

Eight

WAR

ON MONDAY MORNING, June 5, 1967, Bashir Khairi stood before a judge in civil court, arguing a case on behalf of his client, a Mr. al-Abed. Bashir was now twenty-five and a recent graduate of Cairo University Law School, specializing in labor matters. The court had convened in Ramallah in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, the territory King Abdullah had annexed to his kingdom seventeen years earlier. His grandson Hussein was now Jordan's king and head of state.

Ramallah had changed completely since the day in late 1948 when Ahmad and Zakia had taken Bashir and the other children to Gaza. Gone was the desperation of a refugee population sleeping under the trees. Gone, too, were thousands of well-to-do Ramallans, mostly Christians, who had fled the West Bank into the United States in the years following the Nakba. At the edges of town stood the concrete dwellings and narrow, refuse-strewn lanes of the UNRWA refugee camps. Each year, the UN refugee agency was required to submit a budget for renewed funding. Receiving long-term funds or building more permanent-looking housing would imply a UN admission that the refugees were not going home. This position was still unacceptable for the "host" governments, the grassroots political factions that were based in the camps, and most of all the refugees themselves. For Palestinians, resistance meant no compromise on the right of return, no matter how firm Israel's position. Bashir, like most Palestinians, believed there was only one way the land would come back to his people. Force expelled us from our land, he reasoned, and only force will get it back.

Bashir faced the judge and made the case for Mr. al-Abed. In his opening

argument he stated that Abed, a mechanic at a Ramallah garage, had been fired from his job unjustly and that at the very least he should be given his back pay. Bashir sat down, and the attorney for the repair shop began to speak. As he did, a young man darted through the courtroom door, strode swiftly over to Bashir, and began whispering in his ear. It was a little before noon.

For nineteen years, Palestinian refugees had been waiting for the moment when they would return to their homes. At first they had thought this would happen in a matter of weeks. When Israel barred them from coming back, hopes shifted to the UN resolution advocating the right of return. Years later, still in exile, the refugees began to put their faith in “armed struggle.” Increasingly they turned to Egypt’s Nasser. For more than a decade, the Egyptian president had electrified the Arab world with his anticolonial speeches and his aspirations for a great Arab nation.

Bashir, studying law in Cairo, was inspired by Nasser’s dream of unifying the Arabs. His focus on return now had a vehicle, and he set aside all other personal ambitions. “He never bought anything expensive, shirt, shoes, nothing for himself,” Khanom recalled. “Our father would ask him, ‘Do you want money?’ and Bashir would say, ‘No, I have enough.’” Bhajat, Bashir’s younger brother by a year, was completely different. “He was spending three or four times what Bashir spent,” Khanom said. “Bashir never spent money on shoes, never bought himself a suit. We used to call Bashir the son of the beggar and Bhajat the son of the lord. People couldn’t even believe they were brothers.” Bashir believed his discipline would be rewarded, and his people delivered, by the heroic Nasser.

Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal, to the anger of the United States, Great Britain, France, and Israel, was a source of deep pride for Bashir and millions of others on the Arab streets. Nasser had become a leader, with Nehru of India and Tito of Yugoslavia, of the “non-aligned movement” that sought an independent, third path between the superpowers. Most important for Palestinians, Nasser’s recent championing of their cause had stirred hopes in the diaspora for a great Arab rebirth to avenge the defeat of 1948. Unlike the UN and its resolutions on paper, Bashir believed, Nasser could end the long exile of the Palestinians by force of arms.

In the early 1960s, Bashir had grown deeply involved in student activist

politics in Cairo, particularly with the Arab Nationalist Movement. The ANM was led by George Habash, a refugee from Lydda whose sister had been killed by Israeli soldiers in July 1948 and who walked in the heat through the hills to Ramallah. Palestinian political leaders like Habash, and the leaders of the newly formed Palestine Liberation Organization, were rallying around Nasser, urging him to prepare for war. The PLO and its small Palestine Liberation Army would march under Nasser's command. The Egyptian president, however, would say repeatedly that he had no intention of liberating Palestine: The time was not right, especially for attacks on Israel launched from Arab states. For many Palestinians, though, by the mid-1960s the urgency had deepened; the Negev was filling up with new Jewish immigrants, and rumors were everywhere that Israel was developing a nuclear weapons program.

Bashir and his fellow student activists in Cairo believed Arab unity was the key to return, and they watched this maneuvering closely. Some students began guerrilla training in secret "special forces" camps in Egypt and elsewhere. They learned how to plant mines and fire antitank weapons. They jumped from airplanes, waded through swamps, slept on hard ground, ate snakes, and went without food for days.

Two young men emerged from the growing guerrilla movement: Yasser Arafat and Khalil al-Wazir, known as Abu Jihad. Arafat and Abu Jihad believed return would come only if it was led by an autonomous Palestinian political and military organization devoted to armed struggle. Neither Abu Jihad, who had been expelled from al-Ramla in 1948, nor Arafat trusted in deliverance from the Arab states, which they believed had sold out the Palestinians in 1948. Together the two men had founded the guerrilla group Fatah in the wake of the Suez conflict.

