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Missing the Mark: Dimona and Egypt's slide into the 1967 Arab-Israeli War Hassan Elbahtimy¹

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Abstract

Did nuclear considerations play an important role in the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war? This research article seeks to answer this question by examining Egyptian decisions and conduct during the crisis preceding the war. The article argues that despite long-standing Egyptian concerns over Israeli nuclear pursuits, the issue only played a marginal role in Egypt's path to war. Egypt's slide into war was a result of miscalculation rather than a deliberate plan to destroy Dimona. During the pre-war crisis, the nuclear dimension only played a minor role in Egyptian military planning. While a contingency plan to target Dimona was studied, it was never implemented. The article predominantly draws on Arabic-language sources, including first-hand accounts of Egyptian decision-making during the pre-war crisis.

Introduction

In retrospect, Egypt's approach to the May 1967 Middle East crisis appears puzzling. Egyptian leaders took a series of escalatory steps that ultimately put Cairo on a path to war, resulting in a quick military defeat and the loss of the Sinai Peninsula to Israel.² The influence of nuclear considerations represents a puzzle piece—not only in the history of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, but also in the broader history of the region.³ It is now understood that Israel had achieved a rudimentary nuclear-weapon capability on the eve of the war. During the 1960s, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser had announced that a nuclear-armed Israel was unacceptable, going so far as to threaten military action to forestall that possibility. Were Egypt's escalatory moves in May 1967 meant—at least in part—to carry out Nasser's earlier threat of a pre-emptive strike to prevent

¹ I thank the discussants and participants in the workshop 'The Six-Day War (1967) Revisited: The Nuclear Dimension' held at the offices of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Washington, DC for their helpful comments, including Avner Cohen, Jim Hershberg, William Quandt, Joshua Pollack and Leonard Spector, among others. I'm grateful for Amr Yossef's feedback and help with the Hebrew translations. I also thank the editors and reviewers at the *Nonproliferation Review* for their comments and suggestions. I'm grateful for the Wilson Center's Nuclear Proliferation International History Project for enabling my fieldwork and my participation in the 'Six-Day War Revisited' workshop.

² Key Egyptian decisions during the crisis include the mobilization of Egyptian troops to Sinai (14th May 1967), the request to evacuate UN observers from the border with Israel (16th May 1967) and closing Israeli access to the Gulf of Aqaba (announced 22nd May 1967).

³ The war is known in Israel and West as the 'Six-Day War.' In Egypt and the Arab countries, it is known as the 'Naksa' (the setback) or the 'June War.' All these seemingly innocuous labels are embedded in larger narratives about the war. The 'Six-Day War' celebrates its short duration and its dramatic ending. The Arab 'Naksa' deliberately underplays the war and its consequences. In this article, I use the '1967 Arab-Israeli war' to refer to the conflict and the crisis that preceded it.

Israel's development of nuclear weapons? Moreover, did the nuclear dimension play an important role in Egypt's slide to war?

This article seeks to answer these questions and, in the process, engages with recent theories about the nuclear dimension of these pivotal events in the modern history of the Middle East. Earlier scholarly accounts generally shied away from investigating the role that the nuclear angle may have played in pre-war tensions. For example, Richard Parker's study of the war's origins includes only one direct reference to Israel's nuclear facility at Dimona, emphasizing its contribution to the demise of Egyptian-American relations.⁴ While the Middle East historian Douglas Little touches on the role that Dimona played in encouraging more belligerent Arab attitudes from 1966 onwards, he stops short of making any direct connections between the war and the nuclear question.⁵

Recently, interest in the nuclear aspect of the war has grown after the emergence of new information, including the revelation of an Israeli contingency plan to detonate a nuclear device in Sinai.⁶ Other accounts revealed that during the pre-war period, Egyptian pilots flew reconnaissance sorties over Israel, passing over Dimona and causing anxiety in the Israeli cabinet and armed forces.⁷ These revelations have drawn attention to the neglected nuclear dimension of the war.⁸ They have also opened up questions about whether the war, although fought conventionally, was waged with nuclear questions in mind.

Different authors have now proposed theories linking between the war and the state of regional nuclear politics. Shlomo Aronson with Oded Brosh claim that Dimona played a crucial role in the initiation of the war and the unfolding of hostilities. For them, Egypt's determination to take on Israel before it became nuclear-capable can explain Nasser's escalatory steps in 1967.⁹ Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez have taken this line of argument further, arguing that the war

⁴ Richard Parker, *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East* (Georgetown University Press, 1993), p. 103.

⁵ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p. 99.

⁶ "Interview with Yitzhak 'Ya'tza' Ya'akov by Avner Cohen," 1999, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, From the personal collection of Avner Cohen. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/145093>; "Interview with Tzvi Tzur by Boaz Lev Tov at the Rabin Memorial Center, Tel Aviv," August 16, 2001, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Rabin Memorial Center. Obtained by Adam Raz, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134926>

⁷ Ami Gluska, *The Israeli Military and the Origins of the 1967 War: Government, Armed Forces and Defence Policy 1963-67* (Routledge, 2007), pp. 34-36, 128-30.

