

THE OCTOBER WAR

*Memoirs of Field Marshal
El-Gamasy of Egypt*

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The American University in Cairo Press

DS
128.19
E3
E4313
1993

*To my son Medhat, my daughters Magda and Maha, and to
the coming generations, who will be facing difficult and
complex times. May this testimony help you on your journey to
a better future.*

– Mohamed Abdel Ghani El-Gamasy

First published in Arabic in 1989 as *Mudhakkarat al-Gamasi:
barb Uktubar 1973*.

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The American University in Cairo Press
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt

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Dar el Kutub No. 3195/93
ISBN 977 424 316 1

Printed in Egypt by International Press

action

With regard to the War of Attrition, Israel's losses were heavy. Military reports and information reaching us from western sources indicated the success of the war in achieving its objective. . . .

Abba Eban, Israel's foreign minister at the time, said that the ceasefire was received in Israel with a feeling of satisfaction. When Mrs. Meir went on television to announce it, the public reacted as though they had reached a peace settlement. News bulletins would no longer start with the announcer reporting the names of young Israelis fallen in battle. Their losses in life and in valuable equipment had made the War of Attrition very costly to them.

Mahmud Riyad goes on to say that in principle, the war made Israel's continued occupation so costly that Israel was ultimately forced, at the end of the war, to accept what it had rejected at the beginning. Notably, it retreated from its insistence on separate solutions and accepted the principle of a comprehensive settlement. It also retreated from trying to impose direct negotiations on us and accepted indirect negotiations. Regardless of the developments that took place later, this is what Israel accepted when a ceasefire put an end to the War of Attrition.¹

From the military perspective, our armed forces needed not only the War of Attrition but the combat stages of resistance and active defense. These provided essential practical training in actual fighting conditions with Israel, or an 'inoculation' against the hardships of battle. Our fighting men found a new confidence in themselves, their weapons, and their leadership. The armed forces came out of this war with useful lessons, particularly on points of weakness and strength in the enemy and in themselves.

Combat ability improved noticeably between July 1967 and the August 1970 ceasefire. We had used a variety of fighting methods, offensive and defensive, in the different branches of the armed forces. This had provided concrete experience which helped identify weaknesses and make allowances to correct for them. Israel's reliance on sophisticated weapons, its air force, and the wide-scale electronic techniques it used to halt this persistent and escalating war inadvertently pressured Egypt to improve and expand its air defense network, set up a missile barrier, and allowed it to test and improve it on the battlefield. It must be emphasized that without the three years of engagement (1967-70)—starting with defensive resistance using whatever arms were available, and then moving gradually into positive and active

defense which then developed into the defensive-offensive War of Attrition using all types of weapons and involving all branches of the armed forces—our forces would not have been able to make the transition from the total collapse of June 1967 to a massive offensive operation in October 1973, which included crossing a virtually impregnable water barrier, the Suez Canal. Given enemy air superiority, we would not have been able to launch a comprehensive attack before completing our air defense system. This did not take place before August 1970, when we obtained sophisticated weapons from the Soviet Union and, for the first time in Egypt, set up a Department for Electronic Warfare to use electronic equipment and methods in war.

A question which naturally arises is whether there was an alternative to armed conflict following the June 1967 war. Could the problem have been solved through diplomatic and political channels while the armed forces stood passively by? This would have meant Egypt's surrender to Israel's conditions. War is an extension of politics using other means, and diplomatic activity had to be backed up by as much military clout as the capabilities of the armed forces would allow at the time. Foreign Minister Mahmud Riyad has described the positive impact of military action on political action:

The War of Attrition forced Israel into a military and political corner. It was not capable of settling the war in its favor, despite its military superiority. At the same time, it did not want to withdraw from Sinai. Therefore, in the face of Egypt's determination to fight—despite human and material losses—its only option was to engage against its will and despite the bloodshed and losses in men, which it could ill afford.

At the end of the War of Attrition, Egypt had gained a number of advantages and learned some invaluable lessons. We had become familiar with Israeli combat style. Israel came to realize that it was unable to destroy the air defense network. The Israeli air force no longer had effective freedom of action, which in turn exposed the Israeli army's actual combat capabilities. On the other hand, our forces were able to operate very much more freely under the protection of both the air defense and the air force.

Naturally enough, Egypt also had to bear heavy losses. We saw this as the inevitable price for the October War just as Israel paid dearly for its stay in Sinai until the October War began.

It is my opinion that Egypt's overall military and political situation by the end of the War of Attrition was better than it was at the beginning. Indeed, the cessation of hostilities on 8 August 1970 did not mean that

the wheel of war had stopped; it marked the beginning of a new stage in preparation for the October 1973 war.

In Israel, it was admitted that the War of Attrition had inflicted heavy losses and that the Israeli army had lost the upper hand. At a Labor Party meeting on 29 August 1970, Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban conceded that "our losses in number of dead and in valuable equipment has made the War of Attrition an expensive war. Had it not been for the ceasefire, Israel would have had to face an escalation in the war with Egypt and consequently an increase in the number of casualties and an erosion of Israeli air superiority."