On New Year's Day 1965, after nine years of relative quiet between Israel and the Arab world following the Suez crisis, Fatah planned its first attack on Israeli soil. Guerrillas were to cross the Lebanese border and lay explosives alongside water pipes near the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main source of water. The control of water was a key source of tension between Israel and the Arab states. Israel had diverted much of the headwaters of the Jordan River away from downstream Arab lands. Israeli jets had bombed Syrian waterworks in the Golan Heights, across from the Galilee, so that Syria could not divert those same waters. When Israeli tractors moved into the demilitarized zones of the Golan to plow disputed land, they drew

Syrian fire, which, in turn, brought swift Israeli response. Israel wanted nothing to interfere with its plan to support more immigrants with a pipeline to the Negev desert. Fatah, the small band of guerrillas, sought to foil Israel's pipeline plan; after all, the Negev was part of old Palestine, to which the rebels and their followers intended to return. Their attack on the pipeline was a failure, thwarted by Lebanese security before it began, but Fatah issued a "military communiqué" proclaiming success by "detachments of our strike forces" and warning Israel of future actions.

Throughout 1965 and 1966, Fatah, along with a new group called Abtal al-Awda (Heroes of Return), launched dozens more attacks from the West Bank and Lebanon on mostly isolated targets inside Israel. The attacks sharply raised anxieties in the Jewish state, and, as designed, sparked tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors. By late 1966 these attacks, and the Israeli reprisals, had drawn a reluctant King Hussein deeper into the conflict, and closer to the point of no return.

Before dawn on November 13, 1966, Israeli planes, tanks, and troops attacked the West Bank village of Samu, blowing up dozens of houses and killing twenty-one Jordanian soldiers. The invasion, especially in its massive scale, shocked even some supporters of Israel. U.S. officials immediately condemned the attack. In Washington, the head of the National Security Council, Walt Rostow, in a memo to President Johnson, declared that the "3000-man raid with tanks and planes was all out of proportion to the provocation"—in this case, a Fatah land mine that had killed three Israeli soldiers on November 11. Rostow said of the Israelis, "They've undercut Hussein. We're spending \$500 million to shore him up as a stabilizing factor. . . . It makes even the moderate Arabs feel fatalistically that there is nothing they can do to get along with the Israelis no matter how hard they try. It will place heavy domestic and external political strain on King Hussein's regime. . . ."

Rostow believed the Israelis, in attacking Jordan rather than Soviet-backed Syria, which was supporting the Palestinian guerrilla factions, had struck at the wrong target. When Eshkol, in a conciliatory note, wrote to President Johnson asking for his support in this "difficult hour for us," the president didn't respond. Instead, a week after the attack, Johnson wrote to King Hussein of his "sense of sorrow and concern . . . words of sympathy are small comfort when lives have been needlessly destroyed." The president assured the king that "my disapproval of this action has been made known to the

government of Israel in the strongest terms.” He also addressed a fear King Hussein had expressed since the raid. Regarding “Your Majesty’s concern that Israel’s policies have changed and that Israel now intends to occupy territory on the West Bank of the Jordan River,” the president assured the king, “we have good reason to believe it highly unlikely that the events you fear will in fact occur. Should Israel adopt the policies you fear it would have the gravest consequences. There is no doubt in my mind that our position is fully understood and appreciated by the Israelis.”

The king’s fears of an Israeli occupation of the West Bank, however, were secondary to his worries at home. American officials in Amman had already warned Washington that “the monarchy itself is in jeopardy.” The CIA, in a special memorandum to the president, wrote that the Samu attack “badly damaged Hussein’s position at home. It made him vulnerable to attack by disaffected elements of his population, who argue that his policy of peaceful coexistence with Israel has been dictated by the U.S. and has proved a failure.” The king, according to the American assessment, would now be under great pressure to appear more militant toward Israel, especially as his kingdom grew more restive.

In Amman, the Samu raid had already provoked waves of violent protests against the king’s regime. Palestinians accused the army of being weak and unprepared and demanded arms to fight Israel. A PLO broadcast from Cairo called upon the Jordanian army to overthrow the king. Riots broke out in Jordan and the West Bank, Jordanian troops fired at Palestinian demonstrators in Jerusalem, hundreds were arrested, and the king dissolved the parliament, imposed martial law, and secured additional military aid from the United States.

Now the split in the Arab world became more obvious than ever: Egypt and its ally Syria stood in favor of “pan-Arab unity,” while King Hussein was labeled a pro-Western “imperialist agent” and “ally of Zionism.” In the spring of 1967, Syria called for Hussein’s overthrow, and Nasser declared that the king was “ready to sell the Arab nation in the same manner as Abdullah [the king’s late grandfather] sold it in 1948.” Bashir, now twenty-five years old, stood firmly on the side of Nasser and the pan-Arab movement.

As Arab leaders sniped at one another, tensions were rising in the demilitarized zone of Syria’s Golan Heights. The DZs were narrow bands

of land between the Sea of Galilee and the westernmost edge of the Golan. Syrian and Israeli forces had been exchanging sporadic fire over farming operations and the Syrian waterworks diversions, and Syrian mortar fire had fallen on Israeli kibbutzim. On April 7, 1967, Israeli air force pilots shot down six Syrian fighter jets in a dogfight above the Golan; one of the Israeli planes roared over Damascus in a public display of humiliation for the Syrians and their ally, Nasser. Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli army's chief of staff, soon threatened to destroy the Syrian regime. Syria, with its backing of Palestinian guerrillas and its confrontation with Israel in the Golan, was antagonizing Nasser.