⁸ For different views on this debate, see: William Broad and David Sanger, "'Last Secret' of 1967 War: Israel's Doomsday Plan for Nuclear Display," *New York Times*, June 3, 2017; Avner Cohen, "The 'Nuclear Narrative' of the Six-Day War," *Ha'aretz*, July 2, 2017; Guy Laron, "The Six Day War and The Nuclear Coup That Never Was", *War on the Rocks*, June 29, 2017. Shmuel Meir, "The nuclear issue in the Six-Day War: Was it or was it not?" *Ha'aretz*, June 18, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/blogs/shemuelmeir/BLOG-1.4177815>

⁹ Shlomo Aronson and Oded Brosh, *The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), especially pp. 83-112 and 107-08.

was a deliberate Egyptian-Soviet scheme to target Dimona that backfired.¹⁰ Both Avner Cohen and Michael Oren view these theories skeptically, although each emphasizes that the war had a nuclear dimension; while Egyptian nuclear motives are unclear, Israeli fears over Dimona were a factor that pushed Israel into action.¹¹ However, this view is not unanimous. Guy Laron posits that Israel's decision to launch an offensive operation had little to do with Dimona. Rather, he argues that Israeli leaders soberly assessed risks to the reactor; while they were keen to protect the site, they did not think it was in imminent danger.¹² In all these discussions, a systematic evaluation of Egypt's approach to the nuclear dimension of the war is largely absent—but crucial.

This article uses Egyptian sources and first-hand accounts to examine the extent to which the nuclear factor influenced Egypt's approach to the war. It argues that, while Egyptian leaders had long-standing concerns about Israel's pursuit of nuclear weapons, there is no evidence to suggest that these concerns directly triggered Egypt's involvement in the crisis. Israel's reactor at Dimona was nevertheless present, albeit marginally, in Egyptian minds in the pre-war period. Once war became a possibility, Egyptian planners identified Dimona as a potential military target. However, the temptation to harm Dimona was not strong enough to shake Nasser's commitment to a defensive military posture. Addressing Israel's menacing nuclear potential would have to wait for another day.

Abundant sources inform our understanding of Egypt's military planning during the pre-war crisis. These mostly come from the testimonies of members of the Egyptian high command, either as published memoirs or as personal testimonies given on television programs or in the Arabic press. These testimonies provide detailed, sometimes day-by-day, accounts of Egyptian military priorities that allow for cross-examination and corroboration of Egypt's approach and strategy in the run-up to the war. Still, some details around Egyptian decision-making remain unclear. These gaps result in no small part from the informal and rather chaotic style of Egypt's Vice President and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, the de facto military chief. Amer was known to bypass established procedures to communicate directly with field commanders, issuing instructions that left no paper trail and surprised other

¹⁰ Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (Yale University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Avner Cohen, "Cairo, Dimona, and the June 1967 War," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 2 (April 1, 1996): 190–210; Michael B Oren, *Six Days of War: The June 1967 War and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 76, 348.

¹² Guy Laron. "The Six Day War And The Nuclear Coup That Never Was." See also Guy Laron, *The Six-day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). Laron relies on a statement by the commander of the Israeli Air Force, Motti Hod, who described the theory that fears over Dimona pushed Israel to war as 'absolutely nonsense.' Hod mentioned he was not worried about Dimona and that the reactor was adequately protected: "I did not worry that the war would start in [i.e., with an attack on] the reactor. This is something that did not exist. I knew that Eilat was more tempting for them than the reactor." Hod's testimony appears in Danny Shalom, *Ke-ra'am be-yom bahir* [Like a bolt from the blue] (Rishon Letzion: Ba-avir, 2002); translation checked by Dr. Amr Yossef.

members of the high command around him. In addition to insights from these sources, the article also draws upon interviews with former officials, the Nasser collection hosted by the Alexandria Library, the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, and secondary Arabic sources.

The article is divided into five major sections. The first section provides background about Egypt's approach to Dimona prior to the May 1967 crisis. The second section examines whether nuclear considerations played a role in the origins of the crisis. In three successive sections, the article then examines how the issue of Dimona played out during the pre-war crisis. It traces the Egyptian high command's thinking about offensive operations. The article then examines the role of reconnaissance flights over Israel on the 17th and 26th of May, and ultimately discusses the fate of Egyptian planning for offensive operations.

Dimona viewed from Cairo

Long before the outbreak of war, Egypt had been aware of Israel's interest in nuclear technology. French involvement in helping Israel build a secret reactor in Dimona was known to Egyptian intelligence.¹³ Over time, Dimona became a major focus of Egyptian intelligence-gathering efforts. Cairo viewed Israeli nuclear activities with suspicion, but decision-makers struggled to come up with an effective response to the prospect of an Israeli bomb.

From the early 1960s, Egypt experimented with several ideas to address Dimona, but the issue remained unresolved. Cairo considered a nuclear program of its own and pursued nuclear technology internationally, but was never sufficiently invested to create a dedicated program to build a bomb.¹⁴ Rather, Cairo tried to directly and indirectly pressure Israel to give up its nuclear weapons pursuits. Several times, Nasser threatened to go to war if Israel were to attempt to go nuclear.¹⁵ US assessments, however, tended to dismiss Egypt's ability to carry out these threats because of Israel's military superiority.¹⁶

¹³ Author's interview with Samy Sharaf, June 4, 2011, Cairo. Sharaf suggests this was through French sources.

¹⁴ Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyah wa-al-Istirātījīyah. *Al-Barnāmaj al-nawawi al-Misri: al-tatawwur al-tārikhī wa-al-āfāq al-mustaqbalīyah* [[Egyptian Nuclear Program: Historical evolution and future horizons] (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyah wa-al-Istirātījīyah, 2000).

