

Political Infighting and Its Effect on Deterrence: The Eshkol Government prior to the Six Day War

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In mid-May 1967, massive Egyptian forces began entering the Sinai Peninsula, a blatant violation of the understandings reached under the auspices of the US administration after Operation Kadesh. The core of the understandings was that Sinai was to remain a demilitarized zone, in which UN forces would be stationed in order to separate between Israel and Egypt. President Gamal Abdel Nasser went even further than deploying his army in Sinai and at the same time ordered the UN forces to leave Sinai and Gaza. He claimed that Egypt was free to do as it pleased in these territories since they were under Egyptian sovereignty. UN Secretary U Thant acceded to his demand.

Egypt continued to escalate the tension with Israel when it announced the blocking of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, with the clear knowledge that Israel would view this as a *casus belli* and with the understanding that the blocking of the straits would put Israel in an untenable economic and strategic situation, since the vast majority of its oil supply arrived from Iran by way of the Straits of Tiran.¹

These moves by Egypt signaled the collapse of the deterrence that Israel had achieved in its conflict with the Arab countries, particularly Egypt, following the War of Independence and even more so after Operation Kadesh.

1 Zaki Shalom, *Diplomacy in the Shadow of War: Constraints, Appearances and Yearnings on the Way to the Six Day War* (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2007), pp. 197–250 [Hebrew].

The phenomenon of infiltrations into Israel, which was particularly frequent during the 1950s, was first and foremost an expression of the Arab states' assessment, following the War of Independence, that they could not defeat Israel in an all-out war. But since they refused to end the fighting with Israel, as they had promised in the Armistice Agreements, they chose a "mini war" as a way of perpetuating the hostilities, without giving Israel justification to initiate an all-out military campaign against them.

It was clear to Israel's leadership that the Arab countries were refraining from an all-out war, given the potential outcome of such a strategy. They were willing to admit to their obvious military inferiority vis-à-vis Israel, rather than risk another defeat at the hands of Israel. Moshe Dayan, then the chief of the General Staff, stated in this context that, "if there was an Arab country that had the capability to defeat us, it would not hesitate to command its forces to cross the border and attack Israel. Since that Arab states demonstrate obvious reluctance to do so, the meaning of this for the Arab world is that they are well aware of their weakness and their inability to confront Israel."²

Operation Kadesh highly enhanced the assessment regarding the Arab states' strategic weakness vis-à-vis Israel. However, at a certain stage, in particular following Ben-Gurion's resignation from office (June 1963), we can see a gradual erosion in Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis the Arab world. Two speeches given by President Nasser over a period of several years reflected the rapid weakening of Israeli deterrence with respect to Egypt. In a speech prior to the Six Day War (May 26, 1967) delivered to his troops in Sinai, Nasser sounded certain of himself and his ability to defeat Israel: "Recently, we have come to feel that our forces are sufficient to confront Israel, that if we go into battle, we will be victorious, with the help of God . . . We are ready to initiate all-out war against Israel . . . The war against Israel will be all-out and its basic objective will be to destroy Israel. I could not have said such things five years ago or even three years ago. Today I say such things because I am sure of what I am saying."³ This Egyptian assessment shortly before the outbreak of the Six Day War stands in sharp contrast to the Egyptian assessment in December 1963. At the conference of Arab

2 Moshe Dayan. "Military Activity in Times of Peace," *Maarachot* 118–119 (Nissan 5719): 54–61 [Hebrew].

3 Shalom, *Diplomacy in the Shadow of War*, p. 266. Footnote 38.

chiefs of staff in Cairo in December 1963, Nasser made it clear to the Arab countries why he could not dare to initiate a war against Israel at that time: “One holocaust which we have gone through in 1948 is enough . . . We must realize where we are headed when we say ‘return to Palestine.’ It will be a bloody return . . . If Syria is attacked, will I be obligated to attack Israel? . . . It [Israel] attacks one or two Syrian bulldozers and you expect me to attack Israel the next day. Are these words of wisdom?”⁴