The Israeli actions were an embarrassment for Nasser, champion of the pan-Arab cause, and King Hussein seized the moment to shed his image as a lackey for the West. If the Egyptian president really wanted to stand up for the Arabs, Jordan Radio challenged, he should send an unmistakable message to Israel: Close the Straits of Tiran to Israeli vessels. After all, the broadcast intoned, some of those vessels would inevitably be transporting weapons to be used against Arabs in any coming conflict. The challenge from Jordan may have been meant simply to divert criticism from the beleaguered king to Nasser, but like the Fatah raids and the Israeli reprisal attack on Samu, it helped drive the region closer to war. Closing the Straits of Tiran would cut off Israel's access to the Red Sea and Africa beyond. Israel would still be able to ship freely from its Mediterranean ports, which accounted for more than 90 percent of its maritime trade, but nevertheless, closing the straits would be a grave step. Indeed, the last time Nasser closed the straits, during the Suez crisis of 1956, he provoked an Israeli attack.

Privately, Nasser had sent signals to supporters and diplomats that he didn't want war with Israel. By May, however, he was under growing pressure from the millions of people across the Arab world who looked to him for action. On May 15, the Egyptian president sent thousands of troops into Sinai toward the Israeli border. On May 18, he ordered UN peacekeeping troops out of Sinai. The next day, Israel began to mass thousands of its own troops along the border with Sinai.

Three days later, on May 22, 1967, Gamal Abdel Nasser announced the closure of the Straits of Tiran, declaring, "The Jews threaten us with war and we say to them, *ahlan wa sahlan* [you are welcome]. We are ready!"

As far as Israeli leaders were concerned, this was a declaration of war. That day, May 22, the Israeli government sent a request to the U.S. military

for twenty thousand gas masks, and the cabinet went into crisis deliberations. For Israelis, the paralyzing time known as the “period of waiting” had begun.

Dalia Eshkenazi unfurled the last square of black construction paper and taped it onto the window next to the other black squares. Now no light would escape. Outside, in the carport near the front gate, the family’s two-cylinder “Deux Chevaux” Citroën was similarly darkened. A day or two earlier, the police had stood on Herzl Street with brushes and cans of blue-black paint, stopping cars passing between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and swabbing their headlights. Blackened headlights would still cast a dim path but not emit light that could be detected by enemy aircraft. Whether those jets would ever come, whether a single shot would ever be fired, no one knew. Across the country, Israelis were mobilizing: Schools were turned into shelters as citizens and soldiers dug trenches, stepped up blood drives, prepared hospital beds, made plans to send their children to Europe, and dug ten thousand graves.

Dalia was nineteen years old, but during this “period of waiting” she often felt like crawling under a blanket. She had never felt like this, yet she understood that for others something terrible and familiar was reawakening. Later she would recall it as a “collective fear of annihilation.” Her mother’s face wore an expression of perpetual worry. As the waiting period stretched out, the family sat in excruciating silence, listening for a siren. In the Ramla shops people would engage in conversation readily, looking to one another for reassurance; other times, on the streets, they would glance at one another quickly, furtively, one nervous face flashing into the mirror of another.

The radio picked up broadcasts of a serene Egyptian voice, saying, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from? You don’t stand a chance.” Dalia would lie on the blue silken cover of her parents’ bed, listening to the threats of the Arabs in their accented Hebrew. In the newspapers, Dalia had read about the Arabs promising to push the Jews into the sea. At times she thought she should listen to her Western friends who insisted that the taunting voice from Cairo represented bravado and “Oriental exaggeration.” She knew that the Israeli army, in whose officers’ training corps program she now served, was strong. But in a community where people were still walking around with numbers on their arms, Dalia believed, “one

had to take sick fantasies seriously.” She was petrified; so were her parents; so were Aunt Stella and Aunt Dora. *Ma-ihay-yibeh?* everyone was desperate to know. What will happen?

On May 23, the day after Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran and taunted the Israeli public, Israel’s cabinet sent Foreign Minister Abba Eban on a diplomatic mission to Paris, London, and Washington.

Officials in the Johnson administration were trying to keep Israel from attacking Egypt, while assessing whether Nasser truly wanted war, and, if he did, what the outcome would be. A CIA assessment on May 26—part political review and part psychological analysis—surmised that Nasser’s threats against Israel were made partly in response to Israel’s threats to Syria, Egypt’s ally: “He probably felt he had to identify himself with Arab nationalist interests and that some action on his part would refurbish his image in the Arab world.” The CIA memorandum also suggested the Soviets had encouraged Nasser, in part because of the “bad blood” with the U.S. over Vietnam, and that perhaps Nasser believed his forces were now strong enough to withstand an attack from Israel. In addition, the CIA report concluded, “There may have been some element of desperation in Nasser’s attitude, arising from . . . perhaps a fatalistic conclusion that a showdown with Israel must come sooner or later, and might best be provoked before Israel acquired nuclear weapons.”

