption that it is not suitable for Israel. Furthermore both Haikal's estimation of Israel's capacity for endurance (six to eight weeks) and the Arabs' capacity for causing Israeli casualties (ten thousand killed) appear to be grossly exaggerated. Haikal does not explain why or how these predictions are to be accepted nor does he back up his argument with any convincing historical example. What is clear, however, is that if Haikal envisaged a *limited* conflict he does not specify how 10,000 Israelis were to be killed, and if he envisaged a *major confrontation* he does not explain the relation between it and a war of attrition.

There are other major defects in Haikal's visualization of the war. His plan does not take into account the problems of escalation and the ability to contain the enemy's anticipated response. Haikal never discusses what Israel will do to confront the long war that he advocates, nor does he deal with the problem of the intensity of the conflict and the possibility of control to prevent it from turning into counter-attrition.

What Haikal said must not be given too much emphasis, but the fact remains that he is the one semi-official Egyptian source available who sheds some light on Egyptian thinking at the time, and there can be no doubt that his special position close to the political-military leadership of Egypt gives his words greater value than those of an ordinary journalist.

There are indications, then, that the concepts involved in a war of attrition had not been clearly formulated at the beginning of 1969 when Egypt

started its military operations against Israel. One serious drawback was Egypt's failure to dictate the limits within which the war was to be fought. Although it was up to Egypt to *impose* on Israel the character of the conflict and the method of confrontation, Israel's ability to *escalate* prevented this and turned the War of Attrition into a war of counter-attrition. The initiating party (Egypt) failed to impose the necessary restrictions, both political and military, on the responding party, thus forcing Egypt to react to Israeli counter-action and gradually lose the initiative.

Egypt was only rescued from the war of counter-attrition by the intervention of the USSR, which resulted in Egypt's recovering the initiative and the possibility of containing the battle within specific limits. Thus Israel's position in the summer of 1970 was extremely grave, since it had lost its ability to escalate at will, foregoing the initiative and being forced to react to the renewed Egyptian offensive.

Here the important point to be observed is that Egypt was only able to wage a successful war of attrition under two sets of circumstances. The first was when Israel refrained from deploying its aircraft in the battle and, to a certain extent, accepted the rules of the Egyptian "game." But when it decided to escalate and to deploy its aircraft and then resort to bombing in depth, Egypt could only contain this escalation by counter-escalation of a qualitatively similar nature — which was to bring the USSR into the conflict. The situation reached its climax in the summer of 1970, when the only alternatives left to the two parties were either to stop fighting or to abandon the logic of a war of attrition and counter-attrition altogether and to seek a quick decision.

It is thus clear that in the War of Attrition, Egypt did not succeed in achieving its fundamental objectives, which were to force Israel to withdraw. But it did succeed in arriving at a situation where its military capacity was maximized, *and it succeeded in attaining a specific level of military strength that allowed it to accept the American political initiative.* This was what President Nasser referred to when he declared that Egypt accepted the cease-fire from a position of strength, not from a position of weakness.

In 1971, there was a serious discussion on this subject in Israel. General Matetiyahu Peled (who was on the Israeli Staff in the June War) stated publicly in the Hebrew press that Defence Minister Dayan's policy had led to an Israeli defeat in the War of Attrition. Zeev Shiff, the military correspondent of *Haaretz* reproduced Peled's allegations as follows:<sup>74</sup>

From the military point of view, the Israeli army failed in the War of Attrition, and this was the first battle in which it was defeated on the field of battle since the establishment of the State... to the extent that we [in Israel] grasped at the first straw thrown to us, the cease-fire. Why?

<sup>74</sup> *Haaretz*, September 17, 1971.

Peled gave the following reasons:

1. Because we did not succeed in causing the collapse of the Egyptian regime by bombing in depth.
2. Because we relinquished our control of Egyptian skies.
3. Because we failed to restrict Russian movement west of the Canal, and stopped the war after Russian involvement.
4. Because of our failure from the start to insist upon stringent application of the cease-fire agreement.

In reply to Peled, Shiff maintained that Egypt failed to achieve its objective, which was to dislodge the Israeli army from the Canal, in spite of the heavy Israeli losses on the line of confrontation with Egypt. He cited General Eleazar to the effect that Israel accepted the cease-fire not because of these losses but "for other reasons" which Shiff does not specify.

Discussing the attacks in depth he said:

It is true that we bombed without precisely defining the object of this action, and that consequently this was done without the proper framework with regard to the length and rate of the bombing, and we were wrong in that we did not accompany the bombing with the necessary psychological concomitant. But this bombing convinced Abdul Nasser that he was not capable of waging an offensive war against Israel alone, and it was the deep-penetration attack that smashed the Egyptian War of Attrition and constituted the first step towards the cease-fire...

