

**Occupation and resistance:
Some lessons from the 1967-1970 Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition**

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I would like to start by thanking Prof. Assaf Kfoury for this nice introduction and the Bisan Lecture Series for inviting me to speak to you today. And many thanks for all of you who are joining us online.

The subject of my talk is the War of Attrition waged between Egypt and Israel from 1967 or 1968 to 1970, making it one of the longest of Israel's many wars waged with its Arab enemies.

Before spelling out the main questions I pose to study this war, I believe it may be useful to say a word or two about how I, a historian primarily of 19th-century Egypt, became enmeshed in the history of this war.

Seven years ago, and specifically in March 2017, I organized **a conference at Harvard**, where I was a visiting professor, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 June war, the so-called Six Day war. This started a deep fascination with the history of this catastrophic defeat, a fascination that launched a large research project in which I have been involved since that time and one in which I aim to write a social, cultural and also military history of Egypt's wars with Israel. While focused primarily on the 1967 war, the project keeps on expanding, and I now envisage it to start with the 1948 war and to end with the

October 1973 War, the so-called Yom Kippur War. In other words, what started seven years ago as a study of the six-day war, has now morphed into a study of a thirty-year war between Israel and Egypt.

Last year, and on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of October War, **I edited a book in Arabic on the history of that war**, and my own contribution in that book was a chapter on the War of Attrition, the subject of today's talk.

No sooner had I finished my chapter and started working on editing the other chapters in preparation for publication than the current war in Gaza broke out on October 7. Over the following weeks and months, I found myself making comparisons between the War of Attrition in which Egypt and Israel were embroiled for three years and the current war between Hamas and Israel that has been waging for seven months. Of course, these are vastly different wars in scope, tactics, and objectives, but what I find comparable is one question that people are asking: in light of Israel's aggression and continued occupation, what should the people under occupation do? Accept the status quo dictated by Israel given its overwhelming military superiority? or resist with all means available, even if such resistance necessarily results in the expected disproportionate Israeli military response with catastrophic human losses? If Israel's response intends to re-establish the lost deterrence and cow its enemies into submission, what can the War of Attrition teach us about possibilities of defiance and resistance?

These question about the scale, nature and cost of resistance to occupation have been animating Arab social media since Hamas's attacks on October 7, just as they had triggered intense debates among Egyptian observers about the merits of the War of Attrition. I will come back to these debates later on, but I want here to refer to a particularly acrimonious one that flared up on the pages of the daily *Ahram* newspaper in 1996 on the occasion of a PR workshop organized by the Egyptian Armed Forces and to which historians and war veterans were invited. Among those invited was **Abdel Azim Ramadan**, one of Egypt's prominent historians who happened to be a staunch anti-Nasserite. In his presentation to that workshop, **he decried the War of Attrition** as a costly war that Nasser embarked on in a what he argued was a characteristic reckless manner, heedless of the heavy cost incurred by civilians and unmindful of the limited military gains his army might have achieved. This account of the war of attrition provoked a heavy rebuttal, **also published on the pages of al *Ahram***, penned by five prominent generals who planned and fought in the October War. In their rebuttal they highlighted the importance of the War of Attrition to the military buildup that led to the respectful performance of the Egyptian army three years later in the October 1973.

But I am getting ahead of myself, for I believe a brief outline of the stages of this long war is in order, as well as a close analysis to its results and significance. But even before that, it is important to point out the military and political situation after the guns had fallen silent in the June 1967 War.

By the evening of June 7, 1967, and after only three days of fighting, the Egyptian army was in ruins. The army that was sent to Sinai was literally decimated: out of around 90,000 men, 10,000 were killed and another 5,000 were either missing **or taken prisoner**. 50,000 men were wounded. **Out of 845 tanks** at the outbreak of hostilities, 590 remained in Sinai after the ramshackle withdrawal on the night of the 6th of June. Only a handful of units managed to cross the canal back into Egypt without casualties. The Egyptian air force lost 360 jets, most of them while **still on the ground**. Thus, 17% of the ground troops, 4 % of the pilots, 85% of the air defense forces were lost in the war. In addition, 85% of the Egyptian fighter aircraft and the entire fleet of light and heavy bombers were destroyed. This in addition to the loss of **all the Sinai peninsula**.

