On October 6, 1973, Egyptian military forces launched a massive assault against Israeli positions on the eastern side of the Suez Canal. Simultaneously, Syrian forces attacked the Golan Heights. In both cases the Arab armies performed competently, inflicting some of the worst defeats on the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in Israel’s history. Only a few years earlier, Egypt had launched a sustained low-level campaign of artillery barrages and commando operations against Israel. Why did Egypt risk such a large-scale assault in 1973, coordinated with another state, against an adversary it knew to possess nuclear weapons? Why was Egypt willing to use military force for over a year from 1969 to 1970?

Egypt had an intense political dispute with Israel centering on the Sinai Peninsula that Israel captured during the 1967 Six Day War. Egyptian leaders settled on force when diplomatic and military trends seemed to make recovering the Sinai less likely. Conversely, when the diplomatic situation improved after 1973, particularly with more direct American involvement, Egypt avoided military action. Egypt’s strong interests, rooted in recovering territory, did not cause its leaders to ignore the Israeli nuclear arsenal. They believed that so long as they executed only limited campaigns, the benefits to Israeli of using its nuclear weapons would be low. At the same time, Cairo sought to raise the costs of Israeli nuclear use by developing its own unconventional weapons and relying on the superpowers, in particular the United States, to constrain Israel. Thus while the Israeli nuclear arsenal did not deter a conventional attack, it is not the case that Egyptian leaders ignored the Israeli nuclear arsenal in 1973. In short, the Israeli nuclear arsenal was neither all-imposing nor irrelevant. As I show, there is clear evidence that Egypt took Israeli nuclear weapons into consideration throughout this period. They took actions to offset that advantage and were able to discount the likelihood of Israeli nuclear use given the cost-benefit factors associated with nuclear use. In other words,
CHAPTER 3

...my argument helps explain why leaders believed that nuclear weapons would not play a large role, which allowed other factors to drive decision making.

This case is also important to examine because it is the one instance in which aggregate material indicators suggest that the nonnuclear weapon state was as conventionally capable as its nuclear-armed opponent, and yet war occurred. These measures therefore seem to contradict my argument, which predicts war is unlikely in such cases. As I show in this chapter, though, Israel’s conventional military capability was in fact far superior to that of its Egyptian opponent. The case is therefore consistent with my broader argument.

I focus primarily on the Egyptian-Israeli dispute following the 1967 Six Day War in this chapter. The most thorough accounts of the Israeli nuclear program contend that Israel completed a deliverable nuclear weapon immediately prior to the war. As such, the nuclear arsenal could play only a limited, if any, role in Egyptian decision making. I discuss the 1967 war in the conclusion chapter and appendix B.

The evidence presented in this chapter comes from a variety of sources. The conclusions remain tentative, owing to the lack of direct access to Egyptian documents. I rely heavily on declassified conversations between American and Egyptian officials. This method offers some utility in gauging leader intentions. I also draw from memoirs and later accounts of events from participants, including those from Egypt, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Finally, I rely on a number of secondary works, themselves frequently based on interviews or limited access to documents, to better develop the picture. The evidence is nevertheless less complete than in other chapters. While it is clear that Egyptian leaders factored Israeli nuclear weapons into their decision making, it is difficult at times to link a specific behavior to nuclear issues.

The rest of this chapter unpacks my argument in three main sections. First, I review the basic military balance. Next, I provide the background to the dispute. In the third section of this chapter I discuss Egyptian behavior and views on Israeli nuclear weapons. While the core focus is on Egypt, I briefly address the Syrian offensive in 1973 as well. I conclude with a short summary of the evidence.

The Military Balance

Israel has never publicly acknowledged possessing nuclear weapons. It is therefore necessary to demonstrate that Egyptian leaders understood that Israel possessed nuclear weapons during this period. Next, I discuss the conventional balance. While in some rough indicators of power the two
sides appeared equivalent, a more fine-grained analysis demonstrates that Israel had a large conventional advantage throughout the period.

THE NUCLEAR BALANCE

Israel had nuclear monopoly relative to Egypt beginning in 1967. According to Avner Cohen, who has done the most extensive work on the Israeli nuclear arsenal, “On the eve of the [1967 Six Day] war Israel ‘improved’ two deliverable nuclear explosive devices.”\(^3\) The arsenal expanded from there. Using estimates of plutonium production from the Dimona reactor and various US intelligence reports, analysts have constructed rough estimates for the size of the Israeli nuclear arsenal over time. Based on these sources, Israel likely increased its arsenal at a rate of about two warheads per year during the 1970s (table 3.1). Estimates for warhead yields are more difficult to find. Sources suggest Israel was capable of producing weapons with yields in the range of ten to twenty kilotons during this period. I use these estimates to provide a rough estimate of the total Israeli nuclear yield, also in table 3.1, though these numbers should not be taken as precise.\(^4\)

Table 3.1 Israeli nuclear weapons, 1967–1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Warheads</th>
<th>Estimated total yield (megatons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.02–0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.04–0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.06–0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.08–0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.11–0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.13–0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.15–0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.17–0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.20–0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.22–0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.24–0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.26–0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.29–0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Estimated yields based on 10–20 kiloton warhead yield.
Israel’s delivery capabilities evolved as well. In 1967 the ability to deliver a nuclear device was limited. Yitzhak Ya’akov, the Israeli Defense Forces colonel in charge of weapons development in 1967, later relayed that Israel contemplated using “Super Frelon” helicopters to explode a nuclear device for demonstrative purposes.\textsuperscript{5} Had Israel contemplated a nuclear strike against an adversary, one delivery candidate was the French-made Vautour light bomber, because of its payload and range abilities. The Vautour’s estimated range allowed Israel to strike targets deep inside Egypt; Israeli Vautours struck distant Iraqi air bases in the Six Day War.\textsuperscript{6} In 1968 the first American-made A4-Skyhawk achieved initial operating capability. Though Israel privately committed to not use American-made aircraft to carry nuclear weapons, analysts viewed the A4 as a likely nuclear delivery platform until the arrival of the American-made F-4E Phantoms. These aircraft were first deployed to strike into Upper Egypt in January 1970. The Israeli-made Jericho I missiles (based on an earlier French design) had an estimated range of 500 kilometers and were deployed by 1972 or 1973. Initial guidance difficulties limited any availability in 1972. During the 1973 October War, though, there were reports that Israel conducted an operational check of its Jericho missiles and that some Israeli leaders, notably the defense minister Moshe Dayan, may have pushed for additional options.\textsuperscript{7}

There is substantial evidence that Egyptian leaders were aware of Israeli nuclear weapons. It is not the case, then, that Egyptian leaders behaved provocatively toward Israel because of a mistaken belief that Israel lacked a deliverable nuclear capability. Egyptian presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat both publicly acknowledged the existence of Israeli nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{8} Mohamed Heikal, the influential editor of the newspaper \textit{Al-Ahram} and a confidant of Nasser, later wrote that in 1969 Nasser told Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi that Israel likely possessed nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{9} Some suggest that Soviet intelligence had penetrated Israeli defense and intelligence offices in the late 1960s, gained knowledge of Israeli decisions relating to nuclear weapons, and passed that information to its Arab allies.\textsuperscript{10} Whether that occurred or not, the Israeli nuclear program was not a well-kept secret. In July 1970, the \textit{New York Times} reported that “for at least two years the United States government has been conducting its Middle East policy on the assumption that Israel either possesses an atomic bomb or has component parts available for quick assembly.”\textsuperscript{11} During a meeting with President Richard Nixon in 1973, Hafiz Ismail, the Egyptian national security adviser, “pointed out the development of long-range missiles and atomic weapon research going on in Israel.”\textsuperscript{12} A few days later, in meetings with US national security adviser Henry Kissinger, Dr. Hafiz Ghanim, a member of the Central Committee of the Arab Socialist Union, raised the possibility of limiting Israeli nuclear arms, implying that Israel already possessed a nuclear stockpile.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, based on conversations with Syrian officials on the eve of the 1973 October
War, Murhaf Jouejati reports that Egypt’s ally “Syria, of course, knew that Israel has a massive nuclear capability.”