Shiff added that by the same token, if Israel lost the War of Attrition because the Russians entered the area, then Israel must also have lost the June War of 1967 when the Russians took the first steps towards intervening in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Discussing Israeli objectives and achievements, he said:

The War of Attrition was a conflict to obtain control not of Egyptian air-space, but of the Canal line, and there the Israeli army was victorious, not the Egyptians. If it is true that the Russians excluded us from Egyptian air-space it is also true that at the same time they proved to the Egyptians that they were not capable of achieving even limited objectives in a war by themselves against Israel. We made a mistake in the negotiations on the conditions for the supervision of the cease-fire, and the Russians and the Egyptians exploited our mistake... but this was a mistake in only one part of a comprehensive battle in which Israel was victorious. On the eve of the cease-fire Israel lost several planes while attacking the missile batteries; perhaps we were wrong in the way we attacked... but we cannot conclude that we were frightened and clutched at the cease-fire as a drowning man clutches at a straw...

In conclusion Shiff said that the Israeli government accepted the cease-fire because this was its basic objective, and that acceptance of the American

initiative was the result of many factors, and not of Israel's fear of its enemies. "The extent of our achievement in the field of security is shown by the fact that for the second year running our press has not carried black borders reporting the deaths of our men on the Canal."

Shiff's article has been quoted at length because of its die-hard attempt to defend the official Israeli point of view. Shiff said that *Israel's basic objective in the War of Attrition was a cease-fire on the front*, and maintained that the conflict was not one for control of Egyptian air-space, but a struggle for the Canal line. He admitted that Israel was wrong to strike at Egypt in depth without a specific objective, and that Israel was wrong not to accompany the attack in depth with the necessary psychological war. He also admitted that Israel was wrong in attacking the Egyptian missiles and wrong not to make sure of the terms of the cease-fire. Then after all this, he said that the principal gain lay in the fact that no "black borders" and reports of men being killed appeared in the press.

In fact Shiff failed to answer the points raised by Peled. He gave no direct answer to his point about Soviet intervention for even if it is true that Soviet "involvement" in the area began after 1967, there was a qualitative change in the nature of this involvement in 1970. Moreover, Soviet politico-military action in 1970 deprived Israel of one basic alternative that had previously been open to it, this being the real importance of Soviet military action in the War of Attrition. Shiff was evading the issue when he tried to affirm that the struggle was not a "struggle for control of Egyptian air-space" but a "struggle for the Canal," for it is obvious that the two were closely connected, as the Israelis themselves admitted at the time. In fact the "struggle for the Canal" clearly ended, for Israel at least, when Israeli planes started striking at Egypt in depth and when Israeli planes had "stripped" the Canal front of its defences. Shiff also evaded the issue when he stated that Israel did not set itself a clear objective in its raids in depth, because both the Israeli leadership and Western correspondents made it clear at the time that Israel's objective was to undermine the Nasser regime by bringing home the war to the Egyptian people. Peled himself affirmed this in the list of his charges against Dayan. Finally, Shiff did not explain the reasons that led to Israel accepting the cease-fire, maintaining that it was accepted for "other reasons" besides Israel's fear of its enemies and the losses it sustained on the Canal, whilst at the same time saying at the end of his article that the gain achieved by Israel in establishing the cease-fire lay in the fact that no "black borders" were appearing in the press, a statement which appears to contradict this argument. In fact what Shiff called "mistake," Peled calls "failure," but "mistake" is always a somewhat milder word than "failure."

## 5. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT OF THE WAR

The war had a very different impact on each of the combatants. The best criterion for measuring the extent of "attrition" of Israel's morale is to examine carefully what was written in the Hebrew press. Perusal of Israeli newspapers shows that signs of psychological wear were appearing comparatively early in the war. Around May 1969 the Hebrew press began to talk about what it described as the problem of "When will it end?" This was the headline of an article published by the daily *Davar* at that time, in which the writer attacked the inflexibility of Israeli terms of insisting upon the principle of a formal signed peace treaty, saying that there was an opportunity for a substitute that would be less decisive but more fruitful under the then prevailing circumstances.

