DEMOCRACY AND PREVENTIVE WAR:  
ISRAEL AND THE 1956 SINAI CAMPAIGN

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One of the questions that has attracted the most attention in the international relations literature during the last decade is whether the foreign policy behavior of democratic states differs from that of other states. It is commonly argued that democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with each other, they get involved in wars as frequently as do nondemocratic states; they divert more resources into winning the wars they fight, usually emerge victorious, and suffer fewer casualties than do nondemocratic states; and they are better able than other states to make credible commitments.1 It is also argued that democracies do not fight preventive wars—wars motivated primarily by the perception that one’s military power and potential are

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declining relative to that of a rising adversary, and by the fear of the continuing deterioration of the status quo, the erosion of one’s bargaining power, and the risk of a war occurring under worse circumstances later.

The idea that relative decline often leads to war through better-now-than-later logic goes back to Thucydides’ argument that the “real cause” of the Peloponnesian War was “the growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this caused in Sparta.” Historians have identified numerous other cases of preventive war, and political scientists have recently begun to refine the concept and to generalize about the conditions under which such wars are most likely to occur.2

Isolated assertions that democracies do not initiate preventive wars go back to the early cold war period,3 but this idea has been advanced most systematically by Schweller, who argued that “only nondemocratic regimes wage preventive wars against rising opponents. Declining democratic states…do not exercise this option.” In an important qualification, however, Schweller argues that democracies might fight low-cost preventive wars against weaker opponents.4 It is now commonplace for others to follow Schweller in asserting that democracies never (or almost never) fight preventive wars, but without explicitly noting Schweller’s qualification.5 We are less troubled by the failure to acknowledge this qualification, which may be implicit, than by the tendency to


4. Schweller (“Preventive War,” 248, 252) defines a preventive war as one in which “the decision to wage war for either offensive or defensive reasons was based on elites’ perceptions, real or imagined, of an unfavorable power shift.”

Democracy and Preventive War

3

One can find several historical cases in which democracies engaged in military action for what appear to be primarily preventive reasons. Israel's 1981 attack against the Osiraq nuclear reactor in Iraq is almost universally interpreted as a preventive strike. Some argue that the American initiation of an air war against Iraq in the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War was motivated in part by the aim of destroying Iraq's nuclear capability before it became operational, or at least that it was rationalized and sold to the American people on these grounds. The United States, driven by preventive logic, came very close to a military strike against North Korea in the 1994 crisis over the North Korean nuclear program.

These examples are not meant to suggest that democracies frequently initiate preventive wars or strikes, or that they take such actions as often as nondemocracies do, but only that the unconditional statement that democracies never initiate preventive wars is historically inaccurate. The real questions are the conditions under which democracies are likely to respond with military force to an adverse shift in military capabilities, and whether nondemocratic states resort to preventive military action under a broader range of conditions. Schweller's answer—that democracies engage in the preventive use of military force only if they expect the war to involve minimal costs, which he operationalizes to mean that democracies (unlike autocracies) will only initiate preventive wars against much weaker opponents—is plausible and explains all of the abovementioned examples.

There is one striking exception to Schweller's conditional hypothesis, however, and that is Israel's decision to embark on the 1956 Sinai campaign against Egypt. This was a war, not a limited and unreciprocated military action, and it was a war between relative equals, so that none of Schweller's qualifications

9. Schweller, “Preventive War.” The expectation that a strike against North Korea would lead to a North Korean invasion of the South and to substantial American casualties was the primary factor that deterred an American attack. See Sigal, Disarming Strangers.
If we can show that Israeli motivations in embarking on the Sinai campaign had a significant preventive component, this would stand as an important disconfirming case for both the unconditional hypothesis that democracies do not fight preventive wars, and the conditional hypothesis that democracies only fight preventive wars against much weaker states.

The question of when democratic states fight preventive wars is important for policy as well as for theory. After 11 September 2001 there has been increasing concern in the United States and much of the advanced industrial world about the possible use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorist groups or rogue states, and the George W. Bush administration has strongly hinted about possible military action in an attempt to degrade such capabilities before they are developed or used for destruction or extortion. Moreover, with the growing spread of democratic regimes, it is important to understand the conditions under which other democracies might respond with military force to anticipated power shifts.

Our aims in this article are to argue that democracies sometimes initiate “preventive wars,” even potentially costly wars, against adversaries of comparable strength, and to identify the conditions under which they might do so. We do this through a detailed historical case study of the processes leading to the Israeli decision for war against Egypt in 1956.

Scholars use the term “preventive war” in many different ways, and we begin with a clarification of the meaning of the concept. We then consider possible explanations for the hypothesis that democracies do not fight preventive wars, point out possible limitations, and identify the conditions under which democracies are most likely to use military force in response to perceptions of relative decline. We argue that preventive war is a possible strategy for democratic states if the expected costs of war are low, if the state has allies that might reduce these costs through diplomatic or military action, and if the state has few viable alternatives for dealing with relative decline. Going beyond the standard dichotomy between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, we also consider whether some types of democracies are more likely than others to initiate preventive wars, emphasizing the degree of autonomy of the executive from the legislative branch. In the case study of the origins of the Israeli Sinai campaign we conclude that the preventive motivation was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the Israeli decision for war. We identify alternative explanations, note their limitations, and end with a discussion of the theoretical implications of our analysis.

10. In 1956 Egypt ranked much higher than Israel on all but one of the Correlates of War Project’s six indicators of national material capabilities <www.icpsr.umich.edu>. Schweller (“Preventive War,” 264) explicitly states that the 1956 war was not preventive.
Although a single case, or even a small number of cases, is generally not adequate to falsify a hypothesis, it can raise serious questions about a proposition that posits necessary or sufficient conditions for a given outcome, as does the democracies-do-not-fight-preventive-wars hypothesis. We examine a single case rather than several cases because it allows us to conduct a more detailed investigation, provide more convincing evidence that the preventive motivation was in fact a primary factor shaping outcomes, rule out alternative explanations based on other causal variables, and explore interaction effects between the preventive motivation and these other variables. Less detailed studies of a larger number of cases may have the advantage of demonstrating more empirical anomalies, but they do so at the cost of providing less compelling arguments that in each case the preventive motivation, and not other factors, was the primary cause of military action.

By interpreting Israel’s initiation of the Sinai campaign through the analytic lenses of shifting power and preventive war, we also contribute to the historiography on the war. We give priority to internal validity over external validity, and recognize that our hypotheses must subsequently be tested over other cases. Thus our analysis combines the functions of “hypothesis-testing,” “hypothesis-generating,” and “interpretive” case studies. We test the proposition that the set of democratic preventive wars against opponents of comparable strength is empty, generate alternative explanations for the hypothesized low propensity of democratic states to engage in preventive wars, and interpret the Israeli Sinai campaign through a preventive war framework.


12. Israeli leaders at the time presented the war to the Israeli public in preventive terms, and brief assertions by political scientists and historians that the war was preventive can be found in Van Evera (Causes of War, 78) and in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, eds., *International Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 34. We know of no in-depth study, however, that systematically treats the war from this perspective.

13. Another disadvantage of including more cases now is that it would reduce the number of independent cases for subsequently testing hypotheses emerging from this case. Jack S. Levy, “Qualitative Methods in International Relations,” in *Millennium Reflections on International Studies*, ed. Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

We assume that our classification of Israel as a democracy is not problematic. All of the international relations research on the democratic peace, and nearly all of the literature on classification of regimes in comparative politics, treat Israel as a democracy, and the Polity III data for 1955–56 gives Israel a score of ten (out of ten) on the democracy scale and zero on the autocracy scale.

THE CONCEPT OF “PREVENTIVE WAR”

Some scholars define preventive war broadly to include a wide variety of military conflicts, while others define the concept so narrowly that few cases qualify. Taylor, for example, argues that “Every war between Great Powers [in the 1848–1918 period] started as a preventive war, not a war of conquest,” and Copeland argues that decline and prevention account for most of the major wars during the past two centuries of history. Howard makes the broader claim that the causes of most wars can be found in “perceptions by statesmen of the growth of hostile power and the fears for the restriction, if not the extinction, of their own.” At the other extreme, Wolfers argues that “there seems to be no case in history in which a country started a preventive war on the grounds of security.” Given the range of meanings attributed to the concept of preventive war, conceptual clarification is in order.

15. Schweller (“Preventive War,” p. 240) defines democracy to include (1) scheduled elections held periodically with free participation of opposition parties, in which (2) at least thirty percent of the adult population is able to vote for (3) a parliament that either controls or enjoys parity with the executive branch. (4) The government must be internally sovereign over military and foreign affairs; and (5) stable, which is operationalized as enduring for at least three years. To these fairly standard criteria (Doyle, Ways of War and Peace; Ray, Democracy and International Conflict), Schweller adds (6) the existence of private property and a free-enterprise economy; and (7) citizens who possess juridical rights.


The expansive conception of preventive war derives from the tendency to confound the preventive motivation for war with other sources of better-now-than-later logic, particularly the preemptive motivation. Whereas prevention involves fighting a winnable war now in order to avoid the risk of war under less favorable circumstances later, preemption involves the initiation of military action based on the expectation that an adversary’s attack is imminent and that there are advantages in striking first, or at least in preventing the adversary from doing so. Preventive wars differ from preemptive wars in many important respects, including their relative frequency of occurrence, antecedent conditions, anticipated consequences, and normative legitimacy. Leaders anticipate that the failure to preempt will result in an immediate war initiated by the adversary, whereas the failure to take preventive action will result in a continued decline in relative military power and bargaining strength. Because of these and other differences, it is important to maintain the analytic distinction between the preventive and preemptive motivations, though in some cases both may operate simultaneously.

We have been conforming to standard practice in referring to the concept of “a preventive war,” but in fact this usage is quite problematic. It implies that preventive war is a type of war, one that is defined in terms of its cause. This confounds cause and effect in a single concept and raises the question of how to classify cases in which the preventive motivation is just one of several contributing causes of war—and, indeed, most wars involving fears of an adverse power shift fall into this category.

19. Although preventive logic usually applies to the stronger state in a dyad, there is nothing in the definition to preclude preventive action by the weaker actor, who may perceive that its position will worsen even more over time and conclude that this is its last opportunity for war, however risky it might be. Incentives for war under these circumstances may be increased by the tendency toward risk acceptance in the domain of losses, as prospect theory suggests, Jack S. Levy, “The Implications of Framing and Loss Aversion for International Conflict,” in Handbook of War Studies II, ed. Manus I. Midlarsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 193–221. Many interpret Japanese behavior in 1941 in these terms. See Akira Iriye, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Longman, 1987); Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Quagmires in the Periphery: Foreign Wars and Escalating Commitment in International Conflict,” Security Studies 7, no. 3 (spring 1998): 94–144.


23. A rising power that fears preventive action by its declining adversary may have incentives to preempt and seize first-mover advantages. The puzzle is why this does not happen more often. See n. 20.
Although preventive war is defined in terms of unfavorable power shifts, not all power shifts lead to war, and not all power shifts that lead to war necessarily involve the preventive motivation. Sometimes the rising state will initiate the war, as many power transition theorists argue. War can also arise from erroneous perceptions of an impending power shift, from “rapid approaches” that fall short of complete transitions, and from power shifts in which a rising state crosses a critical threshold of capabilities, such as the development of a nuclear capacity. It is precisely because there is no perfect correlation between power shifts and war that it is most useful to focus on the preventive motivation for war as a causal variable, one that intervenes between power shifts and war, rather than on preventive war as a type of war.

In addition, there is no obvious criterion for how important the preventive motivation has to be before war is classified as preventive. Two possibilities that come to mind are situations in which the preventive motivation is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for war. The first requires that war would not occur in the absence of an anticipated power shift, which implies that existing conflicts of interests, domestic incentives for war, misperceptions, and all other factors are not in themselves powerful enough (that is, jointly sufficient)

24. Although it is common to speak of the “initiation of a preventive war,” the definition of preventive war does not technically require that the preventer actually initiate the war. The preventer prefers war over the (deteriorating) status quo, but for diplomatic or domestic political reasons it might prefer that the adversary initiate the war. Consequently, the preventer may attempt to provoke a war rather than initiate it. The preventive motivation was an important factor in Germany’s strong preference for a Austro-Serbian war or even a continental war in 1914, but German leaders were determined not to be the first to mobilize. Fritz Fischer, Germany’s Aims in the First World War (New York: Norton, 1967); Jack S. Levy, “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914,” International Security, 15, no. 3 (winter 1990/91): 151–86.


