

The Six Day War: The Intelligence Assessments on the Road to War

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“We must remember, the changes in our region can be very rapid and if you do not quickly ride on the wave of history, you can miss it.”

Head of the Military Intelligence Directorate,
General Aharon Yariv, 1967¹

Prior to the Six Day War, the intelligence assessments shifted drastically. The basic approach initially claimed that Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser would not dare to act against Israel while his army was involved in the fighting in Yemen. The assessment then claimed that the Egyptian army was deployed in Sinai for defense and deterrence. The final assessment was that Nasser was prepared for a confrontation with Israel.

This essay describes the strategic assessments of the Military Intelligence Directorate before the outbreak of the war, examines their changes, and presents possible lessons for today's intelligence establishment, such as how to deal with the challenge of preventing escalation to war.

1 General Aharon (“Aharele”) Yariv served as head of the Intelligence Directorate in the General Staff Headquarters from January 1964 to October 1972.

Assessment of the Intelligence Directorate until mid-May 1967: “War is not Expected”

In the mid-1960s, the Intelligence Directorate believed that war between Israel and the Arabs would not take place before 1970.² The assessment then was that the Palestinians and the Syrians were trying to draw Egypt into war by means of carrying out terrorist acts against Israel, but that Egypt had no interest in being pulled into such a war, particularly when it was already involved in a war in Yemen. The Military Intelligence Directorate believed that an Israeli strike against Syria would likely force Egypt to take steps to preserve its reputation but that it was not prepared for a confrontation with Israel and would seek to restrain Syria.³ In this context, it was believed that the Egyptian army was not competent enough⁴ and would refrain from attacking without a united Arab front.⁵

In February 1966, Syria underwent a military coup and its regime was seized by Salah Jadid, who until then had ruled behind the scenes. Nureddin al-Atasi was appointed president and Hafez al-Assad (father of Bashar al-Assad) as defense minister. The new regime was hostile toward Israel and maintained a violent campaign against it by supporting Palestinian terror activity, attempting to divert the sources of the Jordan River, and vying for control over the demilitarized areas along the border between Syria and Israel. Israel reacted with force; for example, in July 1966, the IDF attacked engineering equipment and destroyed the canal that Syria had constructed in order to divert the sources of the Jordan River. Following this incident, at a discussion held at General Headquarters on August 8, 1966, the head of the Intelligence Directorate assessed that a broad confrontation with Syria to the

2 Aharon Yariv in the investigation of the war; interview given to the officers of the IDF History Department, February 15, 1970, IDF Archive, File 1135-1784-192 (herein: “Investigation of the War”) [Hebrew].

3 Yariv at the meeting of the General Staff, May 24, 1965 in Ami Gluska, *Eshkol, Give the Order* (Tel Aviv: Department of Defense Publications, 2004), p. 108 [Hebrew].

4 According to a survey of the Research Department of the Intelligence Directorate published about a year before the war, as quoted in the book by Shlomo Gazit, who served during that period as head of the Research Department. See Shlomo Gazit, *At Decisive Junctures* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2016), p. 142 [Hebrew].

5 General Staff Situation Assessment, October 22, 1964: Amos Gilboa, *Mr. Intelligence* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2015), p. 151 [Hebrew].

point of undermining the regime in Damascus—without getting involved in a war with Egypt—was an option for the IDF.⁶ On November 4, 1966, Egypt and Syria signed a defense pact. The Intelligence Directorate did not foresee the Jadid coup nor the Egyptian-Syrian defense pact, and even after these events, it did not change its assessment regarding the feasibility of a regional war.⁷

At the beginning of 1967, the tension mounted between Israel and Syria. In February 1967, in a discussion at the General Headquarters, the head of the Intelligence Directorate stated that “only a major military strike will teach the Syrians a lesson and will stop the grassroots war [Palestinian terrorist activity encouraged by Syria].”⁸ On April 7, 1967, the IDF and the Syrian army engaged in battles following an attack on Israeli farmers who had been working the land near the demilitarized areas. During the battles, six Syrian fighter planes were shot down, two of them over Damascus. The incident, which occurred on the celebrations of the ruling Ba’ath party, was a serious blow to the prestige of the Syrian regime. According to Yitzhak Rabin, then chief of the General Staff, the Israeli action was intended to harm the Syrian regime and perhaps even to topple it and to send a strong message to the Arab countries to put an end to any thoughts of militarily challenging Israel.⁹