The previous day, Lucius Battle, the U.S. undersecretary of state and recent ambassador to Egypt, had suggested to the president another possible reason for Egypt’s actions: that Nasser “had gone slightly insane.” For it was clear to U.S. officials that the Egyptian forces in the Sinai were “defensive in character” and were not preparing to invade Israel. Repeated U.S. and British intelligence estimates cited fifty thousand Egyptian troops in the Sinai. Israel’s estimates, cited often by latter-day historians, are of one hundred thousand Egyptian troops—estimates Walt Rostow of the NSC called “highly disturbing.” The CIA had concluded that these estimates were a political “gambit intended to influence the U.S.” to “(a) provide military supplies, (b) make more public commitments to Israel, (c) approve Israeli military initiatives, and (d) put more pressure on Nasser. . . .” The U.S. had determined, in its own military analysis and in meetings with high-level British officials, that Israel would win any conflict against its Arab enemies in little more than a week. The unambiguous U.S. assessment

of the balance of power in the region included a CIA conclusion that Israel “can maintain internal security, defend successfully against simultaneous Arab attacks on all fronts, launch limited attacks simultaneously on all fronts, or hold on any three fronts while mounting successfully a major offensive on the fourth.” The Israeli capabilities, another CIA assessment declared, were enhanced because “the Arab states are hampered by a lack of cohesiveness and by friction among Arab leaders.” Another factor weighed by U.S. intelligence: Egyptian military strength was depleted by the thirty-five thousand troops Nasser had committed to fight alongside the leftist government in Yemen’s civil war.

On May 26, in a meeting in Washington with President Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and Rostow, Abba Eban declared that the atmosphere in Israel had become “apocalyptic,” and that Israel needed a show of support from the U.S. McNamara assured Eban that three different intelligence groups had in recent days determined that the Egyptian deployments in the Sinai were defensive. The president told Eban that American military experts had unanimously concluded that the Egyptians would not attack, and that if they did, “You will whip the hell out of them.” As U.S. undersecretary of state Nicholas Katzenbach would recall, “The intelligence was absolutely flat on the fact that the Israelis . . . could mop up the Arabs in no time at all.”

The same day, an urgent telegram arrived in Washington from the U.S. embassy in Amman with a personal message from King Hussein. “USG [United States Government] seriously risking hostility of the entire Arab world and complete loss of influence in the area for the indefinite future by the appearance it has given to Arabs of identifying itself with Israel over the Tiran Straits and related issues,” the message declared. “USG identification with Israel in this crisis will force America’s traditional Arab friends to oppose it in order to survive Arab wrath. It is in fact already questionable, whatever position those who are America’s friends might now take, whether their past association with the USG has not made them too vulnerable to survive. . . .”

Now came urgent word from Israel. Also on May 26, Dean Rusk, the secretary of state, relayed a message to the president: Israeli intelligence “indicates that an Egyptian and Syrian attack is imminent. They have therefore requested a U.S. public statement of assurance and support of

Israel against such aggression.” “Our intelligence,” Rusk noted, “does not confirm this Israeli estimate.”

Events were spinning out of Washington’s control. The next day, May 27, the president sent an urgent telegram to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol via U.S. embassy staff in Tel Aviv. “I have just this afternoon received a most important and private message from the Soviet Union,” the president wrote. “The Soviets tell me that they have information that you are preparing to take military action against your Arab neighbors, and provoke a conflict which would be fraught with great consequences. They emphasize their commitment to restraint on all sides and the Soviet view that solutions must be found without a military conflict. They tell us that they know the Arabs do not wish a military conflict.” At three o’clock that same morning in Cairo, the Soviet ambassador to Egypt had paid a personal call to Nasser, waking the president to urge him not to go to war.

In Amman, however, there was a growing sense that war was inevitable. On May 28, King Hussein told the Egyptian ambassador to Jordan that he believed Israel was going to launch a surprise attack against Egypt. Two days later, the king flew to Cairo and signed a defense pact with Nasser, stunning onlookers. Only days earlier, the two leaders had been insulting each other, competing for the hearts and minds of the Arab public, as the king secretly pleaded with the U.S. to moderate its position in the region. Now, in joining Nasser, King Hussein had crossed the point of no return.

Hussein had surmised that without an alliance with Nasser, Jordan would be more vulnerable, on the one hand, to an attack from Israel or, on the other, from Palestinians within his own kingdom who would equate any inaction with betraying the Arab cause. Now Hussein was forging a pan-Arab alliance on the eve of battle. He had even agreed to place the forces of his Arab Legion, along with Iraqi, Syrian, and Saudi troops, under the eastern front command of an Egyptian general, Abdul Munim Riad. Riad would operate from a command post in Amman. When the king returned home, he was greeted by throngs of elated Palestinians; the crowds hoisted the king’s car and carried it along the street.

In Israel, tension in Prime Minister Eshkol’s cabinet had led to a rupture, forcing him to form a unity government with his more hawkish opposition critics. Moshe Dayan, the commander of Battalion Eighty-nine in 1948 Ramla and Lod, was named minister of defense. The new cabinet dispatched Israel’s intelligence chief, Mossad director Meir Amit, on

another trip to Washington. He met with McNamara, who was increasingly preoccupied with Vietnam. The American defense secretary listened as the Israeli intelligence chief told him that “I, Meir Amit, am going to recommend that our government strike.” Amit had come in large part to assess the American reaction to this statement. “There’s no way out,” he recalled telling McNamara. McNamara asked Amit how long a war would last. “Seven days,” replied the Israeli.

