CHAPTER II
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Prelude to June War: A Failure of Super Power Diplomacy

During the years 1965 and 1966, the newly organized Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its affiliated unit, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) became increasingly active in promoting border disturbances and raids against Israel. The Al-Fatah (“Victory”) — a militant Palestinian Organization — which was created in December 1964 with Syrian help, also carried on sabotage activities against Israel from Jordanian territories. In spite of Israeli Government’s warnings and retaliation, the border incidents and Al-Fatah raids continued to occur from Jordanian and Lebanese borders. 1 Israel resorted to retaliatory raids against Lebanon and Jordan.

Coup d’etat and War Hysteria

With the militant wing of Baathist Party coming to power in Syria in late February 1965, there was a cry of “second round” with Israel. War hysteria gripped Israel and the Arabs and both started frantic search for arms. In an effort to effect a diversion of the Baniyas river, a tributary

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1 Arab News and Views (New York), 1 July 1965, p. 1. Israeli soldiers retaliated on 29 April and 27 May 1965 by attacking alleged bases of operations used by commandos in Jordan’s villages of Sjuneh and Qalqilya. In a warning action against the al Fatah activities from Lebanese borders, Israel retaliated on 23 October 1965.
of Jordan River, Israeli aircrafts straffed tractors and earth moving machinery on Syrian side. Israeli reprisal action was aimed at exposing Arab weakness to defend themselves and retaliate by any serious military action. As Security Council failed to pass any resolution on Israeli-Syrian complaints both did not go to it when they fought an air battle on 15 August near the sea of Galilee.²

Syrian government followed increasingly belligerent policy to win great popular support within Syria.³ Israeli warnings and threats of "strong military action" had no impact on the commandos operating against Israel from the Syrian bases. In the Security Council, Syria denied any responsibility for commandos action and refused to act as a police force, to halt al-Fatah operations, for maintaining Israel's security.⁴ Due to disagreement of the Super Powers, Security

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² Pro-Syrian resolution moved by Mali and Jordan urging a formal condemnation of Israel was lost as it could get the support of only 6 members of Security Council. UN Doc. S/7437; for details see UN Chronicle, August-September 1966, pp. 3-12.


Council failed to arrive at any decision.\(^5\)

**ES Sami Raid**

The intensification of Arab terrorist activities in Israel gave rise to grave tensions in West Asia. On the morning of 13 November 1966, Israeli forces in a large scale retaliatory action, attacked the Jordanian villages of Es Sami, Jumba and others. Israeli officials maintained that it was meant to be a "warning and deterrent" to local people who aided saboteurs to operate against Israel.\(^6\) Due to direct Soviet support to Syria and Soviet efforts to restrain the Syrians from using military means, Israel did not attack Syria.\(^7\) Israeli military action against the Arabs was aimed at distracting the people from their internal problems, boost Israeli morale and attract financial contributions from abroad on a large scale.\(^8\) Es Sami incident provoked sharp reaction both in the United Nations and in the Arab World and evoked Israel's censure by all members of the Security Council.\(^9\)


\(^6\) *Israel Digest* (New York), 13 November 1966, pp. 1 ff.

\(^7\) Khouri, n. 3, p. 235.


\(^9\) UN Doc. S/Res. 228 (1966), 25 November 1966 was unanimously passed as there was no major difference amongst the Super Powers.
Even though Israel gained a temporary reprieve from acts of border terrorism, its military action intensified Arab hatred and bitterness and strengthened the position of more militant Arabs at the expense of Arab moderates. To restrain militant Syrian rulers from precipitating the crisis, Nasser signed a five year defense pact with Syria, immediately after the Es Samu incident. Due to Jordan's efforts to prevent commandos from using its territory for operations against Israel, the al-Fatah operations shifted their bases to the Syrian-Israeli borders.

**Israeli-Syrian Clashes**

The situation on the Israeli-Syrian borders aggravated due to commando activities. While Israel blamed Syria for encouraging sabotage activities, Syria charged Israel with increasing tension to justify subsequent large scale aggression of Syria.¹⁰ Israeli warnings were seen by the Arabs as a prelude to a planned Israeli campaign against Syria. These were ignored by Syrian rulers and border clashes continued to occur as frequently as before.¹¹ It culminated in an air battle

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¹⁰ See Israeli letters to President, Security Council dated 8, 9, 11, 15 and 17 January 1967 and Syrian letters dated 10, 13 January 1967. UN Doc. S/7667, 7668, 7673, 7675, 7684 and 7683. On 17 January 1967, Premier Eshkol warned Syria of retaliatory action if the commando raids did not stop from Syrian territory. But Syria's President Attassi, on 8 February declared: "We shall not act as protectors of Israel against Palestine commandos defending their homeland."

on 7 April when Syria lost 6 MIG-21's and Israeli planes flew over Damascus. The air battle convinced Israel of its air superiority and encouraged it to take bold stand. But Nasser was strongly criticized, in some Arab countries, for failure to intervene on behalf of Syria. Nasser came under pressure to play an active role in future and UAR-Syria declared their common resolve to apply joint plans to crush Israeli aggression against Syria.

**UNEF Withdrawal**

In early part of May 1967, there was increase in Arab commands' activities against Israel. On 11 May, Israeli Prime Minister Eshkol, in a public meeting in Tel Aviv said that his government regarded this wave of sabotage and infiltration gravely and warned that Israel "may have to adopt measures no less than those of April 7". In a radio interview on 13 May, Israeli Prime Minister declared:

> It is quite clear to the Israeli government that the focal point of terrorists is in Syria, but we have laid down the principle that we shall choose the time, the place, and the means to counter the aggressor.