Following the Israeli action, Syria demanded that the Egyptian president fulfill the defense pact between the two countries. The Syrian foreign minister warned against “Israeli aggression, which is seeking to topple the revolutionary regime in Syria,” and the Syrian representative at the United Nations declared that Israel was preparing a large-scale attack on his country.¹⁰ On May 11, 1967, the head of the Intelligence Directorate said in a press briefing that if the terror attacks from Syria continued, Israel would take limited military action with the objective of toppling the Syrian regime or inducing Egypt

6 Yariv in a General Staff meeting, August 8, 1966 in Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, pp. 145–146.

7 Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, p. 156.

8 Yariv at a General Staff meeting, February 17, 1967, in Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, p. 185.

9 David Barkai, “Who is Responsible for the Outbreak of the 1967 War? Jordan and the Six Day War,” *Studies in the Establishment of Israel* 9 (1999): 246–279 [Hebrew].

10 Ibid.

to persuade Syria to cease its support of the terror activity.¹¹ It should be mentioned that during this period, the IDF spokesperson was part of the military intelligence.

At the General Staff meetings prior to May 15, 1967, the question whether Nasser would continue to sit idly by if fighting developed between Israel and Syria was asked many times. According to the commander of the Southern Command at the time, Yeshayahu (Shaike) Gavish, the head of the Intelligence Directorate believed that the mutual defense pact between Egypt and Syria signed in November 1966 was “just a piece of paper which implies only moral support from Egypt.” According to Gavish, Aharon Yariv, the head of the Intelligence Directorate also believed that Egypt, which was up to its neck with the fighting in Yemen, would not rush to evacuate its forces from there and given this situation would not want to get involved in another war. When Gavish asked, “How are you certain that war will not break out before 1970?” Yariv responded that “clearly there is a possibility of deterioration before then.”¹²

The Soviet intervention in the crisis by means of deception was a major step toward war. In the second week of May 1967, the Russians sent a biased and false report to Syria—and apparently also to Egypt—about the concentration of significant IDF forces near the Israeli-Syrian border.¹³ During the examination of the lessons of the intelligence, after the war, the head of the Intelligence Directorate explained that the Russians had believed that the Syrians would not cease their support of terror activities, and in order to save the regime in Damascus, which was their ally, they turned to Egypt to exert pressure on Israel by reporting that Israeli forces had concentrated at the border. Based on his assessment, the Russians had lost control of the matter.¹⁴ According to Yariv, the statements of Chief of Staff Rabin to the media about possible IDF actions against Syria, should the terror attacks

11 Yariv at a briefing of military correspondents, May 11, 1967 in Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, p. 213.

12 Shaike Gavish, *Red Sheet* (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2016), pp. 102–103 [Hebrew].

13 Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, p. 204.

14 *Investigation of the War*; see also Eyal Zisser, “Between Israel and Syria—The Six Day War and its Aftermath,” *Studies in the Establishment of Israel* 8 (1998): 205–252 [Hebrew].

against Israel continue, were perceived in Syria and Egypt as a threat to the regime in Damascus.¹⁵

Yariv claimed that the “true situation” was that the IDF did not concentrate its forces on the northern border and did not have any intention of acting against Syria.¹⁶ An incorrect intelligence picture had taken shape, which relied mainly on Soviet deception, Israeli declarations that sought to deter Syria from carrying out terrorist acts against Israel, and the sharing of information and messages between Syria and Egypt.