Numerous studies have reviewed in detail Egypt’s acts of provocation, which in the end led to the outbreak of the Six Day War. There is no doubt that Nasser was directly responsible for these actions and, as a result, for the outbreak of the Six Day War. The provocations on the one hand, and Israel’s continuing restraint on the other, gave Israel a highly important political asset—recognition that it was fighting a just war of self-defense. Little attention has been given to the reasons that led Nasser to conclude that benefit expected from his provocations was greater than the price he would have to pay. In other words, the focus of this article is on the question: What caused the collapse of Israel’s deterrence during the period prior to the war? What were the causes for the cracks that appeared in Israel’s powerful image and in its determination to use that power during that period?

A country’s image of strength has many components: military, political, economic, and technological power, internal resilience, stability of its government, a national consensus, and so forth.⁵ This essay will focus on the Israeli leadership’s image of power as a component in shaping the state’s image of deterrence.

Churchill’s words in the British Parliament that the weakness of Prime Minister Chamberlain and his policy of appeasement had encouraged Hitler to go to war are highly relevant to our discussion in this article.⁶ Following the Yom Kippur War, the testimonies of members of the Israeli leadership before the Agranat Commission about the dismissive Israeli attitude toward Anwar Sadat and its implications on formulating the assessment that the

4 “Nasser: We will Delay the Diversion until We are Ready to Defend it,” *Monthly Review: Periodical for IDF Officers* (May 1967): 6–8 [Hebrew].

5 For further details on deterrence, its components, and characteristics, see Zaki Shalom and Yoav Handel, *Let the IDF Win: The Slogan that Fulfilled Itself* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Sfarim, 2010), pp. 80–95 [Hebrew].

6 Winston Churchill, speaking in the House of Commons, February 22, 1938, Statements on Appeasement, <https://goo.gl/sp4f8f>.

probability of war was low in 1973 must also be remembered. In one of the discussions about the reasons that Israel was surprised by the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, Professor Shimon Shamir stated as follows: “The status of Sadat in this period [during the years prior to the Yom Kippur War] was problematic. He had a low image. He became president not as a result of his strong position but the opposite: because the ‘power centers’ had relied on his weakness and were convinced that the real power would remain in their hands and that they would be able to easily remove him if they wished. When Sadat was conferred as president, his image was somewhere between foolish and ludicrous. The Intelligence Directorate/Research Department felt that Sadat had an image of weakness and a lack of ability.”⁷ Consequently, he believed that such a leader lacked the courage and the personality to initiate a war against Israel.

It is also worth mentioning the words of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, regarding the weakness of the leadership in Israel which led him to initiate provocative acts against Israel, in the assessment that the Israeli leadership would lack the courage to engage in a major confrontation with Hezbollah. A few days after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, he gave the “spider webs” speech in Bint Jbeil:

We are here today free and safe. The enemy’s air force would not dare to fly over us. The Israelis are scared and terrified of every miniature toy-like installation and every Katyusha launcher. They are scared enough to refrain from attacking you today . . . Ehud Barak’s government had no choice but to withdraw from the soil of Lebanon . . . The miniature government of Israel withdrew with haste, with the soldiers leaving tanks, artillery, and a great deal of military equipment in the field. Thus, it is clear that this was a defeat for Israel . . . My brother the Palestinians, Israel has nuclear weapons and the strongest

7 Shimon Shamir, “The Situation of Egypt prior to the Crossing,” *Intelligence in the Yom Kippur War, 1973—Forty Years Later*, ed. Effy Meltzer (Ramat Hasharon: Center for Heritage of the Intelligence Corps and Effy Meltzer Publishing, 2013) [Hebrew].

air force in the region, but they are more vulnerable than spider webs. I swear this to you.⁸