Egyptian leaders were also aware of advances in Israeli nuclear delivery capabilities. In January 1966, the *New York Times* published an article discussing Israeli intentions to purchase intermediate range ballistic missiles from France. Within Egypt, the move was seen as further evidence of Israel’s desire and growing ability to deliver a nuclear weapon. Egyptian leaders also closely followed the Israeli acquisition of nuclear-capable aircraft, including the French Mirage and American-made Skyhawk and Phantom. In May 1973, Ismail raised the issue of nuclear weapons and delivery capabilities with Kissinger, highlighting the “enormous data about political and technical aspects of the employment of atomic weapons [that] are being forwarded to Israel.” Kissinger asked Ismail from where he believed Israel was receiving this information. Ismail replied simply, “From the United States.”

The concentration of its population along the Nile River made Egypt vulnerable to even a few nuclear weapons. A US State Department report in 1964 highlighted that “of all the countries of the Near East, the UAR [Egypt] is the most vulnerable to nuclear attack. A single, well-placed nuclear device would bring a sheet of water 400 feet high cascading down the narrow Nile valley where the entire Egyptian population is concentrated.” Egyptian leaders were aware of the danger. Lower level Israeli officials,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk informed President Johnson in May 1965, “speak frankly about Israel’s strategy toward the United Arab Republic: a) surface-to-surface missiles targeted on the Nile delta, and b) a capability to bomb and release the waters behind the Aswan High Dam. Destruction of the Aswan Dam would require a nuclear warhead; bombing with high explosives could not be counted on to do the job.” Israeli air superiority, most vividly displayed during the deep penetration bombing raids beginning in January 1970, demonstrated a clear ability to execute such a strike.

**The Conventional Balance**

Aggregate material indicators can obscure the Israeli conventional military advantage. The Composite Indicator of National Capabilities (CINC) score, a commonly used measure for power, indicates that Egypt was more powerful than Israel throughout this period. Israel had less than half the measured capabilities of Egypt in every year from 1967 to 1979; in five of the years, Egypt had greater than a 3:1 advantage. According to this measure, then, the NNWS had a large conventional advantage when it fought two wars against the NWS. This challenges my argument, which posits that war in nuclear monopoly is likely to occur only when the NWS has a large conventional advantage.
A closer examination of the military balance, though, reveals that Israel possessed a persistent advantage relative to its regional neighbors, including Egypt. In economic development, a good predictor of military success, the Israeli power advantage was decisive. Israel’s per capita gross domestic product (GDP) advantage grew from more than a 7:1 advantage in 1967 to nearly 12:1 by 1973 (figure 3.1). This allowed Israel to extract a great deal more from its society than Egypt and field a more effective military force. Even with Egypt’s much larger population, the overall size of the two economies were similar. It was not the case, then, that Egypt could simply overwhelm Israel with a larger total economic base. This allowed Israel’s qualitative advantage in economic development to be decisive.

In military power, the balance appears roughly equivalent using indicators for total troops and spending per soldier. Egypt had a lead in the total number of soldiers, though this advantage was a modest one (figure 3.2). Even that advantage may be overstated. Estimates from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) report that Israel’s fully mobilized military actually outnumbered the fully mobilized Egyptian military in ten of the thirteen years from 1967 to 1979. Israel could thus field a military at least as large if not slightly larger than Egypt within forty-eight to seventy-two hours of mobilization. The Egyptian chief of staff Saad El Shazly conceded that “we had no real advantage in front line forces. No less than 58 percent of our vast total were not field troops.” Israel possessed a consistent advantage in spending per soldier, hovering around a 2:1 advantage and approaching a 3:1 advantage in 1973.

![Figure 3.1 Economic ratios, 1967–1979](http://ksgleditsch.com/exptradegdp.html)
The Israeli advantage is more apparent in a qualitative and fine-grained assessment of the conventional balance. The Egyptian military was not a professional fighting force in 1967. Field Marshal Muhammad Abd al-Hakim Amer, the leader of the Egyptian military at the time, treated the armed forces as his “own personal fiefdom,” where personal loyalty was more important than military competence. The army was plagued by poorly organized command structures that had difficulty even communicating with one another in battle. Compounding this problem, low-level officers lacked initiative. The 1967 Six Day War dramatically confirmed Egyptian military ineptitude and set the stage for estimates of the military balance thereafter. “The Egyptian army,” writes Kenneth Pollack, “was all but obliterated during the Six Day War.”

Israel’s advantage was thus very large for several years as Egypt rebuilt its military. Following the debacle in June 1967, Nasser sacked Amer and asserted more direct control over the military. Other high-ranking officers were arrested, tried, and sentenced. All told, Nasser’s reforms led to the removal of eight hundred to a thousand officers, fundamentally remaking the officer corps. The command structure was rationalized to eliminate duplicate chains of command, reduce military ranks for various commands, and centralize power. The ratio of officers with a college degree went from less than 2 percent in 1967 to 60 percent by 1973. While necessary for long-run success, the reforms would take time to have their effect. By the end of
1969, Nasser knew that his military still posed little threat to Israel. Egypt was thus much weaker than Israel when it launched the War of Attrition in 1969.

The 1969–1970 War of Attrition took a toll on Egypt’s military. The war did give the Egyptian military valuable experience in fighting Israel in sustained combat operations. Yet it necessarily degraded Egyptian fighting forces as they were still struggling to rebuild. Ultimately, the Israeli military eliminated enough of the Egyptian defensive capabilities that the Egyptians were forced to turn over defense to the Soviet Union. Unable to even effectively defend itself, Egypt posed little offensive threat to Israel during the next few years.

The Egyptian military did perform admirably during the 1973 October War. Risa Brooks characterizes the Egyptian offensive operations across the Suez Canal as “one of the most remarkable campaigns in military history.” The operation demonstrated marked improvements in the Egyptian military from the experiences of 1967 and 1970, although it must be noted that many regarded the operation so highly precisely because the baseline of expectations for the Egyptian military was so low. The key question for my argument, though, is the extent to which the Egyptian military posed a major threat to Israel.