Egyptian losses were not restricted to men and equipment. Rather, almost all military formations and units had disintegrated. This, in turn, required a comprehensive reorganization, as well as great efforts to raise morale and restore discipline. Thus, by the end of the war, Egypt had no armed forces in the strict sense of the term, an armed forces capable of attacking or even defending.

When Gamal Abdel Nasser **delivered his famous speech** on the evening of June 9, in which he announced his resignation, the Egyptian people had not yet been pained by the details and horror of the defeat. When the masses listened to Nasser claim responsibility for the defeat and abdicate his powers, they took to the **streets in Cairo and other Egyptian cities** demanding that he rescind his resignation. By doing so, they held him responsible for the defeat, expressed their rejection of the defeat, and therefore their willingness to live to fight another day, even if this entailed huge sacrifices.

When he did return to his office on June 10, Nasser was determined to find out what actually happened. The first thing he did was to dismiss the heads of the air force, the navy, and the land army in Sinai. He refused the return to office of **Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer**, who was the deputy supreme commander of the armed forces and who had turned the military into his own fiefdom appointing his friends and cronies in key positions and effectively preventing Nasser from having any control over military matters.

In place of these dismissed commanders, Nasser appointed trusted and professional soldiers. Chief among them were **Muhammad Fawzi as Commander in Chief and Abdel Munim Riad as Chief of Staff.**

The first duty Nasser entrusted to these men was to form fact finding commissions and commissions of inquiry to establish the roots of the debacle.

These commissions analyzed these really armies moves in the six day war, and strove to understand there's really armies probable modus operandi according to the lessons of the war. The commissions emphasized the following points that afforded the Israelis an advantage:

- Moves based on the following war and battlefield principles: surprise, coordination, aggressiveness, and taking maximum advantage of day and night conditions, reconnaissance, and protection elements.
- The preference to outflank and bypass the enemy's defense layouts, while feigning a frontal attack;

The commissions noted the Israelis weak points included the following:

- extreme sensitivity to the loss of life and equipment

While the army was busy learning the lessons of the defeat, Nasser was equally busy trying to secure new weapons to replace those lost or abandoned in Sinai.

Only two weeks after the fighting had come to an end, he received the Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny who arrived in Cairo at the head of a high-level delegation that included General Matvei Zakharov, the Soviet army's chief of staff.

Over the course of five sessions, the Egyptian armed forces' need for weapons was discussed, and the Soviet Union pledged in these sessions to provide Egypt with weapons that would compensate for those destroyed in battle. Indeed, arms shipments of tanks, planes and artillery began to arrive in Egypt in the weeks and

months following this important visit, and according to an estimate of a research center close to the US Department of Energy the value of weapons that arrived in Egypt by the end of 1968 was estimated to be five hundred million dollars.

Nasser, however, realized that rebuilding the armed forces was a complex process that was not limited to the purchase of new weapons. In a cabinet meeting held on June 20, 1967, he said: "The Russians sell us weapons every day. The number of tanks we received from them is very large. We had lost all the tanks... in Sinai. Only 150 tanks managed to cross the canal into the mainland. But the operation we are dealing with is 500 tanks or 600 tanks. Rather, the operation is a people's operation."

This "People Operation" had more than one aspect. First, there was the need to restore the military's self-confidence. Second, there was an urgent need to heal the rift between the army and the people. Third, and to complicate matters further, throughout the summer months of 1967, from June to August, there was a dangerous **coup attempt against Nasser and his regime**, masterminded by the military leaders responsible for the defeat. Although Nasser managed to overcome this potential coup and put those involved on trial, getting rid of so many officers created an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among the officers.

It was in this grim context that the news of the battle of **Ras al-Esh** in northwestern Sinai were received giving rise to hope and opening a way out of this

predicament. when the Israelis captured Sinai, they stopped at Qantara Sharq, but only three weeks after the fighting stopped, specifically on June 30, the Israelis advanced to seize the city of Port Fouad, located on the east bank of the canal opposite the city of Port Said. Their advance was from the south on the road east of the canal, but they were met by an Egyptian platoon at a site called Ras al-Esh south of the city of Port Fouad, and the clash began at seven in the evening and continued until four o'clock in the morning, during which the commando soldiers succeeded in inflicting losses on the Israeli force.

