

# The Airstrike That Shocked The World: A Russian's Perspective

*Valerya Mukraymov was a Red Army officer deployed in Egypt before the Six Day War as a senior army advisor. In a rare and revealing interview, he shares with ZMAN inside information about the involvement of Russian army officers and commanders during the war—and their extreme failure and lack of professionalism.*

It was a lovely sunny spring morning in 1962, and the little Parisian café had not yet fully come to life. Several steady customers, elderly graying Frenchmen, sipped aromatic coffees and munched on croissants, the way men do when they are in no rush to go anywhere.

Another group sat around a corner table, focused on some scribbled paper more than

on their coffee. Had the visitors at the café known who those men were, they would have been in shock.

They were Israeli Air Force General Ezer Weizman, later Minister of Defense, and President of the State of Israel; Lieutenant Colonel Mordechai "Motty" Hod, Head of Operations in the Air Force; and Lieutenant Colonel Yaakov Navo. Two undercover



security guards sat at a nearby table “reading” *Le Monde*, though they understood not a word.

A regular citizen would not have given a second glance at the paper—a simple café napkin on which the men had sketched sharp blue lines and illegible words. It appeared like mere scribbles. However, Muhammed Sidqi Mahmoud, who was to become the Egyptian Air Force Chief of Staff two years later, would have offered all he owned in exchange for that one crumpled napkin.

Since its establishment, Israel has found itself surrounded by enemy Arab armies on its southern, northern and eastern borders. Compounding the difficulty, the Arab militaries were larger and better equipped. Prime Minister David ben Gurion was one of the first to realize that if the young state hoped to survive it would have to gain advantage in the air. Consequently, he invested heavily in his country’s fledgling air force, which until then had consisted of a few faltering propeller aircraft, survivors of World War II. Cutting deals with the French military establishment, Israel began feverishly procuring modern jets, like the Fouga Magister, the most advanced in that era.

At the end of October 1956, the Sinai War broke out. Israel joined Great Britain and France against Egypt. The Israelis captured half of the Sinai Peninsula, but were forced to withdraw due to heavy international pressure from the US and the USSR.

The young country learned a bitter lesson. Its leadership had hoped to deliver a crippling blow that would force their implacable enemies to the peace table. Now, however, they understood that war was going to be an inevitable part of the foreseeable future. If Israel hoped to survive, therefore, it would need to acquire advanced weapons and develop innovative military strategies.

The measly napkin used at the Parisian café represented one such strategy. It held the secrets of “Operation Focus,” the preemptive airstrike designed to devastate the enemy in a matter of hours.

Much forethought was needed for the novel and revolutionary plan. The intelligence division of the IAF and the IDF Intelligence Corps began gathering every piece of information about all airbases in Arab countries. Much information was thus collected about runways, aircraft, routines at Arab bases, location of radar installations in areas around the airports, methods of transferring information from radar installations to commanders, timing for reactions until aircraft land, and Arab pilots’ capabilities to operate under harsh weather conditions, during nighttime, and more.

After the information was collected, planners designed detailed and precise charts for each airfield, including structures to be targeted, runways to be destroyed, the weight of the weapons to be dropped, etc. Flight routes were defined for each airbase and runway, as well as angles for the attack. The airstrike targets were marked on maps of the runways based on the type of aircrafts parked there and the distance necessary for takeoff. Generally, two attacks were assigned and marked for each runway, at a third of a distance on each side. The plan was concluded in the winter of 1965.

With the planning stage complete, simulated practices were held for parts of the operation. An old runway was renovated in the Negev in which dummy enemy aircraft was set up for Israeli pilots to practice. The exercises included arriving at a destination at a very low altitude, while keeping radio silence and executing precise strikes.

## Egypt Invades Sinai

On Monday, May 15, 1967, Israel celebrated its nineteenth Independence Day with a military march.

In the middle of the procession, while Prime Minister Levi Eshkol watched with a wide smile through his large plastic spectacles as rows and rows of soldiers passed by, a military officer whispered something into his ear. Thousands of celebrants saw Eshkol’s smile disappear in seconds. His face turned white.

What was the message? On that very day, Egypt’s president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, decided to deploy armored units into Sinai.