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14 *Israel Digest*, 19 May 1967, p. 5. Earlier *New York Times* on 13 May 1967 had reported that Israeli leaders had "decided that the use of force against Syria" might be "the only way to curtail increasing terrorism."
Consenting on the commando activities on Israeli borders

U Thant, UN Secretary General, in a press luncheon on 11 May 1967 said:

I must say that in the last few days the El-Fatah type of incidents, have increased, unfortunately. These incidents have occurred in the vicinity of the Lebanese and Syrian lines and are very deplorable... that type of activity is insidious, is contrary to the letter and spirit of armistice agreements and menaces the peace of the area. 15

Nasser, who had signed the defence pact with Syria to restrain the extremist Syrian rulers, was under pressure to "go on a war footing for the battle with Israel". Nasser was being accused of hiding himself behind the skirts of UNEF. It induced Nasser to co-operate more closely with the Syrian regime and forced Arab countries to give verbal support to Syria against Israel. 16 On 14 May, Nasser sent a word to Syrians that if Israel attacked "Egypt would enter the battle from the first minute". To deter an attack on Syria and to save his declining position in the Arab World, Nasser took a "calculated risk" to prove that he was ready to employ his military power to protect his allies. 17 On 15 May Syria invoked the joint Defence Pact and called upon Nasser to take the command in his hands. Egyptian forces "began to move in the

17 Khouri, n. 3, p. 245.
direction of Sinai to take up normal positions as Nasser thought that the presence of Egyptian forces in Sinai would deter the Israelis from attacking Syria. 18

On 16 May, Nasser demanded the withdrawal of the UNEF from Egyptian territory. As Israel rejected U Thant's request to station UNEF on its side of the demarcation line, he ordered withdrawal of UNEF from Egyptian territory. 19 The announcement of UNEF withdrawal led to hectic military activities and added to the prevailing war hysteria in the area.

Closure of the Gulf of Aqaba

After the withdrawal of UNEF from Sinai, Nasser on 22 May ordered the closure of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. Israel regarded the closure of the straits of Tiran and the ban on its entry into the Gulf of Aqaba as an infringement of international security and law. It regarded Egypt's action as a breach of solemn and clear international commitment. 20 Israel, therefore, found in the present crisis

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18 Nasser's address of 22 May as reported in New York Times, 26 May 1967; Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, The Cairo Documents (New York, 1973), p. 241; observed that it was purely a defensive move designed to draw off Israeli forces from Syria. Nasser later implied that "an enemy plan to invade Syria on May 17 had been amply confirmed from Syrian, UAR and Soviet sources". Address of 22 May in New York Times, 26 May 1967.


20 The Guardian (London), 24 May 1967. Nasser said that taking over Sharm al-Sheikh meant "Confrontation with Israel. Taking such action also meant that we were ready to enter a general war with Israel. It was not a separate
the nightiest challenge to its existence. This belief created a war-fever in Israel, and the principle of freedom of navigation became a matter of national honour for the Israelis. Israeli Prime Minister, who was under pressure for taking strong action, declared in the Knesset on 23 May:

The Government of Israel expressed its views that the blockade of the Straits of Tiran against Israeli shipping is equivalent to aggression against Israel. The Knesset knows that any interference with freedom of shipping in the Gulf and in the Straits constitutes a flagrant violation of international law. It constitutes an act of aggression against Israel. 21

The explosive situation led to great power involvement. The United States and the United Kingdom endeavoured to obtain a declaration from principal maritime Powers in favour of freedom of navigation to impress upon Cairo to change its decision. But their scheme did not materialize. With their failure, the restraining power of the United States on Israel against any military action by it was reduced. U Thant informed the Security Council on 23 May that Nasser had disclaimed any intention of initiating offensive action against

operation....If Israel embarks on an aggression against Syria or Egypt, the battle against Israel will be a general one...." Summary of World Broadcasts, Part 4, WE/2477/A/3-5, 30 May 1967.

21 Jerusalem Post, 24 May 1967.
Israel. Nasser who was anxious to discourage Israel from attacking Syria and wanted to enhance his position, was successful in his political manoeuvres and staged a sudden and dramatic comeback as the undisputed leader of the Arab World. To increase Israel's discomfiture, King Hussein of Jordan, unexpectedly appeared in Cairo on 30 May and signed a mutual defence pact with UAR.

From 1 June onward the slide to war became rapid and seemingly irreversible. Israel lost hope in the potentiality of US and British moves to reopen the Gulf. Eshkol who was being accused within his party for being too lenient in his policies towards the Arabs, yielded to political and popular pressures and gave the Defense Ministry to Moshe Dayan who declared that Israel "would fight alone if diplomacy failed, it would strike and strike very hard." The Soviet Union and the US advised Nasser not to be first to open fire.

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22 James Reston, in the Cairo dispatches to New York Times on 4 and 5 June stated that Egypt did "not want war... (was) certainly not prepared for war" and had been making "little preparation within Egypt proper for war." The resort to high-level diplomacy, coupled with the general disposition and unpreparedness of Egypt's airforce on 5 June tends to further strengthen this viewpoint. Nasser could not have felt ready for the ultimate battle with Israel as in 1967, one-third of Egypt's military power was in the Yemen.

23 Premier Eshkol later counted, "we were first asked to wait two days, then we sent Abba Eban (Foreign Minister) to the United States - and were asked to wait a further fortnight. President Johnson promised great things. They told us that 40 to 50 maritime powers would sign a guarantee for free passage through Tiran Straits. We examined the situation and found that it really came down to a dozen and finally to only to two countries and then perhaps to one - Israel". New York Times, 10 June 1967.
In response to US efforts to avert the crisis, Nasser agreed to send Vice President Zakaria Mohiddine and Deputy Premier for Foreign Affairs Mahmoud Fawzi to Washington for discussions. But he declared Arab determination not to recognize any declaration by maritime nations on the freedom of passage through the Strait of Tiran. While the moves of Super Powers for peace in the region were in progress, Israel chose to strike. On 5 June morning, Israeli air force took the initiative by raiding Arab airfields and the third Arab-Israeli war started.

United States and the Crisis

Though the zone of confrontation between Egypt and Israel largely remained peaceful between 1956 and 1967, partly due to presence of UNEF in Sinai, the arms competition between Arabs and Israel moved to unprecedented heights. Because of Egypt’s growing role in the anti-Zionist cause and in intra-Arab affairs Moscow generously supplied arms to Egypt. The tension in the Syrian-Israeli zone drew Damascus into ever-increasing dependence on the Soviet Union. To counter Soviet arms supplies to the Arabs, Israel demanded arms from the US. In the Press Conference on 25 February 1965, Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, stressed the need for putting some ceiling on arms-race in West Asia. When Israel’s request for the supply of arms was declined by the US, it resorted to

pressure tactics and threatened to go to war with Arabs, on the Jordan water issue. Israeli pressure tactics succeeded when after Ambassador Harriman's visit to Israel, the US Government in the end of February 1965 announced that the sale or gift of arms to Israel was under consideration. The US agreed to supply M-48 tanks to Israel which established the precedent of US participation as a major arms supplier to Israel, as so far the principal arms suppliers to Israel had been France, Britain and West Germany.

