

## Foreign Relations, 1964-1968, Volume XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967

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### Prewar Crisis, May 15-June 4, 1967

#### 7. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson/1/

Washington, May 17, 1967.

/1/Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Middle East Crisis, Vol. I. Secret.

SUBJECT  
Urgent Message to Eshkol

We had hoped yesterday that tension in the Israel-Syria-UAR triangle was dropping after an ostentatious Egyptian show of putting its forces around Cairo on alert. Last night, however, we and the Israelis learned that the Egyptians have moved forces into the Sinai. Now they have moved forces in front of the UN Emergency Force on the Israel-UAR border and all but ordered it to withdraw.

The UAR's brinksmanship stems from two causes: (1) **The Syrians are feeding Cairo erroneous reports of Israeli mobilization to strike Syria.** Regrettably, some pretty militant public threats from Israel by Eshkol and others have lent credibility to the Syrian reports. (2) Nasser probably feels his prestige would suffer irreparably if he failed a third time to come to the aid of an Arab nation attacked by Israel. Moderates like Hussein have raked him over the coals for not coming to Jordan's aid in November or to Syria's when Israel shot down 6 of its MIG's last month.

In this highly charged atmosphere, it's probably impossible for Israel to get away with a limited retaliatory strike for the next terrorist attack from Syria. But the Syrians may try harder than ever by turning loose the terrorists either to force Israel to eat crow by taking further sabotage attacks without reacting or to drag them and the UAR into a fight. Eshkol may even decide that Egypt's move to the border pushes him too far.

**Secretary Rusk personally recommends the attached message/2/ to Eshkol urging him not to put a match to this fuse.** A week ago, I would have counseled closing our eyes if Eshkol had decided to lash back at the Syrians. We just don't have an alternative way to handle these terrorist raids that are becoming more and more sophisticated. Unfortunately, however, his own public threats seem to have deprived him of the flexibility to make a limited attack today.

/2/The draft message as approved by the President, with an attached note directing that it should be sent LDX to Ben Read, is *ibid*.

I have worked with State to make this message as sympathetic as possible while trying still to strengthen Eshkol's hand against his hawks. Arthur Goldberg is aware of the Secretary's proposal and approves. We will follow events closely to be sure the message isn't overtaken by events before delivery.

Approve/3/

/3/Neither option is checked. On the memorandum "Call me. L." appears in Johnson's handwriting next to the two options. A note in Rostow's handwriting at the top of the page states that the President approved by telephone at 6 p.m.

See me

Walt