27. Although we have defined the preventive motivation in terms of political leaders’ perceptions of relative decline with respect to a particular adversary and their fear of the consequences, perceptions and calculations involving third states can also be important. The declining leader might be primarily concerned about threats that the rising state will pose to the leader’s allies or to regional stability (the United States and Iraq in 1990–91, for example). Or the threat posed by a rising adversary might only be serious when judged in the context of other threats. German decisionmakers in 1914 never doubted their ability to defeat their rising Russian adversary in a bilateral war, but they feared the implications of Russia’s rise for Germany’s ability to defeat Russia and France together in a two-front war by 1917. Fischer, Germany’s Aims.
to lead to war. Such cases are relatively rare but they do occur, as illustrated by
the Israeli attack against Iraq in 1981 and possibly by Japan’s decision for war
against the United States in 1941.28 We will argue that Israel’s 1956 Sinai cam-
paign also fits this category.

One problem with classifying such cases as preventive wars is that such a
war might have more than one necessary condition (as we argue in the 1956
case), and there is no logical reason to privilege one over the other in labeling
the war. Or, there may be other conditions that provide the key triggers that
“push” war to happen, and the preventive war label would distract attention
from these other variables and from the causal mechanisms leading to war.

Cases in which the preventive motivation is a sufficient condition for war,
which implies that declining power and fear of the consequences of decline
lead to war regardless of any existing hostilities or conflicts of interest, are bet-
ter candidates for the “preventive war” label. Such cases are extraordinarily
rare; as Kydd argues, “preventive wars sparked by fears about the future moti-
vations of currently benign states almost never happen.”29

A case in which preventive logic comes close to being a sufficient condition
for the use of military force is the Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor
in 1981. There is good reason to believe, however, that Israel would not have
attacked if the unfavorable power shift involved a state not currently as hostile
as Iraq, if Shimon Peres rather than Menachem Begin had been prime minister,
or if Israeli leaders expected that a military strike would escalate to all-out war
with Iraq.30 They correctly calculated that Iraq would not respond militarily,
and the result was a limited preventive strike rather than a preventive war.

This example suggests the need to distinguish between different types of
military action, which can differ substantially in the expected costs to the pre-
venter and hence in the preventer’s incentives and disincentives to undertake
such action. The use of military force short of war (if the attacker correctly
anticipates the target’s decision not to respond militarily) is generally much less
costly than are wars, particularly wars between states of roughly equal military
capabilities. One implication (if the expected cost hypothesis is correct) might

29. Kydd, “Sheep in Sheep’s Clothing,” 148. Kydd’s argument is quite plausible, but we
must be very careful in testing it. All dyads are characterized by some level of conflict, and if
“benign” is defined to involve an unrealistically low level of conflict or hostility, then the
hypothesis might be true but only in a nearly tautological sense. There would be few preven-
tive wars against currently benign states because there are few currently benign states.
30. Gochal and Levy, “When Do Democracies Fight Preventive Wars?” Israel made a
public statement at the time to the effect that it would apply different criteria (and presuma-
ably not respond the same way) if Egypt were to develop nuclear weapons. Amos Perlmutter,
“The Israeli Raid on Osiraq: A New Proliferation Landscape,” Strategic Review 10, no. 1 (win-
ter 1982): 35; Snyder, “The Road to Osiraq.” 582.
be that democracies are less likely than nondemocracies to use force prevention if they expect an adversary response that will lead to all-out war, but that if the expectation is no response or a limited response that will not lead to war, then democracies will not behave much differently than nondemocracies.

We would expect even smaller differences between democratic and nondemocratic states in resorting to covert action against rising challengers (based on the expected cost of war hypothesis). Although we suggested above that Israel would have responded differently to the development of a Egyptian nuclear program than it did to Iraq’s, we should note that Israel did not refrain from covert action in Egypt in an attempt to block the development of an Egyptian nuclear capability. Israel has also engaged in a sustained campaign of covert actions against Iraq to retard the latter’s nuclear development. Thus, hypotheses on preventive war (or substantial military actions expected to lead to war) do not necessarily apply to the use of military force short of war or to covert action.

Having argued that the concept of a preventive war is not particularly useful and that we should focus instead on the strength of the preventive motivation as an intervening causal variable between power shifts and war, we concede that the preventive war concept is so thoroughly ingrained in the language of the field that scholars are unlikely to abandon it. For sake of linguistic convenience we occasionally refer to “preventive war,” but we use the term to refer to a state strategy driven primarily by the preventive motivation, or, more accurately, to a war arising from such a strategy.

31. We distinguish between unreciprocated military action by regular military forces (like the Israeli 1981 raid) and covert action.


34. Copeland (The Origins of Major War) interprets the cold war, and U.S. containment doctrine in particular, as a preventive war by the United States to avert relative decline against an increasingly powerful Soviet adversary. We prefer to restrict the term preventive war to the actual use of force, and distinguish it from alternative strategies for responding to relative decline.
WHY DEMOCRACIES DO NOT FIGHT “PREVENTIVE WARS”—THE ARGUMENT

Many of the theoretical arguments as to why democracies do not fight “preventive wars” apply equally well to nondemocratic states. Any war involves some risks, even for the stronger state. In Bismarck’s words, “preventive war is like suicide from fear of death.” War can be particularly risky for democratic political leaders, however, and our focus here is on those factors that might distinguish democratic from nondemocratic states with regard to the use of military force in response to relative decline. We begin with Schweller, who provides the most comprehensive analysis of the democracies-don’t-fight-preventive-wars hypothesis.

Schweller argues that the key variable is the expected costs of war. This goes back to Kant’s argument that, because in republican regimes “the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide whether there should be war or not,” the people will “hesitate to start such an evil game” by voting to send themselves off to war. Democratic publics rarely vote on decisions for or against war, of course, but they do vote for political leaders whose positions in power depend on public support and on the perceived legitimacy of their policies, and who, therefore, resort to war or to the use of force short of war only in response to the most serious and immediate threats to the national interest.

36. Schweller, “Preventive War,” 240–48; Immanuel Kant, Eternal Peace, in The Philosophy of Kant, ed. Carl Friedrich (1795; New York: Modern Library, 1977), 438. Schweller (243–45) argues that the aversion of democratic publics to costly wars has other consequences as well, most notably a “liberal complaisance” characterized by the lack of a martial spirit, the resistance to universal peacetime conscription, a general unpreparedness for military action, the lack of flexibility and decisiveness necessary for realpolitik in a competitive world. This is an old realist argument about the disadvantages of democracies in international politics. Morgenthau (Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 4th ed. [New York: Knopf, 1967], 241) emphasized the importance of a democratic government securing popular approval for its policies, but argues that “the conditions under which popular support can be obtained for a foreign policy are not necessarily identical with the conditions under which a foreign policy can be successfully pursued.” Similarly, Kennan (George F. Kennan, The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy [Boston: Little; Brown, 1977], 3–4) argued that public and congressional involvement are “congenital deficiencies” with respect to the effective conduct of foreign policy.
38. The hypothesis of aversion to costly wars by democratic publics and therefore by their leaders is plausible, but it is not clear whether this is a universal generalization or one that is temporally or culturally bounded and perhaps overly influenced by contemporary Western and particularly American attitudes since the Vietnam War. Moreover, although democratic leaders are more likely than authoritarian leaders to be thrown out of office after a military defeat, the personal costs of being deposed may be greater for leaders of certain types of authoritarian regimes. On political survival, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, “War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability,” American Political Science Review 89, no. 4 (December 1995): 841–
Democratic leaders also face greater institutional constraints than do their nondemocratic counterparts. The greater dispersion of political power, checks and balances, and freedom of the press in democratic states, as compared to authoritarian states, require leaders to secure a broad base of public support before adopting risky policies, and preclude political leaders from taking unilateral military action.39

One problem with arguments based on a state’s expected costs or institutional constraints is that they are monadic in form and imply that democratic states are substantially less inclined than nondemocratic states to fight any kind of war, “preventive” or otherwise. Leaving aside the analytic problem of how a state-level independent variable can explain a dyadic outcome,40 most of the evidence shows that democracies are not significantly less likely than nondemocratic states to get involved in war.41 In addition, the emphasis on the military unpreparedness of democracies implies that such states might not be able to fight as effectively as their nondemocratic counterparts. To the contrary, there is substantial evidence that democracies usually win the wars that they fight, both because democracies are more careful in selecting the wars


Whether wars that are expected to be successful but costly constrain democratic leaders more than their nondemocratic counterparts is also interesting, particularly in light of the diversionary theory of war and the argument that democratic leaders are, if anything, more inclined than authoritarian leaders to initiate diversionary action. It is not obvious, for example, that the Israeli public has a greater restraining effect than the Arab “street” on their respective political leaders. Despite plausible arguments from Kant to Schlescher regarding the constraining effects of high expected costs of war on democratic leaders, war can generate political benefits as well as costs for state leaders, and we need more systematic investigations of the relative strength of these effects. On diversionary theory, see Jack S. Levy, “The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique,” in *Handbook of War Studies*, ed. Manus I. Midlarsky (London: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), 259–88; Christopher Gelpi, “Democratic Diversions: Governmental Structure and the Externalization of Domestic Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41 no. 2 (June 1997): 255–82.

39. T. Clifton Morgan and Sally Howard Campbell, “Domestic Structure, Decisional Constraints, and War: So Why Can’t Democracies Fight?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (June 1991): 187–211; Russett, *Democratic Peace*. One problem here is that most versions of the institutional model assume that leaders have more warlike preferences than do their publics and the public’s representatives. Sometimes, however, leaders get pushed into wars by belligerent publics (the United States in the Spanish-American War, for example), or are tempted to engage in diversionary action in the expectation of triggering a “rally ‘round the flag” effect that bolsters leaders’ domestic political support.

40. It is possible that liberal complaisance, aversion to casualties, or institutional constraints might undermine deterrence and increase the probability of an external attack. For an institutional model that incorporates a theory of strategic interaction, see Bueno de Mesquita, et al., “Democratic Peace.”

that they initiate and because they allocate disproportionately more resources to the war effort than authoritarian states.42

It is possible, of course, that whatever the differences between democracies and nondemocracies regarding the constraining effects of domestic publics or the separation of powers, these differences may be more pronounced for “preventive wars,” where the threat to the national interest is not immediate. Although democratic political leaders can mobilize popular support for war, even high-cost wars, in the face of direct and immediate threats to the national interest, they have more difficulty mobilizing support for preventive military action, while nondemocratic states are less constrained. This is the basis of Brodie’s argument with respect to the United States that “war is generally unpopular and the public mood inclines to support really bold action only in response to great anger or great fright. The fright must be something more than a sudden new rise in [the adversary’s] capability.” Similarly, Schweller argues that “prior to risking the high domestic political costs of large-scale war, democratic elites require something more than the assumption of a potential future threat based on the projection of an irreversible decline in relative power. Instead, driven by the necessity of securing enough votes to remain in office, incumbents insist upon evidence of a clear and present danger and usually require several provocations.”43

These various arguments lead Schweller to qualify his proposition that democracies do not fight “preventive wars.” He argues that the pacifying effect of public opinion that precludes democracies from fighting preventive wars is “somewhat contingent…on the expectation that the war will be costly,” whereas autocracies are much less constrained by such costs. Schweller argues that the costs of war are determined primarily by the dyadic balance of power and related factors, and consequently restricts his argument to situations of “power shifts between states of roughly equal strength.”44

The difficulty of securing popular support for preventive war is also related to the fact that preventive wars are generally considered to be more difficult to justify in moral terms. Morgenthau argues that preventive war is “abhorrent to democratic public opinion” because of the moral condemnation of war in the West. Brodie argues that “there now exists a powerful and rigid barrier, largely on moral grounds, to American planning of preventive war,” and it is clear

44 Schweller, “Preventive War,” 248.
from the context of Brodie’s comment that it is the democratic nature of America that generates this moral constraint. The United Nations Charter has a very restrictive view of the right to use military force in self-defense, defined in terms of actual or imminent violations of territorial boundaries. This basically prohibits anticipatory acts of self-defense. Preemption may be a possible exception, but the conditions under which preemptive attack is considered justifiable has been restricted in the twentieth century, beginning with the “no first shot” doctrine of the Kellogg-Briand Pact.45

This view of the difficulty of morally justifying preventive war is reflected in the normative literature on just war. Walzer, for example, argues for “the moral necessity of rejecting any attack that is merely preventive in character, that does not wait upon and respond to the willful acts of an adversary.” He is more willing, however, to accept preemptive strikes (including the 1967 Israeli attack against Egypt) as legitimate under certain conditions. In particular, there must be a “sufficient threat” in terms of a “manifest intent to injure,” a degree of “active preparation that makes that intent a positive danger,” and “a general situation in which waiting, or doing anything other than fighting, greatly magnifies the risk.”46

One may argue, however, that the criteria of perceptions of sufficient threat, intent to injure, and risks of nonaction may apply to some situations of prevention as well as preemption.47 An adversary’s immediate initiation of a war you think you can win may be less threatening than an unfavorable power shift and a high probability of a future war under unfavorable circumstances. If the adverse power shift is sufficiently great, the adversary sufficiently hostile, the probability of a future war sufficiently large, and alternative options to deal with the threat unavailable or inadequate, military action to forestall the threatening shift in power and its consequences might well be morally justifiable by Walzer’s criteria. More important for our concerns, domestic publics or political elites may perceive preventive war to be justifiable under such conditions.

46. Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, 80–85. Although Walzer includes the target’s manifest “intent to injure,” the problems in assessing the adversary’s intent lead us to define preemption and prevention in terms of the preventer’s motivations and perceptions, regardless of the objective accuracy of those perceptions. Note that Walzer’s criteria for legitimate prevention are stricter than those provided by Vattel in the 1750s. Vattel argued that if a state has previously given “signs of injustice, rapacity, pride, ambition, or of an impious thirst of rule,” if it is about to experience a “formidable augmentation of power,” and if it refuses to give “securities” or guarantees against future harm, “its designs may be prevented by force of arms” (Emer de Vattel, The Law of Nations, cited in Walzer, ibid., 78).
47. The criterion of active preparation better distinguishes preemptive from preventive action.
The implication is that the more hostile and threatening a state’s environment, the easier it is for the state to justify, and therefore fight, a “preventive war” in response to relative decline. Similarly, Schweller argues that Israel is a “deviant case” because it “faces extreme systemic constraints” and is “a state under siege.” Arguments involving deviant cases are more useful when recast in terms of theoretically useful categories. This leads us to generalize Schweller’s argument and say, with respect to the first point, that democracies facing severe systemic constraints sometimes fight preventive wars. Combined with the expected cost criterion, the revised hypothesis is that democracies take preventive military action in response to unfavorable power shifts only if they expect that such military action would involve low costs, or if they are under severe systemic constraints, but not under other circumstances. This weakens the hypothesized distinction between democratic and nondemocratic states, because the external constraints argument applies to any state, though it does imply that democracies have a higher threshold of threat before strong systemic pressures overwhelm domestic constraints on the use of force.

This discussion of cultural, normative, and institutional explanations for differences in tendencies of democratic and nondemocratic state to participate in or initiate wars, or preventive wars in particular, is based on the presumed dichotomy between democratic and nondemocratic countries and an undifferentiated conception of democracy. This is a simplification, of course, because democracy and autocracy can be conceived of as the ends of a continuum.


49. For such a hypothesis to be testable we would have to operationalize the concept of “severe systemic constraints” and do so independently of behavioral responses to those constraints (that is, war initiation). One possible surrogate indicator of severe systemic constraints is perception that war is inevitable. The hypothesis would then be that democracies in relative decline are significantly more likely to fight “preventive wars,” even potentially costly ones, if they perceive that war is inevitable. No matter how severely systemic constraints are operationalized, however, it is not clear that democracies differ significantly from nondemocracies in their respective responses to such conditions.

50. Schweller (“Preventive War,” 266–67) offers a second reason why Israel is a deviant case: “the tragic historical experiences of the Jewish people have shaped Israel’s domestic structures in ways characteristic of authoritarian regimes, which explains why Israel has retained a preventive-war option unavailable to other democratic states.” This may be true, but the emphasis on the willingness of Israelis to sacrifice for the defense of the state and accept extraordinarily high levels of military spending and universal and compulsory military service is not at all relevant to Schweller’s criteria for democracy. If Israel’s domestic structures were authoritarian enough to violate the conditions for democracy, Schweller would not have to treat Israel as a deviant case, for a nondemocratic Israel would then not violate the proposition that democracies never fight preventive wars. For an interesting discussion on how Israel, despite its high defense budget and high-level involvement of the military in all aspects of the country’s civil life, has managed to avoid becoming what scholars of civil-military relations call a “garrison state,” see Rebecca L. Schiff, “Israel as an ‘Uncivil’ State: A Reconsideration of Civil-Military Relations,” Security Studies 1, no. 4 (summer 1992): 636–58.
rather than polar opposites, and countries may rank high or low on different dimensions of democracy. This implies that different degrees of democracy generate different levels of war-proneness, and that hypotheses about democracy and preventive war should be cast in probabilistic rather than unconditional terms.

One can also identify different types as well as degrees of democracy, and explore the possible impact of different democratic subtypes on war behavior. Elman, for example, focuses on the extent to which a state is majoritarian or nonmajoritarian based on the degree of autonomy of the executive from the legislature. She recognizes, however, that, in the absence of information regarding the preferences of the executive and legislature on issues of war and peace, the degree of constraints on the executive does not determine the propensity of states to engage in the use of force; she also includes the relative hawkishness of the executive as opposed to the legislature. Elman argues that executive autonomy—which is greater in Westminster parliamentary and semipresidential regimes than in coalition parliamentary and presidential regimes—will increase the probability of more risky foreign policies and war if the executive has more hawkish preferences than the legislature, but decrease the probability of risky foreign policies and war if the legislature is more hawkish than the executive. This framework is modified by Ripsman, who argues

51. This is reflected in the Jaggers and Gurr scale of democracy (0–10) and autocracy (0–10).


53. As we noted earlier, too many institutional models erroneously assume that executives have more hawkish preferences than do domestic publics or legislatures.


55. This argument is about leaders implementing their preferred policies in the absence of bureaucratic or domestic constraints. It is technically incomplete as a theory of war because it fails to incorporate strategic interaction between states. One can argue, in support of Elman’s hypothesis, that lower levels of state autonomy enhance the ability of those states to send credible signals to their adversaries, in part because of the domestic audience costs of retreating from their commitments. More credible signals presumably reduce the likelihood of divergent perceptions of likely outcomes and therefore reduce the likelihood of a war driven by misperceptions. See the sources on audience costs and commitment cited in n. 1. One task for future research is to incorporate variations in democratic regimes type (and not just democracy-autocracy) into a signaling model of international conflict.
that the degree of state autonomy is influenced by decision-making procedures and informal norms as well as institutional structures.56

The recognition that different democratic subtypes generate different constraints on the behavior of the executive, and that democratic as well as non-democratic states can be autonomous and implement their own preferences if their particular domestic structures insulate them from societal groups and public opinion, provides an important point of departure for further research, both on state foreign policy behavior and bargaining between states. We do not explore this issue here, however, because it has few implications for the particular case of Israeli behavior in 1956. While Ben-Gurion ruled under a very narrow coalition in the Knesset,57 his preference (by spring 1956) for preventive war over alternative strategies was shared by his own party, Mapai, and also by Begin-led Herut, the main opposition party. Given this lack of variation in preferences across the key actors and political parties, domestic structures had little impact on foreign policy outcomes. Domestic structures had a greater impact on Israeli foreign policy during the struggle between the Ben-Gurion and Sharett camps—both of Mapai—prior to Ben-Gurion’s return to power in November 1955.

The strategy of preventive war is based on a dynamic conception of international politics involving tradeoffs between the costs and benefits of a war under favorable military circumstances now and the consequences of a decline of bargaining leverage and the risks of war under less favorable circumstances later. Most explanations of the impact of regime type (including democratic subtype) on war, however, ignore possible variations in the time horizons of political leaders in different types of regimes and their impact for security policy in the context of shifting power. The question becomes whether democratic leaders generally have shorter time horizons than do authoritarian leaders.

One variable that might account for variations in time horizons across regime types is variations in expectations of longevity in office. The lower a political leader’s odds of remaining in office by the time the rising power has completed the power transition and achieved parity, the lower his or her domestic political incentives of risking a preventive war now, given the opportunity to pass the costs of inaction off to future leaders. There is some evidence that nondemocratic leaders generally survive in office longer than democratic leaders.


57. In the July 1955 elections, Ben-Gurion’s Mapai party lost seven of its forty-seven seats (out of 120) in the Knesset, while Menachem Begin’s Herut gained three, increasing its number of seats from twelve to fifteen, reducing the Mapai-led coalition to sixty-four out of 120 seats in the Knesset.
leaders.\textsuperscript{58} If this finding is confirmed by further research, then the relative absence of preventive wars among democracies may be explained by democratic political leaders’ more limited time horizons based on their expected tenure in office.

Having considered the various theoretical ramifications of the hypothesis that democracies do not fight preventive wars, let us now turn to an investigation of its empirical validity in the case of Israel’s Sinai campaign.

\textbf{ISRAEL AND THE 1956 SINAI CAMPAIGN}

Our argument is that the preventive motivation for war was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the 1956 Israeli decision to launch the Sinai campaign. Israeli leaders were driven by the fear that the 1955 Soviet-Czech arms sales to Egypt would lead to a significant shift in the dyadic balance of military power between Israel and Egypt once these armaments were fully integrated into the Egyptian arsenal. The new arms would provide Egypt with superiority in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and negate the qualitative military advantages upon which Israeli security had rested since its independence. This shift in the balance of power would be particularly dangerous in the context of ongoing border incidents and reprisals; the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping; Israeli perceptions that President Gamal Abd’el Nasser’s pan-Arabic ideology would lead to the strengthening and unification of the Arab coalition arrayed against Israel; the inevitability of a “second round” of war within a few years; the continued diplomatic isolation of Israel; and the belief that American unwillingness to sell arms to Israel would make it impossible to correct the growing imbalance through external arms purchases. French and British collaboration in joint military action against Egypt provided guarantees of air cover for Israeli cities, great power diplomatic support, and assurances that Britain would not intervene against Israel in an Israeli-Jordanian war. Israeli confidence in British and French expectations of British and French involvement in the war constitutes an additional necessary condition for Israel’s Sinai campaign.

After a brief review of the historical context of the 1956 Sinai War, we examine the nature of the Czech arms deal and its impact on the dyadic balance of power and on Israeli perceptions of Egyptian hostility. Because our analytical focus is on the Israeli decision for war, we examine the French and British

roles only insofar as they affected the Israeli decision for war, and give only brief attention to the complex factors that shaped French and British interest in war or the hostile American reaction to the war.59

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Arab-Israeli conflict continued to simmer after the 1948–49 War of Independence, with Israel’s sense of insecurity heightened by the failure to convert the armistice agreements into peace treaties and by the refusal of Arab states to recognize Israel’s right to exist. More specific threats to Israeli security arose from three interrelated issues: Egyptian interference with Israeli or Israel-bound shipping through the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba; an increasing competition for armaments; and armed infiltration into Israel from Arab states, especially from Jordan and the Egypt-controlled Gaza Strip.

In fall 1949 Egypt placed guns at Sharm el-Sheik, at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, and imposed a blockade to prevent ships bound for Israel from reaching Eilat, Israel’s southern port. The Egyptian blockade imposed significant economic costs on the new Israeli state by effectively forcing Israeli shipping to Asia and the Far East to take the long route through the Mediterranean, the Atlantic Ocean, and then around Africa rather than the direct route through the Red Sea, and also by significantly increasing the transportation costs of oil imports. The failure of the UN to enforce its demands that Egypt honor the international status of these waterways further increased Israel’s sense of isolation, as did the October 1954 Egyptian-British agreement for the British withdrawal of the Suez Canal and the transfer of the canal to Egyptian control within twenty months. Although the British presence had not prevented the Egyptians from interfering with Israeli shipping, Israeli leaders perceived that it had at least deterred any major invasion across the canal. The

primary Israeli concerns, however, were the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba.60

A second issue was the ever-increasing effort by both Egypt and Israel to increase the quantity and quality of their military arsenal through external purchases, which led to an intense rivalry for foreign, and especially Western, arms suppliers.61 The early search for armaments led to the 1950 Tripartite Agreement among France, the UK, and the United States, which set up a multinational committee to monitor and control Western arms sales to the Middle East. Israel and Egypt made most of their arms purchases in the early 1950s through this system, though Western states sold more arms to Arab states than to the Israelis. The pace of arms deals was exacerbated by technological innovations in weaponry in the 1950s, particularly in fighter aircraft. The resulting conflict spiral involved a competition in quality more than in quantity, particularly for Israel, which had always faced a quantitative disadvantage relative to its Arab enemies and for which the maintenance of a qualitative advantage in weaponry was one of the cornerstones of its security policy.62