To appease its Arab friends and counter Arab criticism, the US also promised some air missiles to Saudi Arabia and 50 to 100 Patton tanks to Jordan. The general policy of not becoming "a major supplier of arms in the area" remained intact, the State Department explained, but the US must nevertheless reserve the right "to supply limited amounts of conventional material to meet legitimate defense needs."25 This change in the US decision regarding supply of arms was mainly to check Israel from taking any hasty action and maintain military balance in the region due to continuing introduction of Soviet arms into UAR, Syria and Iraq. The US hoped that its arms supplies will induce the Soviets to limit their arms shipments in the region. It also facilitated arms purchases by conservative Arab countries which had been still at odds with the UAR and Syria. The US Congress acceding to President's

pleadings, authorized him to use his discretionary powers about resumption of food aid to UAR. Department of State announced on 22 June that shipments had finally been authorized because of "definite improvement" in US-UAR relations over the preceding six months.

Arms deliveries to certain Arab States alongside US decision to resume food shipments to the UAR aroused fears in Israel that US policy was shifting too far in a pro-Arab direction. To remove Israeli fears and to help meet Israel her "defense and internal security requirements", and to counter "the potentially destabilizing effect of massive Soviet sales of arms to the area", the US in February 1966 announced the supply of Patton tanks to Israel. Jordan was promised 36 Super-Sonic fighter bombers in April and Israel was assured of the supply of 30 Sky Hawk attack bombers on the same grounds. King Feisal of Saudi Arabia was supported by the US in his efforts to counter Nasser's doctrines of "Pan-Arabism" and "Arab Socialism" and promoting rival concept of "Islamic Solidarity". To Nasser, America thus appeared to be working in close collaboration with his chief regional enemies. He criticized it as "reactionary alliance of Kings supported by imperialism". The chances of the US and Soviet Union

27  Ibid., 12 July 1965, p. 75.
coming together to stop arms race now appeared dim in the poisoned atmosphere created by the Vietnam conflict.

US Attitude Towards Border Clashes

Israel on 14 July 1966, in a retaliatory action air-raided Syrian commando bases and also demolished the diversionary project of the Baniyas River, a tributary of the Jordan River, eight miles inside Syria. As any conflagration could have led to involvement of Super Powers in the confrontation, they did not relish Israeli massive "retaliatory" action. When the US failed to get a resolution, recognizing the responsibility of Israel and Syria both, passed in the UN, it abstained from voting on the one sided pro-Syrian resolution.31

In October, when Israel brought a complaint to the Security Council of increased al-Fatah activities from Syrian borders, the US representative impressed upon Syria to acknowledge its "obligation" to prevent raids from its territory. Seeing that Soviet Union would veto the US and the UK draft resolution (S/7569) asking Syria to take all essential steps to prevent these raids, they withdrew their resolution. US voted for "small powers" mildly worded resolution on 3 November which was vetoed by Soviet Union. US representative

expressed US policy to promote conditions of peace and stability in West Asia and his country's opposition to the use of force regardless of the direction from which it came.  

**Es Sami Incident**

The US was dismayed at the Israeli attack of 13 November on Jordanian village of Es-Sami. The US representative in the UN, Ambassador Goldberg, immediately issued a statement on behalf of his Government expressing strong disapproval of the large scale Israeli military action on Jordanian territory. The US representative while calling on Security Council on 16 November to speak out firmly against reprisal or retaliation which was against UN Charter, also criticized the terrorist attacks against Israel. On 25 November, the Security Council unanimously passed a resolution deploring loss of life and property and warned Israel that any military reprisal would compel the Security Council "to consider further and more effective steps as envisaged in the Charter". The US supported this emphatic censure of Israel without referring directly to the Arab commando activities as Soviet Union would have vetoed such a resolution. This resolution was also in favour of pro-Western King Hussein.

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32 Department of State Bulletin, 26 December 1966, pp. 969-70.


34 Department of State Bulletin, 26 December 1966, pp. 974-5.

of Jordan. 35 This resolution could get through easily as the US wanted to support Jordan and Soviet Union wanted to please the Arabs. To counter pressure on King Hussein to follow pro-Soviet policy, the US on 22 December announced that it was expediting delivery of the Star fighters and several million dollars worth of other defensive equipment to Jordan. 37

Withdrawal of the UNEF and the Closure of the Gulf of Aqaba

Israeli-Syrian air battle of 7 April 1967 further confirmed growing danger to peace in West Asia. The US being involved in the Vietnamese crisis, the State Department could not give proper attention to growing crisis in West Asia. Not until mid-May could the growing crisis in West Asia command serious attention throughout the Government. The US criticized U Thant’s decision to withdraw UNEF from the Gaza strip. The danger of Israel resorting to force became acutely real after Nasser’s closure of Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. On 17 May, President Johnson in the first of several letters exchanged during the crisis with Eshkol, urged restraint and specifically asked to be informed before Israel took any action: “I am sure you will understand...that I cannot accept any responsibility on behalf of the United States for situations

36 Robert H. Estabrook (Washington Post, 26 November 1967) wrote: “A principal reason for the unprecedented censure...was the hope that the United Nations action would help to stabilize the Jordanian Government of King Hussein in the face of unrest and attempts to overthrow it encouraged from outside.”

which arise as the result of action on which we are not consulted.” From the outset, President Johnson seemed to want to avoid war, to restrain the Israelis, and to gain allied support for any action that might be taken. Between 19 and 22 May, the US continued to warn Israel not to act unilaterally.