¹⁵ These public threats occurred regularly but not frequently in Nasser's speeches from 1960 till 1967. In 1960, he warned 'If we become positive that Israel was building nuclear weapons, then this means war between us and them.' Abdel Nasser, Gamal. Speech on Victory Day. Port Said. December 23, 1960. (source in Arabic). In 1967, he warned 'if Israel continues to work toward developing nuclear weapons, then our final response would be pre-emptive war' in: 'Gamal Abdel Nasser Interview with the Observer,' 5 Feb 1967, Bibliotheca Alexandrina Database. (Source filed in Arabic)

¹⁶ In the US intelligence assessment, 'Nasser might be tempted to strike at Dimona, but would probably be deterred by the fear that Israeli retaliation would destroy him before international peace-keeping machinery could intervene to suppress the conflict.' Memorandum from the Board of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency, to Director of Central Intelligence McCone, Consequences of Israeli Acquisition of Nuclear Capability, 6 March 1963. FRUS, 1961-1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962-1963, doc. 179.

Between 1961 and 1965, Nasser engaged in an extended dialogue with the United States, under both President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson, about regional nuclear politics. In these dialogues, Nasser tried to push the US to constrain Israel's nuclear program. He told several American interlocutors that he would not accept a nuclear-armed Israel but also that Egypt would not develop its own nuclear weapons.¹⁷ In international forums, Egypt supported early multilateral efforts to negotiate an international instrument against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and leveraged its proactive multilateral diplomacy toward that end.¹⁸ Yet none of these policies managed to resolve the looming challenge of an Israeli bomb during the 1960s.

While it is challenging to discern how much Egyptian policy-makers knew about it, Nasser's public statements indicate that Egypt seriously underestimated Israel's progress toward nuclear weapons. Asked about Dimona in a 1964 interview, Nasser acknowledged that it could be used for weapons purposes. However, he added, "it is not being used [to build nuclear weapons] according to our information."¹⁹ In other press interviews in 1966 and 1967, Nasser would repeatedly warn the public about Israeli proliferation—though in terms of its potential, rather than a *fait accompli*.²⁰ Nasser's public statements indicate that until at least 1970, Egyptian officials assumed that Israel had not yet gone nuclear. In a February 1969 interview with *Newsweek*, Nasser said that Egyptian experts did not think that Israel would have nuclear capability soon, though he also added that Egypt knew that Israel was "highly advanced in this field."²¹ While the prospect of an Israeli nuclear bomb was alarming, these assumptions allowed the issue to be put on the back burner.

A nuclear trigger?

What drove Egyptian decisions at the beginning of the crisis? Were they driven by a desire to destroy the Dimona reactor and to stop Israel from building nuclear weapons, as Nasser had previously threatened? The dominant narrative of the origins of the 1967 war contends that Egypt had not planned and was not seeking to go to war when tensions broke out in mid-May 1967. Instead, Cairo slid into an unintended war by miscalculating Israel's readiness to fight and the

¹⁷ These exchanges took place on various levels, but the highlights were several meetings between US officials (John McCloy, Phillips Talbot and Robert Komer) and Nasser in Cairo. Telegram from the Embassy in the UAR to the Department of State, June 28, 1963; FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 283. Memorandum of Conversation, September 28, 1964; FRUS, 1964–1968, VOLUME XVIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964–1967, doc. 96. Nasser's pledge not to build nuclear weapons: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, September 12, 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 324.

¹⁸ Mohamed Shaker, *The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: Origin and Implementation, 1959-1979* (London; New York: Oceana Publications, 1980), 45.

¹⁹ Stephens, Robert and Seale, Patrick, "Nasser: We want to be friends with Britain," *Observer*, July 5, 1964. p.6.

²⁰ 'Gamal Abdel Nasser Interview with the Observer,' 5 Feb 1967, Bibliotheca Alexandrina Database. (Source filed in Arabic)

²¹ 'Gamal Abdel Nasser Interview with the Newsweek,' 3 Feb 1969. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Database. (Source filed in Arabic)

strength of Egypt's own defenses. Evidence from multiple Egyptian sources supports this account of events.

In a closed meeting in Nasser's residence on the evening of the 13th of May, Nasser and Amer took the decision to mobilize troops to Sinai (they were later joined in the meeting by Anwar Sadat). The direct impetus for this choice was the realization that Israeli-Syrian tensions were running high and that Cairo had to intervene. Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, the longtime editor of the *Al-Ahram* newspaper and Nasser's confidant, provides a fairly detailed account of the conclusions of that meeting based on his discussions with Nasser the following day.²² According to Heikal, Nasser felt that Israeli threats were real and "serious"; furthermore, they presented an unacceptable "insult" to Egypt, given its commitment to Syria's security through a common defense pact. Nasser and Amer agreed that Egypt "cannot remain passive." Heikal does not mention any nuclear considerations informing Egypt's decision. This absence is particularly significant, since Heikal had previously written about Israel's nuclear capabilities and the need to address them in the Egyptian press.²³

The lack of references to nuclear considerations comes across clearly in a variety of sources. Nasser did not mention the issue in his public statements during the crisis or in his televised resignation speech on the 9th of June.²⁴ Similarly, in his meeting with US envoy Robert Anderson during the crisis, the nuclear issue also did not come up either when they both discussed the origins of the crisis or the possibilities for de-escalation.²⁵ Reports by US envoy Charles Yost, who was sent to Cairo to support the US embassy during the crisis, also do not report any nuclear concerns in discussions with Egyptian officials.²⁶ Sadat, who attended part of the meeting on the 13th of May at Nasser's residence, also identifies tensions over Syria as the driving factor behind Egyptian involvement in the crisis. According to Sadat, Nasser intended Egyptian mobilization to "scare" Israel and deter any attack on Syria, but events "went out of his control."²⁷ Sadat makes no reference to the nuclear question in his account of the war.²⁸ Neither

²² Heikal mentions that the discussion took place over a secure telephone line. Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Heikal, *Al-Infjār, 1967, Ḥarb Al-Thalāthīn Sanah* [The Explosion 1967, The Thirty Year War]. (Markaz al-Ahrām lil-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 1990), 447–48.