On the day that the Second Lebanon War broke out, Nasrallah referred to the power of the leadership in Israel, which was then headed Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Minister of Defense Amir Peretz, and Chief of General Staff Dan Halutz. All of them, he claimed, lacked any significant political or military experience and therefore would be reluctant to engage in military confrontation with Hezbollah:

The Israeli leaders in government right now and those who are responsible are new. Olmert is a new prime minister and there is also a new minister of defense. Therefore, I would like to advise them, before they meet tonight at 8:00 PM to decide on Israel's response to the abduction of the Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah, that they had better seek counsel from previous prime ministers and other former ministers about their experiences in Lebanon. When someone new is in charge it is still possible to mislead him. Therefore, in order not to be misled, they should ask, check, and make sure before they make any decisions.⁹

As part of the discussion of the collapse of deterrence prior to the Six Day War, it can be claimed that the status, authority, and power of Levi Eshkol, then the prime minister and minister of defense, had deteriorated prior to the outbreak of the Six Day War. This was a result of his personality, his declarations, and the bitter political disagreements, particularly with his predecessor David Ben-Gurion, who successfully undermined Eshkol's legitimacy. In our view, the weakening of Eshkol's position during the years which preceded the war, most probably harmed the state's deterrence and thus contributed to Nasser's decision to provoke Israel, which eventually led to war.

8 Nasrallah's Spider Web speech, <http://breakingthespidersweb.blogspot.co.il/2011/05/nasrallahs-spider-web-speech.html>.

9 Quoted by Eyal Zisser, "Hezbollah: The Battle over Lebanon," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 2 (October 2009): 52.

The Political Situation prior to the War

On June 16, 1963, David Ben-Gurion surprisingly announced his decision to resign from the government. The official announcement stated that the decision was the result of “personal needs that are not related to any government problem or specific event.”¹⁰ Several years later, in a letter to Golda Meir, Ben-Gurion wrote that he had resigned in order to write the history of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel.¹¹ This message was unlikely to convince the Israeli people in its sincerity. Ben-Gurion was then seventy-seven years old and still in good physical condition. He was a highly ambitious statesman, who believed he knew more than any other person about Israel’s needs and interests. It was unlikely that he would resign from office just for the sake of writing an historical essay, with all the importance he attached to it. Consequently it seems fair to assume that Ben-Gurion did not leave office of his own free will, just because he wished to write his memoirs. In fact, we suggest that that he was forced to resign for two main reasons: First, he came to realize that his political position and his authority had been undermined due to the bitter internal disputes around the Lavon Affair, among other things. Secondly, as a result of the brutal pressure applied by President Kennedy regarding the Dimona Project, he concluded that the majority of the ministers would accept the American demands that would necessarily lead to the abolishment of the Israel’s nuclear project, to which he was vigorously opposed.¹²

Nonetheless, and despite his resignation from the leadership, Ben-Gurion’s public standing was stronger than any other leader at that time. During his political career, he successfully waded through crises and major decisions that no other political figure during that period had faced. His name was strongly identified with the creation of the State of Israel and its electoral institutions, constitutional framework, and security and defense institutions.

10 Press release from the Prime Minister’s Office, June 16, 1963 (General Chronological Documentation, David Ben-Gurion Archives) [Hebrew]. See also National Archive, *50 Years since the Resignation of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and the Establishment of the Levi Eshkol Government* [Hebrew].

11 Letter from Ben-Gurion to Golda Meir, January 29, 1969, correspondence file, Ben-Gurion Archives [Hebrew].

12 Zaki Shalom, “The Resignation of Ben-Gurion from the Government, (David Ben-Gurion’s diary, June 16, 1963, Ben-Gurion Archives),” *Studies in the Establishment of the State of Israel* 5 (1995): 608–614 [Hebrew].