Under Secretary of Political Affairs Eugene V. Rostow met Israeli envoy on 22 May in Washington to make sure that there would be no shooting over the closure of straits. The US Ambassador in Israel requested Israeli Government to wait for 48 hours before taking any action. On 23 May arrangements were made for Israeli Foreign Minister Eban’s visit to Washington for talks with US officials. President Johnson in his broadcast of 23 May 1967 observed:

We are dismayed at the hurried withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force from Gaza and Sinai after more than 10 years of steadfast and effective service in keeping the peace, without action by either the General Assembly of the Security Council of the United Nations.

He further declared that

The United States considers the gulf to be an international waterway and feels that a blockade of Israeli shipping is illegal and potentially

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39 Theodore Draper, Israel and World Politics (New York, 1968), pp. 87-93. The request to Israel was conveyed on President Johnson’s behalf; H. Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy (New Haven, 1975), p. 276.
disastrous to the cause of peace. The right of free, innocent passage of the international waterway is a vital interest of the entire international community. 40

The US had recognized the importance of unobstructed access to Israel's "back door" at Elath as early as 1957, when President Eisenhower had issued a formal declaration supporting Israel's right of free and innocent passage through the Straits. 41

Expressing the firm commitment of the US to the support of the political and territorial integrity of all nations of the Middle East, President Johnson said:

The United States strongly opposes aggression by anyone in the area, in any form, overt or clandestine. This has been the policy of the United States led by four Presidents—President Truman, President Eisenhower, President John F. Kennedy, and myself—as well as the policy of our political parties. 42

At a regular State Department briefing for reporters, Carl Bartel, a spokesman, said: "The United States has a continuing commitment to maintain peace and security in the area and we are continuing diplomatic efforts and we are supporting the efforts of the U.N. Secretary General." He said that the basis of US commitment stemmed from the 1950 Tripartite Agreement with France and Britain which guaranteed the existing

40 Department of State Bulletin, 12 June 1967, pp. 870-1;


borders of the Middle East.  

The US warned the UAR that it supported the freedom of movement of all nations through the strait of Tiran which guards the Red Sea approaches to southern Israel. A State Department official said the US considered the strait to be an international waterway and it would take a "serious view" if any nation tried to close it.  

In a bid to dissuade Nasser from taking precipitate action, President Johnson on 21 May sent US Ambassador Richard H. Nolte to Cairo with a personal letter containing detailed proposals, asking the UAR to refrain from entering the Gaza strip at the Mediterranean end of the frontier and keep its forces at Sharm al-Sheikh until it had officially guaranteed free passage. It urged Nasser to avoid any step that might lead to war. The UAR Foreign Minister rejected these as unacceptable and warned Ambassador Nolte that "if Israel carries out any aggression against any Arab country, we shall consider you as partners."  

In addition to urging moderation on all parties, the US made considerable efforts to bring about some form of collective action by the great powers to head off the impending crisis. It also tried to enlist the co-operation of Premier  

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Kosygin incooling the ardour of the "revolutionary Arab States". Johnson's letter stated: "Your and our ties to the nations of the area could bring us into difficulties which I am confident neither of us seeks. It would appear a time for each of us to use our influence to the full in the cause of moderation."

Though the US wanted to avoid direct involvement, the President ordered the movement of the vessels of the US Sixth Fleet towards the Eastern Mediterranean. On 24 May, the US urged France, Britain and the Soviet Union to work for peace, both inside and outside the UN. On the night of 26 May, Rostow met Egyptian Ambassador in Washington and urged him to request his government not to resort to force. He assured him that the US was also restraining Israel.

In his meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister President Johnson reiterated his determination to honour the commitments made by previous administrations, especially the commitment given by the Eisenhower administration in 1957 to uphold the right of Israel's "free and innocent" passage in the Gulf of Aqaba. He asked Eban to wait for two weeks to enable US to attempt to settle the dispute peacefully. Israeli Ambassador Harman and Minister Evron who met Under Secretary Rostow in Washington were told that: "The United States had decided in

46 Johnson, n. 33, p. 291.
favor of an appeal to the Security Council... the object is to call for restoring the status quo as it was before... the blockade announcement.” Rostow explained that the Congressional reaction compels a President to take this course.”

On 27 May the Soviet Union informed President Johnson that they had information that Israel was planning to attack the Arabs. Next day, Johnson sent a message to Eshkol repeating the information from Moscow of warning Israel against starting hostilities. He urged restraint to Israelis and hinted at the possibility of Soviet intervention if Israelis were to attack. The message read:

The Soviets stated that if Israel starts military action, the Soviet Union will extend help to the attacked state... As your friend, I repeat even more strongly what I said yesterday to Mr. Eban: Israel must not take pre-emptive military action and thereby make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities. 50

Rusk also sent a message to the US Ambassador in Israel for transmittal to Israelis: “With the assurance of international determination to make every effort to help the strait open to the flags of all nations, unilateral action on the part of Israel would be irresponsible and catastrophic.” 51

50 Ibid., pp. 399-400.
51 Ibid., p. 400.
The US warnings and advice had its impact of restraining Israel and the Israeli cabinet in an emergent meeting decided to accede to Johnson's request and not to go to war. US in a separate message urged President Nasser not to be the first to open fire.52

In an attempt to restrain Egypt from taking the first step, President Johnson's personal envoys Robert B. Anderson and Charles W. Yost visited Cairo on 31 May. They got positive response in Cairo and UAR agreed to send its Vice President to Washington on 7 June. The US also urged Israel to refrain from any armed action until after that date.53 In the Security Council, the US supported U Thant's appeal for a "breathing spell" to let tensions subside, and the White House spokesman, George Christian stated that US efforts to solve the crisis "are toward a UN settlement at this point".54

52 New York Times, 10 June 1967. President Nasser on 23 July 1967 in 'Revolution Anniversary' speech mentioned President Johnson's and Premier Kosygin's messages urging him to "exercise restraint", 30B/ME/2525A/5. According to former American Charge d'Affaires in Cairo, David Ness, he had been given explicit assurances by the Egyptian Government that it would not attack Israel first. See David Ness, "Interview", The Arab World (New York), no. 16, March-April 1970. On 26 May Heykal in Al-Ahram declared that "an armed clash between the UAR and Israel is inevitable". Regarding the Egyptian strategy he wrote: "Israel must resort to arms. But Egypt must wait for Israel to strike the first blow. Let Israel begin. Let our second blow be ready. Let it be a knock out."