It is preposterous to sacrifice national morale on the altar of political tactics... what price are we going to pay for holding on to this principle until it is realized at some time in the distant future?... The Minister of Defence [Dayan] estimated that if this situation continues for long on the Suez Canal, Israel will be in no position to continue limiting herself to a defensive war, but will wage an offensive war... Is it not better that Israel should announce that it is prepared to negotiate with the Palestinians themselves directly...?<sup>75</sup>

Although this view was "doveish" as compared with other Israeli views, yet it is clear that such opinions were widespread and on June 19, 1969, when Israeli losses on the Canal Front started increasing appreciably, General Uzi Narkis, the Commander of the Control Area in 1967, stated in an article in which he referred to increasing alarm in Israel and the lowering of morale as a result of the escalation of the fighting:

...The swing of the pendulum of morale is certainly the greatest disaster that has befallen us since the Six Day War, and if we were to draw a graph of its fluctuations we should find high peaks interspersed with the deepest troughs. But this is not the only phenomenon.... More serious are the views and whispers about whether we have sufficient strength to inflict another defeat on the enemy if there is another confrontation.... Things have reached a state where certain groups of our people have come to require constant injections of moral encouragement to prevent a sudden decline in their faith in our military strength.

It seems that we need to be assured every week that the difference between our strength and that of the enemy is as it always was and has not changed...."<sup>76</sup>

In September 1969, when Israeli casualties again started rising, after having been comparatively low in August, Uri Avneri wrote an article entitled

<sup>75</sup> *Davar*, May 16, 1969.

<sup>76</sup> *Maariv*, June 19, 1969.



“When will it end?” in his periodical *Haolam Hazeh*:

The average Israeli citizen no longer believes in any solution — neither through peaceful nor warlike methods.... Two and a half years after the great victory [1967] peace is further away than ever. The security budget is now two and a half times greater than it was a year before the war, and the period of service required of reserves has greatly increased. Our casualty rate has increased so much that there is no comparison between it and the losses in civilians and soldiers sustained in the period before the war.

Avneri attacked the Israeli government's policy which he said was based on the logic of “no peace” in order to avoid the internal problems that peace may bring about, and once again asked: “Where will it end?”

This question is justified... No people can accept living in a state of continuous and everlasting war. Such a state of war destroyed the kingdom the Crusaders from within when they were fighting with sword and buckle. He who believes that there is no way to peace has the right not to seek for the way to peace, and to remain in a situation without peace for ever...<sup>77</sup>

We have seen that some commentators believed Israeli policy in the years after the June War to be erroneous and that the Rogers Plan offered “salvation” for Israel, and in fact when the cease-fire was accepted many people apparently despaired of carrying on the war:

...On the eve of the cease-fire the feeling prevailed that ‘there is no way out,’ and a large part of the Israeli public was saying ‘we shall be forced to yield, and it is better to do that so that we may pay a small price for concessions’ — meaning by a ‘small price,’ avoiding further casualties...<sup>78</sup>

In August *Davar* published an article under the headline “We Have Certainly Suffered from the War of Attrition” which said:

It is wrong to put our head in the sand and not admit how cruelly we have suffered, although it has not shown in our life... In addition to the 700 men who fell in the Six Day War, our losses total hundreds of soldiers and civilians in the positional warfare in the past three years. Moreover, the rate of losses is very high as compared, for example, to American losses in the Second World War, the Korean War and even in Vietnam. Our feeling for the victims is only a Jewish feeling that every life in Israel is dear to us. Since the massacres in the time of Hitler we have felt the loss of a Jewish life much more strongly than we did in the past, quite regardless of our deficiency in human resources.... But we are deceiving ourselves if we claim that the War of Attrition imposed on us by the enemy has not had an effect on us...<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Haolam Hazeh*, September 10, 1969.

<sup>78</sup> *Maariv*, November 3, 1970

<sup>79</sup> *Davar*, August 17, 1970.

These brief extracts testify to the considerable psychological effect of the War of Attrition on the Israeli public and it is clear that this effect reached its climax after the Soviets intervened and Israel began its strategic retreat at both military and political levels. While the effect should not be exaggerated, the psychological state reflected by these articles shows clearly that the War of Attrition had succeeded to no little extent in undermining Israeli self-assurance and that this had begun to make itself felt in extensive groups of the Israeli public. There were two reasons for this. The first was that the size of the military victory in 1967 had made many Israelis think that the Arabs would resign themselves to the *fait accompli* and finally accept the Zionist presence in Palestine. The Israelis had been led to believe that they might be able to impress Israeli conditions on the Arabs in some final negotiated solution. Thus when two years had passed after the war without the Arabs giving any sign of accepting the new realities created by Israel, the Israeli people began to ask themselves "When will it end?" It was clear to many people in Israel that its situation after 1967 was not at all better than it had been before 1967, despite the constant affirmations made by the Israeli government to the contrary.