The answer remains that the Egyptian danger was limited. To begin with, internal Egyptian assessments prior to the 1973 assault confirmed that the Israelis maintained decisive advantages in armor and air power. Any attempt at maneuver warfare in the open Sinai would be disastrous. As such, Egyptian elites recognized that they lacked the power projection capability to threaten pre-1967 Israeli territory, or even to advance deep into the Sinai. This fact was widely recognized beyond Egypt. Indeed, part of the reason why the Egyptian 1973 assault proved surprising was that Israeli intelligence did not expect the Egyptians to start a war they would militarily lose. In addition, Egypt continued to face difficulties implementing effective force employment critical to success on the modern battlefield. This reduced the Egyptian military threat to Israel. Ryan Grauer and Michael Horowitz find that Israel partially implemented the modern system at the operational and tactical level in 1967, while Egypt managed to only partially implement it at the operational level and failed to do so at the tactical level. Moreover, as John Mearsheimer points out, Israel was capable of launching a breakthrough and exploitation at the operational level in 1967, a fact key leaders recognized. In 1973, Grauer and Horowitz conclude, Egypt had failed to adopt the modern system at all at the operational or tactical levels, while Israel had fully adopted its tenets at both levels. To be sure, implementation of the modern system during war cannot be measured prior to the fighting. Yet the consistent Israeli advantage in this regard underscores the qualitative difference, and past performances can inform later assessment. Moreover, effective implementation of the
modern system requires heavy investment prior to war, which can be observed by opponents at the time. Egyptian and Israeli performance indicates that Israel was training its military in this way prior to conflict, whereas Egypt was not. This is what one would expect, given the difference in levels of economic development between the two states.

True, Egypt could count on regional support against Israel. These alliances did not add markedly to Egyptian power or offset the Israeli conventional advantage, though. The 1967 war demonstrated that even when facing several adversaries at the same time, Israel enjoyed a decisive military advantage. Israeli pilots also proved themselves capable against Soviet opponents (who were better equipped and trained than their Arab allies) during the 1969–1970 war. Perhaps most importantly, the Arab states were never able to coordinate effectively against Israel, degrading their ability to aggregate capabilities.³⁴ And while Egypt received aid from the Soviet Union, that was offset by US support to Israel.³⁵

For its part, Israel apparently did not integrate nuclear weapons into its military planning. “With Israel’s decisive victory against the Arab coalition in the 1967 war,” argues Vipin Narang, “Israel’s conventional superiority was established as its primary deterrent.”³⁶ The Israeli conventional advantage, increasingly underwritten by the United States, reduced the danger that Egypt and other Arab states could pose and with it the benefits of nuclear use. This allowed the costs to Israel of nuclear use to loom large. I discuss the conduct of the wars in 1969 and 1973 in more detail below. Here it is sufficient to note that the Egyptian threat in 1969–1970 was very limited; there is little evidence that Israel considered nuclear use. In 1973, the scope of the danger to Israel was larger, and Egypt took additional steps to signal its limited intentions. Israel’s defense minister Moshe Dayan considered a nuclear threat or demonstration, but Golda Meir and other Israeli leaders ruled out nuclear strikes. As noted earlier, at most Israel ordered a series of operational checks of its Jericho missiles. This was likely done as a signal to the United States that it should speed conventional resupply.³⁷ Had the danger to Israel increased, then the Israeli leadership might have considered more direct measures against Egypt and Syria.

In sum, Israel possessed a meaningful conventional advantage throughout this period. Israel had a larger advantage in per capita GDP that was not counterbalanced by an Egyptian advantage in overall economic size. The two military forces were roughly similar in size, yet Israeli troops possessed a major qualitative advantage over their Egyptian opponents.

Dispute Overview

The totality of the 1967 defeat shocked the Egyptians. Prior to that, President Nasser had entertained broader ambitions in the region, drawing on
Arab nationalism to exert influence. After the defeat, Nasser’s ambitions were significantly curtailed. He initially resigned, only to resume power following public demonstrations clamoring for him to return. His focus then settled on overturning Israel’s occupation of the Sinai Peninsula and regaining control of the Suez Canal. The closing of the canal had deprived financially strapped Egypt of critical revenue. According to one estimate, the loss of the Sinai cost Egypt $400–500 million annually. Firing across the canal continued sporadically throughout 1967. In October, Israel struck another blow against the Egyptian economy by destroying oil refineries in Suez City in retaliation for the Egyptian sinking of the Israeli destroyer Eilat. Additionally, fully 60 percent of the Egyptians who lived along the Suez had been relocated to the Nile Valley, causing severe economic and social turmoil. Beyond the economic and strategic implications, most Egyptians felt a sense of humiliation and deep animosity toward the Israeli occupation. President Richard Nixon would later recall that when he visited shortly after the war, he encountered “a residue of hatred among their [Israel’s] neighbors that I felt could only result in another war.”

It did not take long for war to occur. Egypt initiated sustained hostilities against the Israeli positions across the Suez Canal on March 8, 1969. These included a series of artillery barrages and limited commando raids into the Sinai to disrupt Israeli military operations. Two factors converged to convince the Egyptians it was necessary to act. First, the diplomatic impasse in resolving the status of the Sinai seemed to increase. The former US diplomat Richard Parker relates that in June 1968 Ashraf Ghorbal, then chief of the Egyptian Interests Section in Washington, complained that “an entire year had passed since the June War began and that there had been no movement on the withdrawal issue. [UN Security Council] Resolution 242 had passed, [Gunnar] Jarring had been appointed, and there had been no results. How long will this stalemate be permitted to go on?” Parker recalls similar sentiments expressed by the Egyptian foreign minister a few months later: “A year had passed and nothing had happened. Egypt would not acquiesce in the indefinite occupation of its territories.” As Nasser explained on January 21, 1969, “We must realize that the enemy will not withdraw unless we force him to withdraw through fighting. Indeed, there can be no hope of any political solution unless the enemy realizes that we are capable of forcing him to withdraw through fighting.”

Second, Israel began construction of the Bar-Lev Line, a series of fortifications along the Suez Canal named for the Israeli Defense Forces chief of the general staff, Haim Bar-Lev. Completed on March 15, 1969, the defenses included forts, trenches, sand walls, and artillery and tank posts. It provided a formidable barrier to any future Egyptian assault. Moreover, it signaled that the Israelis were treating the Suez Canal as a permanent border, reinforcing a sense that diplomatic efforts were failing. “As the Bar-Lev Line fast became a reality at the beginning of 1969, Nasser confronted a
difficult strategic situation,” writes George Gawyrch. “Prospects for any serious diplomatic movement were slim indeed. . . . Egypt could ill afford to allow both the diplomatic and military fronts to remain frozen for an indefinite period.” By February 1969 Egypt considered the destruction of those fortifications “vital.” On top of the new fortifications, President Johnson announced the sale of advanced F-4 Phantom aircraft to Israel on October 8, 1968. The conventional military balance, already unfavorable to Egypt, seemed to be dramatically worsening.