A third issue was armed infiltration into Israel from Egypt and Jordan, which began soon after Israeli independence but which did not really become important until late summer 1953. There were relatively few cross-border incidents from Egypt before then, and those that did occur involved private acts by displaced Palestinians, not state-organized and financed actions. After the July 1952 military coup by the Free Officers group, Col. Gamal Abd’el Nasser emerged as the real power on the Revolutionary Command Council and in the country. Until 1954, when Nasser became prime minister, he was primarily concerned with consolidating his domestic support. He concentrated on domestic issues, paid little attention to the situation in Gaza, and refrained from giving much power to the army. Israeli leaders tolerated the status quo vis-à-vis Egypt and, in fact, engaged in secret peace negotiations with the revolutionary government in Cairo.63

Tensions began to escalate after a particularly severe Israeli retaliation against Gaza in late August 1953, which led to an increase in the frequency of fedayeen raids from Egypt into Israel and support for those raids by the Egyptian government. Tensions escalated further in mid-October after Israel, in response to a raid from Jordan that came within ten miles of Tel Aviv, attacked the Jordanian village of Qibya, killing sixty-six of the village inhabitants and incurring censure by a special session of the United Nations Security Council. This led, in turn, to increased fedayeen raids and, by spring 1954, some direct artillery duels between the Israeli and Egyptian armies.64

The conflict escalated further after mid-1954.65 By this time Nasser had solidified his position in the country and in the army and began to give increasing attention to foreign policy. The growing competition with Iraq for leadership of the pan-Arab movement generated strong internal pressure in Egypt for a more belligerent stance against Israel. While Nasser intensified the maritime blockade and generally adopted a more hostile stance toward the West, the Egyptian-Israeli border remained relatively quiet until February 1955. It was at this point that Israel, in response to a relatively minor raid, retaliated against an Egyptian army command post and other targets in Gaza, killing thirty-nine and injuring thirty-two more.66 The magnitude of the Gaza raid and the fact that it targeted the Egyptian army directly was a significant departure in Israeli policy toward Egypt and led to a sharp escalation in the border war. Egypt substantially increased its force levels in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai, in part for the purpose of organizing and supporting infiltration, and the army created a special unit for terror and sabotage in Israel.67

While some claim that it was the Gaza raid that convinced Nasser that war with Israel was necessary,68 we argue that the raid affected the timing of Nasser’s war plans rather than his basic goals. Nasser had already concluded that war was necessary, but had restrained demands from hawks in the military for more weapons and for more confrontational policies by insisting that internal economic development be given priority. The Gaza raid gave more leverage to the hawks and forced Nasser to adopt a more hardline stance. Thus the

65. Shimshoni (ibid., 77) describes this point as a “transformation of Egyptian involvement in the conflict with Israel.”
66. There is no reason to believe that Israeli leaders deliberately intended high levels of casualties from the raid. Dayan and Ben-Gurion had each estimated ten to twelve casualties (Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence*, 80).
primary impact of the Gaza raid on Egyptian-Israeli relations was through its impact on Nasser’s relationship with the Egyptian army.69

Following the Qibya raid and Egypt’s response, there was mounting domestic pressure on moderate prime minister Moshe Sharett to take a harder line against Nasser. Sharett, who had come to power in 1953 after Ben-Gurion’s resignation, resisted early calls for an attack on Gaza,70 but this so angered the more hawkish elements of the Israeli cabinet that, in February 1955, Sharett was forced to bring Ben-Gurion back into the Cabinet as defense minister to replace the departing Pinhas Lavon, who resigned in the midst of a bitter controversy over “who gave the order” to launch a series of sabotage activities in Egypt in summer 1954 (see n. 32). In March 1955 Ben-Gurion tried unsuccessfully to get cabinet approval for the outright conquest of the Gaza Strip, which he wanted as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Nasser over the status of borders and shipping.71 At this point Ben-Gurion ordered General Moshe Dayan, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) chief of staff, to devise a plan to capture the Straits of Tiran by land and break the Egyptian blockade, the imposition of which Ben-Gurion had always regarded as an act of war. After Nasser sensed that the Israelis were contemplating a move against the Straits, he strengthened the fortifications, tightened the blockade of Israeli shipping, and increased fedayeen activity.72

Still, the border conflict remained fairly calm during the late spring and summer. Sharett’s conciliatory policies in the context of a hardening of Nasser’s position led to a decline in Sharett’s domestic political standing, and the 6 July 1955 elections returned Ben-Gurion to the prime minister’s office and demoted Sharett to foreign minister. There was also an increase in the strength in the Knesset of the nationalist Herut party, which along with Ben-Gurion had been calling for a preventive strike against Egypt, and in this sense the elections “served to intensify the war mood in Israel.”73

72. Bar-On, “Influence of Political Considerations on Operational Planning in the Sinai Campaign,” in *The Suez-Sinai Crisis 1956: Retrospective and Reappraisal*, ed. Selwyn Ilan Troen and Moshe Shermesh (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 196–217; Oren, *The Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 132–33. As Shimshoni (Israel and Conventional Deterrence, 86) argues, the idea of a military action to break the Egyptian blockade was a “large conceptual leap” from earlier plans to capture part or all of Gaza. “It envisaged a large operation intended to solve the strategic problems rather than merely to end [Egyptian] infiltration.”
Nasser also faced growing domestic pressures, with increased calls for war from activist elements within the Egyptian army, particularly after Israel's Gaza raid in late February 1955. Nasser recognized that the army was still unprepared for war against Israel, feared that a military defeat would have serious political repercussions, and resisted the increasingly belligerent mood in Egypt, though he appeased the hardliners in the military by increasing fedayeen activity against Israel and by initiating a major military buildup. Nasser was also driven by the competition with Iraq for leadership in the Arab world in the context of the Western-sponsored Baghdad Pact and the reaction to Western imperialism. With his increasing isolation from his Western arms suppliers, Nasser turned to the Soviet Union.

THE “CZECH” ARMS DEAL

Nasser's efforts to secure the necessary weapons for war against Israel culminated in an unprecedented agreement with the Soviets in July 1955 for a massive sale of Soviet arms to Egypt. When Egyptian and Soviet leaders publicly announced the arms deal in September, they described it as one between Egypt and Czechoslovakia, and it came to be known as the “Czech” arms deal, though the armaments were all Soviet in origin. Nasser insisted on the masking of the actual source of the arms because he believed, quite correctly, that the Soviet connection would greatly alarm the Israelis.

The $450 million Czech arms deal included large quantities of technologically advanced tanks, planes, artillery pieces, surface ships, submarines, and miscellaneous small arms. It was notable for both the quantity and quality of the weapons involved, which were unprecedented for the Middle East.

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the weapons were delivered to Egypt and integrated into the Egyptian arsenal, it would increase the number of Egyptian tanks from approximately 170–200 in summer 1955 (already 20 percent more than Israel) to well over 500. It would also give the Egyptian tank fleet an infusion of new technology. Most of the new tanks were T-34 medium tanks and Stalin-III heavy tanks, among the very best in the Soviet arsenal. Although Israel had recently completed an arms deal with France that called for the integration of 30 French AM-III tanks into the IDF in 1956, Israel’s ensuing qualitative superiority would be challenged by the Czech arms deal. The deal also increased the number of Egyptian jet fighters from around 80–100 (compared to Israel’s 30–50) to over 200, and in the process replaced Egypt’s first-generation Vampire jets with more advanced MiG-15s and MiG-17s that rivaled, if not surpassed, the quality of the Israeli Meteor and Ouragan fighters. As a result the Egyptians would not only have substantially more arms than the Israelis, but better arms as well.

Israeli intelligence had been aware of Egypt-Soviet contacts during the summer of 1955 and had concluded by September that they had agreed to some sort of arms deal, but it was not until some time after the formal announcement of the agreement in late September that Israeli leaders learned the details of the agreement and were able to grasp its seriousness. Indeed, it appears that until early October most Israeli officials, including Ben-Gurion, were little concerned with the rumored arms sale. By December, however, their attitude had changed dramatically. There was little doubt within the government that the deal was aimed primarily at Israel, and across the political spectrum there was a consensus that the deal was a watershed development in Israeli-Egyptian relations.

Israel’s military and political leaders were particularly concerned about the qualitative advantages that the arms deal would give to Egypt. Although Israel had never been able to match Egypt in terms of the numbers of armaments, it had always been able to rely on qualitatively superior weapons, morale, training, and technical skills. Some argue that Israeli leaders were willing to accept

80. Bar-On, Gates of Gaza, 17–18; Brecher, Decisions in Israeli Foreign Policy, 230 n. 1; Morris, Israel’s Border Wars, 277.
83. In his announcement of the Czech arms deal, Nasser stated that “The day of Israel’s annihilation is approaching. There will be no peace on the border, for we demand revenge. This means death to Israel” (quoted in David Ben-Gurion, My Talks With Arab Leaders, trans. Aryeh Rubinstein and Misha Louvish [New York: Third Press, 1985], 271).
an overall 3:1 numerical inferiority in relation to the Arabs, and a 2.5:1 ratio with the Egyptians. This applied to air power as well as to military power on the ground. In stressing to a high-ranking American official in March of 1956 Israel’s dire need for arms to counterbalance the Czech arms, Ben-Gurion and Sharett both conceded that Israel did not need to match Egypt arm for arm, and Ben-Gurion stated that “even if we get half the planes that [Nasser] has it is not so terrible.”

The Czech arms deal dramatically changed the strategic situation. The increase in Egypt’s quantitative superiority alone threatened to overwhelm traditional Israeli qualitative advantages, and these qualitative advantages were themselves undermined by the fact that many of the new Soviet weapons were superior to any of those in the Israeli arsenal. As Dayan said later, “It was not only the disparity in quantity but also the superiority in quality which decisively upset the arms scales. The MiGs and Ilyushins which the Egyptians received were at least two stages ahead of the Meteors and Ouragans then in our possession; and their modern T-34 Soviet tanks were infinitely better than our old Sherman Mark 3s.”

The new situation would be particularly threatening in the context of Israel’s limited strategic depth. Israeli strategy necessarily depended on the ability to stop an Egyptian offensive quickly and mount a counterattack before Egyptian forces penetrated too close to Israel’s population centers, but Egypt’s new quantitative advantages threatened to undermine the viability of this strategy. Moreover, the new Egyptian aircraft threatened to undermine Israeli air superiority, leaving Israeli cities vulnerable to bombing attacks. This threat was compounded by the fact that the Israeli air force was never designed to protect civilian population centers, but was designed to provide close air support to ground units.

Ben-Gurion was particularly worried about the effects that the Egyptian acquisition of advanced MiGs would have on Israeli security. He said in the Cabinet in early October 1955 that “if [the Egyptians] really get MiGs—I will be for bombing them,” and in December he anticipated “destruction...in the cities... A heavy price in blood, a lot of blood... The price will be greater and more terrible than we paid in 1948.” In January 1956 Ben-Gurion told the

87. Dayan (Diary of the Sinai Campaign, 4–5) also stated that the arms deal gave Egypt alone a 4:1 advantage over Israel.
American ambassador to Israel that “the real danger [of the Czech deal] is of an air attack.” In later discussions collusion with French leaders Ben-Gurion remarked that “Nasser’s planes can bomb us within ten minutes.”

It is clear that the Czech arms deal represented the turning point for Ben-Gurion. As Troen argues, it “caused a fundamental change in his thinking about the nature and scope of dangers from Egypt and convinced Ben-Gurion to go to war.” Ben-Gurion stated that “the Czech-Egyptian arms deal transformed Israel’s security situation for the worse at one stroke. The quantitative inferiority of our military equipment, which had existed since the War of Independence, became a dangerous position of qualitative inferiority as well.” In a speech to the Knesset on 2 January 1956, Ben-Gurion stated that “during the last few months, the ‘Czech Deal’ has radically transformed the [Egyptian-Israeli] situation in the gravest and most dangerous manner.”

Others concurred with Ben-Gurion’s judgment. Dayan wrote that the deal “wiped out in a flash the delicate balance of forces that existed between the Arab states and Israel.” Dayan’s deputy, Mordechai Bar-On, concluded that Israel could no longer base its security on technological superiority as it had in the past, writing that “even the most courageous of pilots could not outfly faster planes, and even the most daring of gunners could not hit tanks outside their range.” Bar-On believed that the “Israeli army could no longer rely on its defensive capability and preferred to take the initiative into its own hands by striking preemptively before it was too late,” and notes that “in the autumn of 1955, the IDF command favored a preventive war.”

The consensus that the Czech arms deal “revolutionized the perceived balance of power” and “radically altered the Israeli national security debate—both public and private” was shared across the Israeli political spectrum. Even the dovish Sharett viewed the impact of the arms deal not as a “difference between varying degrees of gray,” but instead as “the difference between black and white.” There were differences, however, as to how best to respond to the changing strategic environment. The debate was not between war or peace, but instead between those who advocated an immediate preventive war and those

90. Quoted in Morris, Israel’s Border Wars, 278; Ben-Gurion, My Talks with Arab Leaders, 319. The fact that Ben-Gurion had been in London during the blitz of 1940 probably amplified his fears. Golani, Israel in Search of a War, 61; Morris, Israel’s Border Wars, 277.