²³ Heikal. 'Al-khatar al-lathi Yahoum Hawl Al-Shark Al-Awsat' [The danger that looms on the Middle East]. *Al-ahram*. August 20, 1965 (in Arabic)

²⁴ In his resignation speech Nasser attributed the start of the crisis to concerns over Syria's security. 'Statement by President Gamal Abdel Nasser to the Nation Announcing his Resignation' June 9, 1967. Nasser's Collection. Library of Alexandria.

²⁵ Nasser's meeting with US envoy Anderson. Telegram From the Embassy in Portugal to the Department of State, Lisbon, June 2, 1967. Document 129. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967.

²⁶ Reports by Charles Yost of meetings in Cairo about the crisis: Telegram From the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State 1 Cairo, June 2, 1967. Document 128. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967.

²⁷ Anwar Sadat, *Al-Baḥṭh 'an Al-Dhāt : Qiṣṣat Ḥayātī / (al-Qāhirah : al-Maktab al-Misrī al-Ḥadīth, 1978)*, 186.

²⁸ Sadat, 186–94.

do other senior Egyptian officials close to the decision-making process at the time.²⁹

The absence of nuclear considerations in Egyptian narratives about the origins of the war is significant, given that preventing Israel from going nuclear would have been an acceptable domestic justification for a war that ended badly. No such claim has emerged from Egypt. In separate interviews with the author, both Nasser's presidential chief of staff Samy Sharaf and Minister of War Shams Badran rejected the idea that the nuclear dimension played a role in triggering the crisis.³⁰ When General Mohamed Fawzi, the chief of the general staff at the time, was asked about Dimona in an oral history interview available at the Alexandria Library, he mentioned that Egypt already knew the facility existed and did not describe it as playing a big role in the crisis.³¹ These consistent testimonies show not only an absence of evidence to support the idea that Egyptian decision-makers were actively concerned with Dimona as they entered the May 1967 crisis, but also offer denials whenever interviewers have raised the question.

As the Egyptian military mobilized in Sinai, the justification provided to the troops explicitly referred to the need to deter Israel and protect Syria. Two documents shed light on the Egyptian high command's thinking in the early stages of the crisis. The mobilization order from chief of the general staff Mohamed Fawzy, dated the 14th of May, cited Egypt's common defense agreement with Syria (signed in 1966) and the need to protect an Arab ally against Israeli aggression.³² In a different document, Marshal Amer, as the deputy supreme commander of the armed forces, provided a more detailed rationale for the decisions to mobilize, also highlighting Syria. He wrote that mobilizing forces in Sinai "will make Israel think twice before invading Syria." Amer added that "aborting any Zionist plans for expansion on the expense of any

²⁹ Maḥmūd Riyāḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Maḥmūd Rīyād (1948-1978): al-baḥṭh 'an al-salām. wa-al-ṣirā' fī al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* [Memoires of Mahmoud Riyad: The search for peace and conflict in the Middle East] (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Mustaḡbal al-'Arabī, 1986); Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Jamasī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamasī*, [Memoires of al-Jamasī] Second Edition (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1998); 'Abd al-Mun'im Wāṣil and Aḥmad Ra'fat Ḥilmī, *Al-Ṣirā' Al-'Arabī Al-Isrā'īlī: Min Mudhakkirāt Wa-Dhikrayāt Al-Fariq 'Abd Al-Mun'im Wāṣil*, [The Arab Israeli Conflict: Memoirs and memories of General Wasil] (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Shurūḡ al-Dawliyah, 2002); Muḥammad Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970: mudhakkirāt al-Fariq Awwal Muḥammad Fawzī, Wazīr al-Ḥarbīyah al-Asbaq*. [The Three Year War: Memoirs of General Mohamed Fawzy] (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Mustaḡbal al-'Arabī, 1986); 'Abd al-Muhsin Kamil Murtajī, *Al-Fariq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq : Qa'id Jabhat Sinā' Fī Ḥarb 1967* [General Mortagy Recounts the Fact: Commander of the Sinai Front in the 1967 War] (Beirut : al-Waṭan al-'Arabī, 1970); Murād Ghālib, *Ma'a 'Abd Al-Nāṣir Wa-Al-Sādāt: Sanawāt Al-Intisār Wa-Ayyām Al-Miḥan*, [With Abdel Nasser and Sadat: Years of triumph and days of hardship] (al-Qāhirah: Markaz al-Ahrām lil-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 2001); Heikal, *Al-Infijār, 1967*; Amin Huwayidi, *Adhwa' 'ala Naksa w Iztanzaf* [Shedding Light on Naksa and War of Attrition] (Beirut: Dar Eltalya, 1975).

³⁰ Author's interview with Samy Sharaf, June 4, 2011, Cairo. Author's interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK.

³¹ 'Shehadet Al-Fariq Fawzi Bekhsous Harb El-Istinzaf' [General Fawzy's Testimony on Attrition War]. Undated. Nasser's Collection. Alexandria Library.

³² The document is reproduced verbatim in Heikal, *Al-Infijār, 1967*, 456–57.

Arab state” was a matter of national security for Egypt.³³ In addressing the Egyptian armed forces at the start of the crisis, neither Amer nor Fawzy mentioned Dimona or ordered the military to prepare to disrupt Israel's nuclear capabilities.

