Twenty-four hours after the Soviet warning, Egypt's supreme commander, Field Marshal Amer, put the army on full alert for war.

Lieutenant General Anwar al-Qadi, the chief of operations, told Amer that more than half of the army, including some of its best troops, was bogged down in Yemen; it was in no condition to fight Israel.

Amer reassured him that fighting was not part of the plan; it was just a "demonstration" in response to Israel's threats to Syria.

Two days later Egypt dug itself deeper into crisis. It expelled UN peacekeepers that had patrolled the border with Israel since 1956, and moved troops into the Sinai desert.

The Israeli army, still obsessed with Syria, was much more patient with Egypt at first.

Shlomo Gazit, who was head of analysis in military intelligence, told American diplomats that Israel had been taken by surprise by Egypt's belligerency, but it was "an elaborate charade", that would only get serious if Egypt blockaded the port of Eilat on the Red Sea by closing the Straits of Tiran.

The mood was whipped up by Nasser's ubiquitous radio station, Sawt al-Arab, the Voice of the Arabs.

Broadcasting from Cairo to the rest of the Middle East, it was a vital tool of Nasser's foreign policy. Throughout the crisis, its chief announcer, Ahmed Said, read out a series of blood-curdling threats to Israel.

The Israelis did not call Nasser's bluff when he threw out the UN peacekeepers and sent more troops into the Sinai. So he doubled the stakes.

On 22 May, he banned Israeli shipping from the Straits of Tiran, the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, effectively re-imposing the blockade of the port of Eilat that had been lifted in 1956.

At an airbase in the Sinai desert Nasser announced: "If Israel wishes to threaten war, we tell her, you are welcome." A photo shows Nasser, looking as debonair as ever, surrounded by happy young flyers. Smiles flashed across the grainy black and white still.

The image Nasser desired was pumped around the world - the leader of the Arabs challenging the Jewish state, surrounded by the symbols of a modern fighting force - jet pilots - ready for action. Nasser looks excited, almost like a child intoxicated by the enormity of the line he had just crossed.

The Americans responded 42 minutes after the announcement from Cairo, dangling the prospect of a visit by the US Vice-President Hubert Humphrey if the crisis was averted. President Lyndon Johnson was angry.

The UN Secretary General U Thant was in the air, flying to Cairo on a peace mission when Nasser made his new threat. Nasser repeated the promise he had already made to the Americans and the Soviets, that Egypt would not fire the first shot.

But U Thant concluded gloomily that unless a way could be found around the blockade of Eilat, war was certain.

Pressure to strike

The day after Nasser closed the Straits, the Israeli prime minister, Levi Eshkol, and the cabinet ordered a full mobilisation. In 48 hours, 250,000 men could be put into the field. After compulsory military service, all Israeli men were allocated to a reserve unit.

In a couple of days, most Israeli men under the age of 50 were in some sort of military uniform.

The pressure was crushing General Rabin. Against all the military evidence, he had convinced himself that he was leading Israel to catastrophe. Rabin smoked pack after pack of cigarettes and eventually suffered a nervous collapse.

He slept for nearly 24 hours, recovered himself, and went back to work.

International diplomacy attempted to settle the crisis before it descended into full-scale war. Israel's foreign minister, Abba Eban, flew to Washington for an urgent meeting with President Johnson.

In 1956, when Israel attacked Egypt as part of a secret agreement with Britain and France, the Americans branded Israel an aggressor, and forced it to pull out of the land it conquered. This time Eban wanted Johnson's consent for Israel's fight.

The US president warned Israel not to fire the first shot. He told Eban not to worry about an Egyptian attack. It wasn't imminent and if it came "you'll whip the hell out of them".

Johnson indicated he would work on ways of getting the Straits of Tiran open, perhaps with a multinational naval task force, but wanted time to see if it could work.

Abba Eban decided Israel would have to move at America's pace, but the army was ready to attack and the generals were getting frustrated.

Eban irritated the military men. His overblown style and metropolitan ways got under their skin.

The generals were furious when the cabinet agreed on 28 May to wait two weeks. For them it was about much more than the Straits of Tiran. What mattered was the big picture.