The main US effort during this period was to resolve the crisis through some diplomatic procedure while its effort centred around mustering international support for reaffirmation of the right of passage through the Gulf of Aqaba. As the Vietnam war was reaching a new phase and the US was in no position to become embroiled in West Asia, it strongly urged Israel and Egypt to restrain from any armed action. The US attempted to restrain Israeli hawks by assurances that it would persuade the maritime nations to declare the Straits of Tiran as a guaranteed international waterway. But an opinion was gathering force in the State Department that if Israel was allowed to open the straits itself, then the dispute could be contained within the region and Super Powers could then hope to manage the crisis. The Head of the Israeli Intelligence Services, Meir Amit returned to Israel after tour of the US with the impression that US would neither take initiative to reopen the Straits nor object if Israel acted on its own to reopen it.55

While Washington believed that the danger of war was over for some time, the sudden visit of King Hussein, Nasser's staunch enemy, to Cairo and his signing of Mutual Defence Pact with UAR strengthened Israeli fears of Arab plans to liquidate it. With Moshe Dayan taking over as Israel's Defense Minister the war seemed imminent in West Asia. Britain's Premier,

Wilson visited Washington on 2 June to urgent prompt solution of the Tiran problem. President Johnson again insisted on America's determination to preserve peace and "the territorial integrity" of the West Asian nations. Due to US failure to get a declaration signed by maritime powers, Israel lost faith in US. The Arab states were also caught in grip of war hysteria and seemed to be at point of no return. The US kept on telling UAR and Israel not to strike the first blow. With the Syrian rulers the US had no direct link. The US efforts to resolve the crisis through diplomacy failed when on 5 June morning Israel took the initiative in starting the aerial attack. Its airforce raided the UAR and Syrian bases.

Soviet Union and the Crisis

Soviet Union extended support to Syria in encouraging the activities of the Palestine commandos on the Israeli border. It also denounced Israeli retaliatory raids into Jordanian territory of 29 May 1965. Anti-Western Arab regimes of UAR, Syria and Iraq looked towards the Soviet Union for regular arms supplies and economic aid. In August 1966, the Soviets entered into an agreement with Egypt for providing arms worth $310 million. Soviet Union supported militant neo-batist regime of Syria and promised support to the Syrian Government.

57 For details of the agreement see Jon D. Glassman, Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and the War in the Middle East (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 26-27.
against the alleged anti-Syrian manoeuvres of Israel, Jordan, and the US. It accused Israel of causing "armed provocations" against Syria with the aim of overthrowing the new regime. On 27 May, Soviet Union publicly warned that it could not remain indifferent to threats to Syria that were allegedly being hatched in Israel and in "reactionary quarters" in Jordan and Saudi Arabia with the backing of US and Britain. Tass statement warned that the Soviet Union "cannot and will not be indifferent to the attempts of disturbing peace in a region that is situated in the immediate vicinity of the borders of the Soviet Union." The Soviet arms supplies to Arabs and warnings were used by Israeli Government to pressurize the US for arming Israel. Soviet Union criticized the resumption of American arms supplies to Israel as it took these to be of direct threat to Syrian security.

Israel's reprisal air raids of July 1966 on Syria came under heavy criticism in the Soviet Union. Izvestia on 16 July called this a "piratical act" and maintained that Washington wanted to create a "Near-Eastern Vietnam for the purpose of open military interference in the affairs of Arab people". Supporting Syria in the Security Council meeting,

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58 Izvestia (Moscow), 7 May 1966. On 2 May it had warned the Israelis not to "forget the lessons of Suez and fiasco of their adventure in that region".


60 Izvestia, 24 May 1966.
Soviet Union urged a formal condemnation of Israel's "wanton attack" together with a hint of additional UN measures in case that country failed to behave in future. Because of Western opposition, the Soviet supported resolution failed to get required votes in the Security Council. 61

On 12 October, Israel received a Soviet note which charged: "According to information in our possession, concentration of Israeli troops can again be discerned along the Syrian frontier, and preparations are being made for an attack on the areas bordering the Syrian frontier." 62 Israeli plan of curbing the activities of Syrian based Al-Fatah brought prompt warnings from the USSR that an Israeli military move would invite swift retaliation. Another Soviet Note to Israel on 25 October said:

The Soviet Government possesses proof of concentration of Israeli forces recently carried out on the borders with the Arab states. This concentration is of a dangerous nature since it is closely accompanied by a hostile campaign against Syria.... 63

Radio Moscow in a talk entitled "Israel's Threats against Syria" blamed Israel of "pursuing a war policy against Syria"

61 Un Doc. S/7437, submitted by Mali and Jordan which called upon the Council to "condemn Israel's wanton attack" was rejected by a vote of six in favour with nine abstentions. While deploiring Israel's military reprisal, majority members decided not to vote for it as it did not condemn activities on the part of al-Fatah and Syria as well.

62 Pravda (Moscow), 15 October 1966.

63 Ibid., 26 October 1966.
and turning West Asia into a highly tense area "charged Western powers of openly adopting a partisan attitude towards Israel's false diplomatic efforts and encouraging its aggressive attempts."\(^64\)

On Israeli appeals for Soviet assistance in stopping the terrorist incursions, Moscow in a note to Israel on 9 November 1966 asserted: "It is possible that incidents of the kind were organized in a special way by certain (western) services or by an agency of those services for the purpose of provocation."\(^65\) The Soviet Union did not condemn or even admit the existence of Arab terrorism against Israel. The Soviet accusation against Western intelligence services revealed that the Russians apparently believed, the Western powers, using Israel as their tool, were seeking to undermine the progressive Syrian regime and disrupt the blossoming of Egyptian-Syrians "anti-imperialist ties". Soviet Union opposed the small power resolution calling upon Syria and Israel to co-operate with MAC's and Syria to strengthen its measures against Al-Fatah activities, on the ground that it was "one sided" and it wrongly implied that Syria was to be blamed for the Al-Fatah incursions. The resolution failed of adoption because of Soviet veto.\(^66\)

