

Chapter 1

Toward the 1956 War

If it were not for the Anglo-French operation, it is doubtful whether Israel would have launched her campaign; and if she had, its character, both military and political, would have been different.

— Moshe Dayan¹

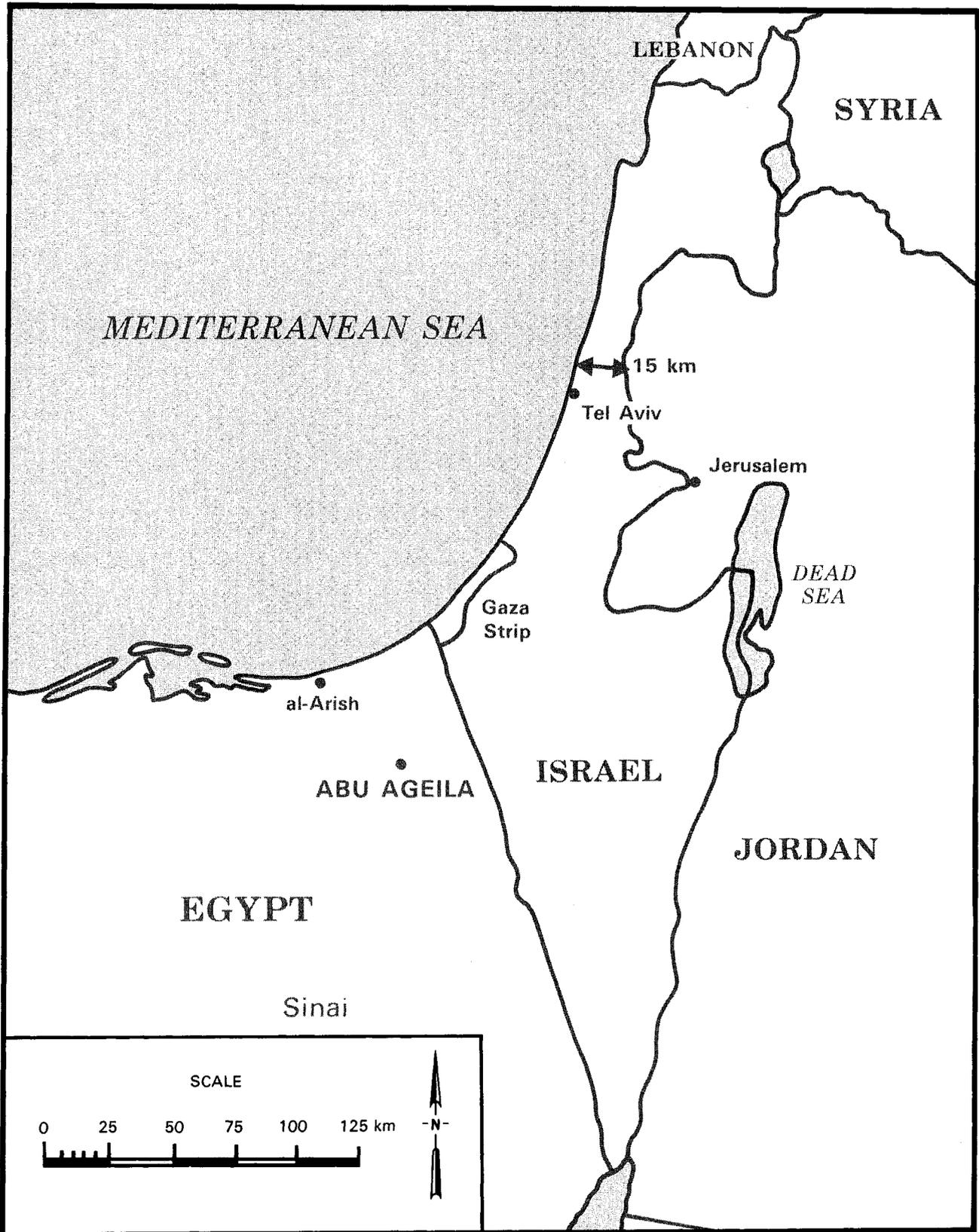
In the 1956 war, Israel's secret agreement with Britain and France for a joint military operation against Egypt virtually guaranteed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) a victory in the Sinai. The Egyptians would eventually find themselves engaged in a two-front war against three states, two of them European powers. However, the coalition with France and Britain that offered the Israeli high command rich operational and tactical opportunities also forced the Israeli General Staff to alter its initial war plans.

By the terms of the agreement, the IDF was to open the war with the drop of an elite paratroop force at the Mitla Pass, deep behind forward Egyptian defenses in the Sinai. This opening military move forced the IDF to commit sizable forces deep into the Sinai to reinforce the paratroopers isolated at Mitla. Furthermore, political constraints stemming from the secret agreement forced the Israeli high command to adopt a tentative, piecemeal approach to the campaign in other parts of the Sinai. These two factors, coupled with the fact that the IDF remained mired in a major doctrinal debate, led to operational problems at the battle of Abu Ageila.

Abu Ageila as Key Terrain

Lacking strategic depth and facing the prospect of fighting on several fronts (see map 1), the IDF was compelled to develop doctrine that emphasized the offense. Israeli military strategy called for transferring any fight into the opponent's territory as soon as possible. Otherwise, a war could lead to much damage of Israel's population centers. To avoid this occurrence, the Israeli Army developed by 1956 a style of warfare intended to foster an aggressive, offensive-minded spirit throughout its armed forces. Training of officers and soldiers emphasized initiative, improvisation, maintenance of aim, and flexibility as ingredients necessary to defeat the enemy's armies.

On the offense, however, because of economic and demographic factors, Israel could ill afford a conflict lasting weeks. Israel's economy was too fragile for a major war effort on their own, and the Israelis were far outnumbered by the Arabs on their borders. In 1956, for example, Israel's Jewish population numbered only 1.6 million, while Egypt had over 20 million inhabitants. A



Map 1. Israel's geostrategic situation, 1949-67

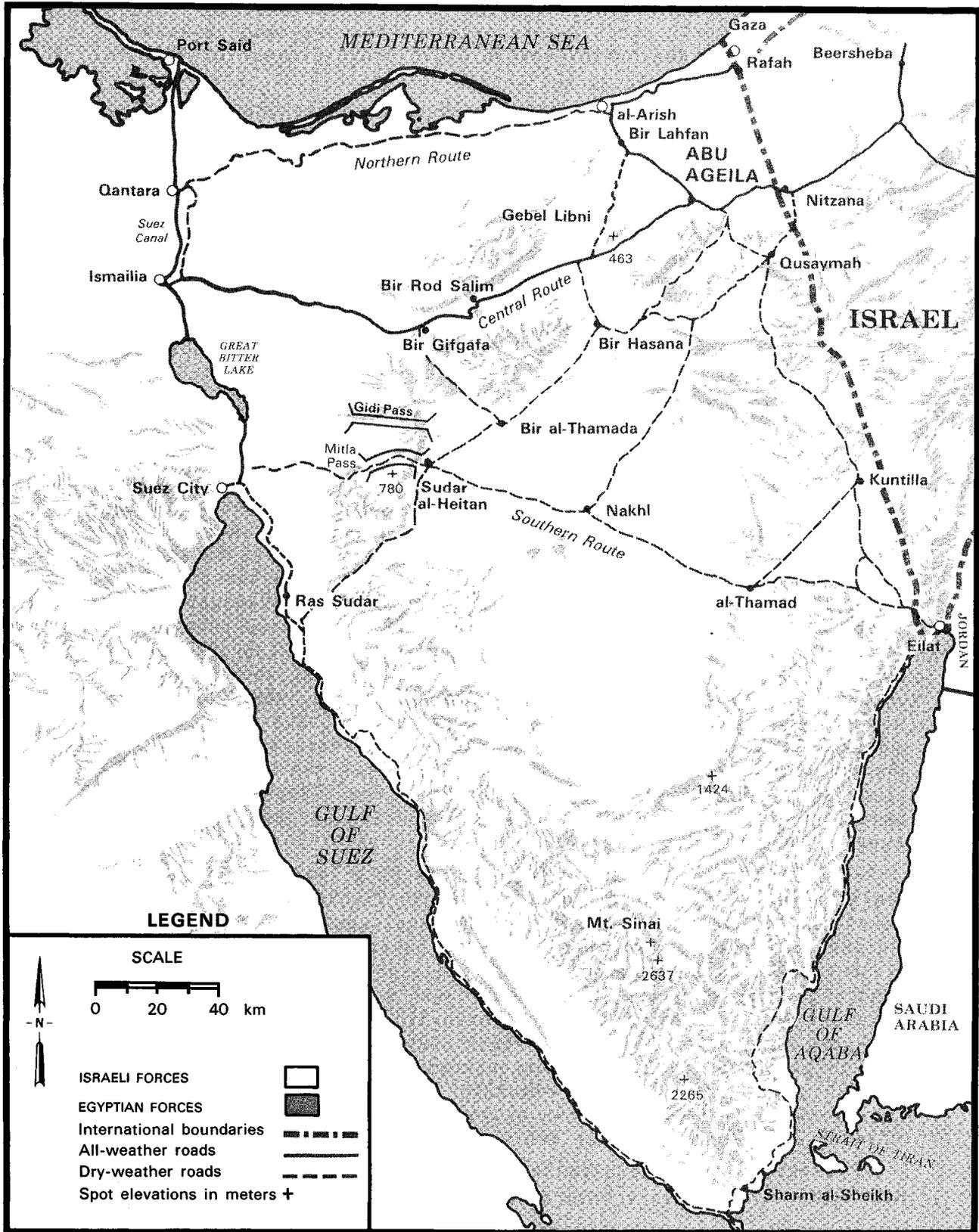
long war would quickly strain Israel's economy and cause many casualties—thereby threatening the cohesiveness of Israeli society. Hence, Israel must defeat her enemies quickly.

Of the three fronts facing Israel, the Sinai offered the Israeli Army the greatest possibility for rapid maneuver warfare. But to win an Arab-Israeli war, the Israelis had to break through the Egyptian defenses that guarded the limited number of avenues of advance in the peninsula. Since Egypt's political leadership wished to avoid abandoning any territory to Israel in the first phase of an armed conflict, the Egyptian high command maintained defensive positions forward in eastern Sinai, close to the Israeli border. In assessing terrain and avenues for maneuver, senior Egyptian officers considered the area around Abu Ageila a key to their static defenses in both the 1956 and 1967 wars (see map 2). If Israel was to accomplish a quick victory in the Sinai, it must seize this critical piece of terrain sitting astride the main avenue of approach to the peninsula.