In contrast to the assessments of the Intelligence Directorate, Egyptian forces had begun to move into Sinai on May 14, 1967 and received wide media coverage. Yariv stated after the war that even if the Egyptian move had not received media coverage, the Intelligence Directorate would have identified the entry of Egyptian forces into Sinai by the following day, because of two confidential reports, one that arrived in the morning and the other, which clarified the situation, arriving in the afternoon.¹⁷

On May 16, the Egyptian media reported that the Egyptian army had declared an emergency due to the tension between Israel and Syria. *Al-Ahram* newspaper, the regime’s mouthpiece, even reported that “Egypt will go to war with Israel if Syria is the target of aggression that threatens its territory or its security.”¹⁸

The Intelligence Directorate Warns Against Egyptian Escalation

At first, the Intelligence Directorate believed that the entry of Egyptian forces into Sinai was for defense and deterrence,¹⁹ but on May 19, after the UN forces evacuated from Sinai due to Egyptian pressure, the Intelligence Directorate changed its assessment. In a General Staff meeting on that day, Yariv said that “it is not clear to us today whether there was an Egyptian

15 *Investigation of the War*.

16 Aharon Yariv, “Intelligence in the Six Day War,” *Prudent Assessment* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense–Publications, 1998), p. 161 [Hebrew]. This essay is based on a lecture he gave at a gathering of lieutenant colonels on July 12, 1967.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

18 Major Yona, “The Background to the Six Day War from the Arab Perspective,” *Maarachot* 191–192 (June 1968): 37 [Hebrew]. Major Yona Bendeman served at that time as a section head in the Egypt Branch of the Research Department of the Intelligence Directorate.

19 Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, p. 220.

intention from the start to escalate or that they intended to achieve a more limited goal of achieving prestige . . . In any case, they are ready for a military escalation, as a result of an intended or unintended provocation.” Chief of General Staff Rabin said that “Aharele [General Aharon Yariv] has analyzed the possibilities. The reality will prove which is correct. I will now discuss the possibilities not according to their likelihood but according to their danger.” Rabin added that “we need to make all the preparations for war. We are finished with the issue of intentions, rather we are now working on possibilities.”²⁰

On May 23, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli vessels, a move that the Intelligence Directorate had already considered several days earlier on May 19 and even before. Nonetheless, it appears that the timing of the event was unexpected.²¹ The army and the Israeli public perceived this measure as an Egyptian declaration of war.²² The Israeli leadership, however, was unable to quickly respond. According to Gavish, after the closing of the straits, “Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin had a nervous breakdown and disappeared for two days,”²³ while Prime Minister and Defense Minister Levi Eshkol hesitated in responding, out of fear that Israel would be perceived as the aggressor and would damage its international relations all while maintaining hope that the United States would resolve the crisis.

In the meantime, the Egyptian forces continued to flow into Sinai, but their intentions were still unknown. Gavish claimed that the Egyptian deployment at the end of May 1967 pointed to the following possibilities: They could carry out an all-out attack in the direction of Ashkelon and Beersheba and south of Mitzpe Ramon in order to cut off the Negev; they could wait for an Israel to attack in order to halt it at the defense lines in Sinai; or they could remain in Sinai in order to exhaust the State of Israel without a war.²⁴

On May 28, Yariv stated at a General Staff meeting that

20 Yariv, *A Prudent Assessment*, p. 40.

21 According to Yariv, “On the 22, prior to the closing of the straits, we reduced the likelihood of this possibility somewhat, following information that we had received.” See *Ibid.*, p. 163.

22 Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, p. 268.

23 Gavish, *Red Sheet*, pp. 115, 124.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 117–119.

Nasser has changed his mind in principle . . . For two weeks, Intelligence has tried to clarify Nasser's intentions. He is changing his intentions like suits . . . We are also checking the activity of the superpowers which has implications for Egyptian actions . . . As head of the Intelligence Directorate, I have failed; I did not expect the possibility that this would happen . . . We have discovered that this is not the Nasser we knew in the past. In the past he did not want to get entangled. Today he is willing to do so and even willing to initiate the entanglement . . . Given the fact that Nasser is willing to attack, we must get ready.²⁵