Israel's victory over the Arab states in the War of Independence, which Ben-Gurion documented in great detail in his diary and many articles, glorified his image and perpetuated his unquestioned authority in matters of foreign policy and security.¹³

Operation Kadesh further consolidated his leadership. Subsequently, no political figure could seriously challenge his leadership. Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, who opposed Ben-Gurion's security policies toward the Arab states, had been expelled from the leadership several months before Operation Kadesh and was no longer in political life.¹⁴ Levi Eshkol, Pinhas Sapir, and Golda Meir, who were more or less the same age as Ben-Gurion, had not acquired anywhere near his level of political experience, nor did they did have the public support he enjoyed, and it is doubtful whether they had wanted to lead the government at that time. In the mid-level echelons, the two former high-ranking military officers, Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon, battled one another for the future leadership. Ben-Gurion very much admired Dayan and his abilities in military and security matters. However, he opposed the idea that a military officer would become defense minister, perhaps because this could lead to a militarization of Israel's politics. Therefore, after Dayan left the General Staff, enjoying great popularity in Israel's public, Ben-Gurion nominated him as minister of agriculture, excluding him from any formal engagement in security issues.¹⁵ At the same time, Ben-Gurion repeatedly criticized Yigal Allon for "deficient performance" during the War of Independence. More specifically, he viewed Allon as being partly responsible for the fact that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) did not capture additional territory in the war, which could have given Israel far more

13 For Ben-Gurion's documentation of the war, see Zaki Shalom, "Ben-Gurion's Diaries as a Historic Source," *Cathedra: The History of the Land of Israel and Its Settlement* 56 (1990): 136–149 [Hebrew].

14 See Zaki Shalom, "The Resignation of Sharett from the Government (June 1956)—Personal, Party and Political Aspects," *Zionism—Collection on the History of the Zionist Movement and the Jewish Settlement in the Land of Israel* 20 (1996): 259–289 [Hebrew].

15 Following the resignation of Ben-Gurion from the government, Moshe Dayan requested that Levi Eshkol, his successor, give him the defense portfolio. Eshkol refused. See National Archive, *50 Years since the Resignation of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion*. In a cabinet meeting on November 9, 1962, Ben Gurion stated that he opposed the nomination of a military personnel as a defense minister. Cabinet Meeting November 9, 1962, File 573, Ben-Gurion Archives.

geostrategic depth and greater security as a result. In general, Ben-Gurion did not have faith in Allon's abilities as a military commander. Furthermore, he feared Allon's tendency to introduce political considerations into military decision making. In any case, neither Allon nor Dayan posed a risk to his leadership at that point in time.¹⁶

The period following Operation Kadesh also consolidated Ben-Gurion's position. The dramatic reduction in the infiltrations by the *fedayeen* (terror organizations) in the Negev, even though the southern border remained largely open after Operation Kadesh, confirmed Ben-Gurion's assessment prior to the operation. According to Ben-Gurion, the *fedayeen* operated not as an independent entity, as the Egyptian regime claimed, but rather as agents of the Egyptian regime. By encouraging their violent operations against Israel, President Nasser sought to maintain a state of war against Israel within the consciousness of the Arab world and the international community, while at the same time refraining from undertaking responsibility for the *fedayeen's* actions. Ben-Gurion, together with Chief of General Staff Moshe Dayan, repeatedly emphasized that the infiltrations could be stopped by extracting a high price from the Arab states supporting their operations. In their opinion, the leaders of these countries were the ones who needed to fight the *fedayeen*, not out of a "love of Zion," but rather because they would pay a high price if the attacks continued. According to Dayan, the Arab leaders knew how to stop the infiltrations much better than Israel did, since they were familiar with the reality within which the *fedayeen* operated and because they had no moral constraints in dealing with them.¹⁷ The calm along the border with Gaza and Egypt following the Kadesh Operation was perceived as proof of the validity of this thesis.