A few months following this land confrontation, there was a naval one that raised morale considerably. On October 21, 1967, the Egyptian Navy managed to lure an Israeli destroyer, **Eilat**, into Egyptian territorial waters off the coast of Port Said and sink it. Israel's losses were 47 dead and 91 wounded. On October 24 Israel responded by bombing oil refineries in al-Zaytiya south of Suez.

Although these battles were not carried out in implementation of a pre-elaborate plan, but were the result of ad-hoc initiatives from local commanders, they reflected a general trend at the level of the new leadership of the armed forces responding to the determination of the masses to reject defeat and to insist on fighting. These commanders were working with dedication to prepare for the construction of the first line of defense west of the canal, which they had succeeded in achieving by November 1967. In parallel with these painstaking

efforts to build the first line of defense, Maj. Gen. Muhammad Sadiq, the director of military intelligence, had given the green light to form a commando unit to operate behind enemy lines in Sinai.

Israeli Defence Minister **Moshe Dayan** was no doubt disappointed after he announced in an interview with the BBC after the end of the June war that he was waiting for a phone call from the Arabs, with which he expected Nasser in particular to accept Israel's conditions for peace. Contrary to his expectations, the Egyptians carried out the aforementioned operations, and then Arab heads of state met at the Khartoum Summit in early September 1967 and declared their three famous no's: no reconciliation, no recognition, no negotiation. Three months later, in a long and detailed speech in Parliament, Nasser raised his famous slogan: "What was taken by force, cannot be recovered except by force." The message was clear: even though Egypt cannot liberate its land by waging an all-out war, this did not mean surrendering or acquiescing to Israeli terms.

The features of the confrontation began to become clear: the depletion of the enemy's capabilities, so that he would not rest while occupying our territory. Despite all these efforts, however, the term "attrition" had not yet been used, as the phrase "war of attrition" did not appear in any Egyptian official statement until July 23, 1969, when Nasser declared, "We are now in a long battle... We are now

ready for a long battle... A long battle of attrition the aim of which is to exhaust the enemy."

Therefore, the period from June 1967 to the autumn of 1968, which we have summarized in the past minutes, can be considered a prelude to the war of attrition.

Before moving on to the first phase of the war of attrition, it is worth stopping at this preliminary stage, which Nasser called the stage of steadfastness, sumud, to try to identify the pivotal changes that occurred in the Egyptian military mentality in that difficult period.

Besides insisting on fighting as the only means of recovering occupied land, we can notice a more sober tone regarding Israel. On the one hand, there was less reference to "the aggression that took place in Palestine in '48", or the hope of wiping Israel from existence. The ceiling of Arab demands for the liberation of all Palestinian lands was lowered to the "removal of the effects of aggression" and "returning to the June 4 borders".

As I have explained, in the weeks and months following the defeat, military commanders have been studying the details of military battles to determine the factors behind Israel's superiority in combat. It was clear that these generals had gotten rid of the feeling of disregard for the enemy and underestimating his capabilities. We can discern from the course of events and from the memoirs of the commanders that they later published that they realized two important facts that

shaped their future plans: Israel's air force is far superior to the Egyptian air force, and this superiority enabled it to achieve the decisive air strike on the morning of June 5. Furthermore, despite working hard to raise the level of training of Egyptian pilots, there was a realization that Israeli air superiority is an undeniable fact, and that the gap between the performance of the Egyptian air force, even if enhanced, and that of the Israeli air force is widening not closing. As we will see later, the ability of the Egyptian commanders in facing this challenge and neutralizing Israel's air superiority was one of the most important results of the war of attrition.

The second fact is the superiority of Israel's armor units and their ability to maneuver quickly and flexibly over large distances. As the first week of fighting in the Yom Kippur War demonstrated, the Egyptian military was able to find a solution to Israel's superiority in armor by arming their infantry with **Malyutka** anti-tank missiles, which surprised the Israelis and confounded them on how to counter these missiles.

After this quick overview of the developments of the so-called steadfastness phase, and the lessons learned by the Egyptian military leadership from the 1967 defeat, we can now follow the development of military operations of the war of attrition stage by stage. Although it is very difficult to determine a specific date for each phase, it may be useful to track the progress of military action by dividing the

conduct of the war into the five phases, whose dates that I am proposing being only arbitrary ones.