American officials had been considering their own show of force: A U.S.- and British-led convoy of Western ships to steam through the Straits of Tiran to send a signal to Nasser that all nations, including Israel, should enjoy maritime rights of free passage. The plan, however, met with resistance among some U.S. generals, who believed that if an American ship drew fire, the result would be war—only this time, the U.S. would be directly involved. In a world dominated by two nuclear superpowers, there was no telling where that might lead. With scant international support, the convoy plan faded.

All signs continued to point toward war, except that Nasser privately continued to express aversion to it. On May 31, he told former American treasury secretary Robert Anderson, a longtime acquaintance, that he would not “begin any fight.” The two men discussed a possible visit to Cairo by Hubert Humphrey, the U.S. vice president, and Anderson laid the groundwork for a visit to Washington by Egyptian vice president Zakariya Mohieddine. Two days later, on June 2, Nasser told British MP Christopher Mayhew, that Egypt had “no intention of attacking Israel.” At the same time, Nasser had made it clear he would not back down from his position on the Straits of Tiran, and on the same day that he pledged to Mayhew not to fire the first shot, Nasser sent an impassioned telegram to President Johnson. At stake, Nasser assured the president, was something more important than the Straits of Tiran or the withdrawal of UN forces. Rather, he said, it was about defending “the rights of the people of Palestine”:

An aggressive armed force was able to oust that people from their country and reduce them to refugees on the borders of their homeland. Today the forces of aggression impede the Arab people’s established right of return and life in their homeland. . . . I may ask how far any government is able to control the feelings of more than one million Palestinians who,

for twenty years, the international community—whose responsibility herein is inescapable—has failed to secure their return to their homeland. The UN General Assembly, merely confirms that right, at every session.

Nasser repeated his position that “our forces have not initiated any aggressive act,” but added, “no doubt, we shall resist any aggression launched against us or against any Arab state.”

On June 3, a new CIA memorandum suggested war was all but certain. “All reports indicate that the Israelis are still confident of victory,” the report stated, but cited “the rapidly-growing belief in Israel that time is running out, and that if Israel is not to suffer an ultimately fatal defeat it must very soon either strike or obtain absolutely iron-clad security assurances from the West. . . . The Israeli strategy calls for gaining control of the air as the first essential step in the campaign.” In Sinai, the report noted, the Egyptians had set up only “the rudiments of an air defense system”; nevertheless, “the Arabs are sniffing blood. So fast and so far does Nasser’s band-wagon seem to be rolling. . . .”

Still, as Israel sent its troops to the Sinai border, many analysts continued to believe that Nasser’s bellicose actions amounted to a bluff for Arab consumption. “They were meant to be seen as a strong warning, not a declaration of war,” wrote Nasser’s confidant, Mohamed Heikal. Some Israelis also doubted Nasser was planning an attack. “The force initially concentrated in Sinai could not hope of defending the area in the event of war,” an Israeli military intelligence analyst would write in a review of the war published by Israel’s Ministry of Defense. “I do not believe that Nasser wanted war,” Rabin would say later. In his June 2 telegram to Johnson, Nasser welcomed the possibility of a visit to Cairo by Humphrey to discuss the crisis, and, as discussed two days earlier with Robert Anderson, he was preparing to dispatch Vice President Mohieddin to Washington. Mohieddin was to make a “routine” UN visit in New York, then meet secretly with President Johnson and other administration officials on or about June 7. Administration officials discussed whether they should inform Israel of this secret visit. Nasser held high hopes for the visit: While “supremely confident,” Anderson reported, the Egyptian president “earnestly desires friendship of U.S.”

Yet while Nasser privately expressed his preference for a peaceful solution, to the rest of the world the voices coming out of Cairo seemed

certain of war and confident of victory. Nasser himself had declared, at a press conference on May 28, "We are prepared, our sons are prepared, our army is prepared, and the entire Arab nation is prepared." A broadcast from the Voice of Cairo dared Israel to strike: "We challenge you, Eshkol, to try all your weapons. Put them to the test, they will spell Israel's death and annihilation."

To Bashir and his family, words like these meant the enemy would be vanquished and the family would return home. To Dalia and her family, the words meant what they said—annihilation. Whatever their intent, Nasser's choice of words amounted to a monumental gamble. Israeli general Matitahu Peled would call it "unheard-of foolishness." Despite King Hussein's warnings of a preemptive Israeli strike, Nasser was in for the surprise of his life.

At 7:45 A.M. on Monday, June 5, 1967, French-built Israeli bombers roared out of their bases and crossed into Egyptian airspace. Flying below radar, the jets angled toward Egyptian bases in Sinai, the Nile delta, and Cairo. Fifteen minutes later, tanks and infantry of Israel's Seventh Armored Brigade moved west into Gaza and toward the Sinai frontier. The war with Egypt had begun. No action at that hour was taken against Jordan, Iraq, or Syria. At 9:00 A.M., Prime Minister Eshkol sent a message to King Hussein through the chief United Nations observer: "We shall not initiate any action whatsoever against Jordan. However, should Jordan open hostilities, we shall react with all our might, and the king will have to bear the full responsibility for the consequences."

A few hours later, Bashir stood up from the plaintiff's table in the Ramallah courtroom. It was late on the morning of June 5, a moment after the young man had come into the courtroom and whispered something important into Bashir's ear.

"Your Honor!" Bashir bellowed. He was surprised how loud his voice sounded. The other lawyer stopped in midsentence; everyone in the courtroom stared at Bashir. "I have just received word that the war has begun on the Egyptian and Jordanian fronts."