The situation deteriorated even further by May 30. King Hussein of Jordan signed a defense pact with Nasser in Cairo. The Intelligence Directorate estimated that Hussein signed the pact based on his assessment of Israel's weakness. Yariv viewed King Hussein's action as dangerous and unprecedented, giving impetus to the deteriorating situation. According to Yariv, "I had a disagreement with the Foreign Ministry and the director of the Prime Minister's Office. I told them, you do not understand the significance of the alliance between Egypt and Jordan. This is dangerous for us. They said that this has already happened in the past . . . I said not in this configuration. Hussein did this because he understood that things are deteriorating."²⁶

An intelligence review dated May 31 and carried out by the Research Unit within the Intelligence Directorate discussed the implications if the decision to attack was to be delayed by two to three weeks and determined that Israel would "not benefit from a standstill in the situation."²⁷ At the military level, it was expected that the existing alignment would coalesce and be reinforced and consolidated, inter alia, by additional forces, such as those from Yemen, and toward the end of the period, equipment purchased from the Soviet Union would arrive (albeit in an improvised manner). In addition, the passage of time would enable the Egyptian air force to prepare and increase its offensive capability and its ability to absorb an attack.

25 General Staff discussion, May 28, 1967, IDF Archive, file 1974-192-1176 [Hebrew].

26 Ibid.

27 Survey of the Research Department of the Intelligence Directorate, "The Significance of a Standstill in the Situation for 2-3 Weeks," May 31, 1967, IDF Archive, file 1974-192-1176 [Hebrew].

According to the assessment, every day that passed reduced Israel's chances of achieving air superiority in the war.

On the political level, the Intelligence Directorate believed that continuing the crisis would damage Israel's prestige and the creditability of its deterrence. It predicted that the United States would be completely alone in the international arena and that its willingness to act on behalf of Israel would diminish. Furthermore, the Intelligence Directorate perceived the nationalist enthusiasm that had swept the region as constituting a danger to King Hussein's regime. In addition, the Research Unit estimated that Syria had an interest in encouraging terror activity that would keep Egypt entangled. It was likely that the Egyptians would continue to restrain terror activities from their territory for the short term; in the long term, however, it was impossible to know how they would operate. In summary, the documents stated that "this is the big moment for Egypt—a wave of uninterrupted achievements by Egypt is liable to give its leaders the feeling that they can continue to exploit the success in order to carry out further actions."²⁸ Therefore, it was concluded that waiting was not in Israel's interest. The survey of the Research Department should be seen not only as an intelligence assessment but also as reflecting a strategic position, according to which Israel needed to carry out a preemptive attack. This position was also consistent with that of most of the IDF generals.

On June 1, a national unity government was established, and Moshe Dayan was appointed as minister of defense. The following day, the head of the Intelligence Directorate presented the survey of the Research Department ("The Significance of a Standstill in the Situation for 2–3 Weeks") at a meeting of the Ministerial Committee for Defense Matters, attended by the General Staff. The head of the Intelligence Directorate rejected the expectations of the political leadership that the United States would work to remove the closure of the Straits of Tiran. In conclusion, Yariv said that Israel should not perceive the United States "as a barrier to determined and rapid action by the IDF."²⁹

At the government meeting on June 4, the head of the Intelligence Directorate reported that Egypt believed that a military confrontation with Israel was inevitable, commando forces had arrived in Jordan, and expeditionary

28 Ibid.

29 Gazit, *At Decisive Junctures*, p. 144.

forces had moved from Iraq to Jordan. Defense Minister Dayan added that Egypt sought to involve Jordan in the military operation and that obvious preparations were being made for an immediate offensive attack on Israel. In this context, the government decided by a majority (according to the proposal tabled by Dayan) “to engage in military action that will liberate Israel from the stranglehold tightening around it and prevent the imminent attack.” The government empowered the prime minister and the defense minister to allow the chief of staff to begin the operation. It began on the morning of June 5, 1967.³⁰

Did the Assessments of the Intelligence Directorate Pass the Test?