The Sinai Peninsula, an area of approximately 61,000 square kilometers, consists of a combination of desert and mountain ranges, with a degraded soil surface, sand-dune expanses, and salinized, dry watercourses called wadis. In this harsh desert environment, human habitation is so sparse that demographic factors have never been a major consideration for armies. Estimates of the peninsula's population during the period of this study vary from as low as 100,000 to as high as 400,000, with a good number of the Bedouin inhabitants engaged in their traditional nomadic way of life. The only town of significance was al-Arish, located in the north on the Mediterranean Sea. Functioning as the administrative center and chief commercial point of the peninsula, al-Arish contained a population of around 15,000 in 1956, which rose to 40,000 by 1967. All other settlements, including the town of Qantara on the Suez Canal and a handful of mining and fishing towns and villages in the western and southern areas of the Sinai, lacked any major military significance, for they stood outside the main corridors for maneuver warfare. For any campaign in eastern and central Sinai, only the town of al-Arish presented an urban obstacle, and a minor one at that. Because of the harsh terrain and lack of settlements, war in the Sinai has been largely a battle for routes of advance.

For the purposes of military planners, the Sinai Peninsula forms three distinct regions. The northern sector, which hugs the Mediterranean coast, is desert country, with open stretches of sand and sand dunes. This loose or shifting sand makes many areas impassable for vehicles. Occasional ranges of low hills dot the landscape, offering numerous possibilities for the establishment of good defensive positions. The only road in this northern region runs along the railroad from Gaza to Qantara on the Suez Canal. Once a camel track, this northern route became a surfaced road by 1954, although the surface in some parts was still rather poorly maintained. Because the area between al-Arish and the Suez Canal is vulnerable to choke points that slow down the movement of forces, the Israelis avoided this northern route in their main efforts to reach the canal in the 1956 and 1967 wars.

The southern half of the Sinai is mountainous, barren, and desolate. Steep mountain ranges occupy a large part of the region, the most famous peak



Map 2. The Sinai

being Mount Sinai (Gebel Musa in Arabic), the traditional site where Moses received the Ten Commandments. Over past ages, great watercourses issuing from the mountains have eroded deep, steep-sided ravines that severely limit travel in the area. Existing camel routes and tracks are rough, and the use of motor vehicles is difficult and susceptible to ambushes. Although such inhospitable terrain makes maneuver warfare virtually impossible, both the Israeli and Egyptian Armies have had to develop contingency plans for the southern region because of the strategic importance of Sharm al-Sheikh, which overlooks the Strait of Tiran, the body of water linking Israel with the Indian Ocean by way of the Red Sea. Closing the strait would sever Israel's only direct link with the East through the port of Eilat, an action which to many Israelis would constitute a legitimate cause for war.

Unlike the northern and southern sectors, the central region offers attackers the best opportunities for maneuver and therefore has preoccupied the attention of both the Egyptian and Israeli Armies. This arid country forms a giant, formidable escarpment composed largely of limestone, with patches of loose, heavy sand alternating with hard, rocky surfaces. Compared with the northern region, the central sector has fewer stretches of sand and thus provides the best possibilities for rapid movement across the peninsula from east to west and vice versa. Militating against unrestricted maneuver warfare, the area has numerous, deep, dried-up watercourses and steep hills of jagged stone. In the western part of the peninsula stands a mountain range running north

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and south, and a few narrow defiles allow units to move through this natural barrier, the most important of these being the twenty-four kilometer long Mitla Pass.

Two main routes traverse the central region of the Sinai from east to west. The southern route runs from Eilat in Israel through Nakhl and the Mitla Pass to Port Tewfik on the Suez Canal. Practicing Muslims, on their way to Mecca and Medina to perform their obligatory pilgrimages, have used this dirt road (known in Arabic as Darb al-Hajj or Pilgrim's Way). In 1956, the road was poor in some places.

The central route has been the best-surfaced road in the entire peninsula. Beginning at the Egyptian-Israeli border, this all-asphalt highway cuts through Abu Ageila, continues on to Bir Gifgafa, and ends up in Ismailia, after crossing the Suez Canal at the Firdan bridge. The Egyptians employed the central route as the main supply route for their forces stationed in the eastern Sinai close to the border with Israel. This made military sense, for the central region afforded the IDF the best possible avenues of attack to the Suez Canal, and the Egyptian military understood the imperative need to react quickly in the area.

Thus, Abu Ageila gained strategic importance because of its location on the central route close to the Israeli-Egyptian border. Here, the Egyptians could develop excellent defensive positions on a number of low ridges and hills that overlooked generally flat terrain. The Egyptian high command developed Abu Ageila into a key link in a defensive system in the eastern Sinai that also included a north-south road network. A good gravel road connected al-Arish with Abu Ageila, while a loose, sandy-surface track just east of Abu Ageila headed south to either Qusaymah or the geographical center of the Sinai near Nakhl. Vehicles with four-wheel drives could negotiate these tracks in 1956—but with some difficulty. If Israel was to make a major thrust to the canal, it must be able to continuously resupply its rapidly advancing combat troops. Thus, Israel must seize Abu Ageila early in the campaign, eliminating an Egyptian threat to the central route. Moreover, in a quick conquest of the Sinai, Israeli military planners had to integrate the tactical battle at Abu Ageila with a series of other coordinated military actions designed to defeat the Egyptian Army.

The Relegation of the Sinai to a Secondary Front

Since the creation of the state of Israel and the consequent 1948 Arab-Israeli War, defense of the Sinai, more than any other front, has been the Egyptian Armed Forces' primary concern. But when President Gamal Abd al-Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956, the Egyptian military focused its attention and resources for a brief period on the possibility of an invasion by a European expeditionary force in the Nile Delta. Consequently, Egyptian forces redeployed to the north, leaving no operational reserves in the Sinai. While this move provided the Israelis a golden opportunity to seize Egyptian forward positions quickly, such a scenario did not develop.

Earlier, before the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Egypt had had a large force stationed in the Sinai. The 8th Infantry Division, a force of ques-

tionable ability composed of Palestinians and National Guard units and commanded by Egyptian officers, guarded the Gaza Strip, while the Egyptian 3d Infantry Division was responsible for the al-Arish, Abu Ageila, Rafah triangle. The 2d Infantry Division watched the border area south of Qusaymah to the Gulf of Aqaba. Behind these two regular infantry divisions stood one armored brigade deployed at Gebel Libni and a second at Bir Gifgafa. This deployment gave Egypt a sizable force at the border and a relatively large armored force of 200 T-34 tanks and SU-100 antitank self-propelled guns in the rear.²

On 26 July 1956, after the United States had reneged on a crucial loan that would have enabled Egypt to construct the Aswan Dam with Western capital, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in retaliation. Before taking this dramatic step, Nasser calculated that little chance existed for an immediate invasion of Egypt by those Western powers whose trade depended in large measure on the canal. He completely ruled out the United States as a threat and felt that France, still smarting from its recent defeat in Indochina, had its hands too full with the Algerian revolution to risk a major military venture. Israel, he reasoned, would not invade the Sinai for fear of provoking attacks on itself by other Arab states in support of Egypt.

Britain, however, loomed as a clear danger. But even the British seemed too preoccupied with domestic and international concerns to undertake such a costly and controversial expedition. Syrian intelligence reinforced Nasser's judgment, providing him with valuable information on the state of British forces on Cyprus, which appeared to pose no immediate danger to Egypt. Moreover, time would work to Egypt's benefit, Nasser calculated, for each passing week would serve as balm soothing national prides wounded by the nationalization.³ Based on these assessments, Nasser felt he risked little in nationalizing the canal.

Immediately after taking over the canal company, however, Nasser took the precaution of placing all Egyptian forces on alert and mobilizing the reserves. Then, at the beginning of August, he met with his senior military commanders to discuss the potential military ramifications of his nationalization act. Nasser wanted Egypt to be prepared to defend itself should Britain or any other European state decide to conduct a military action against Port Said or Alexandria. He therefore directed the high command to redeploy its forces to make the northern region of Egypt—not the Sinai—the main front. Despite objections from some senior officers, Nasser ordered a major withdrawal of forces from the Sinai to bolster defenses around Cairo, Alexandria, and the Suez Canal.⁴

The Egyptian high command, in compliance with Nasser's order, strengthened defenses in the Nile Delta and Suez Canal areas. In addition to the mobilization of the reserves, approximately 30,000 troops were uprooted from the Sinai and moved west of the Suez Canal. Some units relocated along the waterway, while others took up positions in the Cairo and Alexandria areas. After the dust settled from all the desert troop movements, only about 30,000 of the previous 60,000-man force remained in the Sinai.⁵ In specific terms, the redeployment meant the withdrawal of the 2d Infantry Division and the two armored brigades. The 3d Infantry Division, headquartered at al-Arish, was left to guard the northern and central routes, with a few small infantry for-

mations of company size to watch the southern region. Israeli military intelligence followed these events closely and provided its General Staff with accurate information of the new Egyptian deployments.⁶

Egypt's withdrawal of a division and two armored brigades had two major effects. First, defenses in the Sinai were dramatically weakened, with only one regular division left to defend a large region. Second, the Egyptian Army in the Sinai lost its counterstrike force of armor. With its redeployment to the west bank, Egyptian armor, in case of attack, would have to cross the canal first and then travel some sixty kilometers before reaching its staging area at Bir Gifgafa and Bir Rod Salim. Consequently, Egyptian defenders in the eastern Sinai would have to hold out for a much longer period—at least two to three days—before the arrival of this large tank force.

So, on the eve of the 1956 war, Nasser had unwittingly placed his armed forces in the Sinai in an unfavorable strategic and tactical posture. He had little choice, however; the strategic and economic importance of the Sinai paled in comparison to that of Cairo, Alexandria, and the Suez Canal. With Egypt's major redeployment of troops, Israel now had gained operational and tactical opportunities in the opening phases of a land campaign—not to mention the advantage of strategic surprise with Nasser's new preoccupation with Britain and France.