In September 1971 the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* quoted Brigadier Mati Beled as saying that from a military perspective, the Israeli army had failed in the War of Attrition and that this was its first defeat on the battlefield since the establishment of the state. Israel had grasped the first straw thrown to it, which was the ceasefire.

General Weisman, later to become minister of defense, mentions in his memoirs that when the Egyptians accepted the ceasefire on August 1970, the Israelis interpreted this as an acknowledgment that they (the Egyptians) could no longer put up with the bombardments. He said,

But without minimizing the losses they sustained due to our air raids, my fear was that the war would claim the lives of our best soldiers, and this came true. The Egyptians came to have freedom of action for three years to prepare for the October War. It is mad to say that we won the War of Attrition because, on the contrary, it is the Egyptians who benefited most, despite their losses.

During the period from 1970 to 1973, our senior commanders repeatedly said we had won the War of Attrition and this affected our thinking. They should have said we failed to destroy the Egyptian air defense network but had to do so because it would play a decisive role in the next battle and, one way or another, it had to be silenced. We lived under an illusion instead of facing facts. We may have succeeded in raising public morale but we paid dearly for this.

As the War of Attrition continued without our army being capable of stopping it, I gradually realized—unlike many others—that it was the first time we had not triumphed. I have repeatedly said that we failed in this war.

The War of Attrition was the first war Israel failed to win. This fact paved the way for the Egyptians to launch the Yom Kippur [October] war in 1973.

PART III

THE OCTOBER 1973 WAR

Our commitments are being put to the test. The problem of liberating the land is central to our life. . . . The battle will be fought using whatever weapons are available. We will plan for this. . . . Our situation will have to change or our cause will end, die, and disintegrate in 1973.

—President Sadat

THE ROAD TO WAR

The momentum towards war accelerated during 1972 and it became necessary for President Sadat to make several important decisions.

1971 had passed without a settlement, even though President Sadat had declared that this was to be the year of decision in the hope that it would help move the international community towards an equitable political solution to the problem. In a 22 June 1971 address to the naval forces, Sadat had announced that "1971 is a decisive year, and we cannot wait forever." A month later, on 23 July, at the National Congress of the Socialist Union, he declared that "we are coming to a decisive stage in the history of the Arab nation, which is the year 1971." At the end of the session, he repeated these words, saying, "I've said this to you and committed myself before the people and made it known to the world that this year will be decisive for the Middle East crisis."¹

When the situation remained unchanged, Sadat had to rely on the excuse that the Indo-Pakistani war began on 3 December 1971. By January 1972 unrest had broken out in the universities as students in despair demanded action. The fifth anniversary of the June 1967 war contributed to the unrest as people felt that another year would start with nothing done to remove the consequences of the aggression.

Sadat, sensing that his popularity and reputation were at stake, made a series of statements in which he tried to reassure the people that the

decision for war was beyond question or discussion. A forthcoming battle was inevitable for our land to be liberated.)

Soviet policy at the time was predicated on a rejection of war and this was reflected in their refusal to provide us with offensive weapons. It became increasingly clear that the Soviet Union would neither support us nor encourage us to carry out an attack in 1971.

General Muhammad Sadeq, minister of war, did not conceal his distrust of the Soviet Union from the general command. On 24 January 1972 he addressed a large group of officers in Cairo and strongly criticized the Soviets for not providing us with the weapons we had asked for, effectively preventing us from fighting. Sadeq added that the Soviets were spreading false and poisonous rumors among the younger officers, the soldiers, and the students to the effect that the armed forces did have the weapons to launch a war but that it was the senior officers who did not want to fight.

I did not approve of General Sadeq's decision to raise these matters at this meeting because I was afraid it would affect morale, given that the Soviet Union—our main source of weapons—was frustrating and blocking our desire to fight. In my opinion, it was a political difference between Egypt and the Soviet Union and there was no point in sharing this information with our officers. If the point, from the perspective of the minister of war and the commander in chief, was to raise awareness and to keep the troops informed, then its negative repercussions would be greater than its advantages.

On 18 March 1972, at a meeting of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, General Sadeq told us that rumors of a disagreement between himself and Prime Minister Dr. 'Aziz Sidqi were false, as were rumors of a falling-out between himself and the Soviet Union. The disagreement was simply one of principle. The word had got out that naval bases in Marsa Matruh and Alexandria had been put under the control of the Soviets, and this was not true either. Sadeq added that Lieutenant General 'Abd al-Qader Hasan, deputy minister of war, had returned from Moscow with a new weapons agreement including the supply of T 22 planes and T 62 tanks because the Soviet Union had asked for payment in full and in hard currency, without a 50 percent reduction as was the usual practice, and the Egyptian side had refused to sign the agreement under such conditions so the hardware would therefore not become available. The fact is that the role of the Soviets as reluctant arms suppliers had become difficult to swallow, even though they knew very well that they were our sole source of weapons.