16 Zaki Shalom, "Transcript of a Conversation between Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion and General Yigal Peikowitz (Allon), June 16, 1948," *Studies in the Establishment of the State of Israel* 12 (2002): 657–678 [Hebrew]. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary during the War of Independence that "there was a failure in the South . . . I am concerned that Yigal Allon is not able to command such a broad front." See Ben-Gurion's Diary, Ben-Gurion Archives. Years later, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "No one can compete with Yigal Allon's capacity for demagoguery. There is not much distance between him and Menachem Begin, I am sorry to say." See Ben-Gurion's Diary, May 21, 1959, Ben-Gurion Archives.

17 Dayan, "Military Activity in Times of Peace."

Ben-Gurion's leadership was also strengthened by the fact that Operation Kadesh had led the superpowers to de facto recognize the armistice borders and remove from the agenda the various peace plans particularly with Egypt, which included a massive Israeli withdrawal, mainly from the Negev. Most prominent was the Alpha Plan, which called for Israel to return almost one-third of the Negev to Egypt, in exchange for Egypt's agreement to a state of non-belligerency. The superpowers, led by the United States, threatened to impose sanctions and even an economic embargo if Israel rejected their proposals. The Alpha Plan eventually fell by the wayside due to the opposition by Egypt's president. The withdrawal of the superpowers from such "peace plans" after the Kadesh Operation meant that they accepted the Israeli position that adhered to the principle of continuation of the territorial status quo, which was based on the Armistice Agreements.¹⁸

Another achievement of Operation Kadesh, which was, to a large extent, credited to Ben-Gurion, relates to the shift of the national agenda, which had been dominated by security-military issues, to a focus on civilian issues for much of the period following the operation. Among other things, the public and the press directed its attention to civilian and socioeconomic issues, such as the economic and social gaps between ethnic groups in Israel, relations between religion and state, and in that context, the question of "who is a Jew," the economic recession, and so forth. This phenomenon, in which the national agenda marginalized security-military issues, has not reoccurred in the history of the state and accurately reflected the high threshold of deterrence achieved by Operation Kadesh.¹⁹

At the same time, Ben-Gurion exploited the period after Operation Kadesh to create a nuclear option, in the belief that it could serve as Israel's insurance policy for generations to come. He believed that structural asymmetry existed in the balance of forces between Israel and the Arab countries and that Israel would never be equal to the Arab world in terms of territory and population. Furthermore, there was a huge chasm between Israel and the Arab world in terms of their society's values, particularly their attitude toward the sacredness of human life. Ben-Gurion believed that the Arab world wished

18 Zaki Shalom, "The Forgotten War: Operation Kadesh and its Political and Strategic Effects," in *The Thunder of Engines: 50 Years Since the Sinai War*, ed. Hagai Golan and Shaul Shai (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 2006), pp. 279–305 [Hebrew].

19 Ibid.

to destroy the State of Israel. He used to mention the tragic experience of the Holocaust. Many political leaders, he stated, did not believe that Hitler was serious in his call to eliminate the Jewish people. Unfortunately his plans became reality. Similarly, the call of Arab leaders to destroy Israel, Ben-Gurion contended, was not “lip service” but rather a concrete plan of action. Under these circumstances, he claimed, Israel’s security would be ensured only if the Arabs were convinced that Israel’s destruction would lead to their own.

For years, Ben-Gurion worked to develop the Dimona Project, even though he knew that many in the government establishment were vehemently opposed to it. Large segments of the security, political, and academic establishment viewed the project as a reckless adventure, described as a bizarre endeavor whose scope was too grand for Israel. They claimed that it would likely lead to a rift with the United States, Israel’s only ally, and with the world and would push Egypt to also seek nuclear capability. These developments and others, so it was claimed, would endanger the very existence of the state. Nonetheless, Ben-Gurion advanced the project with determination and perseverance. During the years prior to the Six Day War, both Ben-Gurion and his rivals realized that the project had made significant progress and had become a revolutionary strategic reality.²⁰