Indeed, how the Egyptian military mobilized appears more consistent with a deterrence mission and a public show of force, rather than a mobilization for war. It deliberately took place in the public eye, in broad daylight without much secrecy or effort to conceal troop movements. In the following days, Egyptian troops congregated at assembly points to head towards assigned positions in Sinai. Tanks and military units moved through the capital, appearing in crowded public squares, sometimes passing intentionally close to embassies, under the watchful eyes of military attachés and foreign correspondents.³⁴ In fact, General Fawzy describes how the mobilization was organized and executed as a “military demonstration.”³⁵

Further evidence suggests that the Egyptian military had not been prepared for a pending war with Israel. Many senior Egyptian military leaders who provided testimonies about the conflict agree that they were totally taken by surprise when they learned of the decision to mobilize troops into Sinai.³⁶ At the time, Egyptian military priorities were focused on Yemen, where forces had been fighting a protracted counterinsurgency campaign since September 1962.³⁷ The prevailing mood in the Egyptian military towards conflict with Israel is perhaps best captured by a 1966 operations report recommending that any conflict with Israel should be avoided because of the scale of Egypt's military involvement in Yemen.³⁸

There are many other indicators that the military did not anticipate a war with Israel. Prior to the 1967 crisis, the military budget had been frozen for three years.³⁹ Three months before the crisis, the military had ordered the early discharge of a new intake of reservists and decreased the number of conscripts

³³ Amer's document dated 15th of May 1967 and including amendments to the text reproduced in Heikal, 452–54.

³⁴ This was described as an intentional display of “military muscle” by lieutenant General Salah Hadidy Ṣalāh al-Dīn Ḥadīdī, *Shāhid `alá Ḥarb 67* [Witness on 67 War] (al-Qāhirah : Dār al-Shurūq, 1974), 153–54; al-Jamāsī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamāsī*, 49.

³⁵ General Fawzy's testimony in: Sulaymān Maẓhar, *I'tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū: nuṣuṣ shahādātihim amāma Lajnat Tasjīl Tārīkh al-Thawrah* [Confessions from Commander of the June War: Text from testimonies before the committee recording the history of the revolution] (Dār al-Ḥurrīyah, 1990), 53.

³⁶ Murtajī, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqqā'iq*, 46; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 69, 70; al-Jamāsī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamāsī*, 37,38; Maẓhar, *I'tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 109. Author's interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK.

³⁷ Ḥadīdī, *Shāhid `alá Ḥarb 67* /, 37–50; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 23–29; al-Jamāsī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamāsī*, 61–62.

³⁸ Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 28; al-Jamāsī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamāsī*, 64.

³⁹ The overall budget was 174 million Egyptian pounds. Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 67.

by around 25%, due to budgetary constraints.⁴⁰ Many of the fortifications and logistics needed to implement Egypt's defense plan in Sinai ('Qahir,' or 'Conqueror') were not yet in place as the crisis erupted.⁴¹ Just one of three defensive zones established by Qahir had its fortifications ready.⁴²

Similarly, the air force was unprepared and vulnerable. Fortifications for air bases, approved in March, had not been completed by May, leaving the Egyptian air force vulnerable to surprise attacks.⁴³ A new squadron of Sukhoi Su-7 aircraft had been delivered by the Soviet Union but was stored unassembled; as of May, it had not been integrated into the air force.⁴⁴ Overall, the picture that emerges is one in which the Egyptian military was not anticipating active combat on its eastern borders, let alone planning on initiating it. If anything, the military's priorities were in Yemen, while the borders with Israel were neglected and relegated to a secondary position.

Dimona between the offense and the defense

As the crisis escalated and the prospect of a military confrontation with Israel increased, the Egyptian military command began to reconsider elements of its defensive plan, Qahir, in favor of offensive operations. Ideas about a limited offensive emerged on the 16th of May, shortly after Egypt's request for the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force from Sinai.⁴⁵ The Egyptian command started to seriously study these contingency operations, while the decision about blocking the Straits of Tiran was considered (the decision was dramatically announced by Nasser on the 22nd). These ideas, however, were gradually sidelined and ultimately shelved by the 2nd of June.⁴⁶

Did Dimona play any role in Egyptian considerations during that period? The swing toward offense between the 16th of May and the 2nd of June can probably be attributed to a loss of confidence in Egypt's defense posture in Qahir rather than a fixation on the Israeli reactor in Dimona. Qahir was based on a strategy of defense-in-depth. It divided Sinai into three defense zones, to delay, deflect, and then roll back any Israeli mechanised offensive before it could reach the Suez Canal.⁴⁷ The plan assumed that Israel would be the first to attack. Yet in the

⁴⁰ According to Fawzy, these decisions indicate that the War Minister did not expect any crisis on the horizon. Fawzī, 67.

⁴¹ According to Mortagy, engineering preparations in the Sinai theater were only one-fifth complete when the crisis broke out. Mortagy p.63

⁴² Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 49; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Haqqā'iq*, 63.

⁴³ Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 67. Author's interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK..

⁴⁴ Fawzī, 65.

⁴⁵ Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Haqqā'iq*, 66.

⁴⁶ Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 123–24; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Haqqā'iq*, 87–116.

⁴⁷ Ḥadīdī, *Shāhid `alá Ḥarb 67 /*, 109–15; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 100–101; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Haqqā'iq*, 60–62. Heikal, Mohammed. Talasem al-Khuta Kaher. Ma' Heikal. Aljazeera. 17 May 2009. <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/with-haykal/2009/5/17/%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%84->

tense, politically charged atmosphere of the crisis, Amer began to realize that Qahir would not, on its own, stop Israel from achieving battlefield gains, which could be painful and politically costly. In particular, Israel could sweep through Qahir's lightly guarded first line of defense in quick 'raids' or, even more embarrassingly, capture and hold Egyptian territory.⁴⁸