A few days after the end of the war, Defense Minister Dayan appeared before the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Knesset and spoke about the assessments given prior to the war. According to the defense minister:

First, our assessment of the response to our action against Syria, against Fatah. Our assessment in this matter was incorrect. We did not correctly assess the extent to which Egypt would view itself as committed or obligated to react and to participate in the fighting. We all thought that Egypt was busy in Yemen and was unable to disentangle itself. We got stuck on the idea that Nasser had abandoned the Syrians by saying that he would not go to war with Israel over this or that explosion. Perhaps he himself did not realize it. However, the ball kept rolling . . . I do not know if the Egyptians really believed that we were about to attack Syria. But even if they had other considerations, the fact is that the issue of Syria was the main factor in Egypt’s active response. And what is important to us is that we did not predict indeed what would happen. A second assumption that was wrong was that the entry of Egyptian forces into Sinai was just for show . . . A third assumption that was incorrect was that it would be difficult for the Egyptians to remove the UN forces from Sharm el Sheikh . . . It became clear that this mechanism was not hard to get rid of.

30 Ibid., pp. 172–173.

In Dayan's opinion, these mistaken assumptions led Israel to adopt an erroneous policy in its responses to Egypt's actions. For example, he claimed that Israel had erred in its decision to not respond to the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships, which was essentially the first shot of the war.³¹

Shlomo Gazit, the head of the Research Unit of the Intelligence Directorate at that time, later wrote in his autobiography that "the Research Department did not foresee the war. Although it identified the process of escalation, the shift to war came as a surprise."³² According to Gazit, the Arab countries, which did not want war, were no less surprised.³³ Similarly, in a lecture given on July 12, 1967 at a gathering of intelligence officers, Yariv stated that, "As head of the Intelligence branch I could not know, on Thursday or Friday (May 11–12, 1967) that Egypt was going to act—that Egyptian forces were going to enter Sinai, since I knew that we were not going to act [against Syria]. When I saw the information that Syria had reported to Egypt that it had information that the Jews had concentrated forces and they were about to act, we did not get excited, and rightly so, since such things had happened in the past."³⁴ Yariv later made similar statements, saying "We related to this move within the context of the information that we were going to attack Syria, when we knew that we were not going to do so . . . Therefore, we were not concerned about this move."³⁵ According to these statements, the Intelligence Directorate had projected its assessment of the situation (which included the real data on Israel's forces) onto the intelligence picture that was forming in Egypt and Syria, and that was a mistake.

After the war, Yariv spoke about Egypt's intentions after it had deployed its forces in Sinai, admitting that "until today it is still not clear to us whether Egypt intended from the beginning to escalate toward a confrontation" or whether Egypt had intended to only show a demonstration of force in order to offer help to Syria and to achieve prestige. However, given the way the

31 Testimony of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, transcript of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, June 13, 1967, G.M. A-8161/7, in Zaki Shalom, "War and Diplomacy," *Studies in the Establishment of Israel* 16 (2006): 195–242 [Hebrew].

32 Gazit, *At Decisive Junctures*, p. 144.

33 Ibid., p. 157.

34 Yariv, *Prudent Assessment*, pp. 161–162.

35 Rafael Cohen-Almagor, "The Six Days War Interviews with Prof. Shimon Shamir and General (res.) Aharon Yariv," *Social Issues in Israel* 15 (Winter 2013): 181 [Hebrew].

war developed, the Egyptians seemed prepared for military escalation, whether the result of an initiated or inevitable provocation.³⁶ That is, even after the fact, determining Egypt's intentions is very difficult; nonetheless, the presentation of the threat by the Intelligence Directorate was relevant to the decision making, since each of these two possibilities constituted a serious threat to Israel. This threat led Chief of Staff Rabin to prepare the army for war and led the government to agree to initiate a preemptive strike. The assessment of the Intelligence Directorate that the United States would acquiesce to the Israeli attack was also correct.