Throughout the War of Attrition, the United States put forward various initiatives to end hostilities. The most ambitious US effort was the Rogers Plan, named for the US secretary of state, William Rogers. The plan called for an Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory in exchange for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and future negotiations on the Palestinian issue. The Egyptians were skeptical; the Israelis flatly rejected the initiative. Soviet rejection of the plan provided the final nail in the coffin for Rogers’s initiative. As the war plodded along, the United States responded to new Egyptian peace overtures in May 1970 by increasing contacts and proposing a cease-fire on June 19. Nasser explained to the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev that the settlement would give Egypt time to recover and improve its defenses for future diplomatic and, if necessary, military initiatives. “In other words, we exploit that period to reinforce our positions?” Brezhnev asked. “That is true,” Nasser replied. “But it would also benefit us politically, and prove that Egypt and the Soviet Union were working for peace.” The new cease-fire went into effect in August; Egypt immediately used the time to move antiaircraft units forward in violation of the agreement.

Following Nasser’s death on September 28, 1970, Anwar Sadat became Egypt’s leader. He also took over its problems. The Egyptian economy remained stagnant, Egypt was dependent upon the Soviet Union for defense, and Israel remained entrenched on the east bank of the Suez Canal. Sadat shared the general commitment to retake the Sinai. He devoted considerable time to that end, making a number of proposals. Through intermediaries he privately urged the Americans to “tell the Israelis to take this Suez Canal proposal very seriously.” To Secretary of State Rogers he explained in May 1971 that “I don’t want to bother Israel. . . . I’ll sign an agreement. . . . I just want my land back.” In October 1971, the Egyptian foreign minister Mahmud Riad told the US national security adviser Henry Kissinger in a private meeting that “the position of Sadat was now very difficult; he [Sadat] would agree to any reasonable settlement as long as there was some prospect of getting Egyptian territory back.”

The concern for the Sinai went beyond the Egyptian political elite. The ongoing Israeli occupation remained deeply unpopular among the Egyptian public and threatened Sadat’s regime. As Donald Neff points out, following the cease-fire ending the 1969–1970 War of Attrition, the “reminders of no war-no peace added to the frustrated, depressing atmosphere
gripping Egypt, and to Sadat’s problems.” The popular mood did not improve with time. For example, in January 1972 university students demonstrated against the regime on campuses and in the streets, calling for military action against Israel. Egyptian leaders subsequently closed the universities and used military force to end the demonstrations. Mothers of arrested students carried signs reading “Send our sons to Sinai, not to Egyptian prisons.” When Hafiz Ismail met with President Nixon in February 1973, he took care to point out that “30 months of ceasefire was no reason for congratulations. The ceasefire was becoming a burden and a strain, and that it was necessary either to break it or to establish peace.”

The root causes of war in 1973 were thus the same as in 1969: perceptions that diplomatic efforts were proving counterproductive, and Israeli military improvements. On the diplomatic front, the burgeoning US-Soviet rapprochement seemed to relegate the Egyptian-Israeli problem to the back burner. This would deprive Sadat of the superpower pressure on Israel he believed necessary to attain a settlement. Egypt’s relationship with the Soviet Union grew more strained as the latter moved toward détente with the United States. The Soviets consistently provided less military hardware than Egypt desired. In addition, the Soviets counseled that Egypt should avoid provocations toward Israel. True, the Soviets provided additional arms in March 1973, but they continued to press Egypt to avoid any military action while providing no new diplomatic initiatives. For the Egyptians, the Soviets seemed unwilling or unable to take the political steps to make progress. The Soviets, Sadat complained, were “being passive and handing over all initiatives to the Americans.” Over time, Sadat became convinced that the root cause of Soviet waffling was a desire to avoid a regional conflagration that could strain US-Soviet relations. In May 1972 Murad Ghaleb, Egypt’s minister of foreign affairs, told Yugoslavian president Josip Tito that Sadat feared the Soviet Union would reach agreements with the United States that would be “at the expense of the Egyptians” or that would relegate the Middle East to a “question of secondary importance.”

The outcomes of two superpower summits in 1972 and 1973 seemingly confirmed this impression. Addressing the Middle East during the May 1972 summit in Moscow, the United States and the Soviet Union reaffirmed support for UN Security Council Resolution 242 adopted in the aftermath of the 1967 war and called for a “military relaxation in that area.” The statement was “a violent shock to us,” Sadat said. In his view, Egypt “lagged at least twenty steps behind Israel and so ‘military relaxation’ in this context could mean nothing but giving in to Israel.” Sadat subsequently summoned the Soviet ambassador to Egypt, Vladimir Vinogradov, and informed him that “I have decided to dispense with the services of all Soviet military experts and that they must go back to the Soviet Union within one week from today.” The Soviets departed shortly thereafter.
After another banal statement by Brezhnev and Nixon in June 1973, Ismail Fahmy informed Sadat that “the superpowers were contributing to the maintenance of the ‘no peace, no war’ because a permanent settlement in the Middle East had low priority for them. Détente was likely to make this priority even lower, as the two superpowers would now be preoccupied with safeguarding their rapprochement.”

Egypt’s entreaties to the United States also seemed to elicit no favorable developments. The joint US-Soviet statements suggested that the United States was unwilling to upset relations with the Soviet Union or Israel to aid Egypt. Even the dramatic expulsion of Soviet advisers elicited no progress. Ashraf Ghorbal recalled that the Americans gave Sadat “a note saying ‘bravo,’ but that’s all he got.” Frustrated Egyptian officials consistently highlighted the non-change in US policy with the Americans in 1973. Indeed, the immediate American response focused on assuring the Soviets they had not colluded with Egypt to force the withdrawal of Soviet forces. Ismail’s meetings with Nixon and Kissinger in February 1973 reinforced Sadat’s disappointment. “If we don’t take our case in our own hands,” Sadat complained, “there will be no movement, especially given Washington’s ridiculous ideas evidenced by Hafiz Ismail’s trip.”

The second factor that influenced Egyptian decision making was the perception that the military situation was reaching a critical juncture. US support to Israel dramatically increased after 1970 (figure 3.3). For instance, US military loans increased from $30 million in 1970 to $300 annually in 1972 and 1973. True, Nixon attempted to use arms transfers to prod Israel to negotiate in the summer of 1971. That occurred behind closed doors, though, and US aid after 1971 was still much higher than it had been before 1970.

![Figure 3.3 US economic and military obligations to Israel, 1967–1973](https://explorer.usaid.gov/data.html)

The Egyptians frequently pointed to unequivocal US support for Israel as harmful to negotiations. Foreign Minister Riad complained to Kissinger in October 1971 of “the insistence by the United States on maintaining Israeli superiority and therefore depriving Israel of any incentive to come to an agreement.”\textsuperscript{71} Sixteen months later, Ismail told Nixon that “Egypt did not understand the U.S. policy of balance of force. This policy permitted Israel to hold on to Egyptian land. . . . At one time, the Soviet Union was in Egypt, but the Soviet Union has now left and Egypt saw no further genuine motive for its [US] support of Israel.”\textsuperscript{72} Adding to Egyptian frustrations, a short time later word leaked of another US-Israeli arms agreement.\textsuperscript{73} From the Egyptian point of view, the Americans seemed to have no interest to facilitate a settlement without a disruption of the status quo.

