The Arab-Israeli Wars

War and Peace in the Middle East

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escalation, no communique on this aerial encounter was issued, and nor did the Egyptians or Russians mention a word of it in public. There was considerable consternation in the Soviet Union, but the Egyptians merely rejoiced at the Soviet discomfiture: they heartily disliked their Soviet allies, whose crude, gauche behaviour had created bitter antagonism, and whose officers looked down on the Egyptian officers, treating them with faintly-concealed disdain. The commander of the Soviet Air Defences and the commander of the Soviet Air Force rushed to Egypt on that very day.

The cease-fire

Meanwhile, political negotiations had been afoot on the basis of the United States’ so-called ‘Rogers Plan’. Originally proposed by the American Secretary of State, William Rogers, in December 1969, this plan envisaged a peace treaty between Israel, Egypt and Jordan, in which there would be almost complete Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, leaving open the questions of the Gaza Strip and Sharm El-Sheikh. An acceptance of this plan required an agreement for a cease-fire for a period of three months. Nasser returned from a visit to the Soviet Union in July a frustrated and very sick man. He was beginning to realize the scope of the political cost for Russian involvement in Egypt. The strain and cost of the War of Attrition were beginning to tell, and he believed he could use a cease-fire to advance his military plans. He announced that he was willing to accept the Rogers Plan, and Jordan joined him in accepting a cease-fire. On 31 July 1970, Israel also accepted the American initiative and agreed to the cease-fire, which came into operation at midnight on 8 August 1970.

Nasser’s acceptance of the proposals came as a surprise to many. Dr. Henry Kissinger* feels that Nasser may have feared an Israeli pre-emptive strike. He and his Soviet advisers may have interpreted the White House press statements by President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger as indicating a danger of American involvement. However, he feels it more likely, in the light of later events, that Nasser and the Soviets may have decided from the outset to use the cease-fire offer as a cover for moving forward the missile complex with minimum risk. For Israel, the standstill was a crucial part of the cease-fire agreement, and neither party was entitled to reap military advantage by bringing missiles forward. While the exchange of had gone on across the Suez Canal, the Egyptians had not been able to build any new missile sites close to the Canal. If they were now to do this wider the cover of the cease-fire, they would be in a better position to resume the war successfully after the lapse of the three-month period.

Israel fears of Egyptian and Soviet duplicity were far from groundless. Nasser had accepted the Principle of the cease-fire and the actual cease-fire had been carried out

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by the Russians and the Egyptians. During the period immediately before the cease-fire came into effect and immediately thereafter, the Israelis complained to the United States about the very considerable violations of the agreement, but the United States was sceptical about them. In the light of later evidence, Dr. Kissinger was to admit that 'It is probable that our hesitant first response encouraged Nasser to accelerate the forward deployment of missiles . . .'. This evaluation was a most accurate one. From all the evidence that has been accumulated since, it would appear that Nasser's aim was indeed to attempt the next phase of his plans - the seizure of part of the east bank of the Suez Canal under cover of the cease-fire. He obviously fully intended to use the three months of the cease-fire to deploy his missile forces in such a way as to facilitate the crossing of the Suez Canal by his ground forces and to neutralize the Israeli Air Force over the Canal. However, on 28 September 1970 President Nasser died, and this immediately affected the military situation and developments in the area. Contrary to what Nasser had originally planned and intended, the cease-fire was to remain in force until his successor moved the Egyptian forces across the Suez Canal on 6 October 1973.

Thus came to an end a bitter and hard-fought conflict in which the Israeli and the Egyptian armies had been pitted against each other for some three years. This war was a decisive proving ground for new weapons, new methods and new military strategies in many fields. Indeed, the whole strategy and theory of modern air-defence was tested in a brutal confrontation, and a new policy was evolved by the Russians that was to withstand the test of war in 1973. For, on the basis of the new system that had proved itself in July 1970 along the Suez Canal, the Russians created a more developed and sophisticated system both in Egypt and in Syria, a system to which was added the highly-mobile SAM-6 missile. Unlike the SAM-2 and SAM-3, this was proof against many of the electronic countermeasures activated by the Israeli forces.

Israel, for its part, had withstood the battles despite the heavy casualties it had incurred between June 1967 and August 1970 - more than 500 killed and 2,000 wounded on all fronts - and had adapted itself to a hitherto alien type of warfare. When the cease-fire due to last for 90 days commenced, the Israeli Command decided to take advantage of this period of grace in order to reconstruct those parts of the Bar-Lev Line that had been damaged in the War of Attrition and to strengthen it. General 'Arik' Sharon had in the meantime taken command in the south, relieving General Gavish; and, following his suggestions, a second line of fortifications was constructed some five to seven miles behind the Line. Extensive works were undertaken, and a very considerable effort was invested in order to create the necessary infrastructure, for a total cost of approximately £200 million ($500 million).

There were those, like General Israel Tal, who were unhappy with these stepped-up construction activities. They felt that the fortifications were becoming a series of fixed targets under constant observation, with visible supply lines that invited attack. At best, they constituted only a shelter, and the Israeli artillery, it was maintained, was inadequate to support them. It was further pointed out that they could not prevent a water-crossing by day or by night because they were isolated and not mutually-supporting. Again, the proposal was put forward suggesting a system whereby mobile armoured forces with artillery and anti-aircraft support would be responsible for sectors, with tanks in observation points along the water line. But these reservations were not accepted, and construction continued of the complex system in the Bar-Lev Line. With the appointment of General David Elazar ('Dado') as Chief of Staff in January 1972, when he relieved General Bar-Lev, the matter was raised again. While General Elazar favoured the system of fortifications, a form of compromise emerged. There was a complete absence of hostile activity along the Canal, and this inactivity tended to quieten any reservations there may have been about the reduction in the number of fortifications and troops along the Canal. It accorded with a growing feeling of security and public expressions about the excessive burden being caused by the defence budget, and the necessity to look for savings. Wherever there was a group of fortifications, only one now remained active with a minimum number of soldiers manning it; of 26 fortifications, some ten were closed and blocked by sand in such a manner as to require a number of weeks to activate them again. Because of this compromise, the dividing line between the Bar-Lev Line acting as a warning system, or as a defensive system designed to block the enemy, gradually became hazy and clouded: such lack of clarity was to exact its cost in the first hours of the fighting along the Canal in 1973.

The period of quiet that continued along the Canal from 1970 to 1973, the dramatic decision of Nasser's successor, President Anwar el-Sadat, to expel the Russians in July 1972, a failure to read correctly the intelligence picture, and an inability to show sufficient flexibility in evaluation — all these led to the lowering of the Israeli guard over the years. The original concept of the Bar-Lev Line was frittered away, and its implementation was weakened considerably. And all the time, Egyptian preparations were advanced discreetly and inexorably.