"Stop the proceedings!" exclaimed the judge. "And someone bring in a radio!"

Bashir left the courtroom in excitement and raced home. On the streets, people were dashing in and out of shops, stocking up on canned food,

candles, kerosene, and tape for the windows. Others waited in long lines outside the flour mills. On the sidewalks, men crowded around tables beneath overhead speakers, smoking from water pipes and straining to hear the radio. The city was expectant, not only of war, but of the annual throngs of summer visitors that would flock here after the victory. Nineteen years after the Nakba had transformed Ramallah, the city had again become a summer haven for the Arab world, with twenty-one hotels and an annual musical theater festival attended by families from Libya to Kuwait. During high season, the restaurants would stay open until 2:00 A.M. and reopen two hours later. Preparations for the festival were almost finished, and now it seemed the revelers would mark a more profound celebration: Palestine would again be in the hands of the Arabs.

At home Bashir found Ahmad, Zakia, Nuha, and other siblings transfixed before the radio. Egyptian antiaircraft fire had shot down three-quarters of the attacking Israeli jets, the Voice of the Arabs reported from Cairo. The deep, trusted voice belonged to Ahmad Said, who assured his rapt listeners that the Egyptian air force had launched a counterattack against Israel. Israeli forces had penetrated Sinai, but Egyptian troops had engaged the enemy and taken the offensive. Jordan, the Voice of the Arabs announced, had captured Mt. Scopus, a strategic hill in Jerusalem.

The Arabs were winning, Bashir thought. *The Arabs were winning.* Incredible as it seemed, the family would be going home. Umm Kulthum, the Arab world's most beloved singer and, next to Nasser, the biggest living symbol of Arab unity, would soon be singing in Tel Aviv.

"We thought the victory was in our hands," Bashir would say thirty-seven years later. "That we would be victorious and we would be going back home. After nineteen years we really had the very strong feeling that we were going back to our lands, houses, streets, schools—to our lives. That we would get our freedom back, that we would be liberated, that we would get back to the homeland. Sorry to say, that was not the case. It was an illusion."

By the time Bashir and his family heard the reports of the Egyptian advances, Gamal Abdel Nasser's entire air force lay smoking on tarmacs in Cairo, Sinai, and the Nile delta. Israel's surprise attack of five hundred sorties had destroyed virtually all of Egypt's Soviet-built fighter jets, and now the Jewish state had the sky over Sinai all to itself. During the attack, begun as Egyptian air force command personnel were finishing breakfast

and driving to work, the chief of Egypt's armed forces sent a coded message to his counterparts in Jordan, describing early Egyptian victories. Jordanian radar analysts, seeing planes flying toward Tel Aviv, concluded the Egyptian claims were accurate: The intense radar activity, they believed, showed Egyptian jets on the attack, not Israeli fighters returning to base to refuel. Invoking the mutual defense pact, the commander in chief of the Egyptian forces authorized the next step in the plan: the Jordanian offensive against Israel.

By this time, King Hussein had received Prime Minister Eshkol's message promising that Israel would not attack Jordan first and warning of the consequences should Jordan fire the first shot. The king, however, was bound to the pact with Egypt and believed the message from Eshkol was a ploy to help Israel dispense with Egypt first. Only then, Hussein feared, would Israel turn its full military attention to Jordan and the West Bank.

At 11:00 A.M., Jordanian forces began firing long-range artillery toward Israeli suburbs near Tel Aviv and at an airfield at Ramat David. Fifteen minutes later, Jordanian howitzers began firing thousands of shells on neighborhoods and military targets in Jewish parts of Jerusalem. Within an hour, Jordanian, Syrian, and Iraqi fighter jets were slicing into Israeli airspace as Jordanian infantry churned forward toward Israeli positions.

"Brother Arabs everywhere," promised a broadcast from Jordan, "the enemy this morning has launched an aggression on our Arab land and air-space." "The Zionist barracks in Palestine," declared Ahmad Said from Cairo, "is about to be destroyed." Such triumphal messages would have thrilled Bashir's family and terrified Dalia's; Egyptian claims that its troops had crossed Israel's border and were marching toward the Negev desert actually prompted some Israelis to hang white flags in surrender.

The facts told a different story. By midafternoon of June 5, the air forces of Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt had all been demolished. Israeli pilots now patrolled the entire region virtually unchallenged and were free to attack Egyptian ground troops in Sinai or Jordanian infantry moving toward Jerusalem. From this point, the outcome of the war was written. The Six Day War was essentially decided in six hours.

Bashir could hear explosions. The headquarters of the Jordanian army in Ramallah was crumbling under Israeli fire. Then, another series of

thunderous booms: the sound of Ramallah's main radio transmitter going down. And two more, ripping into the soccer field at the Quaker School up the road. Bashir and his family assumed these attacks would soon be answered and that reinforcements—Iraqis or more troops from Jordan—would fortify the city. Surely the Arab armies understood the strategic importance of Ramallah, a key transport hub and center of West Bank communications. Army officers, it was said, had been ordered to defend Ramallah at all costs. Soon, however, there would be reports of Jordanian troops wiped out when they tried to reach Jerusalem from Jericho, as Israeli flares lit up the road and fighter jets obliterated an entire infantry battalion. Word would come of desperate fighting in Jerusalem. Some accounts said the Israelis had the Old City completely surrounded. It wasn't clear where the reinforcements for Ramallah would be coming from. Bashir listened to the explosions continuing through the night and into the next day, shaking the city and its confidence.