By 1973 the military trajectory was decidedly negative for the Egyptians. “We see the [aircraft] deliveries [to Israel] extending through ‘74, ‘75 [as] very revealing,” Ismail explained to Kissinger in May. “We see the technological assistance to be given by the U.S. military to the military industry of Israel [as] a very dangerous policy. Because it means that maybe in a couple years’ time the U.S. can restrict its deliveries but Israel at that time will be able to maintain its balance of force and then the U.S. will come and say we cannot influence Israeli policy.” To drive the point home, he later added that “it is not only a question of a provision of the most complicated, most sophisticated armament which some people say that even American allies don’t get; it is also that question of industrial capacity, and our concern [is] that in a couple of years Israel will defy any approach towards peace.”\textsuperscript{74} In the near future, Israeli conventional capabilities would so dwarf Egyptian forces that military action by Egypt would be completely impossible. That would remove whatever small leverage Egypt had to prod Israel to negotiate.

So the two factors—diplomatic impasse and military change—were converging during 1972 and into 1973. It was at this point that Sadat settled on military action to break the stalemate. “It was impossible,” he noted in his memoirs, “for the United States to make a move if we ourselves didn’t take military action to break the deadlock.”\textsuperscript{75} As Sadat put it at the time, “The time has come for a shock. . . . Everyone has fallen asleep over the Mideast crisis. But they will soon wake up to the fact that Americans have left us no other way out.”\textsuperscript{76} It would not take much. Sadat had long believed that even limited military action could benefit Egypt. “I have to shake up the world and draw its attention to this problem,” he explained to senior Soviet officials in March 1971. “I need to gain only ten centimeters of land east of Suez. That is all.”\textsuperscript{77}

US and Soviet leaders were aware of Egypt’s growing desperation. Brezhnev, who had been counseling Egypt to avoid military action, warned Nixon on June 23, 1973, that they “must put this warlike situation to an end. . . . If there is no clarity about the principles we will have difficulty
keeping the military situation from flaring up.”

Nixon parried the Soviet leader, but privately he shared Brezhnev's concerns. In February, Nixon responded to a suggestion that additional delays would not “be disastrous for US interests” by writing, “I totally disagree. This thing is getting ready to blow.” The United States nevertheless made little effort. While open to Egyptian overtures, Kissinger stuck to a delaying strategy. Kissinger hoped that this would increase Soviet-Egyptian tensions as well as convince Egypt that it had no choice but to make concessions. In 1973, Kissinger believed that the Egyptians were still hedging on the issue of full peace with Israel and pointed out to Brezhnev that it was “hard to convince Israel why they should give up the territory in exchange for something they already have [a cease-fire], in order to avoid a war they can win.”

Egypt launched its offensive on October 6, 1973. The fighting continued for three weeks, ending on October 26. Though Egypt suffered a military defeat, Sadat was successful in generating greater American involvement.

From the Egyptian point of view, the political trajectory on the Sinai Peninsula then began moving in a positive, albeit uneven, direction. As such, Egypt refrained from large-scale military action against Israel. On October 29, 1973—just days after the war—the two sides met at the 101st kilometer of the Cairo-Suez Road. Shortly thereafter they reached an agreement on supplying the trapped Egyptian Third Army, exchanging prisoners of war, and starting disengagement talks. Kissinger, by then secretary of state as well as national security adviser, directly engaged in the negotiations. From 1973 to 1975 the United States put heavy pressure on Israel to offer concessions to Egypt and withdraw in a series of steps from the Sinai Peninsula. On January 18, 1974, Israel agreed to withdraw twenty kilometers east of the Suez Canal. Egypt maintained a foothold to place troops on the eastern bank of the canal, allowing Sadat to claim gains from the war. An international force was also put in place to separate the two sides. The Sinai II agreement followed on September 1, 1975. Israel withdrew farther into the desert, and Egypt allowed “the installation of an American observation station that could be used by Israel.”

In May 1977 the rightist Likud Party came to power in Israel. Through back channels, the new Israeli prime minister conveyed to Sadat that he was interested in a peace agreement with Egypt. The Americans again became heavily involved with the process, allowing the Egyptians to hope for a favorable diplomatic outcome in the near future.

In 1977 Sadat expressed a willingness to travel to Jerusalem. Israel subsequently extended an invitation, and Sadat addressed the Israeli Knesset. In doing so he essentially recognized Israel. Following his trip to Jerusalem, the Israelis agreed to further political and military negotiations. When negotiations bogged down, the new US president, Jimmy Carter, invited leaders from both sides to meet at Camp David. The two sides began talks on September 5, 1978. The United States remained deeply involved, with
Carter engaging in his own shuttle diplomacy over the next year, placing pressure on both sides to reach an agreement. The diplomatic efforts reached fruition with the March 27, 1979, signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty.

The Role of Nuclear Weapons

The underlying political dispute and Egyptian concern with diplomatic and military developments pushed Egypt to confrontation with Israel. The shape that those confrontations took is consistent with my argument on the role that nuclear weapons play in disputes under the shadow of nuclear monopoly. In the 1969–1970 War of Attrition, Egypt pursued a (very) limited war strategy. In 1973, Egypt launched a limited offensive that was more expansive than in 1969–1970. As such, it took additional steps to minimize the risks of nuclear use. Throughout both periods, Egypt pursued various policies to raise the costs of escalation for Israel. It would be a mistake to argue that Egyptian behavior was solely the product of the Israeli nuclear monopoly. Nevertheless, Egyptian leaders clearly took the Israeli nuclear arsenal into consideration. Egyptian behavior highlights the paradox of conventional military weakness when facing a nuclear-armed adversary. On the one hand, weak states can fight precisely because they lack the capabilities to pose a major danger to the nuclear weapon state. On the other hand, that same conventional weakness makes it difficult to achieve success.

Egyptian Behavior

Egypt had no intention of displacing Israeli forces in 1969–1970. Though Nasser occasionally spoke of attempts to reconquer the Sinai by 1970, no such plans were in place.\(^83\) Kenneth Pollack notes that the plan that did emerge was to “harass and attack the Israelis along the canal, [with] low-intensity strikes but on a constant basis.”\(^84\) Egypt had two goals. First, it hoped to put some pressure on Israel to show that controlling the Sinai did not guarantee security. Second, Nasser wanted to more directly engage the United States and the Soviet Union in pushing for a diplomatic settlement. Indeed, intermittent artillery barrages in late 1968 were “Nasser’s way of signaling to the Israelis and the Americans that lack of political progress would lead to further escalation quite soon.”\(^85\) As those proved ineffective, Egypt moved to the more sustained use of force to accomplish the same goal. Egyptian leaders were prepared to suffer greater losses than the Israelis, but they were not ready for the conflict to escalate into a larger war.\(^86\)

In short, Egyptian plans would not create a major danger to Israel. The target along the canal was in an isolated area. Moreover, the lack of any effort for a major crossing provided a natural stopping point for the fighting
that could not threaten to move deeper toward Israel. Egypt would not be threatening Israel’s homeland, its nuclear arsenal, or the destruction of a significant portion of the IDF.