In the final reckoning, it can be said that during his years as prime minister and minister of defense, David Ben-Gurion created for himself the image of a leader that the State of Israel would find difficult to replace. Attesting to this fact, on the day of his resignation from the government, two generals—Yitzhak Rabin, then the head of the Operations Directorate, and Meir Amit, then the head of the Intelligence Directorate—informed him that they viewed his resignation as a “disaster.” Rabin said that “the next three years would perhaps be the most critical. It is possible that the Arabs will unite and we will be faced with a war that threatens our existence.” According to Ben-Gurion, Rabin feared that “without me, the army would have a difficult time.”²¹

For some reason, Ben-Gurion was not angered by the involvement of such senior officers in sensitive political issues. Recall that in the War of Independence, Ben-Gurion was on the verge of dismissing Rabin from the

20 Zaki Shalom, *Between Dimona and Washington – The Struggle over the Development of Israel’s Nuclear Option 1960–1968* (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2005), [Hebrew].

21 Ben-Gurion’s Diary, June 16, 1963, Ben-Gurion Archives.

army for participating in a meeting of Palmach members which Ben-Gurion saw as an inappropriate mixture of politics in the IDF. This time Ben-Gurion was not at all bothered and even wrote in his diary that “his [Rabin’s] words touched my heart and I was hardly able to hold back my emotions and tears.”²² The poet Anda Pinkerfeld Amir also urged Ben-Gurion to withdraw his resignation and wrote the following emotional words to him: “Please listen to the voice of anxiety that exists certainly not just within me, but in thousands of others that value the state more than their own lives.”²³

Under these circumstances, Levi Eshkol who replaced Ben-Gurion as prime minister and defense minister in June 1963, knew very well that any decision and any action he would make would always be compared to similar acts and decisions of Ben-Gurion. He thus would have to work hard to fill Ben-Gurion’s shoes. Until that time, he had served as the minister of finance, and before that he had been primarily involved in economic and social issues. Eshkol rarely made statements on foreign and defense policy. He always supported Ben-Gurion, who played a highly dominant role in the political-security domain while in office and even after resigning from the government.

Under these circumstances, there was no escaping the oft-made comparisons between Eshkol and Ben-Gurion, who would never favor Eshkol. Ben-Gurion was perceived as a leader with authority who had the ability to make bold decisions and function in a state of crisis. He implemented an activist policy of deterrence toward the Arab world and led the IDF in two major military confrontations with Arab states, which were perceived as highly successful for Israel. In contrast, Eshkol created for himself a different image that was much more moderate. He consulted with anyone that he viewed as relevant to the issue at hand. He also hesitated before deciding on a matter. His reactions to the provocations against Israel and especially his well-known statement following Arab acts of terror against Israel, that “the notebook is open and things are being written down” were interpreted as reflecting an overly hesitant and weak personality.²⁴ Furthermore, at least during the early part of his tenure as prime minister and minister of defense, Eshkol

22 Ibid.

23 State Archive, *50 Years since the Resignation of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and the Establishment of the Levi Eshkol Government*.

24 Ami Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order—The IDF and the Israeli Government on the Way to the Six Day War, 1963–1967* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 2005), p. 153 [Hebrew].

himself made clear to all that he suffered from “fear of public speaking” and that there were better-suited candidates for the position of Israel’s prime minister than him.²⁵ These statements clearly evidenced that Eshkol himself was daunted by the tremendous challenge he faced. Thus, already early in his tenure, he himself had compromised his authority as prime minister and minister of defense.