Egyptian Command and Control

The Egyptian high command, nonetheless, had developed a system of command and control along with a general war plan in the event Israel invaded the Sinai. Ultimate responsibility for any armed conflict fell on the shoulders of Nasser who, in his capacity of president, functioned as the supreme commander for the Egyptian Armed Forces. Directly subordinate to him, Major General Muhammad Abd al-Hakim Amer—both the commander in chief and minister of war—exercised operational control over combat forces through a general headquarters located in Cairo. Next in the command chain came the Eastern Military District, with its headquarters in the city of Ismailia on the western side of the Suez Canal. The Egyptian Army had created this command in 1954 in anticipation of the withdrawal of all British forces from the Suez Canal (which actually took place in June 1956). The Eastern Military District commander, Major General Ali Ali Amer, was responsible for the defenses in both the Suez Canal and the Sinai (minus Sharm al-Sheikh). Thus, the operational chain of command went from general headquarters in Cairo, through the Eastern Military District, to any division or independent formation stationed in the peninsula.⁷

Brigadier General Anwar al-Qadi commanded the Egyptian 3d Infantry Division, a force composed of regular officers and conscripts.⁸ His mission was to maintain static defenses on the northern and central routes near the Israeli border. To accomplish this task, Qadi placed two of his infantry brigades forward, the 5th at Rafah and the 6th at Abu Ageila. These brigades were to provide early warning and then to stop or impede Israeli forces until the arrival of Egyptian reinforcements. The 4th Infantry Brigade, located in al-Arish, was to constitute the divisional reserve and had three possible mis-

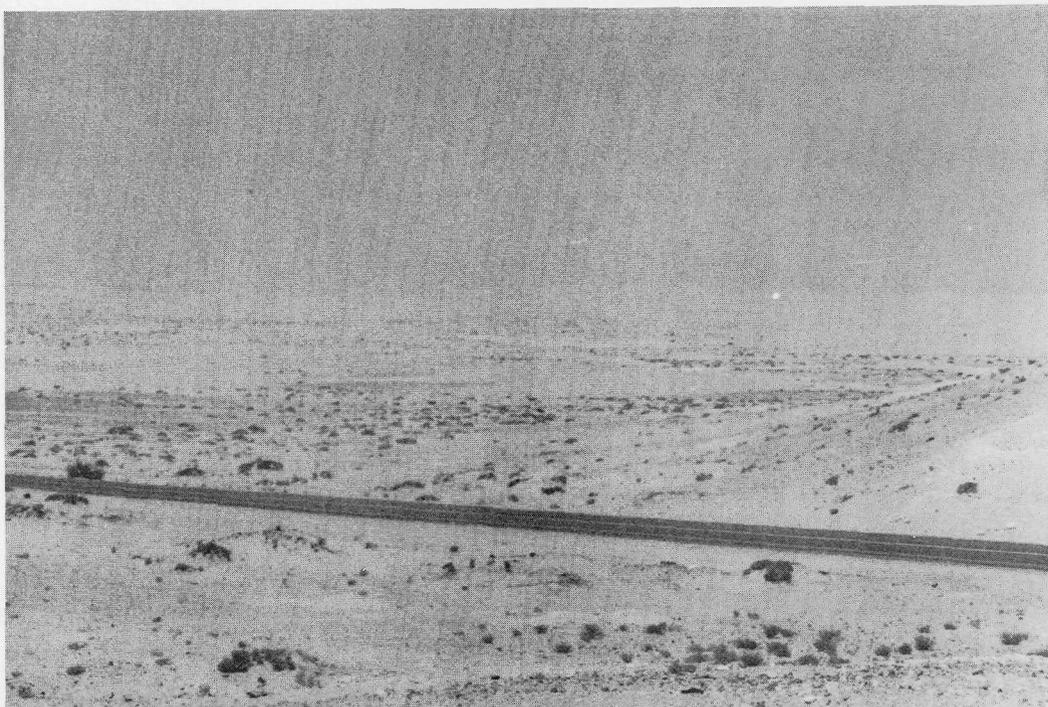
sions: to help the defenders at Abu Ageila; prevent an Israeli advance to al-Arish; or threaten the flanks of any force advancing west.⁹

The Terrain of Abu Ageila

In the Abu Ageila area, the Egyptians anchored their defenses along the central route on three key terrain features (see map 3). First, to the north, stood a sea of shifting sand dunes stretching over forty kilometers to Rafah. Second, south of the central route lay two mountains, Gebel (Mount) Dalfa (418 meters) and Gebel Hilal (914 meters). The Daika Pass, a narrow defile 10 kilometers in length and generally 500 meters in width, cut between these two mountains and offered an invading army the opportunity to move into the rear of Abu Ageila through these otherwise formidable barriers. Third, between the desert to the north and the mountains to the south was the ridge of Umm Qatef.

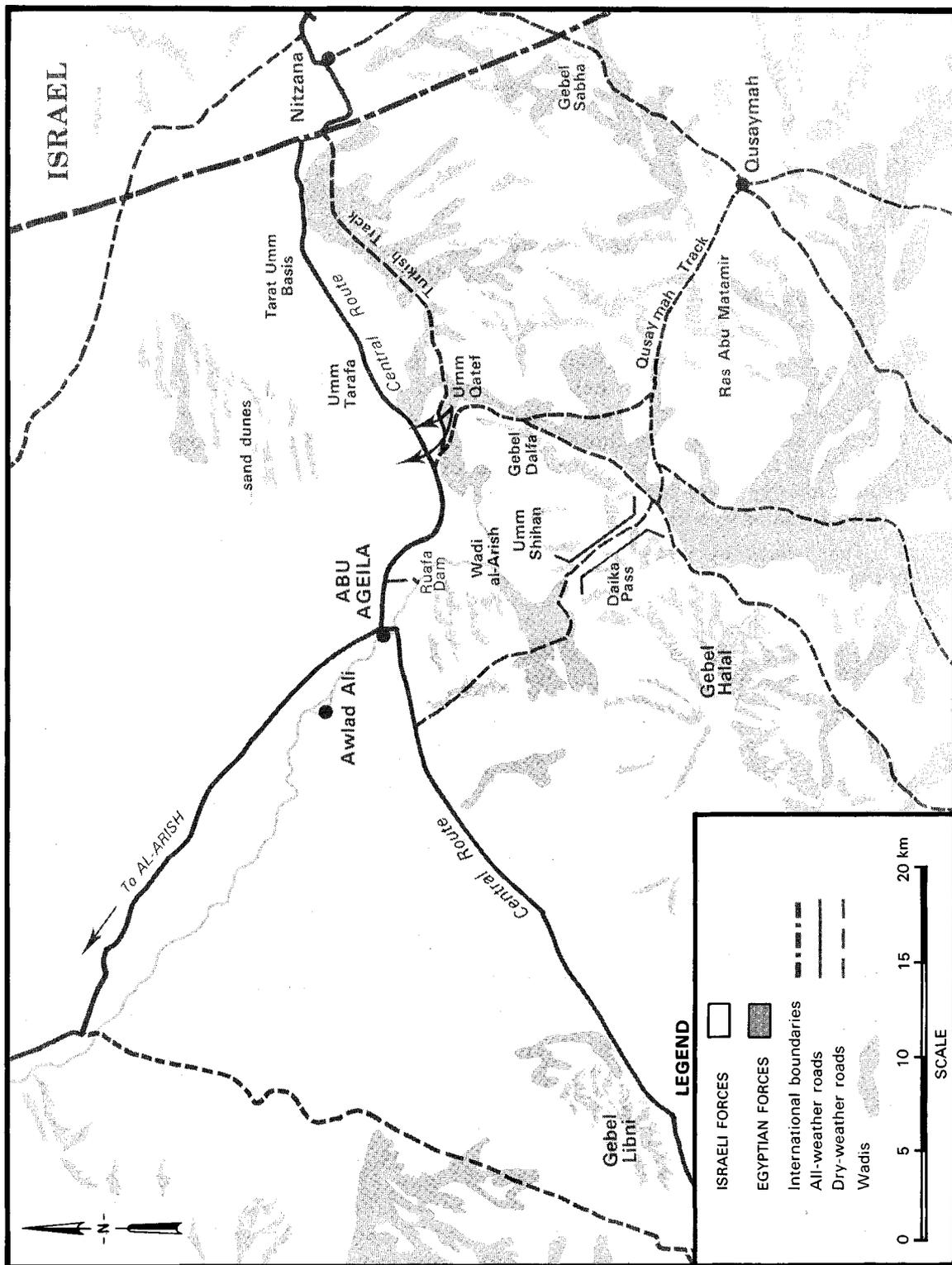
Umm Qatef, a ridge twenty-five to thirty meters in height, formed the most natural position for defenses close to the Israeli border. Located some twenty kilometers from Israel, this ridge spanned several kilometers in length, with the central route cutting through it. Egyptian defenders atop Umm Qatef overlooked the main road in the peninsula and viewed almost five kilometers in an easterly direction toward a flat valley. A frontal attack from the east by the Israelis was thus virtually impossible without incurring heavy losses.

Just south of Umm Qatef lay a low mountain range known as Gebel Wugayr that impeded any Israeli attempt to bypass the area. A small dirt

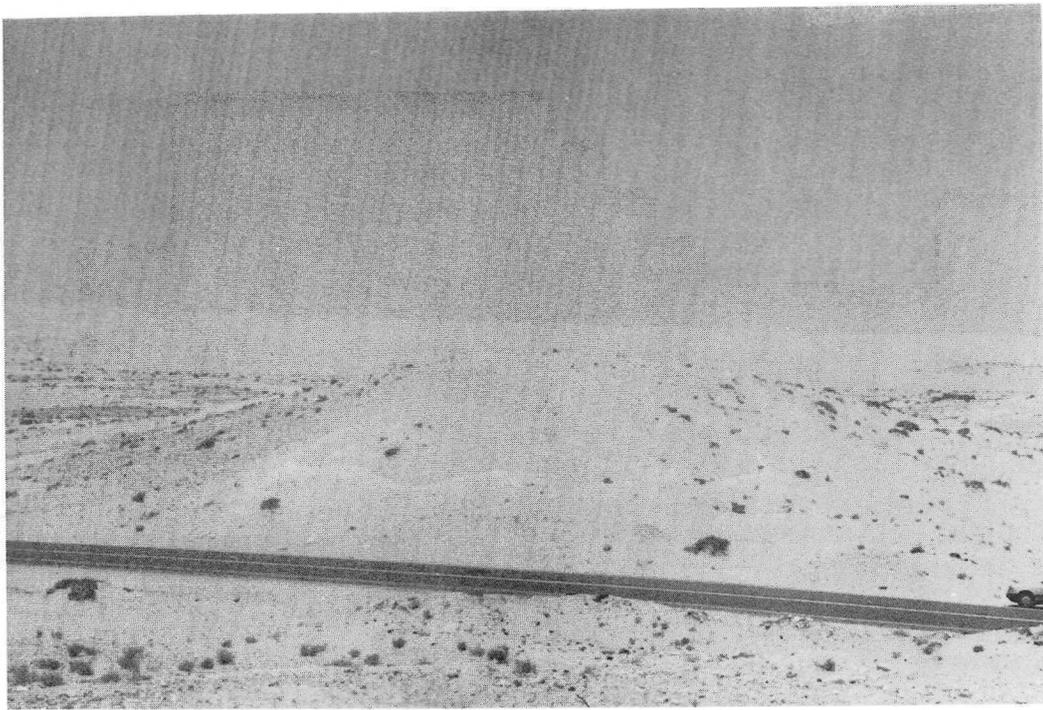


Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odorn

The view from Umm Qatef, looking northwest at the point intersected by the central route