First phase from autumn 1968 to 20 July 1969:

As we have seen, there was a firm belief throughout the period of steadfastness that what was taken by force could not be recovered without force, and by the fall of 1968 we could see that this principle being crystallized. This principle was based on two assumptions: first, as long as Israel maintained strategic superiority, there was no possibility that it would agree to a political solution acceptable on Egyptian terms. Second, a political solution, which would be acceptable from the Egyptian point of view, should be a reflection of real military achievements.

On September 8, 1968, Egyptian artillery opened fire on Israeli positions in Sinai along the canal, killing and wounding 28 Israeli soldiers. Israel responded by shelling the canal cities, killing 26 people and wounding 104. On 26 October, the Egyptians returned to artillery shelling with unprecedented ferocity.

This Egyptian insistence on using artillery as their main weapon had an important reaction; the Israelis began to develop the defensive line, later known as the Bar-Lev Line. The Egyptian military leadership was determined to prevent Israel from turning the front lines into permanent lines, lines that it would fortify, mobilize and entrench itself in, and the Egyptian logic was to turn the advantages

of maintaining the extended lines into a burdensome burden under the weight of Egyptian artillery strikes.

In addition to starting to fortify the Bar-Lev line, Israel decided to respond to the Egyptian artillery shelling through the Suez Canal by carrying out commando operations inside Egyptian territory. The purpose was to convey a message to the Egyptian public: the Egyptian depth is open to Israeli attacks.

Following this dangerous raid into the Egyptian depth, artillery shelling across the canal ceased, and it was decided to focus on defending vital targets. After the defensive capabilities of vital targets were strengthened in depth, Egypt had to respond to the Israeli commando raids, and most importantly, the military leadership was determined to prevent the fortification of the Bar-Lev line.

Accordingly, on 8 March 1969, Egyptian artillery carried out a fierce and concentrated bombardment of Israeli positions east of the Suez Canal that lasted for five hours with the aim of destroying the Bar-Lev Line. Israel responded with counter-shelling on the east bank of the canal on 9 March, just as Lieutenant General Abdel Moneim Riad, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, was visiting the front. He received a direct hit and was killed on the spot. In his honor, the 9th of March was declared Martyr's Day in the Armed Forces. **Egypt bid farewell to its beloved general the next day, March 10, in a state funeral in which Nasser marched** at the forefront, a funeral that quickly turned into a massive popular

demonstration demanding revenge. And indeed Egyptian artillery did not stop pounding the fortified positions of the Bar Lev line throughout the following weeks.

In addition to reinforcing the Bar Lev line, Israel responded to the Egyptian artillery shelling by launching another more commando raids on the Egyptian interior. Furthermore, On 17 May, two Israeli Mirage jets flew over Cairo at supersonic speeds, shattering the windows and causing havoc. Following that raid, Nasser decided to dismissed the commander of the air force, on June 22, 1969, and appointed Lieutenant General **Muhammad Ali Fahmi** as commander of the air defense forces, which had become an independent branch in February 1968 similar to the land, sea and air forces. The first thing the new commander did after taking office was to define the mission of his forces in seven words: "depriving the enemy of his air superiority."

Second phase: July 20, 1969 to January 7, 1970:

One month after the appointment of Muhammad Ali Fahmy as commander of the Air Defense Forces, specifically on July 20, 1969, Israel decided to throw its air force into the war. This decision was one of the most important and dangerous developments in the history of the war of attrition. By taking this decision, the initiative shifted to Israel after it had resided with Egypt throughout the previous phase.

Ezer Weizmann was the one who proposed the deployment of the air force as aerial artillery. In his opinion the defensive strategy adopted by the Israeli army so far had proven ineffective; he was also skeptical that Israeli commando raids deep inside Egypt could achieve significant results. He specifically called for the use of the air force in full force against Egyptian targets on the canal.

Opposing him was Defense Minister Moshe Dayan. Dayan was of the view that the air force should only be used if there were no other options. He thought that such deployment would consume the aircraft in relatively unnecessary operations, and he advocated that Israel should keep its aircraft for a time of serious clash, such as an attempt by Egyptian forces to cross the canal or launch all-out war.

During the week of July 20-28, 1969, the Israeli Air Force bombed SAM-2 missile sites in the northern sector of the front, destroying many of them, as well as radar stations, cannon and mortar and tank positions.