Egyptian behavior during the War of Attrition matched this planning. In March 1969, Egypt began intensive artillery barrages and undertook small-scale commando raids into the Sinai. As the conflict continued, Egypt took heavy losses but did not escalate the level of violence. Force attrition necessitated that the Egyptians rely even more on the Soviet Union, with Nasser traveling to the Soviet Union in December 1969 and again the next month to secure more active Soviet involvement in Egyptian air defense. Israeli deep penetration raids against the Egyptian heartland beginning in January 1970 added urgency to these Egyptian requests. Though the Egyptian motive for increased Soviet support was the deteriorating military situation, the general Soviet involvement would also raise the costs to Israel for any nuclear strike. Following greater Soviet involvement, the war reverted to limited strikes by both sides until the cease-fire in August 1970.

Egypt planned for a limited offensive in 1973. Though the attack across the Suez Canal would be massive, it centered on simply crossing the canal and then digging in for the inevitable Israeli counterattack. During a meeting with the Egyptian Armed Forces Supreme Council on October 24, 1972, the military pressed Sadat on the ultimate goal for the operation. “Is the object the liberation of the occupied territories or is it merely a resumption of military activities so as to give you a better chance of a political solution?” Sadat replied: “Breaking the ceasefire.” Sadat had long noted that he needed to take only “ten centimeters” of land across the canal in order to make progress. The “plan was set for a comprehensive ‘local’ war in which only conventional arms would be used,” Egypt’s General Mohammed el-Gamasy wrote in his memoirs. True, Sadat told President Hafez al-Assad of Syria that Egypt would go farther and seize the strategic Giddi and Mitla passes and from there move to retake the entire Sinai. Privately, though, Sadat ordered the military to focus on taking six to ten miles on the east side of the canal. Further plans were a ruse to maintain Syrian support. Improved civil-military relations and training gave Sadat the confidence his military would execute the orders for a limited, rather than an expansive, attack.

Egyptian behavior matched the underlying planning. On October 6–7 the Egyptians moved ninety thousand soldiers and 850 tanks across the canal under the cover of an artillery barrage and surface-to-air missiles. Egyptian commando teams operated in the Israeli rear to disrupt reinforcements. The main body of troops then moved to eliminate the Bar-Lev line and set up defensive positions. Egyptian forces beat back hasty Israeli counterattacks on the sixth and eighth, inflicting heavy losses on Israeli armor and air forces. The Egyptians advanced steadily, hoping to reach their goal of a six- to nine-mile penetration. Sadat and Ismail Ali, the commander in chief
and war minister, refused to press the attack forward to the Giddi and Mitla passes deeper in the Sinai for several days, despite pressure from Egyptian generals.

The scale of the Egyptian assault could potentially have created a danger to Israel, which would have raised the benefits for nuclear strikes early in the conflict. While Egypt never planned to advance deep into the Sinai, Israel could not be expected to know that at the start of hostilities. Moreover, Israel would need to fully mobilize its society and resources to prosecute the war.

Egyptian leaders offset these dangers by seeking outside support and communicating the limited nature of their assault to the Israelis. Early in the war Sadat used back channels to communicate to Kissinger, and through him to Israel, that Egypt “did not intend to deepen the engagements or widen the confrontation.” While the message raised other issues, Ismail later asserted that none were new except “the commitment not ‘to intensify the engagements or widen the confrontation.’” He added that “where we had committed ourselves not to deepen the engagements . . . our aim was to safeguard our dense population centers and our vital economic interests.”

Kissinger took the Egyptian pledge seriously. At a meeting of the Washington Special Action Group [WSAG] that evening, he argued that his “judgement is that he [Sadat] will cross the Suez and just sit there. I don’t think he will penetrate further.” Kissinger subsequently replied to Sadat that “the United States will use its maximum influence to prevent any [Israeli] attack on [Egyptian] civilian targets. Strong representations to that effect have been made to the Israeli Government.” Any limitations on conventional retaliation would also apply to nuclear retaliation. Thus the US served two purposes. It could constrain Israel, raising the costs of major conventional and nuclear retaliation. The US would also communicate that Egypt did not seek to inflict a massive defeat on Israel, removing a benefit of major conventional or nuclear retaliation.

In addition to encouraging Israeli restraint, the Americans and Soviets sought to end the fighting. Kissinger initially attempted to organize a cease-fire that returned forces to the pre-October 6 lines. To entice the Egyptians, he offered high-level US involvement in working toward a “just peace.” Syria was also pressing the Soviets for an early cease-fire. As a result, the Soviets presented plans to Egypt that called for a cease-fire in place. Sadat seemed to have achieved his goals: there was greater superpower involvement, and Egypt had demonstrated combat prowess, challenging Israeli “invincibility.” Yet Sadat rejected the cease-fire appeals as well as efforts to involve the United Nations. Moreover, within a few days he would order Egyptian forces to advance farther into the Sinai.

Why did Sadat reject the offer and subsequently order Egyptian forces to advance? Answering this question is important to establish that Egypt’s strategy was limited. Several factors influenced Sadat’s decision
to reject the initial cease-fire proposals. Most importantly, the initial proposals might not allow Egypt to reacquire the Sinai. Sadat’s primary goal was to fully involve the United States to put pressure on Israel to withdraw. A return to the status quo ante with only a promise of US support seemed to trade away Egyptian gains for very little. Even the Soviet proposal for a cease-fire in place with only vague future promises would not guarantee US involvement. As Sadat explained to Soviet ambassador Vinogradov, “The United States had to be advised to use its influence on Israel to give up her policy.” As Yoram Meital points out, Sadat realized well before the war that the “longer the Egyptian forces succeeded in holding a strip of land east of the Suez Canal, the greater the chance for intervention on the part of the great powers as well as by the Arab states.”

Second, initial success created incentives to attain the best possible outcome. The Egyptians were surprised at how successful their crossing of the Suez Canal had been. Egyptian planners had estimated 10,000 to 30,000 casualties; the actual number was 208. The Egyptians were not alone in their surprise; the success shocked the Israelis, Soviets, and Americans as well. Kissinger had predicted that Israel would win quickly once it mobilized its forces. When the Israeli ambassador informed him that Israel had lost four hundred tanks to Egypt and one hundred to Syria, Kissinger exclaimed: “500 tanks! How many do you have? We should get [White House chief of staff General Alexander] Haig here. . . . Explain to me, how could 400 tanks be lost to the Egyptians?” A longer war that inflicted higher losses on Israel would have the added benefit of driving home the point that Israel could not avoid negotiations forever out of a belief that the Arab forces were militarily helpless. Prior to the war, Saudi Arabia had encouraged Egypt to hold out to gain more time to gather Arab support, which would increase pressure on the Americans.

