Chapter 1

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The War Decision

The principal Egyptian decision to go to war was made on October 24, 1972. On the evening of that date President Anwar Sadat convened Egypt's Armed Forces Supreme Council at his Giza residence to declare his decision to end the no peace–no war status quo that had lasted since early August 1970, when the War of Attrition ended.[1] Explaining his decision, Sadat said:

> The June 1967 defeat has made both enemy and friend doubt that we would ever fight again. Consequently, all the solutions I am presented with are based on this logic. Our commitments are being tested. I am not prepared to accept defeatist solutions or surrender. I will not sit at a table with Israel while I am in such a humiliating position, because that means surrender. In the face of our people, our enemies, and our friends, we must prove unemotionally and with careful planning that we are capable of sacrifice and can stand up and fight and change the situation with whatever means are at our disposal. . . . The time for words is over, and we have reached saturation point. We have to manage our affairs with whatever we have at hand; we have to follow this plan to change the situation and set fire to the region. Then words will have real meaning and value.[2]

Many of the participants—among them War Minister Mohammed Ahmed Sadiq and his deputy, Abdel Khader Hassan, and senior army officers such as Gen. Abdel Ali Khabir (the commander of the central district), Gen. Mohammed Ali Fahmy (commander of the navy), Gen. Saad Mamounn (commander of the Second Army), and Gen. Abdel Muneim Wasel (commander of the Third Army)—expressed reservations about the feasibility of

Egypt's war option. They were mainly concerned with Israel's air superiority, Egypt's vulnerability to deep penetration raids, and the challenges involved in the crossing of the Suez Canal and the establishment of defensible bridge-heads on its eastern bank.[3] Sadat declined these reservations, emphasizing instead his resolve to go to war even under highly unfavorable conditions:

> We are confronted with a challenge. "To be or not to be." A partial solution has been presented to me [the U.S. peace proposals] and is still waiting for my approval. But, I am not going to accept it. We will simply have to use our talents and our planning to compensate for our lack of some kinds of equipment.[4]

Two days later Sadat dismissed his Minister of War, his deputy, and the Commander of the Navy. Sadiq's replacement was Gen. Ahmad Ali Ismail—an old foe of the Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Saad el Shazly. Ismail had a dubious military record and a poor health condition due to cancer. But, he had one major advantage: Unlike his predecessor, he supported Sadat's decision to launch a war and he envisioned it in the same way that Sadat and Shazly did. Consequently, for the first time since the defeat of June 1967, the President, his War Minister, and the Chief of Staff reached a consensus not only about the need to resort to war, but also regarding its goal and its operational dimensions.[5]

During the October 24 meeting, Sadat defined the goal of the war simply as "Breaking the ceasefire."[6] On this basis the war planners defined its concept:

> . . . a comprehensive "local" war in which only conventional arms would be used. The strategic aim was to upset the prevailing balance in the region and to challenge Israel's concept of security and the principles behind its military strategy. This would require time to allow for the participation of other Arab nations, the most important factors being the creation of a united Arab stand and exploring the possibility of using oil as a weapon of political pressure to influence the outcome of the war. The strategy, therefore, was an offensive military operation to liberate the occupied land in consecutive stages according to the capabilities of the armed forces, and to inflict on Israel the greatest possible number of losses in men and weapons in order to convince it that an indefinite occupation of our land was too costly to bear.[7]

This modest and very limited war conception reflected Egypt's strategic dilemma since the defeat of June 1967, and, even more so, since the end of the War of Attrition in August 1970. On the one hand, stood the Egyptian desire

to erase the outcomes of the Six-Day War—outcomes that were "culturally, psychologically, and politically unacceptable."[8] On the other, was Egypt's pessimistic view regarding its ability to win a victory in the battlefield—a lesson gained in the 1967 and 1969–1970 wars and the outcome of a sober analysis of the Egyptian–Israeli balance of forces by the end of 1972.