Ben-Gurion did not need Eshkol’s remarks in order to make it clear that his resignation did not mean that he had entered the “political desert” and had detached himself from engagement in Israel’s political life. Soon after his resignation, he conveyed clear messages to Eshkol that he had been responsible for his appointment as prime minister and therefore he expected Eshkol to stick to the path that he (Ben-Gurion) had prepared for him: “I thought that he [Eshkol] agrees with my policies . . . and would implement them as a leader of the State of Israel . . . And indeed the members of the coalition and the president [accepted my recommendation] and designated him as the person who would form a new government. Indeed the new government, according to its composition and platform, reflected my assessment that it would continue to implement the policies of the previous one.”²⁶

To many, these statements confirmed that Ben-Gurion had not really left the leadership and, to a large extent, they were right. They believed that, in fact, he would seek to return to the government at some stage, as he did following his first resignation in 1953, or at least would try to become a dominant figure in in shaping government policies.

Ben-Gurion himself did not bother to deny these suspicions; on the contrary, a short time after his resignation from the government, Ben-Gurion outlined the guidelines he expected Eshkol to follow. According to Ben-Gurion, in what appeared to be a veiled threat, Eshkol “should not always prefer compromises, but rather be determined in his decision making.”²⁷ Ben-Gurion knew that this demand was not realistic in the case of Eshkol, a leader for whom compromise was embedded deeply in his character and behavior. Under these circumstances, the rift between Ben-Gurion and Eshkol was inevitable.

25 Meeting of the Mapai Central Committee, June 18, 1963, Labor Party Archives [Hebrew].

26 Letter from Ben-Gurion to Golda Meir, January 29, 1969 [Hebrew].

27 Meeting of Mapai Central Committee, June 18, 1963, Labor Party Archive [Hebrew].

The tension between Ben-Gurion and Eshkol existed on a number of levels: in Eshkol's efforts to exclude Ben-Gurion and his supporters from the inner circle of political-security decision makers;²⁸ in the controversy surrounding the Lavon Affair;²⁹ and in Ben-Gurion's criticism of what he called the "security failure," which he believed endangered the future of the state.³⁰ For many, this criticism reflected Ben-Gurion's disappointment with the ways and means that Eshkol was advancing Israel's nuclear option. Without getting into a detailed discussion of these issues, it can be said that the disagreements led Ben-Gurion to initiate an unprecedented campaign to delegitimize Eshkol and his leadership. His criticism went far beyond disagreements on certain policies that Eshkol adopted. Ben-Gurion was obsessed with the necessity to prove to the Israeli public that Eshkol simply lacked the suitability to lead the State of Israel.

In September 1965, Ben-Gurion expressed his unambiguous opinion of Eshkol in very clear words: "I want to confess to one of the most serious mistakes that I have made since the creation of the State of Israel. This relates to my recommendation, on my resignation from the government in June 1963, that Levi Eshkol replace me as prime minister. I should add that I did not realize my grave mistake all at once . . . I knew that Eshkol does not have the necessary qualities to be prime minister and he has characteristics that are not suitable for a prime minister . . . The best thing he can do for the state is to leave his position as soon as possible."³¹ Ben-Gurion repeated this position in various forms throughout the period: "I see disaster in Eshkol's leadership of the country,"³² he said in a conversation with one

28 Ben-Gurion demanded, among other things, that Eshkol leave Shimon Peres—a Ben-Gurion supporter—in the position of deputy minister of defense. See the farewell ceremony of Ben-Gurion from Ministry of Defense employees, file of meeting transcripts, June 28, 1963, Ben-Gurion Archives [Hebrew].

29 Zaki Shalom, *Like Fire in his Bones—The Path of Ben-Gurion and his Struggle over the State's Image 1963–1967* (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Institute for the Study of Israel, Midreshet Ben-Gurion, 2004), pp. 42–61 [Hebrew].