92. Quoted in Breecher, Decisions in Israeli Foreign Policy, 247; Ben-Gurion, My Talks with Arab Leaders, 243.

who preferred to exhaust all diplomatic means to restore a military balance of power between Israel and Egypt before turning to war as a last resort.94

Although Sharett acknowledged that the situation had changed in fundamental ways and that, once the new weapons were integrated into the Egyptian arsenal, Nasser would be ready for war, he did not believe that war was inevitable within six months or even a year. He believed that the IDF had maintained its superiority over each of the Arab states and that the combination of this superiority and Egypt’s fear of outside intervention would be sufficient to prevent war, at least for a while.95 For these reasons Sharett adopted the more cautious course of merely warning Nasser of the grave consequences of the situation while embarking on a massive search for Western arms that would reduce the technological gap that emerged between Israel and Egypt. Sharett and the foreign ministry began negotiations with the United States, while Dayan and Peres in the Defense Ministry began to work informal contacts with French government and business officials.96

Israeli hawks, led by Dayan, strongly objected to Sharett’s preferred policy. They believed that the magnitude of the Czech arms deal made it impossible for Israel to restore a balance of arms with Egypt and the other Arab states, and wanted to initiate or provoke a war to destroy the Egyptian army while it was relatively weak. Ben-Gurion was also open to a military response, and had given every impression that he would not hesitate to alter Israeli policy drastically when he took over again as prime minister.97

Once back in power as prime minister on 3 November 1955, however, Ben-Gurion initially pursued Sharett’s policy of giving primary emphasis to the acquisition of Western arms.98 He feared that an attack on a Soviet-armed Egypt would be futile unless the IDF first received its own infusion of advanced Western armaments to close the imbalance created by the Czech deal; worried about possible British intervention on the side of Egypt;99 doubted the long-term benefits of preventive war; and worried that unilateral military action would isolate Israel diplomatically and possibly leave it without external assistance.

sources of armaments for subsequent rounds of war with the Arabs. Ben Gurion argued (2 January 1956 speech to the Knesset) that “there is only one way to prevent war in the Middle East…and that is the rapid supply of defensive arms to Israel.”

The strategy of focusing on arms purchases rather than preparing for war was contested at various levels of Israeli government and society. Dayan kept pushing the cabinet strongly for military action. In the cabinet the small left-wing Mapam party was opposed to war, but the party refused to oppose the war publicly. In the Knesset, the right-wing Herut, led by Menachem Begin (a long-time rival of Ben-Gurion) clamored for a preventive war against Egypt. There was some opposition from Maki (the Israeli Communist Party) and various Arab-Israeli parties, but the plan for war passed fairly easily.

Despite the sometimes heated debates between the prime minister, the chief of staff, and the opposition, throughout the winter and spring of 1956 Israeli defense and security policy centered on the search for arms. Sharett (now foreign minister) concentrated on acquiring arms from the United States, while Ben-Gurion, Dayan, and Peres (Ministry of Defense director general), focused their efforts on France. Sharett was almost completely unsuccessful in his attempts to gain weapons from the Eisenhower administration. This failure to get arms from the United States was particularly troubling. Only the Americans and the British made tanks on par with the Soviets, and Israel did not expect much help from Britain because of its colonial legacy in the Middle East; only the United States could sell weapons to Israel on favorable price and credit terms, and because of complicated NATO rules concerning jet procurement, the U.S. government had to approve any substantial sale of NATO-underwritten arms.

Israeli leaders were more successful in their attempts to buy weapons from France, though France and Britain were each still concerned about breaking...
too drastically with the protocol outlined in the Tripartite Agreement. Israel secured French assurances on the sale of numerous tanks and military aircraft to be delivered beginning April 1956, but this was countered by further Egyptian purchases of Soviet fighters in December of 1955 and the spring of 1956. Furthermore, Israeli arms purchases were generally not as technologically advanced as those of Egypt. As a result, when the new Soviet weapons were counted in the Egyptian arsenal, Egypt would still hold a considerable advantage over Israel in quantitative and, more importantly, in qualitative terms. Thus Brecher writes that “the further flow of Western weapons did not alter the balance appreciably,” and Oren concludes that “Egypt [was] in a position of marked superiority in every area.” This is evident from Table 1, which compares Egyptian and Israeli weapons before and after the Czech deal.

### Table 1

**Numerical Impact of the “Czech” Arms Deal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spring 1955</th>
<th>Summer 1955–Summer 1956</th>
<th>Total—Fall 1956</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tanks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>170–200</td>
<td>440–540</td>
<td>510+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>345+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jet Warplanes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>250–400</td>
<td>250+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fall 1956 totals represent the absolute lowest estimates. Values may be less than the sum of first two columns because of discarding of old weapons.


Although most analysts support the view that the Israeli arms purchases from France did not fully compensate for Egypt’s new Soviet arms, and that they left Israeli leaders with a perception of quantitative and perhaps qualitative inferiority, some recent revisionist scholarship disputes this. It argues that the French arms sales fully counterbalanced Egypt’s new arms and eliminated any pressures for preventive war generated by the Czech arms sales to Egypt, and that the Israeli decision for war in fall 1956 was motivated more by expansionist objectives arising from specific grievances rather than by perceptions of declining power.\footnote{Golani, \textit{Israel in Search of a War}; Morris, \textit{Israel’s Border Wars}.}

We return to the revisionist interpretation in a later section, but it is important to note here that revisionists significantly underestimate the extent to which the Czech arms sales gave Egypt a qualitative advantage in tanks and aircraft over the Israelis, and overestimate the extent to which subsequent Israeli acquisitions from the French compensated for these disadvantages.\footnote{Golani’s view of Israeli superiority on the eve of war is not consistent with his argument (\textit{Israel in Search of a War}, 184–90) that, because of the vulnerability of Israeli cities to Egyptian air attack, Israel would not have gone to war without the air cover from France that was provided by the Sévres agreement.}

In terms of tanks, Egypt’s modest quantitative advantage over Israel was significantly enhanced by the Czech arms deal and only partially compensated by the new French arms. In qualitative terms, Egypt’s armored superiority over Israel increased even more dramatically. While both Israel and Egypt had only light, Second World War–style tanks in the summer of 1955, a year later Egypt had around 450 new medium and heavy tanks compared to Israel’s 190 medium tanks. Not only did Egypt increase its lead in “strong” tanks, but the T-34 was viewed as superior to its Western counterpart, the M-3.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Israel’s Border Wars}, 277.}

A comparison of the jet fighter forces of each side generates a similar pattern. Before the Czech deal, Egypt had about 80 jet fighters relative to Israel’s 50, and within a year Egypt had 245 fighters to Israel’s 114, which was a modest increase in Egypt’s quantitative advantage. In addition, it is generally agreed that the MiG-15 was a class above the Israeli Meteor and Ouragan, and that it also outperformed the Mystère.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Israel’s Border Wars}, 277 n. 51; Oren, \textit{The Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli Conflict}, 94.} It is clear that from summer 1955 to summer 1956 Egypt had increased its lead over Israel both in the quantity of tanks and jet fighters and in the technological sophistication of these weapon systems. As Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary in early September 1956, if Israel was
to achieve a military victory over Egypt, it “must take care of how to overcome the quantitative and qualitative victory superiority of the Egyptian arms.”

Israeli leaders were not only concerned about the existing balance of capabilities, even after the French arms deal, but also doubted their ability to keep up with future Egyptian arms purchases, given Israel’s diplomatic isolation and, particularly, the lack of American cooperation. This situation was compounded by financial considerations. Israel was forced to buy weapons with cash or with extremely limited amounts of credit because its French and other Western suppliers were in no economic position to offer better terms. The Americans could have offered better terms but were unwilling to supply arms. By 1956 the Israeli defense budget had already swelled well beyond its previous levels, and it was estimated that the costs of the minimal number of modern weapons would increase the annual military budget by 50 percent. By contrast, the Soviets had given favorable terms of price and credit to Egypt, and Nasser had mortgaged the 1956 Egyptian cotton crop in order to finance the Czech deal. The Israelis, forced to pay cash at market values, were not confident that they could continue to match Egyptian arms bought on preferential terms.

By late spring 1956 a majority of Israeli leaders had concluded that the plan of countering new Egyptian arms with purchases from the West, pushed strongly by Sharett and with less conviction by Ben-Gurion, was a failure. This failure contributed to Sharett’s leaving the cabinet in June 1956, which gave Ben-Gurion much greater flexibility in preparing for a war that he was convinced was necessary.

Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders were concerned not only about the adverse shift in the balance of power, but also about Egyptian intentions. Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders, their world views significantly shaped by the formative experiences of 1948, had concluded that Egypt under Nasser was intent on destroying the state of Israel. Although prior to the Czech arms deal Israeli leaders viewed a “second round” war as probably inevitable due to continued Egyptian demands for the extinction of Israel, they did not see such a

113. Brecher, Decisions in Israeli Foreign Policy, Golani, Israel in Search of a War, 24. Ben-Gurion helped ease Sharett out of the government, in part by threatening to resign in mid-June 1956. He later reported that the tense security situation required the “fullest possible coordination between the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs,” which was not possible with Sharett in the cabinet. Quoted in Netanel Lorch, “Ben-Gurion and the Sinai Campaign, 1956,” in David Ben-Gurion: Politics and Leadership in Israel, ed. Ronald Zweig (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 295. Bar-Zohar (Ben-Gurion, 99) argues that “If Sharett had stayed, the Suez affair might never have happened. But with Sharett gone, the way was open for the war on Egypt which Ben Gurion had long envisaged.”
war as imminent.\textsuperscript{114} Egypt’s acquisition of Soviet arms led the Israelis to update their assessments of the Egyptian timetable for war against Israel. Ben-Gurion and others pointed to Nasser’s increasingly frequent calls for pan-Arabism, the rising number of fedayeen attacks, and the gradual tightening of the blockade against Israeli and Israel-bound shipping. Ben-Gurion also feared that popular expectations in Egypt, buoyed by the Czech deal, would create domestic pressures that might force Nasser into initiating a conflict. In addition, the act of acquiring the new arms was itself perceived by Israelis as an indicator of increased Egyptian hostility and aggressiveness. This is reflected in Bar-On’s comment that while, in 1955, Israeli leaders contemplated a preventive war to “negate the consequences of the Czech deal,” by fall 1956 “the war was fought to contend with the motivations of the Czech deal.”\textsuperscript{115}

By 1956 Israeli leaders had increasingly come to perceive an Egyptian attack or deliberate provocation as inevitable and to believe that it might come sooner rather than later. In a speech to the Knesset on 2 January 1956 Ben Gurion stated that the Czech weapons were “intended solely for aggressive purposes against Israel.” On 9 March he stated that, following the failure of clandestine peace negotiations in the early spring of 1956, “there was no doubt in our minds that Nasser was intent on war against Israel and that this was the purpose for which he was getting, with Russian backing, a wealth of arms from Czechoslovakia.” He said that “we cannot help seeing war approaching inevitably, as in a Greek drama” and that while he believed in principle that war could be prevented, “I can hardly believe that there is any chance of success. My faith in miracles is melting away.” Ben-Gurion also feared that Nasser’s successful nationalization of the Suez Canal without a Western response would increase his prestige and “strengthen his desire to annihilate Israel.” A month before the Sinai campaign Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary “There is no doubt that Nasser intends to attack Israel at the first opportunity.”\textsuperscript{116}

A key question for Israeli leaders was how long it would take for Nasser to integrate the Soviet arms into the Egyptian military, and thus to be ready for the war that Israeli leaders perceived as inevitable. Shipments of weapons began to arrive in Egypt in November 1955, and at that time Israeli intelligence estimated that it would take eight months for Egypt to absorb the weapons, which would put mid-summer 1956 as a possible date for war. In January 1956


\textsuperscript{116} Ben-Gurion, \textit{My Talks with Arab Leaders}, 273, 294, 301, 317, 319, 325.
Ben-Gurion said “I assume that they will attack at the beginning of the summer.”

This assessment underestimated the obstacles facing Egypt in its efforts to integrate the new weapons into its military system. There were shortages of troops trained to use the Soviet weapons and of competent officers to lead them, and it was necessary to adjust the old doctrine to make optimal use of the new weapons. Estimates were pushed back to late autumn 1956, but even by October 1956 relatively few of the new aircraft had joined operational squadrons. By the time of the Sinai campaign only 30 percent of the new MiGs, 24 percent of the Illyushins, and 25 percent of the new tanks were ready for use by the Egyptian army. By this point Israeli intelligence had some sense of these limitations, and had shifted the estimate of Egyptian readiness for war to early 1957.