Map 3. The Abu Ageila area



Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odom

The central route as seen from the southern half of Umm Qatef looking north



Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odom

A view of the central route from the northern side of Umm Qatef looking south



Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odom

The prospect from the southern half of Umm Qatef looking directly east



Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odom

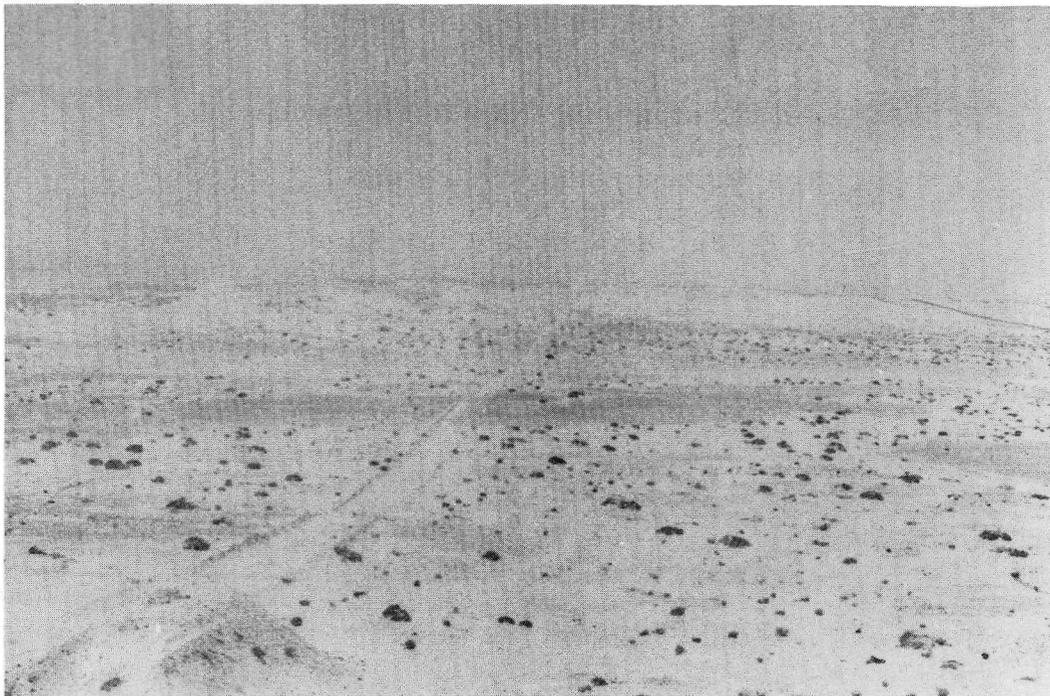
The view from the southern part of Umm Qatef looking due east down the Turkish Track

track, called the Turkish Track, ran east to west just south of the central route. Defenders on Umm Qatef could make it costly for the Israelis to use this avenue of attack against the Abu Ageila complex.

Just west of Umm Qatef stood a second ridge where the Egyptians could place forces in support of those at Umm Qatef. And still farther west, some eleven kilometers from the first ridge, stood a low ridge at the southern tip of which the Egyptians had constructed the Ruafa Dam. Connected to the central route by a road, this stone and earthen dam created a reservoir during the spring and early summer when the Wadi al-Arish became a small stream, perhaps two meters deep. Egyptians used the low, hilly area around the dam for positioning a second echelon. From here, the Egyptians could easily observe any military movements to the west of them for several kilometers.

A major drawback of the main defensive area, which stretched from Umm Qatef to Ruafa Dam, was that the valleys and low, rolling ridges in the area made mutual fire support from the various positions impossible. Another problem was that Abu Ageila—the intersection of the central route and the road to al-Arish—stood outside of the main defensive complex owing to its lack of suitable defensive cover. Thus, some literature refers to the entire area as either Umm Qatef or Umm Qatef-Abu Ageila, rather than just Abu Ageila.

Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila also had to pay special attention to the route that ran through the small village of Qusaymah. Situated on a dirt track some ten kilometers from the Israeli border at Gebel Sabha and twenty kilometers southeast of Umm Qatef, Qusaymah sat in a valley blessed with trees that provided soldiers with much needed shade and the relief of greenery.



Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odorn

The view from the southern end of Umm Qatef looking due west along the Turkish Track

A 22-kilometer track connected Qusaymah and the central route at a point several kilometers behind Umm Qatef. To reach the central route, the Qusaymah Track cut through the defile of Ras Abu Matamir, after which a fork turned southwest in the direction of the Daika Pass and Bir al-Hasana. Taking Qusaymah thus afforded the Israelis an opportunity of bypassing Abu Ageila or attacking Umm Qatef from the rear. To meet this threat, the Egyptians constructed defensive positions at Umm Qatef to ward off an Israeli flanking movement from the south.

Static Defenses at Abu Ageila

On the eve of the 1956 war, Brigadier General Sami Yassa Boulos, a Coptic Christian, commanded the 6th Infantry Brigade, with responsibility for the defense of Abu Ageila.¹⁰ A number of factors would help Boulos carry out his mission during the war. First, Boulos had been in his position for a while, knew his troops, and had adequate time to develop his defenses. Second, the division commander had given him enough latitude in command so that he could demonstrate initiative in battle.¹¹ In addition, the Egyptian brigade at Abu Ageila still had British equipment and commanders and soldiers who were appropriately well versed in their weapons and the tactics for employing them. The unit had only just begun its transition into the unfamiliar Soviet system after Egypt's arms deal with the Soviets in September 1955.

The Egyptian 6th Infantry Brigade was missing its 16th Infantry Battalion, which general headquarters had withdrawn for service in the canal area.¹² This move left the 6th Brigade with only two of its organic infantry battalions and the following organization:

- 17th and 18th Infantry Battalions
- 289th Reserve Battalion (minus)
- 2d Cavalry Troop
- Two reconnaissance troops of light vehicles
- 78th Antitank Battery (self-propelled)
- 94th Antitank Battery (self-propelled)
- A light antiaircraft battery
- 3d Artillery Regiment (25-pounders) (see figure 1)¹³

This force numbered approximately 3,000 men.¹⁴

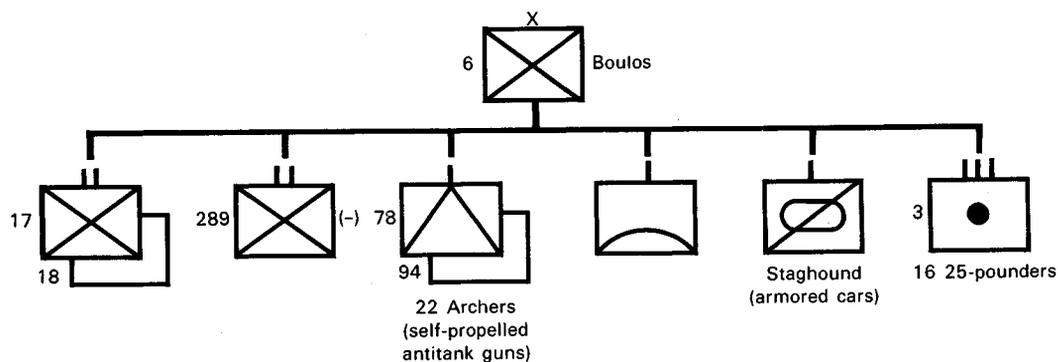
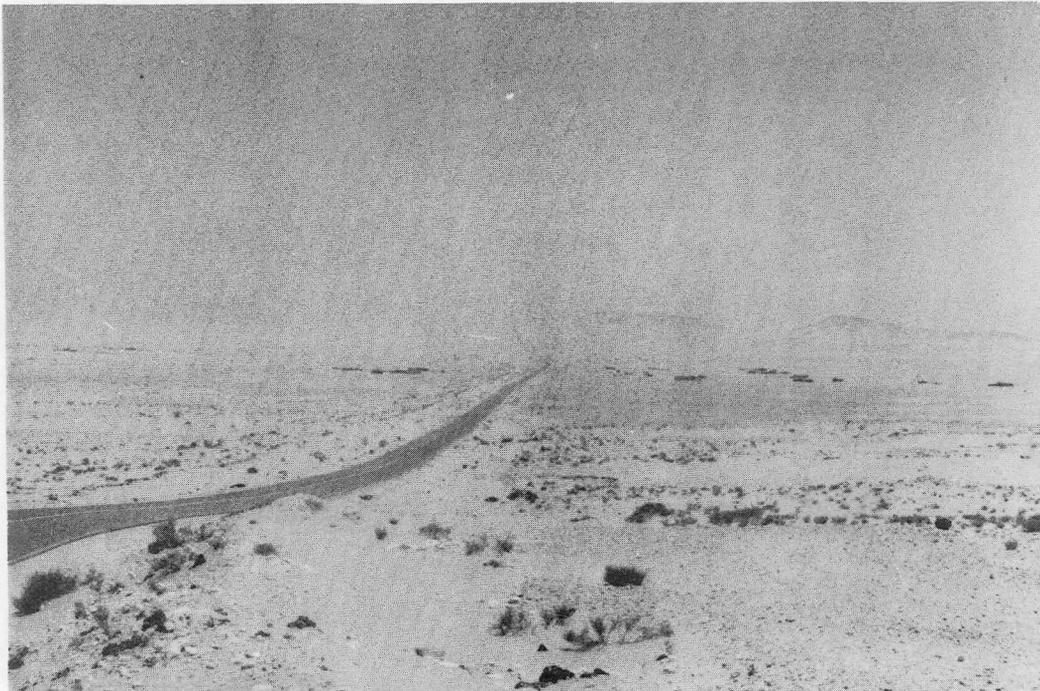


Figure 1. Egyptian forces at Abu Ageila

Boulos deployed the bulk of his force at Umm Qatef, a ridge that gave the Egyptians a commanding view of movements from the east (see map 4). There, he placed the 18th Infantry Battalion, one infantry company of the 17th Battalion, and the 78th Antitank Battery. One infantry company of the 289th Reserve Battalion, augmented by a section of antitank guns, was entrenched on Qusaymah Track just west of Gebel Dalfa. The light antiaircraft battery took up positions throughout the Umm Qatef and Ruafa Dam areas.