However, the Egyptians did not stop artillery shelling across the canal, so the Israeli Air Force carried successive from August till December 1969 aiming to completely destroy the anti-aircraft air defense system and secure absolute air superiority over the canal and deep inside Egyptian territory.

The Israeli Air Force thus succeeded in neutralizing the Egyptian artillery. And It can thus be said that by the end of 1969, Egypt's skies were practically

opened to the Israeli air force as a result of the success of the Israeli Air Force in disabling the anti-aircraft missile bases along the western coast of the canal, leaving Egypt without any effective defense against Israeli air superiority along the Gulf of Suez and the Canal.

Third Phase: January 7, 1970 to April 18, 1970:

Despite the heavy losses resulting from Israeli bombardment of Egyptian positions along the canal and on the shores of the Gulf of Suez, Egyptian artillery shelling did not cease, and attempts to build SAM-2 anti-aircraft missile bases have not stopped either. When the Israelis realized that their efforts did not lead to a cessation of hostilities even after the air force was deployed, some Israeli commanders began to demand that the battle be moved deep into Egypt, and not be restricted to the borders of the Canal and the Gulf of Suez.

Yitzhak Rabin, who was army chief of staff in the June War and who would become Israel's ambassador to Washington after the war, was one of the strongest advocates of using the air force to strike military targets deep inside Egypt. There was opposition to Rabin within the Israeli government, but in the end, Prime Minister **Golda Meir** settled the argument by allowing the depth raids, and it is clear from her media statements that the overthrow of the Nasser regime was a key motive behind her decision: On January 16, 1970, she said: "I would not

waste any tears if Abdul Nasser were knocked out of power. However, the deep penetration raids were not aimed at pushing him out of power, but at cutting him down to size. The proximity of the raids to Cairo has driven home the truth not only to Abdel Nasser, but to the entire Egyptian people, who have to know in what direction their leader is dragging them.”

The penetration **raids began on January 7** with a raid on the SAM2 missile battalions in Dahshur, in addition to the bombing of the Anshas air base, and then continued raids on military targets in Tal al-Kabir, Khanka, Helwan, Baltim, Hikestep, Manqabad, Damietta, Mansoura and West Cairo Air Base. Each strike consisted of Phantom fighter bombers (which Israel had received from the United States in September 1969) assisted by Skyhawks, with air protection provided by Mirage.

The raids continued until 13 April 1970. Israel focused its bombardment on every activity it perceived was connected to the anti-aircraft missile forces; Israeli warplanes hit schools, hospitals, parks and airports, arguing that these buildings were used as missile launch sites. In the process, they brutally shelling civilians, many of them children, into smithereens.

Nasser had predicted that Israel would launch raids deep inside Egypt, but he believed that these operations would take place in the spring of 1970. Now that

Israel has already begun to carry out what he feared most, urgent and decisive action was necessary to stop these raids.

Nasser therefore paid a secret **visit to Moscow** from January 22 to 25, 1970, to ask the Soviet Union to help strengthen Egypt's air defense system and prevent the Israeli air force from penetrating deep inside Egypt.

Accompanying Nasser on this crucial visit were only three individuals: Mohamed Fawzi, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, and Nasser's private secretary, Mohamed Ahmed. After Nasser presented the gravity of the situation, he asked the Soviet leaders to provide Egypt with SAM-3 missiles, which are distinguished from SAM-2 missiles by their ability to counter low flights, provided that these missiles are stationed around vital targets in the Egyptian depth to protect them. After the Soviets agreed to Nasser's request and to help train Egyptian technicians on this new type of missile, Nasser realized that the training period on these missiles would last for six months, during which the crews of SAM-2 missiles would be withdrawn to train on the new missiles, which would leave the Egyptian skies open to Israeli raids. Nasser therefore asked the Soviets not only to send missiles with the necessary radars and technical equipment, but also to send Soviet crews to work on the new missiles.

This request represented a dangerous escalation in the extent to which the Soviet Union was involved in helping Egypt against Israeli raids, as it meant

sending officers and soldiers, not just missiles and technical equipment.

Complicating the matter was the realization by the assembled Soviet commanders that these missiles would require air protection, which would mean sending planes with their pilots to protect the Egyptian depth.