The dominant view in the Israeli military was that Israel would probably win a war, but that the costs of war, and ultimately the likelihood of defeat, would continue to rise with the incorporation of the new weapons into the Egyptian arsenal. This created strong incentives to go to war now rather than wait and fight the inevitable war under worse circumstances later. This attitude was evident in Ben-Gurion’s statement, made soon after Sharett resigned as foreign minister, that “a negative attitude of ‘waiting it out’ is not enough. In the long run, doing nothing may be far more dangerous than any bold deed—such as fomenting a war.”

This emphasis on the importance of Israel’s preventive motivation for war is reflected in much of the literature. Troen argues that after the Czech arms

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117. “Ben-Gurion’s Diary.”
118. For a discussion of the ability of developing countries to assimilate weapons purchases from stronger states into their arsenals, see Christopher S. Parker, “New Weapons for Old Problems: Conventional Proliferation and Military Effectiveness in Developing States,” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (spring 1999): 119–47.
121. It is difficult to find data on Israeli expectations regarding the likely outcome of a war, and several of the key Israeli actors are ambiguous or contradictory in their written accounts. Dayan (Diary of the Sinai Campaign, 160, 163), for example, writes that without British help, France could not provide enough bombers to attack major Egyptian airfields near Cairo, which would leave Israel vulnerable to an Egyptian air attack, but he also claims that he was confident in victory even without help from France and Britain.
sale, the question for Ben-Gurion “was not would there be a war with Egypt, but when.” The cost of war would gradually rise, and “it was in this context that Ben-Gurion was willing to consider a preventive war.” Oren argues that the Czech arms deal was “the event most responsible for the outbreak of the second Arab-Israel war,” and that Israel “sought to deter Egypt by decisively launching a preemptive strike.” Bar-Zohar writes that “following the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, the growing menace from the south, and the blockade of the Tiran straits, Israel took a path that was to lead to a preemptive war.”

Evron writes that “the arms race [between Israel and Egypt] was a major cause of the 1956 war.” Once the Egyptians had fully absorbed the new Czech arms, “the balance of power would tilt in favor of Egypt and the latter would launch a war against Israel. The Israeli preventive war that ensued was a direct result of the Israeli perceptions (or misperceptions) of the objectives of the arms deal, coupled with the escalation along the borders.”

While Israeli perceptions of the unfavorable shift in the balance of power and the inevitability of a second round of war in the context of an ongoing spiral of conflict constituted a necessary condition for war, they were not sufficient, because they cannot explain the timing of the Israeli attack. To explain why Israel moved in fall 1956 rather than earlier or perhaps later, we cannot ignore the window of diplomatic opportunity created by British and French incentives for military action against Nasser in response to his nationalization of the Suez Canal (26 July 1956) and support of the Algerian rebels.

THE ROLE OF FRANCE AND BRITAIN

In their consideration of a military strike to weaken Egypt while the opportunity was still available and before the new weapons from the Soviet Union could be fully integrated into the Egyptian arsenal, Israeli leaders, and Ben-Gurion in particular, were extremely concerned about the vulnerability of Israeli territory and population centers to an Egyptian air attack. Ben-Gurion also worried that if Israel initiated war it would run the risk of militarily, diplomatically, and economically isolating Israel from Western powers, which would leave Israel unprepared for future rounds of war.

123. The larger context of these remarks makes it clear that both Oren and Bar-Zohar mean prevention in response to a deteriorating situation rather than preemption in response to the anticipation of an imminent attack.


Although Franco-Israeli relations were quite good, especially after Israel's purchases of substantial amounts of French arms, the United States (particularly Secretary of State Dulles) was unwilling to inflame Arab opinion and did little to help Israel compensate for the Czech arms sales. British-Israeli relations were also cool. The legacy of Britain's colonial rule in Palestine prior to Israeli independence remained, and Britain's military alliance with Jordan created a potentially serious point of conflict.

Under these circumstances, it was quite fortuitous for Israel that French leaders had independently begun to consider the possibility of stronger action against Nasser, largely in response to their view that Nasser was a major force behind the insurgents in Algeria. French arms sales to Israel had brought the two countries closer together, and in late June 1956 Israeli and French leaders held talks about alternative strategies for containing Nasser, and perhaps even toppling him from power. Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal on 26 July created, in French eyes, a great opportunity because the French believed that Nasser's defeat or removal from power would facilitate their war against the Algerian rebels.126

Despite their concerns about Nasser and their willingness to provide Israel with arms, French leaders hesitated to go too far along the path of military action without British diplomatic support, logistical support in the form of a staging area in the eastern Mediterranean, and additional airpower.127 Securing British participation in an offensive alliance with Israel against Egypt was not an easy task. Although Nasser's support of insurgencies in pro-British Arab countries and particularly his nationalization of the Suez Canal gave Britain a reason to join in a war against Egypt in order to guarantee access to the canal and possibly to depose Nasser,128 there was considerable mutual distrust between Israeli and British leaders, and this delayed direct talks between the two states.129 Ben-Gurion said that, “After the Arab nations, [Britain] is for us the most hostile government in the world…. I feel that [Prime Minister Anthony] Eden wants to be rid of us.” Ben-Gurion was especially concerned about the risk of British intervention in support of its Jordanian ally in the event of war. In response to demands in the Knesset in June 1956 that Israel attack Jordan,

127. Golani, Israel in Search of a War, 81, 86.
128. While Ben-Gurion (“Ben Gurion’s Diary,” 306) thought at one time that a war might lead to the forced deposition of Nasser, by September 1956 he believed that such an outcome was highly unlikely.
Ben Gurion replied “doesn’t [the honorable gentleman] know that we will meet the British army there?”

Ben-Gurion’s fears of Britain persisted well into the negotiations with France and Britain over a joint military operation. In August 1956 Israeli officials learned that while Britain and France wanted to attack Egypt and to “get rid of Nasser,” Britain was adamantly opposed to Israeli participation. As late as 16 October 1956 Peres noted in his diary that “Ben-Gurion took into account the possibility of… the British… even joining the Arab camp at the last moment.” Neutralizing the risk of British intervention was a key diplomatic objective for Ben-Gurion, and he was not willing to go to war with Egypt until he had British support, including British assurances that it would not honor its alliance treaty with Jordan if Jordan intervened against Israel.

These fears was not entirely misplaced. After Israeli reprisals against Jordan for terrorism that had been sponsored and carried out by Egypt, Britain had developed war plans for action against Israel, and in September, a month before the Anglo-Israeli alliance, Britain explicitly threatened to fulfill its treaty with Jordan in response to further Israeli reprisals. The British cabinet agreed as late as 18 October 1956 that Britain would have to defend Jordan against an Israeli attack. In his diary a year after the war, Eden voiced his concern: “So this nightmare scenario haunted me. Jordan folly, Israeli retaliation, British commitment and our airforce Meteors called upon to fight French Mystères.” He was also concerned about a wider entanglement in the region that could see France and Britain on opposing sides: “This was a nightmare scenario that could only too easily come true; Jordan calling for support from Nasser and ourselves, Nasser calling for support from Russia, France lined up with Israel on the other side.”

In May 1956 French leaders began to inquire seriously about Israeli enthusiasm for joint military operations against Egypt, and some informal talk of a joint Franco-Israeli operation continued into the summer despite American objections and British backpedaling. The first concrete discussion of a joint operation came in late August when the French proposed to Ben-Gurion that

130. Quotes in Golani, Israel in Search of a War, 21; Morris, Israel’s Border Wars, 277. See also Brecher, Decisions in Israeli Foreign Policy, 242; Shlaim, Iron Wall, 154.
134. Anthony Eden, Full Circle: Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Sir Anthony Eden (London: Cassell, 1960), 512–13. See also David Dutton, Anthony Eden: A Life and Reputation (London: Arnold, 1997), 427. While the fact remains that Israel and Britain did not go to war with each other, Ben-Gurion’s fear of British intervention on the side of Jordan and of an Anglo-Israeli war, along with Britain’s development of war plans against Israel in spring 1956, run contrary to the spirit of the “democratic peace.”

Israel conquer the Sinai in order to turn the Suez Canal into an international waterway. Yet, by mid-September, Ben-Gurion still did not believe that the British would act or that they wanted Israeli assistance if they did act.135 After some initial optimism, Dayan also came to share this assessment. The Italian ambassador reinforced this view when he told Ben-Gurion that Israel should not interfere in any war against Egypt, in order to keep Nasser from rallying multinational Arab support.136

In late September, however, French and British leaders agreed upon the desirability of joint military action with Israel against Egypt, and wanted a meeting with Israeli leaders to discuss Israel’s participation.137 The most important obstacle was that “the British were squeamish about attacking Nasser without provocation” because British prime minister Anthony Eden feared the public’s reaction to war.138 With Eden unwilling to make an unprovoked attack against Egypt, the French constructed a pretext involving Israeli action that constituted “a real act of war and a genuine threat to the canal,” and a British response as a “protector” of the canal.139 The plan called for Israel to attack the Egyptian forces in the Sinai peninsula, and, as Israeli forces reached close to the Suez Canal, for British and French troops to occupy the canal zone in order to protect the canal from destruction by the warring Israeli and Egyptian armies.140

Ben-Gurion initially rejected the “Israeli pretext” scenario and its call for an Israeli initiation of the war. He feared that it would lead to international condemnation of Israel as the aggressor and also to substantial Israeli casualties while Israel fought alone before British and French intervention.141 Ben-Gurion also feared that an Israeli initiation could lead to the introduction of

136. Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, 232; Ben-Gurion, Diary, 298.
137. Ben-Gurion, Diary, 299. British and French interest in military action was motivated in part by the failure of the London conferences (16–26 August, 19–22 September), from which Israel had been excluded, to generate a negotiated settlement of the Suez crisis. Oren, The Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli Conflict, 56–58.
139. Bar-On, “The Influence of Political Considerations,” 208; Nutting (No End of a Lesson), who was second in command at the Foreign Office, objected to all aspects of British policy and resigned for that reason.
Soviet-backed “volunteers” into the region, and that an Israeli attack during the weeks preceding the American presidential election might draw the ire of Eisenhower, who was campaigning as the candidate of peace.

Ben-Gurion’s fears were moderated in a French-initiated trilateral meeting in Sèvres (22–24 October), when Britain and France agreed to an earlier intervention in the war and France agreed to station planes in Israel. The Sèvres protocol of 24 October, signed by Britain, France, and Israel, was a slight modification of the original French idea: it called for a joint Anglo-French action against Egypt four days after Israel launched an attack into the Sinai and along the western coasts of the Gulf of Aqaba. The attack was to proceed under the guise of an Anglo-French action designed to insure the safety of the Suez Canal. Britain and France would issue a warning to Israel and Egypt to withdraw their forces from the canal zone. After the Israeli acceptance and the expected Egyptian rejection of this demand, Britain and French military forces would intervene.

The Sèvres agreement created a number of diplomatic and strategic benefits for Israel, giving it the desired war with Egypt under ideal circumstances. The agreement assured Israeli leaders that they would not find themselves in a war isolated from the great powers. They would secure general diplomatic support from France and Britain, which guaranteed a veto against any anti-Israeli resolution in the UN Security Council, and an assurance that Britain would not intervene in support of Jordan against Israel. French and British support would also help temper any negative response from the United States, which Ben-Gurion had feared might result if Israel were to act alone against Egypt. The British assured Ben-Gurion that they had the tacit approval of Eisenhower, although it appears that Eden did not inform the United States about the joint operation, presumably because he anticipated that they would not support it.

142. Brecher, Decisions in Israeli Foreign Policy, 239.
144. Kyle, Suez, chap. 17; Golani, Israel in Search of a War, chap. 8.
146. Shlaim, Israel and Conventional Deterrence, 177; Brecher, Decisions in Israeli Foreign Policy, 230.
The United States provided no official support for the military action, and in fact reacted quite negatively to it.\textsuperscript{147} At Sèvres Israel also secured a separate agreement with France, in which the French promised to station a reinforced squadron of Mystères IV fighter-bombers in Israel and two combat ships off the Israeli coast for defensive use.\textsuperscript{148} This provided Israel with the requisite air cover over Israeli cities and border regions to alleviate Ben-Gurion's concerns about civilian casualties from Arab air raids. The stationing of French planes in Israel would also signal France's willingness to carry through with its part of the operation.\textsuperscript{149}

With its agreement for the joint military operation and with the separate understanding with France for air cover, the Sèvres protocol eliminated the two primary obstacles that had held Ben-Gurion back from the preventive war he wanted to eradicate the Egyptian threat before Israel's relative military position deteriorated any further. These were his fears of diplomatic isolation and vulnerability to an Egyptian air attack, along with the additional concern about the possibility of British intervention on the side of Jordan against Israel. War was now possible as well as desirable for Ben-Gurion.\textsuperscript{150}


\textsuperscript{148} See Troen (“The Sinai Campaign,” 135) for a copy of this annex.

