

MEMORIES OF WAR

The seeds of our defeat of June ٥, ١٩٦٧, were sown much earlier, during the years of Nasser's autocratic rule. These years made me realize that the mistakes made by a democracy in a whole generation do not compare with the mistakes that can be made by a dictatorship in a single day. When we deprive people of their freedom, all manner of evils can follow, as we have seen recently in Iran.

Twice in my own lifetime I have voted for dictatorship—both occasions on the same day, July ٢٧, ١٩٥٢, after the revolution that overthrew King Farouk. I did so because I was totally convinced that this was the only way to rid our country of corruption. I am not ashamed to admit that I later changed my mind. The years of autocratic rule that followed the revolution hurt the Egyptian citizen twice over: once through removing his freedom, and again through the practices that were adopted by the committee that was set up to abolish feudalism. This committee wounded the pride of many families whose wealth was confiscated.

All this happened at a time when Arab-Egyptian relations were at their lowest ebb. The Arab world was disunited. In September ١٩٦٢ Egypt had committed many troops to save the revolution in Yemen and to try and bring that country out of the Middle Ages. Aden was liberated as

a direct result of our support. In return, we lost thousands of our young men in the Yemeni hills, thousands of miles away from home. The Yemeni War contributed to the increasing ruptures in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia was against us. Many other countries joined them and took a stand against Egyptian military intervention. Most important, the Yemeni operation forced Egypt to send its elite forces overseas. These forces did not return until after the ۱۹۶۷ War.

We therefore entered the ۱۹۶۷ War against Israel—a fierce enemy, armed to the teeth—with a large part of our army miles away from the front. They were fighting a battle that was not ours in order to defend a revolution that was also not ours. The Yemeni War might have been used as a training ground for our armed forces, but unfortunately this did not happen. We later found that our military leaders there were exploiting the situation in order to feather their own nests.

This was revealed after the ۱۹۶۷ defeat during the hearings against Abdel Hakim Amer, who was then commander of the armed forces.

During this period, the Soviets as usual were unhappy to see one of their allies becoming too powerful and were terrified that Nasser's influence would spread from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf. His power was beginning to exceed what they wanted. He had become a legend in the Arab world after the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the war of ۱۹۵۶. The Soviets were angry at his growing popularity, and Khrushchev therefore provoked two crises against him. The first was in ۱۹۵۸, the year when Egypt united with Syria, and the second was in ۱۹۶۱ when the union broke apart.

The Soviets attempted to build up a rival to Nasser in order to lessen his popularity in the Arab world. In ١٩٥٨ they thought Abdul Karim Kassem, then president of Iraq, could be set up as Nasser's rival, but their expectations foundered. Kassem was overthrown and left the scene. They tried again with Salah Gedeed, a Syrian politician, who showed his loyalty to the Soviets by preaching their Marxist doctrine. Gedeed abolished all titles, calling everyone "Comrade," the form used in Syria to this day.

On a visit to the Soviet Union in May ١٩٦٧, just before the catastrophe that overtook our armed forces, I met a friend, a Russian politician called Smirnov, one of the deputy foreign ministers. I spoke to him about Gedeed, and he told me of the miracles he had performed. I warned him of their experiences with Abdul Karim Kassem and added: "You learn nothing from your mistakes." Smirnov disagreed, then took me on one side and whispered something in my ear. "You return today to Cairo," he said. "As soon as you arrive, go straight to Abdel Nasser and tell him that we have information confirming the fact that Israel has mobilized ten divisions of troops on the Syrian border." I did not delay one second after my arrival in Cairo. I rushed immediately to Nasser's home to tell him what I had learned from the Russians. Nasser said the Russians already transmitted the same message directly to him. This is typical of the way they act. The story was a lie.

Later, the Russians tried the same tactics with Colonel Qadaffi when they told him in a private message: "Take care. Sadat has sent an armored division from Alexandria to the Libyan border." Qadaffi was afraid and became emotional, shouting to the five continents against me.