Again, the War of Attrition was essentially a war of nerves; it was not a total confrontation in which all resources were mobilized, creating a feeling of enthusiasm and strong national commitment. Israel had become accustomed to swift and rapid results in its wars with the Arabs, and when confronted with a war that went on day after day, with every news bulletin reporting skirmishes and fighting without achieving any tangible results, the cumulative effect must have been great.

The effect of the war on Egypt was altogether another matter. There was (and still is) a fundamental difference between Arab societies and Israeli society. This difference is only one aspect of the general difference between developed and underdeveloped societies (both these terms naturally being relative), and one cannot measure Arab psychological attrition by the same yardstick that Israeli psychological attrition could be gauged.

One illustration of the difficulties involved in trying to measure the effect of the war on the Arab side is that newspapers and other information media in virtually all the Arab countries present either official or semi-official points of view. In this way such phenomena as "Arab Public Opinion" cannot be properly identified; neither is it possible to define "public pressure" as such, whereas both these factors can be identified with regard to Israel. (This observation is not a value-judgement on the respective merits of the societies in question but merely a statement about their nature.)

This does not mean that Arab political leadership was isolated from public opinion, nor does it mean that the latter had no way of expressing its demands. For example, President Nasser was obliged to respond to public demands

for retaliation after the destruction of the Egyptian cities along the Suez Canal by claiming that Egypt would attack civilian targets in Israel.<sup>80</sup> (In fact, in this case the threat was not carried out, and it is highly improbable that it was intended to be carried out, given the disparity between Egyptian and Israeli coercive power.)

President Nasser also emphasized the necessity for endurance and the inevitability of victory:

We have declared the War of Attrition and said, Let us start a new stage...  
We are confident that we shall hold out and persevere in this war...  
We shall inflict many losses on Israel and after that we shall go on from the War of Attrition to the War of Liberation.<sup>81</sup>

It is very doubtful whether Nasser really anticipated "liberation" in May 1970 when this speech was made. However, this was in many ways the most crucial phase in the war and it was necessary to bolster up morale at a point when Egypt was on the verge of realizing one of its primary objectives, i.e., building up its military strength as a political bargaining point.

Because the psychological effect of the war in Egypt (and the other Arab parties) cannot be readily estimated through the press and other information media, some general discussion about the difference between developed and developing societies is necessary.

It is possible to discern two major elements that delimit the ability of a society to withstand the pressures of war. The first may be termed the technological (socio-economic) element and the second the demographic element. A society that has attained a high technological level generates high-level military-industrial capacity but also high-level susceptibilities. An advanced economy is based on a highly complex organizational structure relating to both economic needs and the distribution of these needs. Thus a large-scale electrical deficiency or black-out, for instance, would be a major disrupting influence in an advanced society (viz. the New York black-out in 1969) but not in a developing one (black-outs in Beirut are common occurrences). Furthermore certain materials such as ball-bearings (in the case of Germany in the Second World War) are vital for the maintenance of an advanced economy but not so in a developing one. Thus, whereas large-scale bombing of advanced economies can have great impact, similar bombing of "primitive" economies rapidly reaches a point of diminishing returns. This has been demonstrated quite amply in the American air offensive over North Vietnam.

Of course, the socio-economic element is necessary but not sufficient to demonstrate the relative vulnerability of certain societies. Other factors such

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<sup>80</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, March 28, 1969.

<sup>81</sup> *Al-Ahram*, May 29, 1970.

as the nature of the political system and the news dissemination media are also important.

The demographic element compounds the effect of the technological element. In other words it may be assumed that the smaller a country is, the less it is able to dispense with its manpower resources and vice-versa. However, what determines morale is the interaction between this element and the technological element mentioned above.

Hence, it may be maintained that a power that is both small (i.e., relatively unable to absorb losses in manpower) *and* technologically advanced (i.e., has high-level economic needs with the resultant vulnerability) is at a disadvantage when facing a power that is both large and relatively underdeveloped *ceteris paribus* (political will, etc.). This generalization, if valid, would explain why the effect of the War of Attrition on Israeli morale (especially in a society accustomed to wars of quick-decision) was probably far greater than its effect on Arab morale as a whole and Egyptian morale in particular.

Ultimately, any assessment of the War of Attrition will have to be based on the political attitudes and aspirations of each side. Insofar as the Egyptians failed to prevent the hardening of the cease-fire lines into what looked increasingly like a new *status quo*, the War of Attrition which they initiated can hardly be said to have proved a success. But their defensive posture at the end of 1970 was incomparably stronger than at any time since the 1967 war, albeit with considerable Soviet political and military assistance. On the other hand the Israelis also failed to bring the Arabs to terms through military means and by attempting to do so had dramatically increased the extent of the Soviet presence in the conflict area.