\textsuperscript{149} The joint military plan created a dilemma for Israeli leaders. Israeli forces had to threaten the Suez Canal, but the canal itself had no military value for Israel, and having Israeli forces reach the canal would place IDF forces far from Israeli territory and from Israel's principal areas of concern—Gaza and the Straits of Tiran. In order to create the perception of a genuine threat to the canal while also allowing for the rapid evacuation of the troops should the need arise (in the event of French or British defection from the joint effort, for example), Dayan planned for the IDF to capture the lightly guarded Mitla Pass in the Sinai, 20–25 miles west of the Canal, but not seek an engagement with the enemy. Ironically, Israeli forces blundered into a battle with Egyptian forces, a battle that is remembered in Israel as a heroic and legendary victory. Bar-On, “Influence of Political Considerations,” 208–10, 214; Bar-Zohar, \textit{Ben-Gurion}, 240. More recently, leading paratrooper officers who took part in the Mitla Pass battle—including Mordechai Gur, the IDF chief of staff from 1974 to 1978, and Yitzhak Hofi, who would become director of the Mossad—criticized the way in which the paratrooper commander at the time, Anik Sharon, planned and conducted the battle, saying it did not conform to the government's wishes and was not sufficiently sensitive to the likely cost in IDF soldiers' lives.

\textsuperscript{150} Another possible Israeli incentive for joining France and Britain in a war with Egypt was that it might facilitate Israel's ability to secure a nuclear reactor from France. (Ben-Gurion was extremely worried about Israel's future vulnerability and wanted nuclear weapons to reduce that vulnerability, but discussions about the reactor were always framed in terms of the peaceful production of nuclear energy.) Both Peres and Ben-Gurion admitted that this was part of their calculations, and at Sèvres Peres reached an agreement with the French about a nuclear reactor. The nuclear question did not come up at Sèvres until after the decision for war had been made, however, and the key factor that helped finalize an agreement about a reactor was Soviet nuclear threats against Israel during the war. Thus Shlaim argues that “Israel did not join in the Franco-British war plot in order to get a French
Thus assurance of British and French intervention was a necessary condition for an Israeli decision for war, at least in autumn 1956.\footnote{Whether French intervention alone would have been enough to alleviate Ben-Gurion’s concerns is difficult to say. It would have provided diplomatic support and air cover, but would have left Israel open to the risk of British intervention in support of Jordan. British participation, however, was a necessary condition for French intervention, so the question is moot.} In the absence of substantial Western diplomatic support, and in the absence of some form of air cover for Israeli cities, it is extremely unlikely that Israel would have gone to war, at least at this time. Instead, Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders almost certainly would have made further efforts to secure additional arms from the West to deal with the deteriorating military balance before resorting to war under risky diplomatic and military conditions.\footnote{Ben-Gurion, \textit{Diary}, 197.}

Our argument that French and British intervention was a necessary condition for war, at least in autumn 1956, draws support from statements of key Israeli actors and from later analysts. Dayan argues that, “If it were not for the Anglo-French operation, it is doubtful whether Israel would have launched her campaign.” Bar-On wrote that “only when these two problems had been resolved—when British participation in the operation had been guaranteed and the threat of Egyptian bombing of Israeli strategic and civilian targets considerably reduced—only then would Ben-Gurion...accede to the French request” for joint military action. Shimshoni argues that Ben-Gurion “would not approve the Sinai campaign until absolutely sure of effective air cover for Israel’s civilian population, a requirement that rendered Israel’s decision for war dependent on an alliance with a European power.” Golani claims that Ben-Gurion was adamant that Israel “would not initiate a major military operation without significant support by one Great Power at least.”\footnote{Dayan, \textit{Diary}, 3; Bar-On, \textit{Gates of Gaza}, 221; Shimshoni, \textit{Israel and Conventional Deterrence}, 101; Golani, \textit{Israel in Search of a War}, 21.}

This raises the counterfactual question of whether Israel might have taken military action alone against Egypt at a later time if the Sèvres coalition had not materialized. We believe that in the context of an adverse shift in the balance of power, ongoing conflicts over border raids and the blockade of Israeli shipping, and Israeli perceptions of the inevitability of a second round of war nuclear reactor.” Cohen concludes that other factors were more important, and that Ben-Gurion would not have made compromises over the terms of military collaboration just to secure a nuclear reactor. Mordechai Bar-On, who was Dayan’s military aide at Sèvres, argues that the nuclear issue was marginal for Ben-Gurion and that Dayan knew very little about it. We conclude that Israel’s aim of obtaining a nuclear reactor from France was not a primary motivation for Israeli military cooperation with France and Britain. See Shlaim, \textit{Iron Wall}, 176; Avner Cohen, \textit{Israel and the Bomb} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 54–55; Bar-On, \textit{Gates of Gaza}.}
with Egypt, particularly under Nasser, Israel would not have passively accepted the continuation of an unsatisfactory and deteriorating status quo. Had the Israelis not been able to secure additional arms from Western powers to reverse the changing strategic balance with Egypt, they would probably have decided to go it alone in a war with Egypt before it was too late. In an August 1956 expression of his opposition to going to war without allies, Ben-Gurion wrote that “I am not inclined to carry out the [military] operation on our own—at the present time” (our emphasis).  

In this sense British and French involvement affected the timing of Israeli military action rather than the fact of war. Thus Troen argues that Ben-Gurion had assumed Israel would fight alone, that Nasser’s unexpected nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956 was an external shock that created the conditions for British and French intervention, and that “this unexpected alliance influenced the timing and the character of the conflict with Egypt, but did not determine its occurrence.” Similarly, Oren argues that the Suez crisis “provided the context, not the cause, of the second Arab-Israel war. The Anglo-French invasion of Egypt was conditioned on Israel’s attack in Sinai, not vice versa. Operation Musketeer [the British-French invasion] merely determined the timing of Operation Kadesh [the Israeli invasion] which, in the eyes of its planners, had long been unavoidable.” Bar-On argues that while the Sèvres agreement “tipped the scales in favor of Ben-Gurion’s positive decision” for war, “underneath it was one fundamental assumption that Ben-Gurion shared with most of the Israeli leadership in 1956: the inevitability of a confrontation between Israel and Nasser’s Egypt. It was in Israel’s best interest to ensure that it took place at a time under conditions most favorable to it.” As Troen argues, “For the British and the French…the issue of war with Egypt was one of now or never. For Israel it was one of now or later.”

Although the Israeli Sinai campaign was driven by preventive concerns about the changing strategic balance and its military and political consequences, there was also some degree of preemption involved, in the sense that Israeli leaders believed that a second round of war was inevitable under Nasser.

154. Ben-Gurion, Diary, 295.
155. Troen, “The Sinai Campaign,” 182, 190 (emphasis in original); Oren, The Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli Conflict, 129; Bar-On, Gates of Gaza, 247. Thus we disagree with the claim that British and French intervention was more important than the shifting balance of military power. This is a plausible interpretation of Golani’s argument that “the question of whether Israel would go to war against Egypt had depended, since July 1956…more on France than on Israel,” and particularly of Ovendale’s argument that “the immediate origins of the Suez-Sinai war lie more in the diplomacy of Britain, France, and the U.S. than in the wish of Ben-Gurion and his colleagues for a preemptive strike against Egypt” (Golani, Israel in Search of a War, 186; Ritchie Ovendale, The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Wars [London: Longman, 1984], 163).
and that the war could occur any time after Egypt had integrated the new armaments into its arsenal. Israeli perceptions that war was inevitable and possibly not too distant were further solidified by the announcement of the integration of the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian armies under a single Egyptian command on 19 October 1956. Ben-Gurion later described the joint command having “one clear end in view: war to the death against Israel. The noose that had been prepared for us was being tightened; it was obvious that Nasser would stop at nothing to destroy us. We could no longer delay urgent and effective measures of self-defense.”

By this time, joint Israeli-French-British planning for war was far along. Expectations of an imminent war and incentives to strike first in order to gain first-mover advantages, which are key elements of preemption, did not exist. In fact, Nasser had pulled most of his forces back from the border and the eastern stretches of the Sinai in the summer of 1956 during the crisis of the nationalization of the Suez, in order to assure the Israelis that he had no intention of undertaking military action and thus to reduce any dangers of a war by miscalculation. The threat was moderately distant, not imminent, and derived from an adverse shift in the strategic balance, not the immediate threat of adversary attack, and for this reason the Israeli motivation is much more preventive than preemptive.

**SUMMARY**

Our basic argument is that although Israeli leaders were dissatisfied with the existing status quo—defined by the continued hostility of surrounding Arab states, the refusal of those Arab states to accept the legitimacy of the Israeli state, and the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping and support of armed infiltration—they were not willing to go to war to change that status quo as long as they were assured that Israel’s strategic position was secure and not deteriorating. The Czech arms sales undermined that assurance, as did Israel’s inability to secure a guarantee a future supply of armaments from the West and from the United States in particular. When the diplomatic opportunity arose, Israel went to war for the primary aim of preventing the further deterioration of the Israeli strategic position, given the assumption that a second round of war was inevitable.

156. This added to the Egyptian-Syrian joint command of October 1955 and was significantly strengthened on 26 October 1956. Peres, *David’s Sling*, 170.
Thus there were two necessary conditions for the Sinai campaign: Israel’s preventive motivation for war based on expectations of Israel’s relative decline and its fears of the consequences of decline, and the great power diplomatic support and air cover that were provided by the Anglo-French participation in the war. It was the fact that these two conditions—Israel’s preventive motivation for war and the Anglo-French participation in the war—overlapped in early fall 1956 that opened a window of opportunity for Israel, and thus explains the timing of the war.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

A new wave of “revisionist” scholarship appears to contradict our view that the Sinai campaign was a preventive war to maintain the status quo. There are variations in emphasis, but the basic argument of the “new historians” in Israel is that the Sinai campaign was an aggressive war designed to expand Israel’s territorial boundaries and create a new political order in the Middle East, and in the process lift the Egyptian blockade, reduce armed infiltration into Israel, eliminate Nasser, and consolidate the alliance with France.159

Morris, for example, argues that “Israel’s leaders had set a course for war, prodded by the persistent pinpricks of the infiltrators, by a militant public opinion, by an officer corps bent on hostilities, by the vision of the potential ‘second round’ threat from Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, and by France.”160 Similarly, Golani argues that Israeli political and military leaders wanted a war and were waiting for the proper diplomatic and domestic conditions to arise, and that the window of opportunity created by British and French grievances against Nasser were far more important than the Czech arms deal.161 In fact, the arms deal, rather than pushing Israel into war, “put an

159. Some of the “new historians” give greater emphasis to Israeli political culture and especially to the growth of militarism. They argue that Israel’s large-scale retaliatory raids in response to armed infiltration, and even the Sinai Campaign itself, were the product of a strategic culture that came to rely on military force as the solution to a wide range of diplomatic problems and that brought prestige to the military in Israeli society. This view focuses not so much on the constraints, opportunities, and strategic choices facing Israeli leaders in 1956, but on the culture, ideologies, and institutions that had strongly shaped Israeli preferences and strategic options in 1956. See Jonathan B. Isacoff, “International Relations and the Historical Revisionism Problem in Sinai 1956 and Vietnam” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago, Ill., 24 February 2001). Also Uri Ben-Eliezer, The Making of Israeli Militarism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). For a critique of revisionist treatments of Israeli history, see Efraim Karsh, Fabricating Israeli History: The ‘New Historians’, 2nd rev. ed. (London and Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 2000).


161. In this view, Israeli retaliations in response to armed infiltration into Israel in the three years leading up to the war were aimed not to reinforce deterrence, but instead to draw
end, for the time being, to Israel’s efforts to bring about war” by eliminating the Israeli military superiority that was necessary for any substantial Israeli-initiated military action.  

There is no doubt that the continuing border conflict and the Egyptian blockade of Israel shipping were important causes of war. Both Dayan and Golda Meir, who succeeded Sharett as foreign minister in June 1956, mention free passage of Israeli shipping through the Gulf of Aqaba and an end to the fedayeen attacks as the primary goals of war, and Peres emphasizes the importance of opening the Straits, but these factors cannot explain the timing of the Sinai campaign in the absence of the preventive motivation. The conflicts of interest over borders and waterways were neither individually or jointly sufficient for war. The ambiguity of the 1949 armistice had existed for seven years without war. There had been high levels of tensions between Israel and Egypt since the early 1950s; these tensions had increased in 1954 when Nasser began to pursue his pan-Arab policies and escalate the fedayeen attacks, and again in 1955 with the signing of the Czech arms deal in fall. Yet war did not immediately follow.  