Only later did he find out the Russian story was not true. Our “armored division” was a mobile bakery for the use of our troops. The Soviets* objective was to dangle Qadaffi upside down by his legs and leave him swaying in the wind.

In the case of the false alarm over the Israeli mobilization against Egypt, this was also just another example of the characteristic tactics of the Soviet Union.

At about the same time that this was going on. Field Marshal Amer had gone to Pakistan, where he heard a lot of critical comment about Egypt’s acceptance of the Israeli occupation of Sharm-el-Sheikh. Amer lost his head and sent Nasser a telegram asking him to order the closure of the Tiran Straits, which leads to the port of Sharm-el-Sheikh. When Amer returned to Cairo, Nasser asked him: “Do you know the meaning of your request? It would mean war with Israel. Are you ready for such a war?” Amer answered: “Our forces are ready for anything.”

Nasser wanted to stop this Arab auctioneering; so he ordered the mobilization of our forces in the Sinai. As I said before, at that time the bulk of our army was in Yemen. So, one day, the Egyptian people woke up to find rows and rows of tanks and armed vehicles rolling through their cities to the Sinai. A big press campaign was started to stir up the people.

A plan had been drawn up for the Sinai mobilization. On Air Force Day, May ٢٢, Nasser made a speech announcing the closure of the Tiran Straits and requesting the United Nations to move its troops away.

Every day I went to briefings at the army headquarters with Nasser, remaining there until midnight. Our last meeting was on June ۷, a Friday. By this time, the whole world was living on its nerves. In Jerusalem, the prime minister, Levi Eshkol, trembled at the prospect of war, although Ezer Weizman, the chief of staff, assured him that Israel would win. In Washington, President Johnson called for restraint and the Soviets asked for calm. Messages flew in from all sides.

I must now state something for the historical record. There are eyewitnesses alive today who know the truth of what I am saying. On the night of Friday, June ۷, we met at the headquarters of the armed forces, where Nasser, in his capacity as president of the Republic, signed the final plan for war. Then he spoke to the commander of our air force and said: “The first strike will be against our air force.” The commander of the air force replied: “We are expecting it, Mr. President. We have based our plans on that expectation.” Nasser asked him: “Have you assessed what our losses might be in the first strike?” The commander replied: “It will not exceed ten percent, not by any means.”

Then the president spoke to all the commanders present: “It is now Friday night. Yesterday, a new coalition government was formed in Israel. If war is to break out, it will come tomorrow or the day after—or Monday, at the very latest.” It appeared as though Nasser was reading from a book. The war broke out on the morning of June ۹—Monday.

I swear now before God and the people that the war plan we had agreed upon was never implemented. The unauthorized changes that were made led directly to the fall of al-Arish on the first day of fighting. And

the fall of al-Arish meant that the war had ended in favor of the enemy. Al-Arish was the army's forward depot, and it fell without resistance.

On June 5, I woke up to the news that Israel had attacked us. Our radio claimed we had shot down twenty-seven Israeli planes. My only comment was that the Israelis had made a big mistake in attacking us. We were ready for them, and I was confident of victory. I did not rush out and put on my clothes but entered the bathroom to shave and take a shower as I did every morning. Then I told my driver to take me to army headquarters. Above Cairo and the al-Masa airport I saw smoke rising. At first, I was not worried: I knew we had a good network of anti-aircraft missiles and thought the smoke came from the fallen Israeli aircraft.

Soon, I noticed another car beside mine. It carried the Soviet ambassador, and I thought he was on his way to congratulate our government—or that he had been summoned to headquarters to answer a request for more arms and ammunition. I told my driver: "Follow the ambassador's car. He will be going to headquarters." Our two cars drew up outside the headquarters building. I gave the ambassador time to enter before me. When I went in an enthusiastic young officer told me we had now downed fifty Israeli planes. But when I went underground to Amer's office, I found a very different story.