The removal of UN forces from Sinai further highlighted the vulnerabilities in Qahir.⁴⁹ The plan's focus on defense-in-depth meant that two outposts, Gaza and Sharm al-Sheikh, were marginal to Egypt's defense plans. Yet, as the crisis evolved, both Amer and Nasser realized that these lightly defended locations had become contested and politically sensitive hot spots.⁵⁰ Sharm al-Sheikh controlled the gateway to the Gulf of Aqaba; its importance increased as tensions over access to the waterway flared up. Gaza was a Palestinian territory then under Egyptian administrative control; losing it to Israel would expose Cairo to Arab criticism and undermine Pan-Arab solidarity.⁵¹

Amer took two steps to address fears that Israel would capture either of these locations or conduct a surprise raid to embarrass Cairo. First, he pushed Egypt's defense lines closer to the Israeli border and reinforced the first line of defense with more military units. Second, he asked military planners to prepare contingencies for an Egyptian offensive that would bring the conflict inside Israel's borders. Thoughts about offensive operations developed along two lines. Egyptian forces could either conduct raids, attacking Israeli troop concentrations close to the Egyptian border, or they could seize territorial pockets that could be used for bargaining leverage if Israel broke into Sinai, captured Sharm al-Sheikh or Gaza, or interdicted navigation in the Suez Canal.⁵²

In addition to these considerations, offensive operations had a strong advocate in the air force, whose commander, Gen. Muhammad Sidqi Mahmud, repeatedly pushed for an Egyptian first strike. This was in large part because Egypt's forward air bases in Sinai were within easy reach of the Israeli air force and could suffer a disarming Israeli strike in light of lack of adequate aircraft shelters.

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%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1

⁴⁸ Murtaji, *Al-Fariq Murtaji Yarwi Al-Haqā'iq*, 66–67.

⁴⁹ Egypt initially did not want UN forces removed from Gaza or Sharm al-Sheikh. Heikal, *Al-Infijar*, 1967, 462–67; Fawzi, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 72–74; Riyāḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Maḥmūd Rīyād (1948-1978)*, 46, 47. Maj. Gen. Indar Jit Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder: Withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force Leading to the Six-Day War of June 1967* (London and Totowa, N.J.: Frank Cass and Company Limited 1980).

⁵⁰ Fawzy mentioned that Nasser asked for defence of the Gaza strip to be revisited in the meeting of the high command on the 25th of May: Fawzi, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 123–24.

⁵¹ Under Qahir, the defense of Gaza was assigned to units with light weapons, who depended on reinforcements from the Egyptian base in al-Arish almost 50 km away.

⁵² Murtaji, *Al-Fariq Murtaji Yarwi Al-Haqā'iq*, 66–67; Fawzi, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 107–8.

In a meeting of the high command, Sidqi Mahmud warned that his force would be “crippled,” using the English word, if Israel were to strike first.⁵³

It was within this context that the Egyptian military command considered plans for an Egyptian first strike. In a rush and without adequate intelligence or reconnaissance, Egyptian planners developed contingencies for three separate operations. These plans used Sinai as a springboard toward either the northern, central or southern areas of the Negev Desert. The nature and direction of the proposed ground operations indicate that Dimona was incidental to the planning process. Amer chose to focus on the south, convinced that an operation against Israel’s Red Sea port of Eilat stood the best chance of success. This operation, which came to be called ‘Fagr,’ or ‘Dawn,’ became the focus of Egyptian offensive planning, while other proposals faded into the background. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Dimona was entirely out of the picture. During the crisis, Amer asked the air force to prepare additional plans to target key Israeli assets. Dimona was identified as one such target. The list also included the port of Haifa, oil refineries, and targets in support of an Eilat offensive.⁵⁴

Ultimately, none of these contingencies was executed, as the military and political odds against them were high. Field commanders protested that their troops had not trained for offensive operations.⁵⁵ Even the air force, the strongest proponent of an Egyptian first strike, saw these newly conceived offensive ground operations as a burden. Worried about a disarming Israeli air strike, Egyptian air force commanders pushed for operation ‘Fahd,’ or ‘Leopard,’ which consisted of a first strike against Israeli air force assets above all else. Accordingly, they saw any other operations, including against strategic targets or in support of the Eilat offensive, as a distraction and an inconvenience.⁵⁶ When Amer asked Sidqi Mahmud to prepare for additional operations, he protested, “I’m not the commander of the US air force.”⁵⁷ He complained that the resources at his disposal were limited and that he could not implement more than one plan at a time. The available Egyptian testimonies give no indication that a contingency plan to attack Dimona was discussed or considered at higher political levels or involving Nasser.

Egyptian reconnaissance and Dimona

During the crisis, Egyptian and Israeli air forces traded incursions into their respective airspaces. Israeli accounts frequently cite two sorties, on the 17th and

⁵³ Author’s interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK. The vulnerability was in part the result of budgetary constraints that prevented building fortifications or additional air bases to disperse Egyptian jets. Furthermore, Egyptian radars could not detect low-altitude flights and the Soviet Union refused to provide an upgrade for Egyptian air defenses. The service was also haunted by its experience in 1956, when the British military managed to destroy or disable most of the Egyptian air force on the ground. Mazhar, *I’tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 103–62.

⁵⁴ Sidqi Mahmud’s testimony in: Mazhar, *I’tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 111.

⁵⁵ al-Jamāsī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamāsī*, 68; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 108–9.

⁵⁶ Fahd was a plan for 72 hours of offensive air operations in support of Qahir.

⁵⁷ Sidqi Mahmud’s testimony in: Mazhar, *I’tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 111.