At noon on Tuesday, June 6, General Riad, the Egyptian in charge of the eastern front forces, sent an urgent message from Amman to his counterparts in Cairo. "The situation in the West Bank is rapidly deteriorating," Riad warned. "A concentrated attack has been launched on all [points], together with heavy fire, day and night. Jordanian, Syrian and Iraqi air forces in position H3 have been virtually destroyed." Riad had been consulting with King Hussein. The general posed a series of terrible choices to the command headquarters in Cairo: cease-fire, retreat, or fighting for one more day in the West Bank, "resulting in the isolation and destruction of the entire Jordanian Army." The cable requested an immediate reply.

Half an hour later, an answer came from Cairo, advising the Jordanians to withdraw from the West Bank and arm the general population. As this reply was coming in, the king sent a telegram to Nasser, underscoring the unfolding calamity on the Jordanian front and asking the Egyptian president for his advice. Nasser replied that evening, repeating the counsel of his men in uniform. The Jordanian army, Nasser urged, should vacate the West Bank while Arab leaders pressed for a cease-fire.

In the light of the early evening of June 6, Bashir stood on the roof of an apartment building in Ramallah, facing south. It was warm and clear but for the dark pillars of smoke rising from the direction of Jerusalem and the

haze around the Mount of Olives just to the east. Bashir squinted through the smoke, out past the Amari refugee camp that had grown after 1948 and toward the tower at the Qalandia airstrip, where he had landed from Gaza with his father ten years earlier. There he could see a line of tanks and jeeps moving north. As news of the approaching troops reached the streets below, some Palestinians joyfully began preparing to greet them. They assumed these would be the Iraqi reinforcements. Bashir remained on the roof, his left hand characteristically in his pocket, and fixed his gaze on the road to the south. Slowly, as the tanks came closer, he surmised that they were not Iraqi.

Ramallah fell on the night of June 6 as Israeli ground forces moved in from the south and west. There was little resistance; eyewitnesses would later say many Jordanian troops had retreated well before the Israelis ever arrived. In some cases, the departing Arab soldiers forgot to leave keys for the weapons storehouses, ostensibly stocked with English rifles for the people of Ramallah to repel the invading Israelis. The Jordanian army's main accomplishment in Ramallah, Bashir would remember wryly, was in urging people to get out of the line of fire. "The Jordanian army was asking people to go inside their houses," he said. "That was the extent of their contribution. We didn't feel that they were really fighting."

In fact, from Jenin in the northern West Bank to Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Hebron farther south, the Jordanian army was without air cover or radar and defenseless to repeated bombings of its ground troops from Israel's French-built fighter jets. The Jordanians had suffered devastating losses, and because of the constant air attacks they were unable to send supplies or reinforcements to the front lines. By late on June 6, as Israeli troops penetrated the West Bank and stood poised at the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, King Hussein's forces were in retreat across the Jordan River, to what was left of his kingdom.

By late on June 6, Dalia knew that the war was won. She experienced it not with elation—not yet, since the fighting was still going on—but rather with a sense that a miracle was taking place in Israel. *How could this have happened?* she thought again and again. *Did God save us? How can this be?*

With the news the previous day that Israel had destroyed the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian air forces, Dalia felt a profound relief such as she had never experienced, just as before the war she had never felt such horror. For

Moshe and Solia, the feeling tapped something old, from twenty-four years earlier: the moment when they learned that the Bulgarian authorities had suspended the deportation orders for the Jews and that they would not be boarding train cars for Poland.

On the morning of Wednesday, June 7, Bashir and his family woke up to a city under military occupation. Israeli soldiers in jeeps were shouting through bullhorns, demanding that white flags be hung outside houses, shops, and apartment buildings; already balconies and windows fluttered with T-shirts and handkerchiefs.

Bashir was in shock from the surreal and the familiar. Another retreating Jordanian army had been replaced by another occupying Israeli force. *In 1948*, Bashir thought, *we lost 78 percent of our land. And now all of Palestine is under occupation.* The taste was bitter and humiliating. Not only did the Israelis capture and occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, they now held the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. Perhaps most shocking of all was that East Jerusalem, and the Old City with its holy sites, was now in the hands of the Israelis.

On the evening of June 10, Solia was visiting with Dora and Stella in the addition that had been built onto the house for the two aunts. The women sat at the kitchen table, eating their traditional supper of garlic and Bulgarian cheese, when Dalia burst into the room.

“Get up, get up!” she shouted to her mother and her aunts. “The war is over!” Moshe heard the commotion and joined them. In the final phase of the war, Israel had captured the Golan Heights from Syria. At 6:30 that evening, the United Nations imposed a cease-fire; the shooting and shelling had stopped. Everyone began jumping wildly, laughing and hugging and kissing one another.

In the evening, Dalia gathered her family and began to dance: slowly at first, arms extended, neck tilted, head back, eyes half-open, loose skirt shifting softly around her. She spun slowly between the walls of Jerusalem stone. Gradually the other women of the family joined Dalia, and they formed a circle, hands on one another’s shoulders, moving to the hora, the Israeli national dance. Solia and Dora and Stella and Dalia swayed through the open house, out to the yard, past the jacaranda tree and the lemon tree, laughing and weeping.