30 Ibid., pp. 74–103.

31 Ben-Gurion diary, September 17, 1965, Ben Gurion Archives.

32 Conversation with Avraham Wolfenson, Ben-Gurion diary, June 20 and 23, 1965, Ben-Gurion Archives.

of his supporters, and on another occasion he complained of the “moral destruction that Eshkol and his supporters” were causing in the country.³³

Eventually, the tension with Eshkol led Ben-Gurion to resign from Mapai, his mother party, which he had created. “The Israel Workers’ Party, which I have been a member of since its creation,” he wrote in his diary, “no longer exists. This is a party in which there is no comradeship, there is no free discussion, there is no real willingness to listen to the opinions of the members of the party.”³⁴

Under these circumstances, taking into account Ben-Gurion’s dominant position in Israel’s politics, Eshkol had no chance of maintaining his status and authority. He also lacked the political stamina and abilities that would enable him to withstand Ben-Gurion’s attacks. His political status and authority gradually weakened.

Eshkol’s weakened position was mainly reflected in his authority as defense minister. Eshkol had the misfortune of serving as defense minister while Yitzhak Rabin, a dominating figure with extensive military experience, was the chief of the General Staff. It was clear that Rabin would seek to fill the vacuum created by Eshkol’s lack of knowledge and experience. Yitzhak Leor, Eshkol’s military secretary, would later say that “the strongest man in the IDF was, without a doubt, Yitzhak Rabin . . . the chief of the General Staff, a strong individual who entered the vacuum created when Ben-Gurion left and Eshkol came in . . . the appointment [of Eshkol] as prime minister found him almost unprepared for this huge task, especially with respect to defense matters.”³⁵ Eshkol’s efforts to limit Rabin’s power at the beginning of his tenure were unsuccessful. Throughout his tenure, Rabin openly expressed his positions on clearly political issues, to the chagrin of Prime Minister Eshkol.³⁶

Conclusion and Lessons to be Learned

The State of Israel is a democracy characterized by numerous internal disagreements. These controversies naturally pose difficulties for the prime minister to fulfill his policies. However, in a broader view, these disagreements

33 Ben-Gurion diary, February 21, 1967, Ben-Gurion Archives.

34 Ben-Gurion diary, April 13, 1965, Ben-Gurion Archives.

35 Eitan Haber, *The Day the War Broke Out* (Tel Aviv: Idanim, Yedioth Ahronoth, 1987), pp. 41–42 [Hebrew].

36 Gluska, *Eshkol, Give an Order*, pp. 152–153.

are the source of Israel's strength: They ensure that strategic decisions would be undertaken in the broader possible consensus. They also give expression to its democratic and liberal character in the eyes of the entire world. At the same time, it should be remembered that when these disagreements go beyond a certain threshold, the scope of which is difficult to assess, they also affect the state's foreign policy-strategic position and its deterrence image, especially in the eyes of its enemies. Adversaries and enemies are liable to interpret internal disputes as an expression of weakness. This would necessarily lead to the erosion of Israel's deterrence. Eventually, its enemies might conclude that aggression against it could be worthwhile.

The period prior to the Six Day War was characterized by highly intensive internal infighting within Israel. The most prominent conflict was that between Ben-Gurion and Eshkol, which led to an irreparable rift between these two individuals who had worked together for so long as part of the national leadership of the State of Israel. In the end, that infighting led to the breakup of the Mapai party and the establishment of the new Rafi party by one of the first founders of Mapai, David Ben-Gurion.

The tension between Ben-Gurion and Eshkol assumed the character of a battle to delegitimize Eshkol's suitability as prime minister and defense minister. Eshkol's statements reinforced his undermining and damaged his image of authority. In particular, the erosion of Eshkol's authority was reflected in his inability to create an image of control over the IDF's General Staff and the person heading it, Yitzhak Rabin.

There is no doubt that the Egyptian leadership was familiar with the internal situation in Israel. We assume that this was a major component leading to the erosion of Israel's strategic deterrence among Arab world in general and the Egyptian leadership in particular. We believe this was one of the factors that likely contributed to President Nasser's decision to provoke Israel, with the clear knowledge that he risked an escalation toward war, which indeed was the result.