Those factors did not necessitate that Egypt advance deeper into the Sinai, though. The primary impetus for the advance was mounting Israeli pressure on Syria. Israel had concentrated its initial effort against the Syrians. With Syrian forces on the verge of collapse, Assad pressed Sadat to allow Egyptian armies to advance in accordance with prewar arrangements. The goal was therefore not decisive Israeli defeat, but to prevent the collapse of the Syrian position. Importantly, the Soviet ambassador Vinogradov told Sadat that the Soviet high command had given its approval for such an operation. With Soviet backing, the Egyptians made the limited assault to take the passes. Egyptian generals voiced their opposition, knowing that any advance would move beyond Egyptian air defenses and open holes in their lines. When Chief of Staff Shazli protested the order, his superior Ismail Ali said the attack had to go forward. “It is a political decision,” he explained. The result was unsurprising: the Egyptian advance was beaten back with heavy loss. The Israeli Defense Forces advanced
rapidly. By October 16, Israeli advance units had crossed the Suez Canal into Egypt, and an Israeli crossing in force took place on October 18.\textsuperscript{109} The collapsing military situation at that point pushed Sadat to accept a cease-fire in place.\textsuperscript{110} He approved Kissinger’s visit to Moscow and agreed to accept the joint US-Soviet proposal. Israel, itself now having attained a decisive military victory, accepted the cease-fire reluctantly and completed encircling the Egyptian Third Army prior to halting its advance. The Israeli actions infuriated Sadat, but there was little Egypt could do at that point. Despite the military defeat, Sadat succeeded politically. Egypt maintained forces on the eastern side of the canal, and secured greater US involvement in the dispute. The stage was set for six years of negotiation, which would lead to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and restoration of Egypt’s control of the Sinai.

**EGYPTIAN NUCLEAR VIEWS**

Israel’s nuclear progress caused considerable concern within Egypt. For example, Sadat, then president of the Egyptian National Assembly, told Dean Rusk in 1966 that regarding an Israeli nuclear weapon, Egypt “felt equal concern and would be forced [to] launch [a] preventive war if Israel acquired [a nuclear] bomb.”\textsuperscript{111} Though Egypt did not launch that preventive war, unease over the Israeli nuclear arsenal remained and influenced Egyptian policy. Efforts were made to raise the costs of any Israeli nuclear use, and there was a general belief that as long as Egypt posed only a minor threat, the benefits of nuclear use for Israel would be low.

Egyptian leaders believed that the limited danger to Israel would reduce the risks of a nuclear strike. It is not the case that Israeli nuclear capabilities did not enter into Egyptian planning, but rather that, consistent with my argument, the nature of Egyptian plans and capabilities meant that the danger to Israel would be low and with it the likelihood of nuclear use. Highlighting the underlying thinking, one Egyptian military official recalled that in “1973, we knew that Israel had nuclear weapons, missiles with armed nuclear warheads. So there was some gambling that Israel would not go nuclear unless we crossed their borders. That was not in our plan, or even in our capacity.”\textsuperscript{112} Similarly, General Gamasy and Egyptian government spokesman Tahseen Basheer both expressed the belief that as long as Egypt did not threaten Israel’s pre-1967 borders, nuclear use was unlikely.\textsuperscript{113} Kenneth Pollack stated that “a number of Egyptian generals, including Gamasy,” made the case that in 1973 the Egyptian military was “never going past the bridgeheads. There was not a chance the Israelis were going to use nuclear weapons.”\textsuperscript{114} Such beliefs could have been expected during the 1969–1970 confrontation when Egypt was both weaker and the fighting more limited.
Egyptian thinking also tracked with American assessments at the time. “We must at least contemplate the possibility that, faced with a massive Arab attack, Israel might launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike,” argued the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs Paul Warnke. At the height of the October War, a National Security Council memorandum noted that “the Israelis will probably use an atomic bomb before they concede the 1967 borders.” In 1991, William Quandt, a member of the NSC at the time of the war, wrote that Israel might make “a nuclear threat . . . if Egyptian troops broke through at the passes [that is, deeper in the Sinai and thus closer to Israel proper]. None of this had to be spelled out in so many words by the Israelis.” If Israel’s closest ally after 1967 believed Israel might use nuclear weapons in certain situations, it would be surprising if Israeli adversaries did not take nuclear weapons into consideration.

To reiterate, my claim is not that Israeli nuclear weapons forced Egypt to pursue limited military options. Egypt lacked the conventional capabilities to do much more than it did. That is precisely the point. Egypt could pursue its limited aims with the hope that nuclear use would be unlikely. Even then, in language similar to the theoretical framework introduced in chapter 1, any attack would be a “gamble.” To further reduce the benefits of a nuclear strike for Israel, the Egyptians communicated their limited intentions to the Israelis through the Americans. Egyptian leaders also identified additional factors that would raise the costs for nuclear use and pursued several policies to reinforce those factors where possible.

Chief among those was the belief held in both Cairo and Damascus that the Soviet Union and United States would constrain Israeli nuclear use. Officials in Damascus at the time did not believe Israeli nuclear strikes likely “because the Soviet Union and the United States would not have permitted such an event to happen.” Nasser reportedly told a disappointed Gaddafi in 1969 that it was impossible to destroy Israel because “neither the Russians nor the Americans would permit a situation that might lead to nuclear war.” Donald Neff writes that in 1972–1973, the Egyptian general staff concluded that the “superpowers would not allow a complete victory by either side.” Moreover, Egyptian leaders conveyed a belief the United States had strong influence over Israel throughout this period. During the 1973 war, Egypt relied on the United States both to communicate limited Egyptian aims and constrain Israel. The decision to convey Egypt’s limited intentions was thus consistent with the belief that the United States could exercise a restraining influence on Israeli nuclear use, except in cases of a threat to Israeli survival.

The Egyptian expectation of external constraint against Israeli nuclear use was reasonable. There is some evidence that the Soviets provided guarantees against an Israeli nuclear strike. The New York Times reported in February 1966 that during the December visit of Soviet deputy defense minister
Andrei Gretchko to Cairo, the Soviets “promised to give President Gamal Abdel Nasser a guarantee of nuclear protection if Israel developed or obtained such weapons.” Nasser allegedly told Al-Ahram editor Mohamed Heikal that the Soviet Union would supply Egypt with a nuclear umbrella if Israel threatened nuclear use, and Heikal claimed in 1973 that the Soviet Union had previously “guaranteed” the Aswan High Dam against Israeli nuclear attacks. There are reasons to doubt the Soviets offered a nuclear security guarantee, but that does not preclude conventional security guarantees if Israel was to escalate to nuclear use. Indeed, US officials took seriously the possibility of Soviet action. “Should Israel brandish nuclear weapons, the Soviets would counter it and it would be very dangerous for Israel,” Kissinger explained to US senators following the October War.

Soviet support was not simply rhetorical. In addition to supplying Egypt with weapons and training, the Soviet Union intervened directly, albeit in a limited manner, in 1970 following Israeli deep-penetration attacks and raised the prospect of joint intervention with the United States during the October War to prevent the destruction of the Egyptian Third Army. It was not unreasonable, then, to conclude that the Soviets would act in the event of nuclear use against one of its clients, even if the bulk of its advisers had left in 1972. In sum, the Soviets likely did attempt to assuage Egyptian fears, US officials in both the Johnson and Nixon administrations considered it likely the Soviets would move to counter any overt Israeli nuclear actions, and the Soviet Union intervened when Israel struck Egyptian targets in 1970. Israeli leaders would have to take the Soviet reaction into account. If faced with its own destruction, Israel may have judged the benefits of nuclear use sufficient to set the potential costs aside; but as long as Egypt could not pose a major threat, such costs would loom larger.