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64 Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), part 1, SU/2299/64/1, 25 October 1966.
66 SCOR, yr 21, mtg. 1319, pp. 9-11. Small power resolution was supported by 10 while opposed by 9 members of the Security Council.
Es-Samu Incident

During his visit to West Asia in mid-May 1966, the Soviet Premier Kosygin urged a united front among the "progressive" Arab States. Soviet efforts culminated in a new UAR-Syrian Defence Pact signed on 4 November 1966. Moscow expected moderate Nasser to act as a check on militant Syrian Government. But the Soviet supported pact acted otherwise, as Syrian rulers, expecting Soviet help, started the anti-Israeli campaign more vigorously. Israel Government felt concerned at coming closer of enemy Arab States. Fearing that any action against Syria might involve Cairo and Moscow, it retaliated by raiding Jordanian village of Es Samu on 13 November 1966. Pravda commented: "Although the first blow has been delivered against the territory of Jordan, the true target of Israeli militants is certainly Syria."67 Though attack on pro-Western Jordan should have been welcome to the Soviet Union, it feared King Hussein's overthrow might bring back US intervention into the area against any change in Jordan. Soviet experts charged that King Hussein was aware of the Israeli attack in collaboration with West as the attack provided an excellent pretext to the US for the renewed arms drive.68 On 25 November resolution condemning Israeli raid in Jordan was unanimously passed in the Security Council.69 Soviet Union

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68 New Times (Moscow), 21 December 1966.
69 UN Doc. S/7593 submitted by Mali and Nigeria was passed by a vote of fourteen in favour with only New Zealand abstaining.
supported the resolution as it provided an opportunity to please the Arabs.

Soviet Union greatly increased its popularity in the Arab countries by uncompromisingly supporting the Arab position in a series of UN debates growing out of clashes along the Israeli frontiers. Expressing its concern for Syria, the Soviet Union accused Israel of conspiring with the imperialists in doing "dirty work" and overthrowing the "progressive" Syrian regime. The Israeli Foreign Minister, Abba Eban during his visit to London called upon Soviet Union to relinquish its "one sided policy" and implement its policy of "peaceful co-existence" in West Asia.

Soviet Union and the War Scare in West Asia

Nasser failed to act as a check on militant Syrian rulers and was under constant attack from Syria and Jordan for not taking any armed action against Israel. At this very time the Soviet Union contributed to a major war scare in the midst of a sufficiently tense situation on the Syrian-Israeli frontier. A report in Izvestia of 3 February 1967 claimed that "large armed forces (Israeli) have been concentrated on the northern (Syrian) border. The incident on the Syrian-Israeli frontier which began on the eve of the new year, continued

70 Pravda, 9 January 1967; Izvestia, on 3 February blamed Israel of "provoking border conflicts and increasing tension" in West Asia to please "its Western protectors".

71 The Observer (London), 19 February 1967.
unabated." Reacting to Israeli-Syrian air battle in Syrian
territory on 7 April, the Soviet Union denounced "the reaction-
aries" in Tel Aviv, and alleged that they were standing ready
at the behest of the Western imperialists "to violate peace
in the near east".72

Soviet official reaction to the 7 April incident
came after two weeks delay. The Soviet Government cautioned
the Government of Israel about the risky nature of her policy
towards her neighbours and warned that it would bear full
responsibility for the consequences of its aggressive policy.
The Soviet Note commenting on Israeli policy said: "That policy
is fraught with danger, the full responsibility for which will
rest with the Government of Israel".73 On 21 April, Soviet
Deputy Foreign Minister, Yakob Malik called in the Israeli
Ambassador in Moscow, Katriel Katz, and accused Israel of
"aggression" and warned of reprisals. The warning note was
full of serious but unspecified threats of retribution and
warned Israel about her "risk laden policies" against her
neighbours which were "pregnant with dangers and she must
bear responsibility for them".74 But Israeli Ambassador

74 Oral statement of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs
emphasized the right of his country to defend her citizens and
the integrity of the borders and justified Israel's action
against Syria. 75  Moscow made it clear that it would not
tolerate threats of violence to Syria's regime.

Israeli Prime Minister's remarks, that the US Sixth
Fleet would be shielding Israel in case of Soviet intervention,
was interpreted by the Soviet Union as a prelude to US inter-
vention in West Asia.  Soviet Union called it as the American
policy of starting conflicts in the Near East "so that
Washington could make it as "pretext for direct intervention".
Soviet Union regarded Syria and UAR as the main targets of
the imperialist plot. 76  Soviet Press linked the alleged
Israel design with American plans.  Soviet policy was aimed
at pushing the US to the forefront by making Washington re-
sponsible for Israel's action.  Moscow noted that "in military
and political circles in the Israeli capital, voices are being
heard which increasingly talk about the necessity of
demonstrating strength again".  Quoting New York Times,
it said that "the Israeli authorities are planning a new air

75  Jerusalem Post, 8 May 1967.  The Soviet Ambassador in
Israel, Chuvakhin, refused to visit the Syrian border
when suggested by Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister on
12 and 19 May and by Israeli Prime Minister on 29 May.

76  SWB, part 1, SU/2439/44/10, 14 April 1967.  See US
News and World Report (New York) of 17 April 1967 for
an account of Israeli Prime Minister's interview in
which he said that his Government was acting on under-
standing that Washington would back its guarantees via
the Sixth Fleet: "We get these promises when we ask the
United States for arms and are told 'Don't spend your
money, we are here.  The Sixth Fleet is here."
force attack against Syria". It hinted also at a secret agreement between the Americans and Israeli authorities. The Soviet Union, therefore, decided not to restrain the Syrians as it thought they had reason to apprehend an Israeli attack.

The Soviet Union charged Israel with troop concentrations on the Syrian borders. It expected that in face of these accusations, Israel would be prevented from embarking on any military actions. It would further enhance the Soviet prestige in the region and build up the image of the Soviet Union as the only consistent friend of Arabs. The Soviet Union expected Nasser’s prestige to rise and the "progressive forces" in the area to come closer in this process. The impending Israeli attack was again and again presented by the Soviet Press as a plot directed and financed by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the US and backed by the US Sixth Fleet. It referred to Eshkol’s remarks that in the event of an armed clash with Arabs, the US would help Israel with the Sixth Fleet. It was also suggested that the whole adventure had been planned by the US to divert world attention from Vietnam.