Amer stood behind his desk, his eyes shifting, not concentrating on anything. Two members of the revolutionary council sat silently on a couch. The way Amer looked—his eyes out of focus—and the silence of my colleagues made me anticipate an unexpected catastrophe. I looked at the field marshal and said: "Good morning, Abdel Hakim." "He did not answer. Not one word. After a whole minute, he realized I was there and

said in a low voice: "Good morning, Anwar." I moved to the couch and asked my colleagues: "What has happened?" The answer was the last thing I expected. With one voice they said: "The Israelis have destroyed our entire air force. "One of them added: "Do you remember what happened in the ١٩٥٦ war when the Israelis destroyed all our planes? They repeated the same strike this morning. We lost all our air force."

The news came as a thunderbolt. I sat stunned, unable to believe what I had just heard! I felt bitter as I fell on a couch in the office, a million questions erupting inside me. We sat in silence. Suddenly the sad silence was broken by the ringing of a telephone; Abdel Hakim answered it. The call was from our forward base at al-Arish and the news it brought was bad—the Israelis were advancing on the base. As military men, we understood at once the meaning of this news: al-Arish, our firmly fortified base, was essential to the defense of Egypt. If it should fall, the war would be over. According to the original plan on which we had agreed, al-Arish could only be reached after bitter fighting and heavy losses for the Israelis. Even if they were prepared to accept such losses, we doubted they could have reached the base.

But we now learned the agreed upon plan had been changed. So to whom could I address my bewildered questions? To whom could I speak? The voice of Abdel Hakim continued to break the silence of the office, still answering the call from al-Arish. Suddenly the door opened from the adjoining salon, and Gamal Abdel Nasser entered.

I had not known that Gamal was at headquarters, although his house was less than two minutes away. He had just been talking with the Soviet ambassador, who had arrived at our headquarters. After a quick

greeting, he turned to Abdel Hakim and said: “Abdel Hakim, why did you call for the Russian ambassador?”

Abdel Hakim answered: “I want to ask them to arrange a cease-fire because the United States has entered the war and has destroyed our air force.” In front of me and our two colleagues, Nasser said: “Abdel Hakim, the United States has not entered the war. It was Israel and not America who destroyed our air force.” Abdel Hakim attempted to talk, but Nasser interrupted him: “I do not agree, and I will not permit the announcement that the United States has entered the war until you bring me the tail off an American aircraft with its insignia.”

While he was speaking these words, our radio was claiming we had shot down seventy planes—when in fact all our airfields, including those at Heliopolis and Huckstep, had been hit by the enemy.

An argument ensued between Nasser and Abdel Hakim Amer, in the middle of which Nasser asked us to leave, wanting to be alone with Abdel Hakim to berate him for calling the Russian ambassador. He told me afterward: “This is a political act and has nothing to do with the work of the commander-in-chief. It is in my jurisdiction as president, and if the commander-in-chief wishes to notify the ambassador of anything, he should submit his request to the president of the Republic who should make the decision whether to send for the ambassador or not and whether to ask for a cease-fire or not. This is the work of the president of the Republic.

After we had left, I went upstairs and found Mahmoud Fawzi, chief of staff of the armed forces—and later commander-in-chief—facing me. I

asked him: “What is the position of our armed forces in the Sinai after the attack on the air force?” Fawzi replied: “The troops are still holding fast, but the destruction of our air force is a most critical matter.” I told him: “You must attempt something,” and he replied: “We are doing all we can.” It was obvious the man was in a state of shock.