26th of May, as targeting Dimona.⁵⁸ But how significant was Dimona to the Egyptian sorties into Israeli airspace? The answer is not conclusive. On the one hand, Amer asked the air force to prepare a contingency plan for an air raid on strategic targets, including the nuclear site.⁵⁹ It is therefore possible that the flights over Dimona were intended either to gather information about the reactor or test its defenses. On the other hand, air-power historian Tom Cooper suggests that these flights could have been executed on the initiative of local commanders and without much advance planning or preparation.⁶⁰ Cooper's research, based on interviews with Egyptian air force pilots, suggests that these flights were primarily undertaken to boost morale and respond to Israeli incursions rather than having serious operational value.⁶¹

While Egyptian literature includes several references to these sorties, a link to Dimona is not made explicit. Rather, Egyptian accounts provide several reasons for incursions into Israeli air space. A published account by one fighter pilot then stationed in Sinai, Mamdouh El-Malt, supports some of Cooper's findings. Pilots in forward deployment to Egyptian air bases in Sinai were furious about low-altitude Israeli air incursions that were not captured by Egyptian radar. These pilots repeatedly pushed for authorization to reciprocate, and even conducted sorties into Israel without high-level authorization.⁶² But testimonies from higher military leaders suggest that Egyptian incursions were more than just reciprocal gestures. Egypt had a chronic problem obtaining reliable intelligence on Israel. As Israeli troops took positions along the border, the need for fresh intelligence became pressing. General Fawzi mentioned that the first successful Egyptian aerial reconnaissance took place on the 2nd of June and yielded good information about concentration of Israeli troops 15 km from the border.⁶³

In his book on the 1967 war, published in 1990, Heikal provides a glimpse into discussions about the Egyptian flyovers. Heikal's detailed account makes no reference to Dimona. He describes sorties by two Egyptian MiGs that crossed into Israel and took photographs within the area between Eilat and Beersheba.⁶⁴ The Egyptian MiGs were not successfully intercepted by Israeli jets, which chased them for 14 minutes after entering Israeli airspace. The MiGs flew at a high altitude, above the ceiling of Israel's Hawk surface-to-air missiles. The success of such a deep incursion into Israeli airspace boosted the morale of the Egyptian air force. Heikal also mentioned these sorties in his 2009 televised memoirs. This time, he explained how these incursions might have caused Israeli

⁵⁸ Gluska, *The Israeli Military and the Origins of the 1967 War*, 34–36; 128–30.

⁵⁹ Mazhar, 111,161.

⁶⁰ Tom Cooper. 'Joyriding Egyptian Pilots Helped to Provoke the Six-Day War With Israel.' War Is Boring. October 17, 2016. Accessed on 15 October 2018: <https://warisboring.com/joyriding-egyptian-pilots-helped-to-provoke-the-six-day-war-with-israel>

⁶¹ David Nicolle and Tom Cooper, *Arab MiG-19 and MiG-21 Units in Combat*, vol. 44 (Osprey Publishing, 2004), 9–10.

⁶² Deraz, Esam. 'Mamdouh el-Malt Yarwi.' [Mamdouh el-Malt Recounts] *Wafd*. June 18, 2009.

⁶³ Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 122.

⁶⁴ Heikal, *Al-Infijār, 1967*, 701.

decision-makers to worry about Dimona. He did not, however, address whether Dimona was the focus of the Egyptian maneuvers.⁶⁵

On balance, the deep incursion flights had limited value as an intelligence-gathering tool and were less menacing than they appeared. These deep-penetration flights were conducted at high speed and high altitude in order to evade Israeli interception and air defenses. This meant that pilots had only a brief window of opportunity to do anything useful when passing over Israeli targets. Crucially, according to Sidqi Mahmud, Egypt also lacked dedicated photo-reconnaissance equipment mated to suitable aircraft.⁶⁶ The Soviet Union, Egypt's main military supplier, kept a tight leash on both aerial reconnaissance equipment and access to satellite imagery for fear of fueling regional conflict or encouraging possible Egyptian adventurism. Because of the lack of dedicated reconnaissance cameras, the military had to improvise solutions. This involved fitting locally available cameras onto aircraft. These improvised cameras, however, had limited visibility and could only capture images from a narrow angle, reducing their usefulness.⁶⁷

Heikal, in 2009, goes as far as concluding that these high-altitude missions were counterproductive.⁶⁸ First, he suggests that they provided little new or useful information. Second, he claims that the Israeli air force's inability to intercept intruding jets gave the Egyptian command the wrong impression about the level of Israeli preparedness: Amer, Heikal relates, concluded that the Israelis must be "asleep" and surmised, "it appears that we have overestimated the strength of Israel's air force."⁶⁹ The limited value of these sorties is reflected in other testimonies. Sidqi Mahmud believed that if Egypt were to launch an aerial offensive, the first wave of attacking fighters would have been dedicated as much to gathering information as to engaging in combat, a form of "armed reconnaissance"; this detail underscores the continued inadequacy of Egyptian intelligence.⁷⁰ Ultimately, Nasser was unenthusiastic about these incursions. On the 2nd of June, el-Malt, who was stationed at al-Meliz (Bir Gifgafa) air base, recalls that instructions were issued to pilots at al-Meliz, which was involved in several reconnaissance flights, to stop any flights over Israel for fear of provoking Israel into a war.⁷¹

The break of 'Dawn'

Operation 'Fagr' ('Dawn'), the most developed of the proposed offensive plans, was never executed, despite being seriously considered by the Egyptian high command. By all indications, Amer saw an attack on Eilat as his best bet for an offensive, but had his hesitations. General Fawzy, the Chief of the General Staff,

⁶⁵ Heikal, Mohammed. Talasem al-Khuta Kaher. Ma' Heikal. Aljazeera. 17 May 2009

⁶⁶ Sidqi Mahmud's testimony in: Mazhar, *I'tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 150.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶⁸ Heikal, Mohammed. Talasem al-Khuta Kaher. Ma' Heikal. Aljazeera. 17 May 2009.