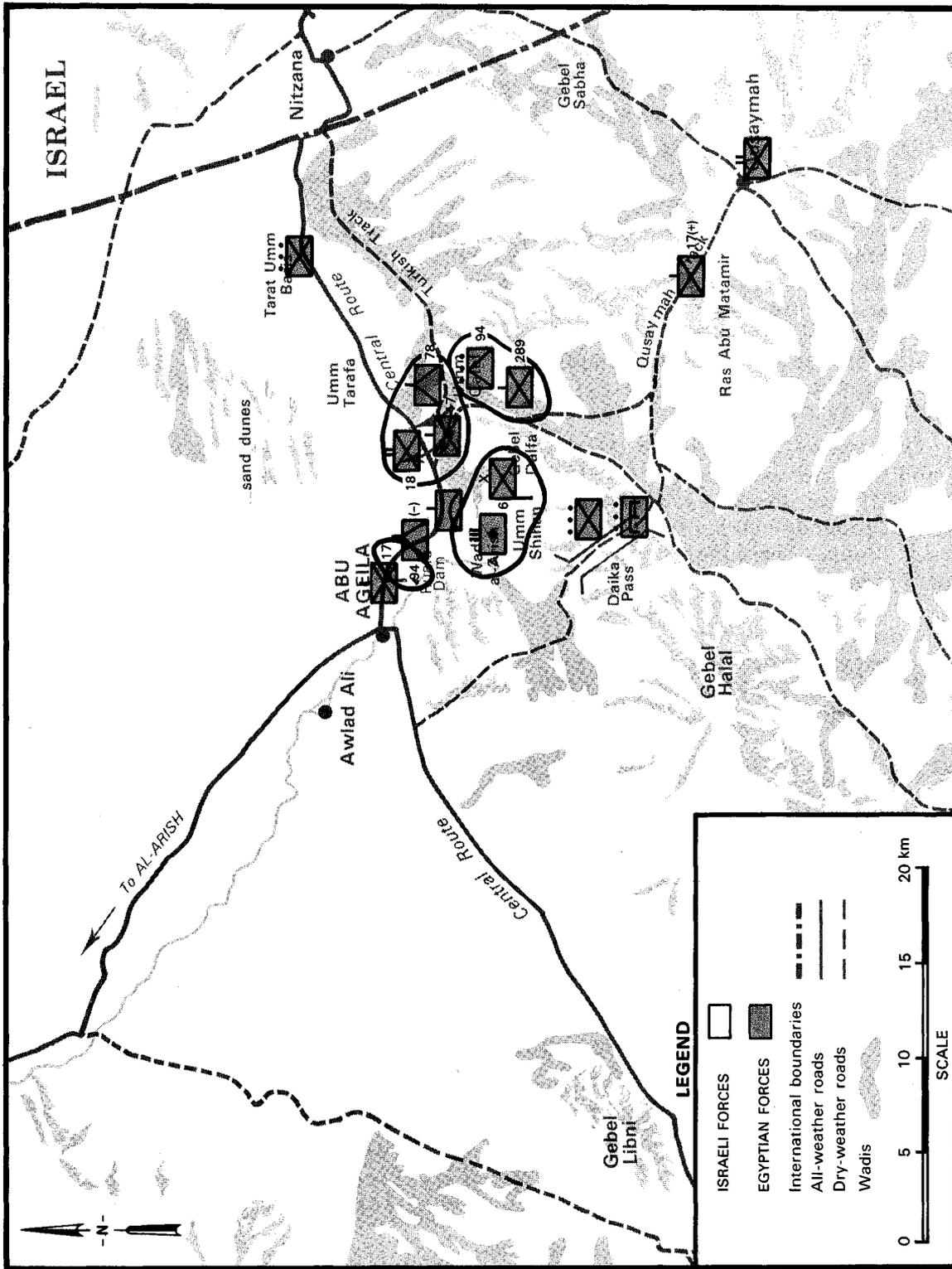
The 3d Artillery Regiment occupied a position at the base of Gebel Dalfa, behind the second ridge to the west, with Boulos' command post just east of the artillery perimeter. For his general reserve, Boulos relied on one company of infantry, the headquarters of the 17th Infantry Battalion, and part of the 94th Antitank Battery—all located in the Ruafa Dam area. His main logistical base was situated at Awlad Ali (with its water wells), some twenty-two kilometers from Umm Qatef. Locating their supplies at Awlad Ali gave the Egyptians access to water, which was lacking at Abu Ageila. Any Israeli penetration into the brigade's rear area through the Daika Pass to the crossroads at Abu Ageila, however, would cut off the Egyptian defenders from their main logistical base at Awlad Ali.¹⁵

Observation posts ringed the main defensive perimeter. A troop of Staghound armored cars guarded the Daika Pass, whereas one company from the 17th Battalion and two reconnaissance sections containing land rovers, jeeps, and Staghounds overlooked the defile at Abu Ras Matamir on the Qusaymah Track. Boulos positioned a security detachment from the 18th Battalion at Tarat Umm Basis, a hill area some nine kilometers east of Umm Qatef. This



Courtesy of Maj. Thomas P. Odom

Tarat Umm Basis, looking eastward to the Israeli border



Map 4. Egyptian deployments at Abu Ageila and surrounding area

position served as a forward observation post overlooking a valley almost six kilometers in length. Several platoon- or squad-size observation posts ringed the border-crossing area.

To delay an Israeli attack, the Egyptians placed explosives at three points south of the Abu Ageila main complex: the first on Qusaymah Track near the eastern edge of Gebel Dalfa; the second on the bridge just before the turn into the Daika Pass; and the third within the pass itself. To set off these explosions at an appropriate time, the brigade commander received elements from the 2d Engineer Regiment.¹⁶

Even though Egypt had concluded a major arms deal with the Soviets in September 1955, the Egyptian 6th Brigade still possessed mainly British World War II-vintage weapons and vehicles, but it had no tanks. This forced the Egyptian commander at Abu Ageila to rely on antitank weapons and artillery firepower against Israeli armored attacks. The 3d Artillery Regiment contained sixteen to eighteen British 25-pounders (howitzers with 88-mm cannons possessing a range of up to 12,000 meters). The 78th and 94th Antitank Batteries each consisted of eleven self-propelled Archers, a total of twenty-two. The Archer, first adopted by Britain in 1942, mounted a 76-mm antitank gun on a Valentine tank chassis. The antitank gun faced backwards, which reduced its effectiveness in attacks or counterattacks. Boulos had the Archers from the 78th Antitank Battery and elements from the 94th Antitank Battery entrenched in the forward positions at Umm Qatef and overlooking Qusaymah Track, leaving him with only eight Archers in the second echelon. The Egyptians also had approximately three dozen towed 57-mm antitank guns that were organic to the infantry battalions. To deal with the Israeli Air Force, the 6th Brigade had an anti-aircraft battery of 30-mm guns. The main combat vehicles available to the Egyptians were Staghound armored cars, normally armed with 37-mm guns, and Bren carriers, lightly armored vehicles.¹⁷

To fortify their main perimeter, the Egyptians employed a system that S. L. A. Marshall has referred to as "a hedgehog." The aim was to have as many mutually supporting defensive positions as possible.¹⁸ The Egyptians placed barbed wire and a minefield in front of Umm Qatef; mines also guarded the area between the southernmost tip of Umm Qatef and the defenses on Qusaymah Track. Behind the mines and wire stood a network of sandbagged trenches and bunkers that included infantry and antitank guns. The field artillery provided additional fire support against attacking forces. Obstacles would slow down the enemy while Egyptian antitank and artillery fire destroyed his forces. This concept resembled the one the British employed in the Western Desert during World War II: units held key terrain with self-sufficient, fortified, and box-based infantry and artillery, while a maneuver force hit the flanks of the advancing enemy. In the case of the Egyptians, the maneuver force would come from the divisional reserve at al-Arish.

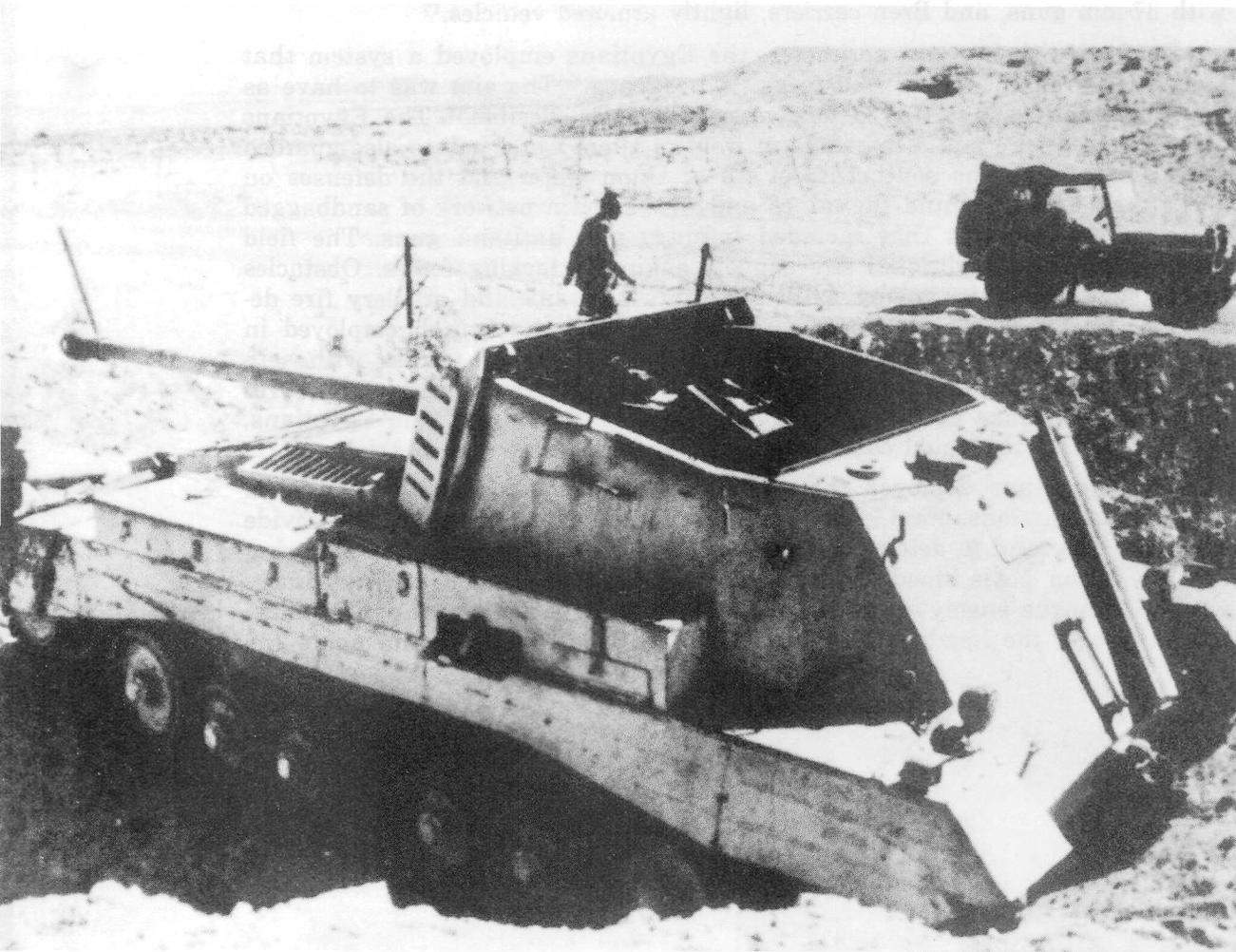
The Egyptians deployed their combat forces at Abu Ageila to perform three basic missions. First, forward elements served as observers to provide early warning and to determine the size of attacking forces. Behind this ring of observation posts stood the main combat force at Umm Qatef; its orders were to stop the enemy's advance. Finally, a general reserve of one infantry company and the headquarters from the 17th Infantry Battalion—some 150

to 200 men supported by the 94th Antitank Battery (minus)—was prepared to stop any breakthroughs and handle any Israeli maneuvers in the rear.¹⁹

The Egyptians' general reserve for use in a counterattack was relatively small and without armor support, and Moshe Dayan, writing after the war, saw this limited capacity as a major flaw in the Egyptian defenses: "The Abu Ageila defense complex could play a decisive role in the defense of Sinai only if it served as a solid base for mobile forces who could go out and engage an enemy seeking to break through to the Canal."²⁰ To a point, Dayan was correct in his evaluation, but as events proved, even this Egyptian defense system, with limited maneuver capability, became a major thorn for the IDF.