I then took my car and returned home to Giza, where I sat in my office, pondering. The sequence of events passed before my mind: Abdel Hakim’s shifting eyes while he spoke to me . . . how he had sent word to the commanders in the Sinai, asking them to meet him at the al-Meliz airport on that fateful Monday, June 9! The commander-in-chief, and with him all the commanders of the armed forces, in a plane in the middle of war! And awaiting them at the al-Meliz airport, the Sinai commanders! Naturally, the Israelis had heard of this, and it presented them with a golden opportunity. The commander-in-chief in a plane, airborne, on a trip. This meant definite instructions had gone out to the Rocket Corps not to launch any rockets until the commander-in-chief’s plane had landed.

The Israeli air attack came. Their planes arrived while the Rocket Corps had instructions not to open fire because the commander-in-chief was airborne. They arrived at 6:30 a.m.—the breakfast hour for our pilots after the inspection shifts. Routine had not changed, even though we were on the brink of war and the enemy might take that into account. What happened that day did not reflect Israeli cleverness. Never! Our commander-in-chief had paved the road for them. At one stroke they destroyed our entire air force. Not one rocket was fired!

When the attack came, Abdel Hakim Amer was airborne, midway on his trip. When he realized what was happening he turned back and personally witnessed the bombing of our airports. He continued to circle in the air, his eyes shifting. They were still shifting when I met him in his office at army headquarters. Finally, the commander-in-chief was able to land at the Cairo airport, which had also been hit. The tragedy was at its peak. Almaza Airport and our planes there had been completely destroyed. He was met by the commander of the air force, who reported to him: "All is in order, sir. Our planes have all been hit."

All this went through my mind as I sat at home in Giza. The time came to take a walk on the terrace, but before I did so, I again phoned headquarters and asked Abdel Hakim about our position. He replied: "The battle now centers around al-Arish." I replaced the receiver, stunned, and started pacing the terrace a number of times, the road to the pyramids in front of me. Along the road came trucks from Tahrir Province, carrying the *fellahin chanting*: "To Tel Aviv? They had heard that on the radio."

My pace quickened as I cried out silently: "To Tel Aviv? It is al-Arish that has fallen. The war is over; the air force destroyed in an hour this morning. In exactly sixty minutes it was all destroyed; as a result it's all over in the Sinai, and in the whole of Egypt, too." My inner voice groaned as the trucks rolled past, the *fellahin* still chanting; "To Tel Aviv!"

"Please God, what shall we tell these people?" I asked myself. "When shall we inform them of the catastrophe? What will be the result of it? Will the Israelis cross the Canal and enter the eastern bank? Or will they come from Suez?"

Mixed feelings surged within me as I walked on the terrace at my house in Giza. Without realizing it, I found I had been walking for two whole hours. I rushed again to the radio, but it was striking the same note: Our forces are in action. But no mention of the destruction of our planes. Once more I called Abdel Hakim. His reply was: "Al-Arish has fallen." This was the last time I spoke to him. The moment I put down the receiver, all was over between us. It was sunset on June ۵, ۱۹۶۷. I called Gamal Abdel Nasser and said: "Carnal, go to headquarters and tell Abdel Hakim Amer to retire. You are the responsible commander-in-chief."

Night came and the Israelis started their psychological warfare; raids all night long over Cairo, the air-raid sirens never ceasing. My youngest daughter, Nana, was six years old at the time and was frightened every time she heard a gun or a rocket. I sent the children to the ground floor, then to Mit Abul-Kom, where I had built a home six or seven years before.

The night passed in Cairo, with anti-aircraft guns pounding, rockets firing, sirens sounding, and aircraft flying through the night until morning.

Silence struck me like a disease, and I believe it struck many. And here I stop to release a secret for the first time: I took the decision to launch the October War of ۱۹۷۳ just twenty-one days after the catastrophe of June ۵, ۱۹۶۷. How this was carried out and why will be the subject of my next chapter.

Sadat's next chapter was never written. He was assassinated in Cairo the following day.

Abdel Hakim Amer was dismissed as commander-in-chief after the Egyptian defeat in June and committed suicide while under house arrest in September 1971. Sadat's official position at this time was Speaker of the Egyptian National Assembly.

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