As they circled through the yard, Dalia looked up at the night sky and sang: “David the king of Israel is alive. Alive and present. David is alive . . .” She would always remember this night and its abiding sense of miracle and liberation.

Within a week, refugees began arriving in Ramallah from villages near Latrun. Every villager from Beit Nuba, Imwas, and Yalo had been ordered out of their homes and sent north toward Ramallah; those who tried to return were blocked by a line of tanks and soldiers shooting in the air. Nineteen years earlier, Israeli soldiers commandeering buses had dumped the people of al-Ramla at the edges of these villages as they began their march in the punishing sun to Salbit. Now the villages themselves were emptied and several thousand of the ten thousand residents had taken refuge in Ramallah—a small portion of the more than two hundred thousand Palestinians who would be displaced by the 1967 war.

In Ramallah, life was transformed. The summer theater festival and countless other plans were canceled abruptly. Israeli soldiers took the place of Jordanian police, and the prisons began to fill with young Palestinian men. Within weeks, the authorities announced a new justice system to be administered by occupation judges sitting in the West Bank. But the Israelis had a problem: Almost no Arab lawyers would come to court. A general strike had rendered the new Israeli courts virtually silent and empty. The strike had been organized, the Israeli authorities would soon learn, by a young West Bank lawyer named Bashir Khairi.

Bashir and dozens of other Ramallah lawyers had begun meeting secretly with clients in private homes. The occupation authorities threatened him and the other organizers with jail time and enticed them with reduced sentences for clients already in prison. “As long as there’s an Israeli flag behind the judge in the courthouse,” Bashir told an Israeli colonel, “I won’t be representing my people.” An Israeli judge told Bashir he would release fifteen Palestinians accused of illegal demonstrations if Bashir simply showed up in court to represent them. Bashir refused, as did almost every other lawyer in similar circumstances: Of the eighty lawyers in Ramallah, Bashir would recount, only five took part in the new system. Now nearly anytime a new trial would be called, the court would be vacant except for the accused and his accusers. Civil matters went underground entirely.

People began to resolve their disputes in private, creating an alternative system in the face of a collective enemy.

As the occupation wore on, a sense of calm and clarity began to settle over Bashir. The loss was devastating, but it made one thing clear: Palestinians could rely only on themselves to deliver their own justice. It was clear that the right of return, guaranteed by United Nations Resolution 194, would never be delivered by the UN or the international community. Return was subsequently promised by the Arab states whose armed forces instead were crushed and humiliated. The Arab states still put up a rhetorical front—in the days after the war, they would publicly declare “no reconciliation, no negotiation, and no recognition” regarding Israel—but these were increasingly taken as empty words by Palestinians.

Strangely, though, in the midst of occupation and the utter failure of the Arab regimes, a sense of freedom was emerging: a notion that the Palestinians were suddenly free to think and act for themselves. In the weeks after the occupation, Bashir began to believe that his people would go back to their homeland only through the sweat and blood of Palestinian armed struggle. He was far from alone in this assessment.

In the wake of the June 1967 war and the Israeli occupation, the pan-Arab movement was in shreds, but the spirit of a Palestinian national liberation struggle was surging. Thousands of young men signed up to become fedayeen—freedom fighters, or, literally, “those who sacrifice.” Their goal was to “liberate Palestine” and guarantee the right of return by any means necessary. The ranks of Fatah, led by Arafat and Abu Jihad, swelled, and soon a new organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), would be born from an alliance with the pro-Nasser Arab Nationalist Movement. Its leader was Dr. George Habash, the refugee from Lydda.

Across the West Bank and in exile, young men confronted their parents with their plans. Fathers demanded their sons seek the safety of higher education in Cairo or London; one son, a young man named Bassam Abu-Sharif, asked his father, “What is a PhD when we have no country?” He did not want to be “an eternal foreigner, a landless, homeless, stateless, shamed, despised Palestinian refugee.” Bassam, after joining the PFLP, would recall telling his angry father, “I would rather be in prison in my own country than be a free man in exile. I would rather be dead.”

For now, though, Palestinians would find themselves returning to their homes not in triumph, but simply to ask permission to peer inside.

The great paradox of the occupation was that suddenly historic Palestine was easier to reach than at any time since 1948. Within days of Israel's capture and annexation of East Jerusalem, the boundary that had separated Hussein's Hashemite kingdom from Israel and West Jerusalem became nearly invisible. At the same time, all along the old West Bank-Israel border—also known as the Green Line—Israeli soldiers had been redeployed to other fronts to patrol the vastly expanded occupied territories. Therefore, there were far fewer Israeli soldiers along the Green Line. By late June, it had become easier for Palestinian families to cross into their old homeland and touch the soil and stones of earlier days.

This is how Bashir and his cousins found themselves in the West Jerusalem bus station in the summer of 1967, where they climbed onto the 1965 Royal Tiger and rolled west, past the ruins of old Arab villages, past the husks of burned-out Israeli jeeps covered with bouquets, down the hill to the Latrun Valley, past the cement factory, across the railroad tracks, and into al-Ramla, where a young woman named Dalia was sitting in her yard, staring into the leaves of a jacaranda tree.