Qusaymah figured prominently in Egyptian defensive plans. The commander of the 3d Infantry Division at al-Arish exercised direct control over the National Guard battalion of 500 to 600 men located there. The battalion's mission was to conduct a delaying action to discover the size of the enemy's force and its possible intent. The bulk of the battalion was concentrated at Qusaymah, with several platoon-size observation posts located on Gebel Sabha near the border. The battalion was large enough, unlike the observation posts around Abu Ageila, to deal with a small Israeli raiding party. To prevent an easy bypassing of Qusaymah, the brigade commander at Abu Ageila also placed regular units at the pass at Ras Abu Matamir. Together, these two forces might have put up a stiff resistance, but since the National Guard battalion had only jeeps, its fighting capabilities were severely limited against

An Archer at Umm Qatef



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armor. Consequently, the battalion commander at Qusaymah had instructions not to become decisively engaged and to withdraw into the main defensive perimeter at Abu Ageila if faced with a far superior force.²¹

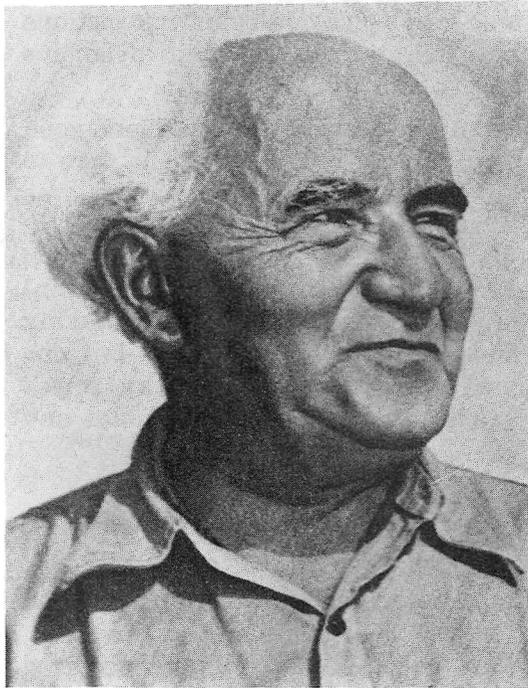
In summary, Egyptian defenses at Abu Ageila were in relatively good shape on the eve of the 1956 war. The Egyptians had had sufficient time to develop their main and outer perimeters, and the brigade commander was familiar with the terrain and his men. His troops were disciplined and trained, and they were under the command of regular officers and NCOs. Furthermore, the brigade commander clearly understood his superior's intent in the event of a major assault on Abu Ageila and even possessed some latitude for making decisions. The Israelis thus faced a formidable foe at Abu Ageila—but one dependent on an operational reserve stationed over 200 kilometers away, across the Suez Canal. This strategic situation gave the IDF both operational and tactical advantages.

The Sèvres Agreement

Israel went to war in large measure because France and Britain promised to invade the Suez Canal in cooperation with Israeli operations in the Sinai. The final agreement for military cooperation among the three states occurred during highly secret meetings held at Sèvres, France, from 22 to 24 October, less than a week before the outbreak of hostilities.²² Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion, Chief of the General Staff Moshe Dayan, and Director General of the Defense Ministry Shimon Peres represented Israel. On the French side sat Prime Minister Guy Mollet, Minister of Foreign Affairs Christian Pineau, and Defense Minister Maurice Bourges-Maunoury. Selwyn Lloyd, the British foreign secretary, and his aide, Donald Logan, arrived late during the first meeting.

By 24 October, after much discussion, all three parties overcame a major obstacle: no one wanted to appear as a flagrant aggressor in attacking Egypt. The British and French needed a pretext for invading Egypt—both for domestic and international consumption. Three full months had elapsed since the nationalization of the canal, and the Egyptians were clearly succeeding in maintaining a normal level of traffic on that vital waterway. So the two European governments—grasping for any face-saving rationale—wanted the Israelis to “threaten” the canal to justify a British and French expedition to “protect” it.

Ben-Gurion, for his part, wanted to avoid involving Israel in a major campaign without a concurrent British and French military involvement; otherwise, Israel would appear a blatant aggressor. Dayan worked out an ingenious compromise to break the deadlock. A battalion of Israeli paratroopers would land on 29 October at the Mitla Pass, some thirty kilometers from the canal. This action would appear to pose a military threat to the Suez Canal serious enough to warrant France and Britain sending an ultimatum to the Egyptian and Israeli governments demanding the withdrawal of both of their armies ten miles from the canal. In effect, Egypt, if it complied with this demand, would have to abandon its control of the canal, while Israel would gain a free hand to conquer the Sinai. No one expected Egypt to accept this outrageous demand, and the French and British could then cynically follow



Israel Defense Army 1948–1968

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister
and minister of defense

through with their threat of an invasion by bombing Egyptian airfields within thirty-six hours of the Israeli paratroop operation. The two European states would then land an expeditionary force in the canal zone, while Israel pressed on with its military operations in the Sinai.

In exchange for an Israeli partnership in the invasion of Egypt, France agreed to continue transferring arms to Israel. Military relations between the two countries had begun in 1952 with secret negotiations for the sale of arms to Israel. The first major consignment followed in 1954, approximately one year before Egypt's arms deal with the Soviets. The steadily growing military relationship between France and Israel served as the basis for further discussions between the two governments concerning military cooperation against Nasser once Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal. Eventually, the French brought the British and Israelis together for a joint military operation. From August to October 1956, more French military hardware arrived in Israel, including AMX tanks, fighter aircraft, artillery pieces, and badly needed ammunition (especially for the Israeli Air Force).²³ Then, on 27 October—at the last minute—Israel received an important shipment of 200 6 by 6 trucks that, according to Dayan, retrieved the situation: “After the poor crop of Israeli vehicles mobilized from civilian owners, I do not know what we would have done if these French trucks had not arrived.”²⁴

But even this military aid was insufficient for Ben-Gurion to contemplate going to war with Egypt. At Sèvres, Ben-Gurion was also troubled by the thirty-six hours that would elapse between the opening of hostilities by Israel and the actual attack by European bombers on Egyptian airfields. During this long interval, Egypt would almost certainly send a large strike force against the Israeli paratroopers at Mitla and might even launch its own

Major General Moshe Dayan



Israel Defense Army 1948-1958

bombers against populated areas in Israel. Both possibilities greatly disturbed Ben-Gurion and made the Israeli leader balk in his negotiations with French and British officials. To assuage his fears and cement the alliance, the French promised to send a reinforced squadron of Mystère IV-A fighters and a squadron of F-84 fighter-bombers to defend Israeli airspace. These arrived quickly. Now, with a French air umbrella protecting Israel, the Israeli Air Force was free to provide ground support to its troops. In further support of the Israelis, French pilots reportedly flew missions on the first day of the campaign—although many Israelis deny this.²⁵

With the Sèvres Agreement in hand, Israel could begin the war confident that a second front would open up against Egypt in a relatively short time. In the meantime, French air squadrons would assure the safety of Israeli cities. This French military involvement at the onset of the war was precisely the guarantee Ben-Gurion needed to ensure that France and Britain would keep their part of the bargain.

Operation Kadesh

Dayan, now armed with the promise of eventual European involvement, had to alter his war plans to accommodate British and French wishes. According to Dayan, the operational directive of 5 October 1956—that is, the one formulated by the General Staff before Sèvres—had assigned an entire paratroop brigade to help seize al-Arish in an operation involving naval and other ground forces. During the first two days, the Israeli Army would concentrate its efforts on taking the northern Sinai, including al-Arish, Abu Ageila,

Gebel Libni, and Bir al-Hasana. Then, the bulk of Israeli forces would advance toward the canal, while a brigade headed southwest to capture the Strait of Tiran.²⁶ From the general outline of this plan, Dayan clearly wanted to attack the Egyptian 3d Infantry Division head-on at the onset of the campaign.