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77 Izvestia, 16 May 1967. Commenting on May 1967 reports about Israeli plans to overthrow the Syrian regime, Goldberg, the US Ambassador in UN said: "This totally false accusation of a lies - Israeli plot helped substantially to inflame the crisis in which Israel and Egypt confronted each other for the first time in 10 years across border no longer patrolled by the United Nations," Department of State Bulletin, 3 July 1967, p. 6.

78 Izvestia, 20 May 1967.
Nasser later disclosed that he also got information from Soviet sources regarding Israeli plans to invade Syria. President Nasser in his famous resignation speech of 9 June declared:

We all know how the crisis began in the first half of last May. There was a plan by the enemy to invade Syria, and the statements by his politicians and his military commanders declared that frankly. The evidence was ample... Even our friends in the Soviet Union told the parliamentary delegation which was visiting Moscow last month that there was a calculated intention.

In a speech to the UN General Assembly on 19 June, Premier Kosygin declared:

In those days, the Soviet Government, and I believe others too, began receiving information to the effect that the Israeli Government had tried for the end of May, a swift strike at Syria in order to crush it and then carry the fighting over into the territory of the United Arab Republic.

The Soviet Union failed to point out to the Arabs the dangers of the increasingly bellicose line they were taking. Pravda on 16 May published in an inflammatory tone a communiqué of the visiting Egyptian Parliamentary delegation, giving

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79 Address of 22 May 1967 in New York Times, 22 May 1967; Broadcast of 9 June 1967 in ibid., 10 June 1967. Anwar as-Sadat, Head of the Parliamentary delegation met Kosygin on 29 April who told Sadat that the Soviets have information that the Israelis had massed two brigades on the Syrian border. Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Cairo Documents* (New York, 1973), p. 240. This was also repeated by Nasser in his Revolution Anniversary speech on 23 July 1967 at Cairo University.

sweeping endorsements to Nasser’s belligerent attitude on Palestine. The Soviet-Egyptian joint communique said:

The Soviet side fully supports the lawful and inalienable rights of the Palestine Arabs. It supports the struggle and the efforts undertaken by the Arab states against the aggressive intrigues of imperialist forces striving to exploit the Palestine problem for an intensification of tension in the Near East....

Nasser interpreted the Soviet warning as an expression of Soviet backing for a move that he wished to take to serve his own broader purpose, particularly to revive his declining prestige in the Arab world.

**UNEF Withdrawal and Closure of Straits**

While the Soviet Union extended political and moral support to Nasser over his demand for withdrawal of UNEF from Gaza, it expressed lack of previous knowledge over it. The Soviet Government statement on the West Asian situation said:

Despite the presence of UN troops in Gaza area and the Sinai Peninsula would, in this situation, give Israel advantages for staging a military provocation against Arab countries, the UAR Government asked the UN to pull out its troops from this area. 82

On 23 May, an official Soviet statement did not refer to Sharm el-Sheikh and renewed blockade of Eilat at all. Uneasy about the extent of Egyptian move, its diplomats at UN “assiduously

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81 Izvestia, 19 May 1967.

inquired from all who might have some special knowledge of Arab intentions, why Nasser had taken this step and how far he was prepared to go."

Showing its concern in the developments, the Soviet Union declared that it will "continue to do everything in its power to prevent a violation of peace and security in the Near East to safeguard the legitimate rights of the people". Soviet Union did not attempt in UN to work out a device for keeping UNEF at Sharm el-Sheikh. After the blockade of straits, Security Council was urgently convened to deal with the dangerously explosive situation. But the Soviet delegate Fedorenko declared: "The Soviet Union...deems it necessary to stress that it does not see sufficient grounds for a hasty convening of the Security Council." At the same time Soviet Union did not publicly endorse Nasser's closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israel, and it did not take any position on the Egyptian right to close the Straits to Israel. The reason for this equivocal position was probably the likely effect of the Egyptian claim on the Soviet Union's own maritime interests in Turkish territorial waters through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus (for entrance to the Black Sea).

Mid-way in the crisis, Soviet diplomatic activity suddenly increased as Soviet Union realized that diplomatic

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35 SCOS, yr 22, stgs. 1341, p. 2.
solution at this point would favour the Arabs. Soviet Union along with the US attempted to caution Nasser against further intemperate action. On 26 May Kosygin proposed to President Johnson that they should act mutually to reduce tension and both sent virtually identical notes to Egypt and Israel. The notes urged restraint and stated that aggressive action would have severe consequences for the entire world.36

On 27 May night, Soviet Ambassador in Cairo, Dmitri Pozdnayaev, awakened Nasser to convey an urgent message from his Government urging Nasser’s Government “not to be first to open fire”.37 He also assured Nasser that his Government would see to it that Israel also did not take the initiative. Soviet Prime Minister, Kosygin also sent a similar cautionary message to Israeli Prime Minister Eshkol on 26 May urging his Government to settle the conflict by unwarlike means “and avoid the outbreak of an armed conflict” which could have “serious consequences for international peace and security”. It stated:

We are concerned that, however, complicated the situation on Israeli borders with Syria and the United Arab Republic (Egypt) may be, it is necessary to find ways to settle the conflict by unwarlike means. It is easy to light a fire, but to put out conflagration may not be...as easy. 38

36 Heikal, n. 79, p. 242. Between 25 and 23 May, Kosygin reportedly told the visiting Egyptian Minister of War, Shams el Din Badran, “We are going to back you. But you have gained your point. You have won a political victory. So it is time now to compromise, to work politically.”

37 Ibid., p. 244.

The note was moderate in tone and nowhere Kosygin accused Israel of responsibility for the tense situation. But Soviet Union refused to verify the facts on Eshkol's request, who in his reply on 1 June called upon the Soviet Union to "join the other great powers and use all its influence for a permanent peace settlement in the Middle East". Israeli Premier gave no definite assurance that Israel would not resort to war. After precipitating the crisis, the Soviet Union warned Israel directly and through the US of its intention to directly come to the aid of Arabs.