Leonid Brezhnev, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, got alarmed, telling Nasser, according to Heikal's account, "This will mean that we are challenging the United States militarily." Nasser replied: "Why does the United States give itself the right to act fearlessly in helping Israel, when you hesitate repeatedly before taking a single step?" To reassure the Soviets, he told them that they were only required to protect the depth, but the front line on the Canal and the Gulf of Suez would be defended by Egyptian forces, so there would be no possibility of a Soviet-Israeli confrontation. When the Soviets did not budge, Nasser threatened to step down and hand over power to a colleague who could get along with the United States. The Kremlin leaders then asked Nasser to for some time to discuss the matter amongst themselves. They then convened a meeting of the Supreme Soviet that included all the Marshals of the Soviet Union (twelve Marshals). A few hours later the Soviet leaders informed Nasser that all his requests had been approved (except for MiG-23s, which could reach deep into Israel).

Within a month, Soviet air squadrons and air defense equipment with their crews began to arrive in Egypt, and by April 1970 the number of Soviet experts in Egypt reached ten thousand. Israel realized the presence of Soviet pilots to protect Egyptian airspace on April 11 when an Israeli pilot heard a Russian conversation between two pilots flying two Egyptian MiG-21s, and immediately informed his headquarters who ordered him not to engage. Soon thereafter, the Israeli government took a decisive decision to stop the penetration raids once and for all. The Israeli government's decision was based on the need to avoid any Israeli-Soviet confrontation, because such a confrontation would lead to U.S. involvement and trigger an all-out war between the two superpowers.

Nasser's decision to request Soviets assistance to provide Egypt not only with SAM-3 missiles, but also with Soviet experts and pilots was a very important decision, for as we have seen, one of the direct results of his January 1970 trip to Moscow was that the Israeli raids on the Egyptian depth stopped, and thus Egyptian engineers and experts were able to intensify their efforts to complete the air defense system in the Canal Zone.

Fourth stage: from April 18, 1970 to August 7, 1970:

There is no doubt that "Operation Kavkaz" (which is the name given by the Soviets to their military involvement on Egypt's side in the war of attrition) achieved a pivotal shift in the war of attrition, as the penetration raids stopped, as

we said, on April 18, 1970, and thus the initiative shifted again in favor of Egypt; Israel also failed to achieve the desired goal of the penetration raids, neither the Nasser regime fell, nor did Egypt accept a peace settlement on Israel's terms.

As a result of this dramatic shift in the course of the war, the Egyptian military leadership directed all its energy to building what was later known as the "missile wall" parallel to the canal, an integrated system of SAM-2 and SAM-3 air defense missiles, reinforced by anti-aircraft guns and a complex network of radar devices.

Building this "wall" was fraught with many dangers, as rocket batteries were installed on a concrete base that Egyptian workers usually built under cover of darkness so that Israeli reconnaissance operations could not detect them. But the enemy aircraft were on the lookout for them, so that no construction would be completed.

The success of the Egyptians, with the help of the Soviets, **in building the missile wall represented an important turning point in the war of attrition;** until then, the Soviet intervention in the war was limited to defending the Egyptian depth, but now the Soviets have moved their activity to the Canal Zone as well, so the clash between the Israeli Air Force and Soviet missile crews was now inevitable, and indeed the confrontation between Israeli planes and Soviet missiles began the next day, Tuesday, June 30, and throughout the following week, the first

week of July. Israeli raids on Egyptian positions west of the canal continued, unaware that the missile wall has been completed, resulting in the downing of five Phantoms on June 30, and two more on July 3. Total Israeli losses in the first week of July amounting to 13. Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's ambassador to Washington, commented on this dangerous development: "Our attempts to attack the [Egyptian] missile system were unsuccessful, and many Phantoms were shot down in our attempts. This was a new and extremely dangerous situation." Egypt and the Air Defense Forces have designated June 30 as their national holiday to be celebrated annually, and this week has been called "the Week of the downed Phantoms."

However, the Egyptian success in building an integrated air defense system about thirty kilometers west of the canal came at a high cost in lives; in the three months from May to July 1970, more than 1,500 men fell as a result of the Israeli aerial bombardment on missile sites west of the canal, and on some days the number of casualties reached 300 per day,

Fifth stage: from August 8, 1970 to the end of December 1970:

The last phase of the war saw Egypt pushing the Missile wall all the way to the canal just following the acceptance of the Rogers Peace Plan on 8 August 1970.