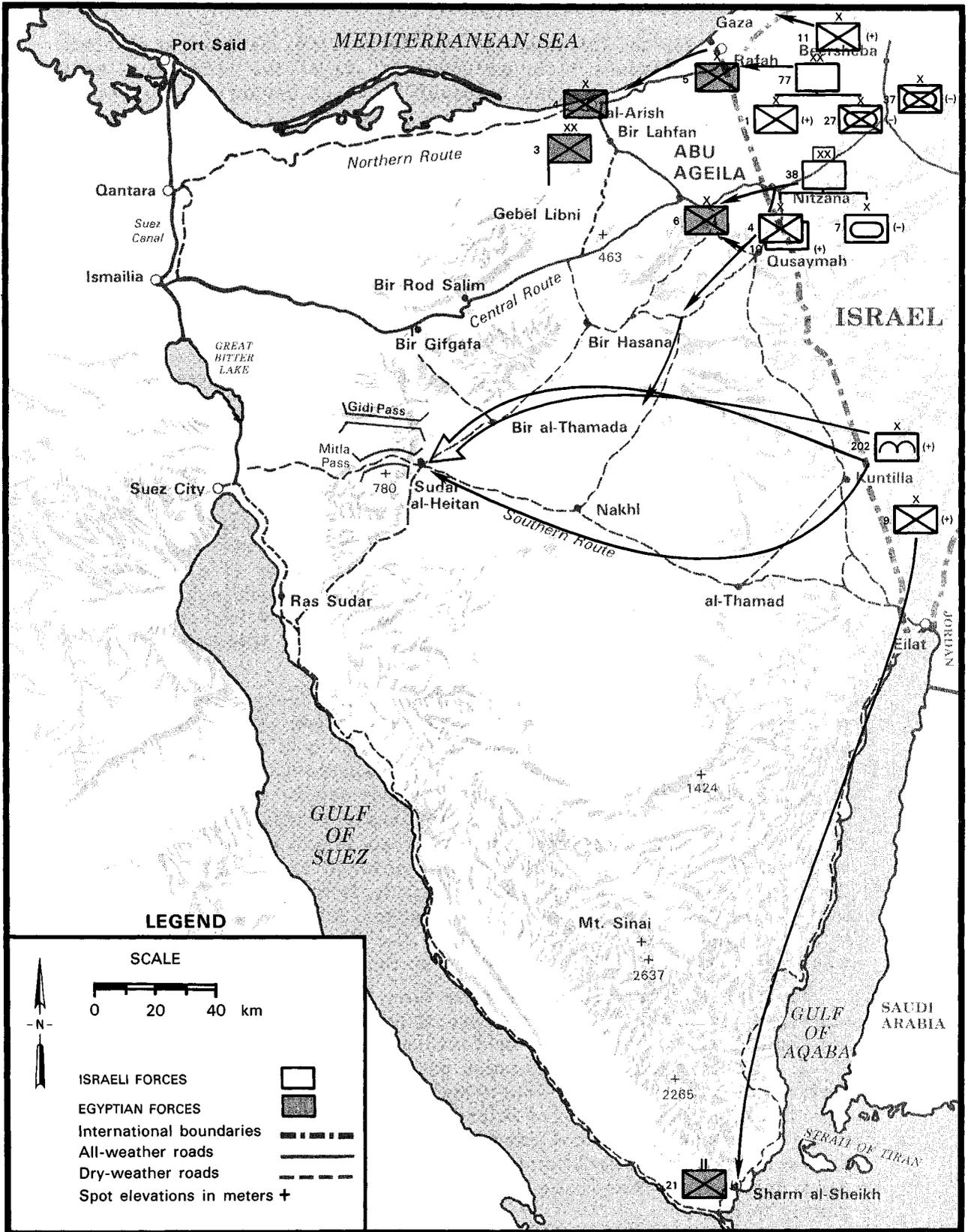
On 25 October, upon his return from France, Dayan immediately issued new directives for Operation Kadesh (the Biblical name for the place from which the Jews began their odyssey in the Sinai under Moses' leadership). His plan committed the 38th and 77th *Ugdahs* (division-size task groups) and three independent brigades—a total of some 45,000 men—against the Egyptian Army in the Sinai (see map 5).

The first phase of the operation involved the drop of a paratroop battalion at Mitla Pass, scheduled for late afternoon on 29 October. Simultaneously, the remainder of the paratroop brigade, reinforced by a tank company and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ariel Sharon, would advance along the Kuntilla—al-Thamada—Nakhl route for a linkup with the force at the Mitla Pass. Dayan would thus begin his campaign advantageously because of the earlier withdrawal of the Egyptian 2d Infantry Division from the southern region of the Sinai. The Egyptian high command, ordered in August to conduct a major pullout of forces, had decided to thin troop deployments in the south while keeping the 3d Division on guard over the Rafah—al-Arish—Abu Ageila triangle. The southern route, now unguarded except for a few infantry companies, offered Dayan an opportunity to link up with his small force at Mitla.

During the first night, while the paratroopers executed their orders, the Israeli 38th *Ugdah* would prepare to attack the Egyptian positions at Qusaymah, to be initiated on the morning of the 30th. In the meantime, the 9th Brigade would prepare for its long and arduous journey toward Sharm al-Shiekh. Then, on the night of 30—31 October, the 38th *Ugdah* was to seize forward positions east of Umm Qatef and advance to capture Abu Ageila on the next day. During the latter operation, the 77th *Ugdah* would assault Rafah and then al-Arish on the northern route, while the 11th Infantry Brigade moved against Gaza. Finally, the bulk of the 38th and 77th *Ugdahs* would head for the canal in conjunction with the 9th Brigade's long trek to Sharm al-Shiekh.²⁷ Dayan had identified clearly the main objectives of the campaign: to create a military threat to the Suez Canal by seizing territory in proximity to it; to break the Egyptian blockade of the Strait of Tiran by capturing Sharm al-Shiekh; and to "confound the organization of the Egyptian forces in the Sinai and bring about their collapse."²⁸

Operation Kadesh did, however, possess a major weakness. Naturally, an Israeli military thrust deep into Egyptian territory best suited the paratroopers, and Dayan decided to commit the IDF's only paratroop brigade, the 202d, to this phase of the campaign—one battalion to drop at Mitla Pass, while the remainder moved overland along the southern route. This decision, however, would adversely affect operations against Egyptian fortified positions such as those at Abu Ageila.

By 1956, Sharon's paratroopers had developed into the elite force of the IDF, and Dayan, to enhance Israeli fighting capabilities, modeled his entire army after the unit. But this process was not yet complete, especially in infantry formations.²⁹ By assigning the Mitla operation to the entire 202d Para-



Map 5. Operation Kadesh

troop Brigade, Dayan eliminated his best fighters from battles that involved assaults on fortifications in the eastern Sinai. He left the paratroopers with only a political mission designed to bring France and Britain into the war.

Therefore, for the conquest of Abu Ageila, Dayan had to depend on infantry brigades composed of reservists, who, because of secrecy, could be called up no sooner than forty-eight hours before the war began—instead of the required seventy-two.³⁰ Some reserve units, as events would show later, lacked sufficient training to assault a well-fortified position such as Abu Ageila. Although the trade-off ultimately worked to Israel's benefit—Britain and France did enter the war—operations at Abu Ageila would suffer as a consequence.

Abu Ageila in Operation Kadesh

Colonel Yehuda Wallach commanded the 38th *Ugdah*, whose mission it was to seize Qusaymah, Umm Qatef, and Abu Ageila. Wallach, an infantry battalion commander in the 1948 war, had served in the interwar years as an infantry brigade commander, commandant of the battalion commanders' school, and inspector of the infantry corps. To accomplish his task in Operation Kadesh, Wallach was assigned two reserve infantry brigades, the 4th and the 10th, and the 7th Armored Brigade, the only regular tank brigade in the IDF. The 38th *Ugdah* commander also had three batteries of heavy field artillery, a battery of medium-size artillery pieces, and a company of engineers.³¹ In case of a major operational or tactical problem, Wallach could appeal to Brigadier General Assaf Simhoni, the front commander, who in turn could request assistance from the 37th Mechanized-Armored Brigade, which, in the meantime, served as a general reserve.³²

Dayan provided Simhoni and Wallach with clear instructions for the first phase of fighting. The 4th Infantry Brigade—comprised of three infantry battalions, a reconnaissance company, a mixed company of antitank-antiaircraft guns, and a battalion of mortars and field artillery—was to proceed on foot on the night of 29–30 October to take Qusaymah by the morning of the 30th. Its commander was Colonel Joseph Harpaz, a company commander in the 1948 war, who afterwards commanded an infantry battalion and then served as the commandant of the Officers' School.³³ Another consideration in this early move by the 4th Brigade was that the Israeli high command wanted to open another route to help the paratroopers. Afterwards, at least part of this force would dash in the direction of the Mitla Pass, while other units would attempt to outflank Umm Qatef from the south.

The 10th Infantry Brigade, with its three infantry battalions, one reconnaissance company, a mixed company of antitank-antiaircraft guns, and a battalion of heavy mortars and field artillery, would embark on the night of 30–31 October to take the observation posts along the central route and then capture the main defenses at Umm Qatef by 1 November. To give the brigade more firepower, the 7th Armored Brigade transferred one of its tank companies to the 10th Brigade.³⁴ Colonel Shmuel Goder, commander of the 10th Brigade, had been a highly successful and much decorated artillery officer in the Soviet Army during World War II. He commanded an artillery regiment before immigrating to Israel.³⁵

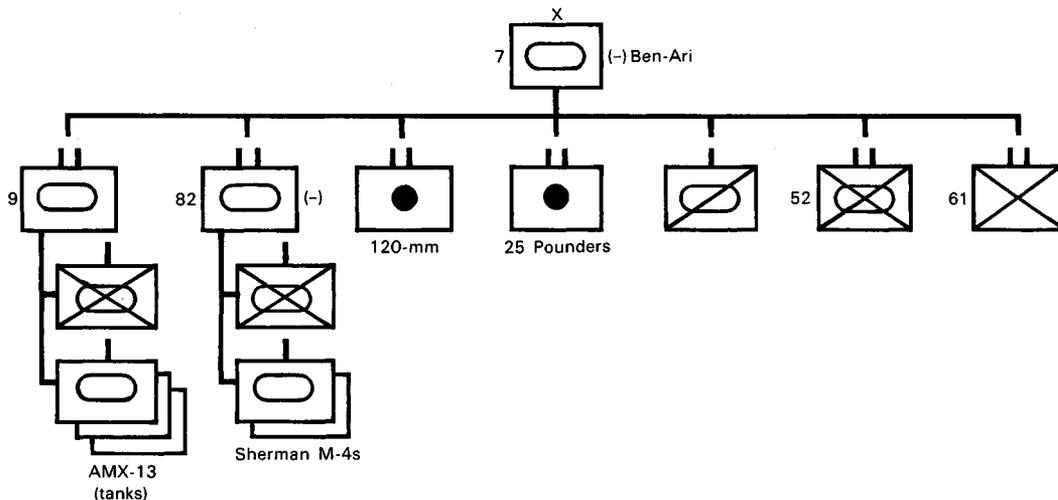


Figure 2. Organization of the 7th Armored Brigade

Colonel Uri Ben-Ari, perhaps Israel's premier tankerman in 1956, commanded the 7th Armored Brigade, which had two tank battalions, the 9th and the 82d; two battalions of infantry, one mechanized (52d), the other motorized (61st); a reconnaissance company; and a battalion each of 120-mm mortars and 25-pounders (see figure 2). The 9th Armored Battalion consisted of AMX-13s—light French tanks weighing 14.5 tons, mounting a 75-mm gun, and having a speed of thirty-five mph. The 82d Armored Battalion, on the other hand, had the Israeli Sherman M-4s, with either 75-mm guns from the AMX-13 tanks or 76.2-mm guns. The Sherman tank weighed thirty tons and could travel up to twenty-five mph. The brigade's reconnaissance company consisted of three platoons riding on jeeps.³⁶ Dayan planned to have the 7th Armored Brigade remain as Wallach's reserve, ready to assist either the 4th or the 10th Brigade—but under no circumstances was it to enter combat before the 31st. Then, Israeli tanks would exploit any success achieved by the infantry by heading for the canal.³⁷

A comparison of the opposing forces at Abu Ageila shows the Israelis possessed a marked advantage in both manpower and weaponry. Against the Egyptian infantry brigade at Abu Ageila and a National Guard battalion at Qusaymah, Wallach initially had at his disposal one armored and two infantry brigades. In 1956, an Israeli infantry brigade numbered between 3,500 and 4,500 men—even as high as 5,000 in some instances—whereas the 7th Armored Brigade contained from 3,000 to 3,500 men.³⁸ When one takes into account the *ugdah's* artillery and other units, the Israelis had at least 12,000 men pitted against a combined Egyptian force of 3,500 at Abu Ageila and Qusaymah.