Implications and Lessons

The Egyptian decision to stand by Syria and to send its forces into Sinai on the evening of May 14, 1967, prior to the outbreak of the Six Day War, was the first surprise for the Intelligence Directorate. The second surprise was Nasser's willingness to escalate after his army had entered Sinai. The Intelligence Directorate changed its assessment following the evacuation of the UN forces from Sinai. The basis for these surprises apparently was the Intelligence Directorate's difficulty in estimating the extent to which Nasser was prepared to go to war so that he could consolidate his status as leader of the Arab world and Egypt's position as leading the struggle against Israel. Nonetheless, in the circumstances of May to June 1967, Israel did not find itself the victim of a surprise attack and had enough time to prepare for an all-encompassing war, which it won.

From a historical perspective, the surprise that occurred before the Six Day War was one more in a series of intelligence failures regarding Egypt's intentions and actions. Thus, during the 1950s, the Intelligence Directorate failed to predict both the Czech-Egyptian weapons deal and Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal,³⁷ which led to Operation Kadesh in 1956. In 1960, the entry of the Egyptian army into Sinai (the Rotem affair) surprised the Intelligence Directorate.³⁸ The gravest event of all took place six years after the Six Day War, when the Intelligence Directorate failed to warn of a surprise Syrian-Egyptian attack in the Yom Kippur War, for which Israel

36 Yariv, *Prudent Assessment*, p. 163.

37 Shaul Avigor, "Memorandum of the Intelligence Community in Israel," IDF Archive 144/1/2002, appearing as Appendix C in Yigal Shefi, *A Test of Deterrence* (Tel Aviv: Department of Defense Publications, 2008) [Hebrew].

38 Ibid.

paid a heavy price. The underlying factor of all these events was that the Intelligence Directorate had underestimated the Egyptian regime's willingness to take military risks for achieving its goals.

The Six Day War was a result of escalation, and most of the parties involved did not want to engage in war. Beyond the root cause of the Arab world's rejection of the existence of Israel and the hostilities against it, one of the main reasons for the outbreak of the war was the gap in information, the failures in intelligence assessments, and miscalculations³⁹ among the players involved, including Israel. Contributing to this was the Soviet deception that had lost all control. If the players had possessed accurate intelligence, it is doubtful that the war would have broken out. The Intelligence Directorate, however, did not consider this possibility, since it believed that Israel's enemies would act according to a familiar paradigm, although, in fact, they had formed a different paradigm. These events illustrate the challenge facing intelligence in the process of escalating to war, during which rival parties, who theoretically act rationally, commit all their forces to war when they do not intend to do so. This is an insight that is still relevant today and is an important lesson in intelligence: The main challenge facing intelligence researchers is not just to present the situation of the enemy forces but also to assess the enemy's perspective of Israel's forces, even if it is erroneous. Formulating such a perspective is essential for assessing their readiness and, in some cases, will prevent a military confrontation.

An analysis of the events that preceded the Six Day War can explain why messages of deterrence can lead to unexpected outcomes and how, in some cases, revealing true information is the way to stop escalation. The role of intelligence in the context of preventing escalation is to understand how the enemy and other players view Israel's capabilities and intentions and, in particular, to understand how Israel's messages and positions are being interpreted. Furthermore, intelligence can recommend messages and actions to the government that will reduce the tensions on the other side.

The case of the Six Day War also illustrates the challenge of dealing with a rapidly changing reality. On this matter, Yariv stated the following in a

39 Miscalculations is defined as a situation in which the players attribute malicious intentions to each another because the information they possess is deficient or mistaken. As a result, they arrive at incorrect conclusions, are dragged into escalation, and find themselves in a situation in which they did not want to be.

lecture after the war: “There were those in our corps who did not exactly understand what was going on, who continued to live according to the pace and psychology that prevails in periods of calm, at a time when the pace was starting to become one of war . . . The problem was the very rapid changes in the situation and that people did not understand these changes, which also required changes in the overall perception. And for someone who had a particular viewpoint it was not so easy for him to change it given the rapid changes taking place.” According to Yariv, the lesson to be learned was that “the changes in our region can be very rapid and if you do not quickly get on the wave of history, you will miss it.”⁴⁰

40 Yariv, *Prudent Assessment*, p. 163.