The decision to push air defense missiles to the western shore of the Suez Canal was of paramount strategic importance: despite the fact that the Egyptian Air Force lacked pilots with experience comparable to that of Israeli pilots, and despite

the fact that Soviet MiG-21s did not match American Phantoms in speed, range, or maneuverability, the Egyptian Air Defense Force succeeded in building most powerful anti-aircraft missile network in the world, a network that neutralized the Israeli Air Force. The importance of this neutralization was proven in the first week of the October War, when Egyptian air defense was able to establish a tight umbrella that protected the Egyptian forces as they crossed the Suez Canal; it also proved effective in protecting the besieged Third Army east of the canal from Israeli aerial bombardment, as proved by a study issued by the CIA, on the October War.

Conclusion:

The war of attrition was a remarkable achievement by all standards; after only three years of an unparalleled catastrophic defeat, Egypt's leadership, army and people were able to rebuild their armed forces, prevent Israel from imposing a deplorable settlement, and inflict heavy losses on Israel that prevented it from reaping the fruits of its victory.

The war of attrition did not aim to force Israel to withdraw from Sinai, as **AbdelAzim Ramadan** claimed. To say that it was futile and a failure therefore is to miss the whole point of the war. As **five senior Egyptian military commanders** (Mohamed Fawzi, former minister of war, Abdel Moneim Wasel,

former commander of the Third Field Army, Abdel Moneim Khalil, former commander of the Second Army, Hassan al-Badri, former director of the Nasser Military Academy, and Jabr Ali Gabr, head of the air force chair at the Nasser Military Academy), have said, forcing Israel to withdraw was not one of the goals of the war of attrition.

In their 1996 Ahram article these five commanders argued that:

The specific objective [of this war] was to preserve the morale of the fighters; to raise the morale of the Egyptian and Arab peoples; to create the appropriate conditions for the transition to the stage of offensive operations, and keep the issue of Israel's occupation of Arab lands on the list of international concerns; to ensure that the Soviet Union continued to supply advanced weapons and equipment, and to disturb and stop the Israeli forces, and to place them and the people of Israel under constant moral pressure, as a result of the continuous losses inflicted on its soldiers on the front.

Unquote.

Furthermore, to argue that Egypt paid too heavy a price in this war, and that it made a mistake in entering it in the first place, as Ramadan argued, is also missing the point. As the five commanders argued, quote:

The war of attrition war was a political and military necessity to maintain the cohesion of the front and rear front; to keep the issue of Israeli occupation in

the headlines; to maintain the will to fight; to acquire field combat efficiency; to develop war plans according to the change of factors affecting it; and obtain information about the enemy and the ground through forceful reconnaissance, which cannot be carried out without actual combat.

Unquote.

Let us give the final word to **Ezer Weizmann**, one of Israel's fiercest hawks, to acknowledge Israel's defeat in the War of Attrition. Quote: As the war dragged on, without our army finding a way to put an end to it, I, unlike others, became gradually convinced that this was the first time we were not winning. I said so countless times: we failed in this war. We did not comprehend it correctly. When the Egyptians agreed to a cease-fire in August 1970, we interpreted it as an admission on their part that they couldn't stand our bombing anymore. Without detracting from the great suffering inflicted on them by our air force, I don't have the shadow of a doubt that the Egyptians wanted a ceasefire in order to move their missile system forward to the canal, so that it could neutralize our air force when their units crossed the waterway. All this backs up both of my contentions. First, the War of Attrition, in which our best soldiers shed their blood, resulted in the Egyptians gaining a free hand, over a period of three years [1970-1973], to prepare for the great war of October 1973; if so, it is no more than foolishness to claim that we won the War of Attrition. On the contrary, for all their casualties, it was the

Egyptians who got the best of it. Second, by our errors between March 1969 and August 1970, and, subsequently, by our tragic acquiescence when the Egyptian violated the cease-fire and moved their missiles ahead, we, with our hands, smoothed Egypt's path to the Yom Kippur War. When our blindness caused us to misread Egyptian intentions and prevented us from applying an accurate interpretation – or taking action to forestall the enemy – it was then that the Yom Kippur War began, with all its ensuing results.”