In addition to a favorable manpower ratio, the Israelis also held an overwhelming advantage in tanks; Wallach had an armored brigade of around 100 tanks, whereas the Egyptians had no tanks and relied on antitank guns and artillery to stop Israeli armor.³⁹ If either tactical commander needed rein-



Mid-East Wars: Israel's Armor in Action

AMX-13 light tank

forcements, Wallach was again in a more favorable position than his Egyptian counterpart, for he could look to Simhoni and the 37th Armored-Mechanized Brigade. The Egyptian commander could rely on only the 4th Infantry Brigade and its two to three tank companies.

The 38th Ugdah's Vulnerabilities

Yet despite all his apparent advantages, Wallach had to exercise command within a set of restrictions that prevented him from achieving surprise and mass. The 38th *Ugdah* had to begin the attack with the capture of Qusaymah, postponing its assault on Umm Qatef for approximately forty-eight hours. Furthermore, Wallach needed to send at least part of the 4th Infantry Brigade to Mitla to reinforce the paratroopers there. In addition, Dayan had ordered Simhoni not to commit the 7th Brigade before the 31st, which reduced, somewhat, the Israelis' overwhelming armor advantage. In short, the plan to seize Abu Ageila was piecemeal and tentative in nature—like the campaign itself. Dayan adopted this approach to the campaign to comply with Ben-Gurion's wish that no extensive combat should occur until the commencement of French and British bomber attacks on Egyptian airfields.

In addition to the political constraints placed on Operation Kadesh, the IDF labored under internal problems. Before the war, the IDF had become embroiled in a major debate over the use of armor and infantry.⁴⁰ Moshe Dayan, chief of the General Staff, headed what might be loosely called the "infantry school." Born in Palestine in 1915, he was an infantry man, schooled in the experiences of small-unit tactics that characterized much of Israel's War for Independence (1947–49). Ben-Gurion had taken Dayan under his wing and helped him rise rapidly in the army. After Dayan had commanded a



Mid-East Wars: Israel's Armor in Action

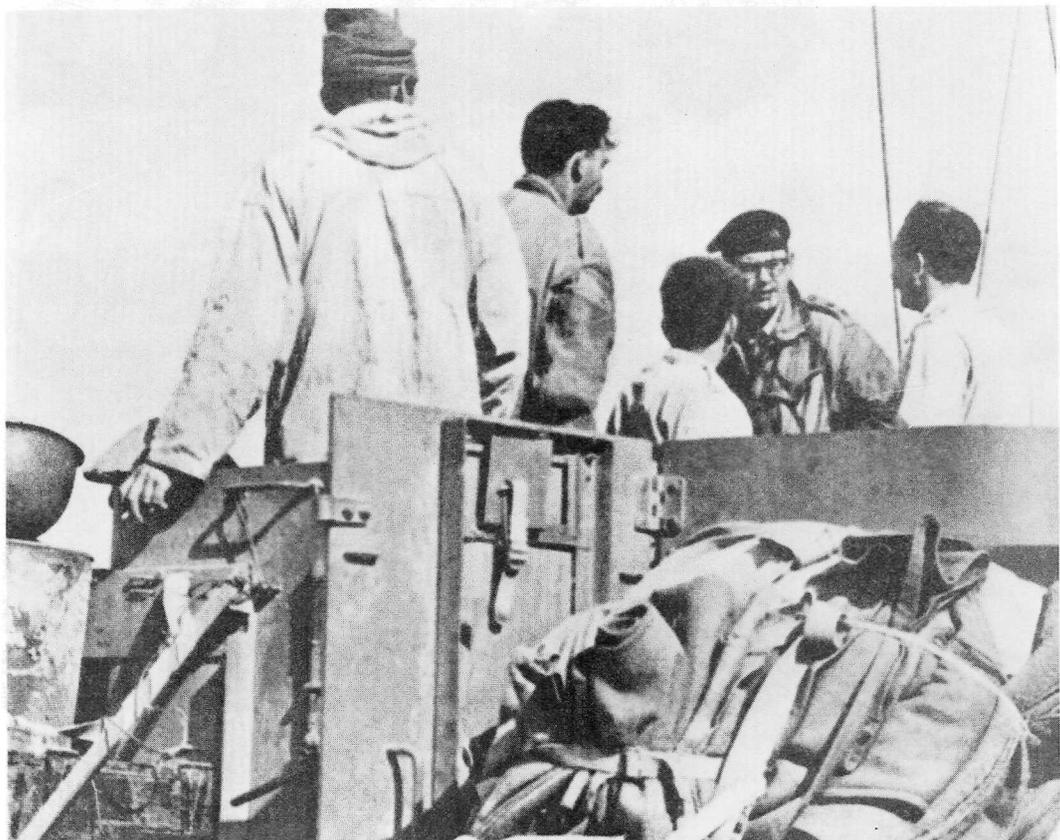
A Sherman M4 A3 E8 (Israeli version), mounting a 76.2-mm gun

battalion and then a brigade in the 1948 war, Ben-Gurion convinced him to remain in the army and take charge of the Southern Command. After attending

a three-month course in England for senior officers (1952), Dayan served as head of the Northern Command and then as chief of operations. In December 1953, Dayan, at the time only thirty-seven years old, became chief of the General Staff.

Dayan had studied little military history and thus had some difficulty transcending his own experiences. For Dayan, infantry shone as the queen of battle; tanks were too expensive and mechanically unreliable to constitute the spearhead of an attacking force. He ignored many of the lessons of World War II as having little relevance to the new Israeli Army. To Dayan, an ideal combat formation consisted of an infantry battalion, with a tank company and artillery in support as part of a combined arms team. As part of this scenario, infantry—riding in jeeps, half-tracks, or armored cars—would make deep and rapid penetrations, with tanks following on transports. Against fortified positions, infantry would, if necessary, dismount and assault, with tanks providing fire cover. Thus, the motive force of Dayan's army was mobile infantry.

Brigadier General Haim Laskov opposed Dayan's infantry-oriented doctrine. Laskov, unlike Dayan, had fought outside of Palestine as a major with the Jewish Brigade in the British Army and thus had experienced combat firsthand on a modern battlefield. After Israel's War of Independence, Laskov played a



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Armor corps commander, Brigadier General Laskov, in his command vehicle, 1956

Chief of Staff Haim Laskov, chief of the
General Staff, 1958—69



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major role in building the IDF's military education system. In tribute, the Officers' School today bears his name. Before the 1956 campaign, he served as director of military training (1948—51), commanding officer of the Israeli Air Corps (1951—53), chief of operations (1955), and commander of the Armor Corps (1956—57). After his military career, Laskov went to England to study history and economics at St. Anthony College, Oxford.

In sharp contrast to Dayan, Laskov complemented his military experiences by reading military literature extensively. He was greatly influenced by Liddell Hart's theories of armor warfare and introduced Israeli officers to the importance of tanks in achieving decisive victories in maneuver warfare.⁴¹ Laskov believed in concentrating tanks to act as the spearhead of a land campaign, with infantry and artillery assaulting fortified positions, while tank battalions moved toward the enemy's rear, cutting supplies and communications and blocking the arrival of reinforcements.

Just prior to the 1956 war, Dayan worked out a compromise that still favored infantry but assigned a greater role to armor. Originally, Dayan consigned the 7th Armored Brigade to make a feint attack against Jordan as part of a general deception, but later decided it should lead a spearhead in the Sinai, if events favored it. Unlike other Israeli armored brigades, the 7th Brigade carried a full complement of two tank battalions. Two other Israeli brigades, while they were called "armored," were units blending mechanized and armored characteristics. The 27th Brigade, assigned to assault the Rafah area, and the 37th, the general reserve, each had only four tank companies in comparison to the 7th Brigade's six. The 202d Paratroop and the 10th and 11th Infantry Brigades received attachments of tanks, the latter from the 37th Brigade. The remaining four infantry brigades—the 1st, 4th, 9th, and 12th—

received no tanks or a platoon at best.⁴² Doctrinal ambiguity over the roles of armor and infantry, as events would make evident, resulted in confusion regarding how the IDF would defeat the Egyptian Army. This problem was further compounded by the fact that senior Israeli commanders lacked knowledge of the Sèvres Agreement and thus did not understand the reasoning behind some of Dayan's planning.

Another internal problem in the IDF on the eve of war concerned Dayan's view of the character of the Egyptian Army. Ten years after the war, Dayan described how he had evaluated the Egyptian Army going into the 1956 campaign: "There is no need to fear that Egyptian units who will be bypassed will launch a counterattack or cut our supply lines. We should avoid analogies whereby Egyptian units would be expected to behave as European armies would in similar circumstances."⁴³ Such an attitude is referred to by Dayan's contemporary critics as the "Collapse Theory." In essence, Dayan did not have a high regard for the Egyptian Army, and this helps explain why Dayan assigned the 10th Infantry Brigade, supported by a tank company from the 7th, the conquest of Umm Qatef—instead of the entire task force under Wallach's command. Dayan expected that once the campaign unfolded that a mere brigade would prove sufficient to remove any threat by the Egyptian defenders.⁴⁴

Another circumstance also complicated matters for Dayan: the vulnerable position of the paratroop battalion at Mitla during the first twenty-four hours of the campaign. Dayan feared his paratroopers might become stranded, so he ordered an assault against Qusaymah to secure a route to reach them. Only afterwards could Wallach move against Abu Ageila. Fear for the fate of the paratroopers also complicated matters for the 7th Armored Brigade in the overall campaign. The brigade's tanks, in addition to their designated mission, had to be prepared to make a dash toward central Sinai should the need arise. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Avraham Adan, the commander of the 82d Armored Battalion of the 7th Brigade, received as one of his possible missions a quick thrust toward Mitla to help Sharon's men.⁴⁵

The above problems adversely affected Israeli operations at Abu Ageila. Despite the eventual participation of France and Britain in the war, the tentative and piecemeal approach of Operation Kadesh, coupled with doctrinal ambiguity, created an unexpected albatross for Wallach when the Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila refused to surrender when surrounded. The Egyptians' tenacity in the defense also demonstrated the hollowness of Dayan's Collapse Theory.