More puzzling is Egyptian reliance on the United States. The United States had influence over Israel, but why would the United States use that on Egypt’s behalf? Extended deterrence guarantees are considered difficult to make credible in the best of circumstances. The United States was not even an Egyptian ally. Indeed, Maria Post Rublee rightly points out that Egyptian leaders would likely discount the depth of any US commitment because Egypt “has not received any formal security guarantee from the United States and knows that Washington would side with Tel Aviv over Cairo.” Egyptian leaders never lost an opportunity to complain about unreserved American support for Israel.

There were nevertheless grounds for the Egyptian belief that the United States would act to constrain Israeli nuclear use. To begin with, the centerpiece of Sadat’s strategy in 1973 was to force the Americans to engage. Sadat expected US involvement. On nuclear weapons more specifically, the Egyptians were aware of the general US nonproliferation policy. This was hardly a secret, as the United States openly pushed states to sign the
Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. US officials flatly told Egypt that they opposed the introduction of nuclear weapons into the Middle East. In a 1966 meeting with Sadat, Secretary of State Rusk “stressed [the] unalterable US commitment [to] oppose [the] proliferation [of] nuclear weapons,” adding that the introduction of “nuclear weapons into [the] Near East arms race would cause [the] US [to] react very harshly. . . . Israel [is] under no illusions about [the] US stand on nuclear weapons proliferation.” As Rublee demonstrates, part of the Egyptians’ reason for abandoning their own nuclear program was the understanding that US policy was firmly against nuclear proliferation.

The United States eventually did accept an Israeli nuclear weapon capability, of course. Yet indicative of ongoing American concern with proliferation in the region, President Nixon and Prime Minister Meir made arrangements, the precise details of which remain unknown, by which Israel would exercise nuclear restraint in return for US conventional support and an end to US pressure on Israel to abandon its nuclear program. Subsequent “documents suggest that Meir pledged to maintain nuclear restraint—no test, no declaration, no visibility.” Use of nuclear weapons against Egypt would obviously create “visibility” and make a declaration superfluous. That could lead to further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East or the direct introduction of Soviet nuclear weapons in the region.

In addition to proliferation concerns, the United States feared Israeli nuclear use would directly harm American security and influence. US and Soviet leaders both hoped to keep conflicts in the area limited for fear that escalation might draw the two superpowers into direct confrontation. Assistant Secretary of Defense Warnke outlined a fearful scenario in 1968 in which Israeli nuclear use prompted Soviet retaliation. In that event, the United States faced “totally unacceptable alternatives. The first of these, a nuclear strike by the United States, is almost unthinkable. If directed against the Soviet Union, it would lead inexorably to all-out nuclear war. If directed against an Arab state, it would virtually compel Soviet retaliation against U.S. territory, particularly in view of the fact that Israel would have been the first to resort to nuclear arms.” Such concerns were not overly alarmist. After all, the mere suggestion by the Soviets on October 24, 1973, that they might intervene to prevent Israeli destruction of the Egyptian Third Army prompted the United States to move various forces and raise its alert status to Defense Condition (DefCon) III. Even if Soviet units did not intervene directly in the fighting, an expansion of any Egyptian-Israeli conflict to nuclear use that inflicted a major defeat on Arab forces would provide the Soviets an opportunity to gain influence in the region. That would undermine the long-term US foreign policy goal to reduce the Soviet role in the Middle East.

Throughout this period, Egyptian leaders also worked to delegitimize the Israeli nuclear program and pursued chemical weapons to raise the
costs of any Israeli nuclear strike. “Egypt worked in two tracks,” one former Egyptian military official explained. “We tried to get rid of Israel’s nuclear weapons through diplomatic efforts, and we sought military alternatives such as strong conventional forces, surface-to-surface missiles, and chemical weapons options.” Egypt signed the Nonproliferation Treaty on the first day it opened for signature in the hope that this would increase US pressure against the Israeli nuclear program and as a way to signal that Israel’s nuclear program placed it outside the international community.  

Egypt also sought to leverage biological and chemical weapons to raise the costs of any Israeli nuclear use. Though there are reasons to doubt the extent of the Egyptian biological weapons program, in 1970 Sadat stated that “Egypt has biological weapons stored in refrigerators and could use them against Israel’s crowded population.” Egypt remains outside the Chemical Weapons Convention, refusing to join until Israel signs the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. As in the 1991 Iraq case, Egyptian elites recognized that chemical weapons were not equivalent to nuclear weapons. Yet as Rublee notes, the Egyptian chemical capability “may have helped assuage both security concerns and psychological needs: Egypt would not be left without any defense against a WMD attack and in fact could launch one of its own.”  

Though the focus in this chapter has been on Egyptian decision making, it is worth briefly addressing Syrian behavior during the October 1973 War. The Syrian plan was limited as well, largely centered on retaking the Golan Heights. As Kenneth Pollack notes, Syrian forces “were to concentrate on seizing the small number of points of entry onto the Golan from Israel, sealing the plateau to prevent a counterattack by reserve units assembling in Galilee and trapping the Israeli forces defending the Golan.” When asked about the possibility of Israeli nuclear strikes, Murhaf Jouejati related that Syrian leaders made two calculations. The first, noted above, was the Soviet and American restraining influence on Israel. The second was that “part of the reason why the Syrian army stopped on October 7 where it did . . . was to send the signal to Israel that the Syrian attacking force did not have the intention of going any further. . . . So Syrian leaders were sending a signal, ‘We’re not going to go any further. Don’t panic.’” In addition, President Assad planned for and then pressed the Soviet Union to push an early cease-fire. Victor Israelyan relates that Assad explained to the Soviet ambassador on October 4 that “after the initial victories of the Arabs, the Soviet Union should promptly initiate a cease-fire resolution in the United Nations Security Council.” The “military phase” would take only one or two days. Much of the motivation for the cease-fire was to consolidate gains and avoid an Israeli conventional counterattack. Had the cease-fire been quickly enacted, though, it would also allay Israeli fears that the Syrian army would rapidly advance into the heart of Israel. Ultimately, Syrian
forces enjoyed some initial success but were unable to reach key Jordan River bridges and secure the heights before the Israeli counterattacks.\textsuperscript{146}

The basic Egyptian behavior toward Israel is consistent with my argument. An intense political dispute pitted Egypt against Israel. Egypt was markedly weaker than Israel. That conventional military imbalance and the shape that the conflict took provided low benefits for Israel to use nuclear weapons. Egyptian leaders gambled that various costs associated with using nuclear weapons could loom large. They frequently discussed the Israeli nuclear arsenal and pursued various steps to further minimize the already low likelihood of an Israeli nuclear strike. Nuclear weapons did not deter Egyptian action, but neither were they irrelevant to Egyptian considerations.