It was an unprecedented challenge, and from that moment onward Israel entered a state of emergency historians would later call the “Waiting Period.” The atmosphere was grim. A large plot of land in Tel Aviv was prepared as a cemetery for thousands of potential corpses. Prayers were organized, and many foreign citizens made a hasty exit from the country.

The Arab armies were massive and Egyptian radio broadcasts ranted endlessly that within a few days they would be “throwing the Jews into the sea.” Then Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. War now seemed unavoidable.

## Rabin Falls Apart

As the tension reached a pitch, Chief of Staff Yitzchak Rabin held the final conference with Air Force Commander Motty Hod. After hearing the details of Operation Focus, Rabin felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. If it failed, it could mean the end of Israel. Unable to bear the pressure, Rabin had a nervous breakdown (which only came to light years later). He collapsed into bed for hours, unable to cope.

Ezer Weizman documents a different version in his book “*Lecha Shamayim Lecha Aretz*.” Two weeks before the war, Rabin

invited him to his house and said the following:

*I messed up the state due to a series of errors.... I believe that the one who erred must leave. I made a mistake. Are you willing to take on the position as a chief of staff?*

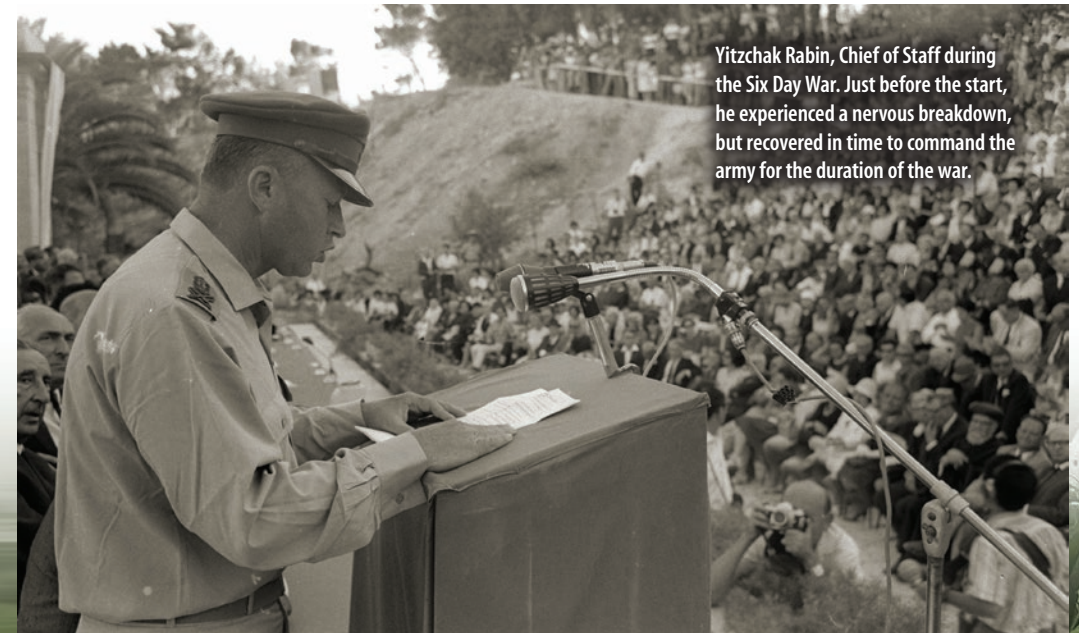
“I refused the offer,” Weizman relates in his book. “I told Rabin it would demoralize the IDF. I suggested he rest up. Over the next two days, I commanded the army.”

As soon as Rabin recuperated, and after much deliberation, the government approved Operation Focus for the following day. The attack would commence at 7:45 (8:45 Egyptian time).

## The Judeophile Russian Officer

Much has been written about the attack, especially from the Israeli viewpoint (see accompanying article). Very little, however, has ever been revealed about how the dramatic events unfolded in the eyes of the many Russian military personnel who had been sent to Egypt to train and advise the Egyptians (the Russians also sent advisors to Syria).

**Zman** conducted an exclusive interview with one such Russian advisor, Valerya Mukraymov. We met him at the “Jerusalem” restaurant, which is *kosher l’mehadrin* and



Yitzchak Rabin, Chief of Staff during the Six Day War. Just before the start, he experienced a nervous breakdown, but recovered in time to command the army for the duration of the war.