In fact, the cycle of border violence had begun to subside by the time of the Sinai campaign. The number of infiltration incidents originating from Egypt had peaked from July 1954 to March 1955 (162 incidents) and again from April to June 1956 (76 incidents), but declined significantly after that, to 17 in the three-month period from July to September 1956. After the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, which Nasser realized carried a significant risk of war, Nasser ordered a substantial reduction in the number of infiltrations from Gaza and of direct army-to-army harassment. Infiltrations from Jordan did increase substantially, and most of this activity was probably organized, armed, financed, and controlled by Egyptian intelligence. If Nasser wanted to avoid the direct Israeli reprisals against Egypt which could have forced him, for domestic reasons, to take strong action before his army was ready, his
strategy worked, because Israel initiated only a few minor operations against
Egypt between April 1956 and the beginning of the Sinai war.\textsuperscript{165}

Although the blockade of Israeli shipping and the infiltration of fedayeen
into Israel were clearly important grievances, and although Ben-Gurion repeatedly emphasized these factors in the year leading up to the war, he responded
to the blockade with protests to the United Nations and with appeals to interna-
tional law, not with military action; and he responded to border incidents
with armed reprisals but never with a more substantial military action. As
Troen concludes, “although there was frustration and a continuing search for
an effective response to Egypt’s provocations, there is no indication that Ben-
Gurion intended to go to war over these grievances. . . . It was the . . . [Czech
arms deal] . . . that caused a fundamental change in his thinking . . . and convinced
Ben-Gurion to go to war.” Luttwak and Horowitz argue that the Egyptian-
directed fedayeen campaign “need not have provoked the war but for the im-
minent possibility of a far more serious threat to Israel’s basic security which
arose from the Soviet-Egyptian arms’ supply agreement”; and Golani concedes
that “though Israel had been denied passage in the Suez Canal since its estab-
ishment, this was by no means its major reason for going to war against
Egypt.”\textsuperscript{166}

In arguing that Israel would have gone to war in the absence of the Czech
arms deal, many revisionists still give considerable weight to the importance of
the preventive motivation for war in Israeli decision making. Golani, for ex-
ample, argues that for Israeli leaders the status quo was unsatisfactory, that
Israel’s strategic position would eventually deteriorate, that a second round of
war with the Arab states was inevitable, and that Israel’s small size and geopo-
litical position made it imperative that if war was imminent it was absolutely
imperative that Israel strike first. Golani acknowledges that in late 1955 Dayan
and Ben-Gurion wanted to deal a crushing blow to Egypt before the Egyptian
army grew too strong, but that Ben-Gurion believed that certain diplomatic
obstacles had to be overcome first. He also argues that once Israel secured
French arms and then an alliance with France and Britain, the preventive war
strategy was revived, in part because of Ben-Gurion’s desire “to engage Egypt
before it had time to absorb its new Czech-provided Soviet weaponry.”\textsuperscript{167} This
comment suggests that Golani, and perhaps other revisionists as well, dismiss

\textsuperscript{165} Mohamed H. Heikal, \textit{Cutting the Lion’s Tail} (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986); Shim-
shoni, \textit{Israel and Conventional Deterrence}, 91; Morris, \textit{Israel’s Border Wars}.

\textsuperscript{166} Troen, “The Sinai Campaign,” 181; Luttwak and Horowitz, \textit{The Israeli Army}, 141;

\textsuperscript{167} Golani, \textit{Israel in Search of a War}, 188.
the short-term but not the long-term effects of the Czech arms deal on the Israel decision for war. Thus the view of many revisionists with respect to the impact of the preventive motivation is quite similar to our own. We disagree as to whether the new armaments from France fully counterbalanced Egypt’s new armaments from the Soviet Union, but this is a minor point with few implications, because we agree that the French arms made war more likely but that Israel still needed to overcome its diplomatic isolation before war was possible. The main disagreements concern Israel’s willingness to tolerate the existing status quo and the counterfactual question of whether Israel would have initiated or provoked war in the absence of the Czech arms deal or something like it. The revisionists argue that the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping, border violence, and implacable Arab hostility in general was so intolerable that war would have occurred even in the context of a stable balance of power, whereas we argue that Israel was not willing to go to war to change an undesirable but tolerable status quo as long as its security in the long term was assured by a favorable balance of military power. In this sense, the revisionists focus on issues, and argue that conflicts of interests over the blockade and armed infiltration were the primary motivations for war, whereas we focus on power, and argue that perceptions of an adverse shift in the balance of power was both the primary motivation for war and a necessary condition for an Israeli-initiated war in 1956.

Another way to think about this difference is that the revisionists agree with us about the importance of Israeli expectations of an adverse shift in power, but disagree about the reference point around which Israeli leaders framed their choices. We argue that the Israeli reference point was the current status quo, while the revisionists argue that the Israeli reference point was an aspiration level defined by an improved geopolitical position and more secure borders. We both emphasize the certainty in Israeli eyes that an unfavorable shift in the balance of power was inevitable, that it would leave Israel short of its reference point, and that Israeli leaders chose to gamble on war rather than accept the certainty of falling short of its reference point.\footnote{On reference points, framing, loss aversion, and risk propensities, see Levy, “Framing and Loss Aversion.”}

**Theoretical Implications**

We have posited two necessary conditions and several key contributory conditions for the Israeli decision to go to war against Egypt in 1956.
The first necessary condition was the preventive motivation that arose from the Czech arms deal, the unfavorable shift in the balance of power that would follow, and Israeli fears of the consequences of that shift. The second necessary condition was French and British participation in the war, which Israel required in order to avoid diplomatic isolation, provide air cover for its civilian population, and eliminate the risk of British intervention on the side of Jordan in an Israeli-Jordanian war.

Though necessary for war, the preventive motivation and Anglo-French participation were not jointly sufficient for war, at least not in fall 1956. First of all, Israeli grievances over the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping and over the armed infiltration of fedayeen into Israel also played a critical role in the initiation of the Sinai campaign. Both imposed enormous economic and social costs on Israeli society, provided a constant reminder of the existential threat to Israel posed by Arab states that refused to acknowledge its right to exist, and convinced Israel of Nasser’s implacable hostility. This was critical, for it led to the belief, widely shared among Israeli decisionmakers in 1956, that a second round of war with Egypt was inevitable.

Although the combination of the unfavorable shift in power, grievances over the maritime blockade and armed infiltration, perceptions of the inevitability of a second round of war, and assurances of British and French intervention made an Israeli decision for war very likely, that decision was not inevitable, at least not in fall 1956. Another key contributory condition for war was Israel’s limited success in securing armaments from the West to counterbalance the growing Egyptian arsenal. If war was inevitable, if the passage of time favored Egypt and its Arab allies, and if the continued search for Western arms would not work to counter the deteriorating military balance, Israel had run out of options, preventive logic became compelling, and Israeli leaders turned to war as the only alternative.

These conclusions regarding the factors underlying the Israeli decision to embark on the 1956 Sinai campaign have several important theoretical implications. The significant role of the preventive motivation in Israel’s decision for war against Egypt in October 1956 runs contrary to both the unconditional hypothesis that democracies do not fight preventive wars, and to the conditional hypothesis that democracies only fight preventive wars against much weaker opponents. Although collusion with Britain and France did reduce Israel’s expected costs of war, significant risks remained, including the possibility that Britain or France might defect from the agreement, a possibility that Israel took into account in devising its military plans.169 Thus the Sinai campaign

demonstrates that the category of democratic preventive wars, even against adversaries of comparable strength, is not empirically empty.

The importance of British and French collusion for the Israeli decision for war also has important theoretical implications. Although Schweller’s operationalization of the expected-cost-of-war hypothesis to mean that democracies fight preventive wars only against much weaker states is frequently useful, the assumed identity between high costs and adversaries of equal strength does not always hold. In the 1956 case, for example, Israel was extremely worried about civilian casualties from Egyptian bombing, to the point that securing external allies’ protection against such attacks was a necessary condition for the Israeli decision for war, at least in 1956. This case suggests that either a favorable dyadic balance of power or assurances of allied support can generate expectations of low costs from war and allow democracies to fight preventive wars.

Schweller acknowledges that alliances might play an important role, but he suggests a different causal mechanism, one involving “a defensive alliance system to counterbalance the threat.” In 1956, however, Israel did not want a defensive alliance to counterbalance the threat, deter war, and provide for Israeli security, but rather an offensive alliance that would allow Israel to fight the war that it wanted and eliminate the threat while military and diplomatic conditions are favorable. Thus we have two alternative alliance strategies in response to relative decline: a defensive alliance to counterbalance the threat, or an offensive alliance in conjunction with preventive war. Which is the more common response to decline, and under which conditions, are empirical questions requiring further investigation.

This discussion raises the larger question of other strategies available to a state in relative decline, something to which the literature on the preventive motivation has given too little attention. One such strategy is the attempt to counterbalance the threat with the acquisition of additional armaments. Indeed, this was the Israeli strategy after the Czech arms deal, and the growing recognition that this strategy would fail—in part because of the absence of American help—was a critical factor that led to the Israeli decision for war.

170. Schweller, “Preventive War,” 249.

171. There are other possible strategies, including economic reconstruction at home or appeasement, but these are often not always feasible, prudent, or politically acceptable. One particular arms-acquisition strategy potentially available to a state facing relative, and especially, irreversible decline, is the acquisition of nuclear weapons. We argued earlier (see n. 150) that the aim of acquiring a nuclear reactor and know-how from France was a secondary, but not a primary, aim for Israel in seeking military collaboration with France against the Egyptian threat in summer and fall 1956. There is little doubt, however, that the not-so-veiled Soviet nuclear threats against Israel in the immediate aftermath of the 1956 campaign, the joint U.S.-Soviet pressure on Israel to withdraw from the Sinai (which Israel did in March 1957), and the continued hostility of Egypt and continued expectations of subsequent
Our argument that the preventive motivation was a necessary but not sufficient condition for war in 1956 also supports the argument, often associated with defensive realism, that perceptions of an unfavorable power shift are not a sufficient condition for war, independently of more specific issues or grievances over which the war is fought. Specific conflicts of interests and grievances between Egypt and Israel over waterways and borders were an extremely important contributory factor leading to Israel’s Sinai campaign, both because they posed direct threats to Israel’s territorial integrity and economic well-being, and because they contributed significantly to Israeli beliefs that a second round of war was inevitable.

We have suggested a number of conditions that increase the probability that a democracy confronting an unfavorable power shift might initiate or provoke war for primarily preventive reasons: expectations that military action will involve low costs, either because the opponent is much weaker or because the military support or intervention of allies will minimize costs to the democracy; intense systemic constraints that reduce the relative salience of the expected costs of war now by increasing the risks of doing nothing and allowing relative decline to continue; perceptions that a future war with the rising adversary is highly probable or inevitable within a few years; and perceptions that alternative strategies to war, particularly internal military buildups or the acquisition of armaments from external sources, are not feasible or available. These hypotheses emerge from our analysis of the Israeli experience in 1956. Whether they are more generally valid, and how frequently democracies go to war in response to a decline in relative power, can only be determined through the analysis of a larger number of historical cases.

rounds of warfare combined to convince Ben-Gurion and Peres to intensify even more Israel’s search for nuclear weapons. There is also evidence that, in the wake of the 1956 campaign, the French prime minister, Guy Mollet, was so concerned by what he perceived as Israel’s vulnerability to U.S.-Soviet pressure that he authorized a much closer French-Israeli nuclear collaboration to facilitate Israel’s development of a nuclear capability (Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*). While nuclear weapons do not eliminate a state’s concern about the consequences of relative decline, they generally reduce the ability of adversaries to exploit the deterioration of a nuclear state’s strategic position. Under some conditions a nuclear strategy might even allow a state to make more concessions to the adversary on certain issues, and thus dampen a possible conflict spiral, without undercutting a state’s strategic vulnerability. In fact, some of the more dovish elements in Israel have called upon Israel to make deeper territorial and security concessions to the Palestinians and to Syria, in confidence that such concessions would not impair Israel’s strategic position. Shimon Peres, for example, considered by many to be the “father” of Israel’s nuclear bomb, is also a leading “dove” and an ardent advocate of Israeli-Palestinian-Arab accommodation. For the debates in Israel on the role of nuclear weapons in Israel’s strategy, see Uri Bar-Joseph, “The Hidden Debate: The Formation of Nuclear Doctrines in the Middle East,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 1982): 205–27.