In the United Nations, the Soviet Union assumed obstructionist posture toward the war prevention initiatives of other powers. Throughout, it insisted that the situation was not grave in West Asia. In the urgent meeting of the Security Council, on the request of Canada and Denmark, Soviet delegate Fedorenko complained that there was no "sufficient ground for such a hasty convening of the Security Council" and chided the Western Powers for "dramatizing the situation" and accused them of "planning to interfere" in the affairs of Arabs. As late as 29 May, he accused US Ambassador Goldberg of attempting "to dramatize the situation" and accused Israel of "dangerous aggravation of tensions". Soviet strategy in

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89 Dagan, n. 65, p. 222.
91 UN, SC, Provisional Verbatim Record, 29 May 1967 (S/PV/1343), pp. 87-102 and 121-2.
the UN consisted of preventing any serious discussion of the issue by belittling its gravity. It rejected President de Gaulle's proposal for concerted four-power action. On 3 June, Soviet Ambassador accused the US for "its complicity with the extremist circles in Israel which were preparing aggression against neighbouring Arab States".92

On 23 May, Cairo radio in a broadcast quoted an address by Marshall Gretshko at a farewell part in honour of UAR's War Minister Shams al-Din Badran:

> The USSR, her armed forces, her people and Government will stand by the Arabs and will continue to encourage and support them. We are your faithful friends and we shall continue aiding you because this is the policy of the Soviet nation, its party and Government. On behalf of the Ministry of Defense and in the name of the Soviet nation we wish you success and victory. 93

Nasser on 29 May declared in the UAR Assembly that Soviet Union will "stand with us in the battle". Nasser's claim was not contradicted by the Soviet Union due to Syrian President's visit to Moscow at that time. The Soviet leaders were apparently unwilling to allow any differences to arise between themselves and their Arab clients, or to "deprive

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92 SCOR, yr 22, stg. 1346, p. 15.

93 Mohd. Heikal wrote that Kosygin told Shams-al-Din Badran that "we are going to back you. But you have won a political victory. So it is time now to compromise, to work politically." But Badran misunderstood and conveyed to Nasser that Russians were prepared to back Egypt to the hilt. Heikal, n. 79, pp. 218-19.

themselves of the political pay offs, they evidently expected
to garner from an Arab political victory over Israel in the
face of US opposition." 94


tzvestia on 1 June warned Israel that if they "unleash
aggression, they will meet not only the united strength of the
Arab states but also resolute resistance from the Soviet Union
and all peace loving countries". In response to Israeli
Foreign Minister Eban's declaration that Israel can wait only
for a limited period for the fulfilment of her demands -
opening the Straits of Tiran, the Soviet Government in a Note
to the Israeli Government on 2 June said:

The Soviet Government wishes to repeat that it
will do everything in order to avoid the possi-

bility of military conflict, its present efforts
are concentrated (on achieving) this (aim). But
should the Israeli Government decide to accept
the responsibility for the outbreak of armed
conflict, it will have to pay the consequences
in full. 95

The Soviet Union by following consistently pro-Arab
policy from 1964 to the eve of the war lost credibility with
Israeli rulers. Its efforts to restrain Syria through Nasser
did not succeed. Arabs, who were under wrong impression about
Soviet support, let loose the war hysteria through provocative
statements. In the mounting tensions between the Arabs and

94 Arnold L. Horelick, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East",
in Paul Y. Hammond and Sidney S. Alexander, eds.,
Political Dynamics in the Middle East (New York, 1972),
P. 389.

95 Dagan, n. 65, p. 64.
Israel, the Soviet leaders saw an opportunity to increase Soviet influence in the Arab world. The crisis in West Asia deepened after Nasser's action of withdrawal of UNEF and closure of the Gulf. The Arabs and Israelis were caught in the grip of war hysteria. The effectiveness of the Soviet efforts to prevent war was hamstrung, however, by the contradictory position into which the Soviet Union had placed itself. The Soviet leadership which did not want to lose its political gains in the Arab world, had to endorse Arab aspirations, while at the same time restraining the Arab action. Israeli actions had to be condemned, and at the same time sufficient goodwill had to be maintained with Tel Aviv to convince Israelis of the sincerity of Soviet peacemaking efforts. In the May-June 1967 events, these contradictory efforts became impossible to maintain.

Concluding Observations

The crisis of 1967 was not something absolutely sudden, since the whole tempo of the dispute had been quickening since early 1966. As far as the Soviet Union and the US were concerned, the situation by April 1967 had polarized to the point, where Russia was inalienably identified with the Arabs and the US with Israel. When the crisis deepened in May 1967, the Super Powers failed to take decisive steps to resolve it.

The American policy during the crisis period, leading to outbreak of armed hostilities, reflected hesitancy, indecisiveness and weakness which in turn allowed the crisis
to run its own course. Throughout this period, the US avoided taking any forceful initiatives and relied on mere hesitant verbal reactions. In particular, this was the case with regard to the withdrawal of UNEF, the lack of political initiatives within the United Nations, the problems posed by Egyptian blockade of the Strait of Tiran and the efforts to restrain the Israelis.

As the Arab states were in a clear position of tactical advantage, the Soviet Union showed marked disinterest in exercising any restraining influence on its Arab-clients. It rather encouraged the Arab initiatives at the outset of the crisis and exercised only the mildest restraining influence as the war approached. In this connection, the Soviet Union supported the Egyptian mobilization in Sinai, showed lack of interest in UN involvement in the situation and attempted to intimidate Israelis. It co-operated with the US only on the specific issue of avoiding direct clashes between the Super Powers.

In the last week of May the Super Powers did take some joint steps to restrain the local parties from resorting to arms but doubts about each other’s motives could not bring them together to evolve any joint solution to avert the armed clash. Both the Super Powers realized and assessed the cost of their direct involvement in the coming war in West Asia and desired to keep it at a regional level. The Super Powers could not risk direct confrontation as it could lead to a global
war. Thus before the June War, both the Super Powers demonstrated an increasing sensivity to the dangers of over-involvement and both took no initiative for a political settlement.

The outbreak of the war showed up the singular inability of any outside power to control events in West Asia during a crisis. It was due to this realization that the Super Powers kept as much as possible outside an area and a situation in which they thought they might get sucked but which they knew were obviously beyond their control.