⁶⁹ Heikal, *Al-Infijār*, 1967, 701; Heikal, Mohammed. Talasem al-Khuta Kaher. Ma' Heikal. Aljazeera. 17 May 2009.

⁷⁰ Sidqi Mahmud's testimony in: Mazhar, *I'tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 114.

⁷¹ Deraz, Esam. 'Mamdouh el-Malt Yarwi.' [Mamdouh el-Malt Recounts] *Wafd*. June 18, 2009.

mentions that an order was given on the 25th of May for an attack on Eilat to take place on the 27th. Whether this was a readiness order (as Amer often gave to ensure combat units were always “on their toes”) or a final authorization is unclear. In any case, Fawzy relates that the order was retracted two hours after it was issued, following a meeting between Nasser and Amer.⁷² Sidqi Mahmud recounts a similar start-and-stop. On the night of the 26th of May, Amer asked him to be ready to launch an air attack against Eilat. The order was reversed 40 minutes later.⁷³ Heikal, in his 1990 book, mentions that Nasser asked Amer to shelve any plans for a first strike in the morning of the 27th and that Amer cancelled his orders later that day.⁷⁴

These accounts reflect the confusion and indecision within the Egyptian command about whether to authorize an offensive operation. Amer appears to have been the central figure in this confusion; it is difficult to conclusively determine his logic. He committed suicide shortly after the war and left no memoirs or other testimony. Judging from the accounts of witnesses in the military command, Amer's thinking comes across as chaotic and unstructured. He is simultaneously depicted as enterprising, willing to take risks, and worried about losing face if Israel were to beat him to a first strike. While an opportunity to attack Dimona might have been a factor encouraging him to take a belligerent posture, it is not evident from the accounts of those around him.

Whatever Amer's reasons for supporting a first strike, Nasser's word ultimately carried the day. Offensive plans ultimately remained unrealized. The Egyptian president was more interested in securing a political solution that would allow him to consolidate his gains from the crisis, avoiding a risky military confrontation. He made that clear in his closed meeting with air force pilots on the 22nd of May, shortly after announcing the closure of the Straits of Tiran.⁷⁵ He emphasized these preferences again in meetings with members of the military high command and with Amer.⁷⁶ Nasser felt he could not escalate the crisis further without compromising international support for Egypt or antagonizing the United States and the Soviet Union, which were pushing for de-escalation.⁷⁷ Within Egypt, Nasser's authority was not challenged. Even Amer folded; by the 2nd of June, he stood side by side with Nasser before the high command, arguing against a first strike. Amer said that it was better to receive the first strike and fight Israel than make the first strike and fight the United States.⁷⁸

⁷² Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 114, 124.

⁷³ Commander of Egyptian Air Force General Sidqi Mahmoud's testimony in: Mazhar, *I'tirāfāt qādah Ḥarb Yūniyū*, 142.

⁷⁴ Heikal, *Al-Infijār, 1967*, 573–74.

⁷⁵ Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtaji Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq*, 73; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 104. Author's interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK.

⁷⁶ Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 123, 124; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtaji Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq*, 79; al-Jamasī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Jamasī*, 70, 71. Author's interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK.

⁷⁷ Heikal, *Al-Infijār, 1967*, 573–74.

⁷⁸ Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 125, 126; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtaji Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq*, 81. Author's interview with Shams Badran, April 5, 2017, Plymouth, UK.

Conclusion

This article has examined Egyptian attitudes and actions towards Dimona during the crisis preceding the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In the process, it has engaged with recent literature assigning a prominent role to the nuclear dimension of the crisis. Examining available first hand accounts of Egyptian political and military decision-making suggests that the nuclear issue was marginal to Egypt's approach to the crisis rather than a key or decisive factor. During the pre-war crisis, Egyptian leaders considered Israeli nuclear capabilities and the issue was on their metaphorical radar. For example, the Egyptian military added Dimona to its list of possible military targets, and Amer asked the air force to develop contingencies related to the nuclear site. But none of these plans were considered urgent and they were never executed.

On balance, the role that nuclear considerations played for Egypt during the pre-war crisis appears limited. There is no evidence to suggest that Dimona was a decisive factor in the outbreak of tensions leading to the war. On the contrary, multiple Egyptian testimonies support the conventional narrative that the crisis began because of an Egyptian miscalculation, against the backdrop of rising Israeli-Syrian tensions. The nuclear angle also appears to have been marginal to key Egyptian political and military decisions during the crisis, particularly regarding whether offensive operations should be launched. A large preponderance of evidence indicates that Egyptian leaders were primarily occupied with other matters. Even when Egyptian planners considered Dimona was considered, they did so in an ad-hoc manner, without prioritizing plans to attack the nuclear site.

Even if the nuclear angle played only a marginal role in Egyptian thinking during the crisis, the nuclear consequences of the war for Egypt were significant. Following Egypt's military defeat and the loss of Sinai, Nasser could no longer credibly threaten war to forestall the development of an Israeli bomb. Egyptian priorities also changed. Rebuilding and reorganizing the armed forces became an overwhelming concern, allowing the issue of Dimona to recede into the background. In the aftermath of the war, Egypt embraced a multilateral solution to the problem of Israel's nuclear capabilities. Egypt supported the last stage of negotiations of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which it signed in July 1968.⁷⁹ Since that time, Cairo has used multilateral diplomacy as its main tool to oppose and stigmatize Israel's nuclear capabilities.

⁷⁹ Statement by Egyptian Ambassador Hussien Khallaf. Final verbatim record of the Conference of the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament, Meeting 390, ENDC/PV.390, 15 August 1968.