Nasser was uniting the entire Arab world against them. He had moved divisions into the Sinai desert, making a direct threat to Israel's borders.

Jordan's dilemma

Nasser had been the undisputed leader of the Arab world since 1956. Now standing up to the hated Israelis, his position among Arabs as a political idol was reinforced.

He held a news conference with foreign journalists in Cairo on 28 May, in which he linked the crisis in the Sinai and the Straits of Tiran with Israel's "aggression" towards the Palestinians.

Coexistence was not possible because Israel, he said, had robbed and expelled the Palestinians in 1948. Israel would also get what was coming for threatening "to march on Damascus, occupy Syria and overthrow the Syrian Arab regime".

Nasser's confidence forced King Hussein of Jordan into a corner. Hussein did not trust Nasser. He confided in the CIA station chief in Amman, Jack O'Connel, who had become a close confidant, that he was convinced the West Bank was Israel's strategic target. Hussein's senior officers were pressing for closer co-ordination with Nasser.

For Hussein it all came down to survival. He decided on reconciliation with Nasser. He believed that if he stayed out of the war "an eruption" among his Palestinian subjects might cause his regime to collapse. If he fought, Egyptian air cover might delay Israel's advance into the West Bank long enough for the UN to impose a ceasefire.

On 30 May, King Hussein flew to Cairo and did the deal. When he returned to Amman deliriously happy crowds tried to lift up his Mercedes so they could carry it back to the palace. Hussein was not deluded. The crowds loved him because Nasser had accepted him, not the other way around.

Later he told the historian Avi Shlaim: "I knew that war was inevitable. I knew that we were going to lose. I knew that we in Jordan were threatened, threatened by two things: we either followed the course we did, or alternatively the country could tear itself apart if we stayed out."

Fear and threats

If they could fight on their own terms, Israel's generals were confident they would score an overwhelming victory. But strict military censorship kept those conclusions private.

At the same time, bloody threats poured out of Arab radio stations and on to the pages of Israeli newspapers. Only 22 years after the end of the Holocaust it was not surprising that the Arab propaganda hit home.

A doom-laden mood overcame the country. People made black jokes: "Let's meet after the war. Where? In a phone box," alluding to how many Israelis might be left.

The government stockpiled coffins; rabbis consecrated parks as emergency cemeteries; tens of thousands of pints of blood were donated.

The mood was not helped when Prime Minister Levi Eshkol made a disastrous broadcast to the nation on 28 May. He stammered and fluffed his way through it.

At a meeting afterwards Israel's generals gave him a vicious dressing-down. Among many interventions, Brig Gen Ariel Sharon raged "we have removed our principal weapon, fear of us".

Several of the commanders used aggressive, highly pejorative language comparing the government to Jewish leaders in the diaspora who had been forced to beg like slaves. Native-born Israelis in the 1950s and 60s were brought up to reject what they assumed was the weakness and passivity of European Jews who did not fight when the Nazis came.

To the young Israeli generals, mainly native-born, mostly in their 30s and 40s, Eshkol, who liked speaking Russian and Yiddish as much as Hebrew, seemed to embody the weakness of the diaspora. That was unfair - he had arrived in Palestine as a young man and had spent his life building the state.

Brig Gen Elad Peled, one of four divisional commanders, was at the meeting. Peled told me in 2002: "The mental generation gap was very important. We were the cowboys, frontier people. We looked at the older generation as people who were not free, they were not liberated… the minister of education asked me 'what if you're wrong? You're playing with the existence of the state.' I told him I am 100% confident about the result of the war."

Like many Israeli prime ministers, Eshkol was also minister of defence. He was forced to give the job up, in favour of one of Israel's war heroes, the swashbuckling, one-eyed general, Moshe Dayan.

The soldier had stated his essential philosophy at the funeral of Ray Rothberg, who was killed at a kibbutz near Gaza in 1956. "It is the fate of our generation that our life requires that we be always prepared and armed, strong and determined, for if the sword be struck from our grasp, we shall die."

Eve of war

Nasser was gambling for high stakes. Egypt had a modern air force but the army was weak. His generals were well-aware that Nasser's brinkmanship had taken them to the edge of a disastrous war.

International attempts to defuse the crisis had failed. The only idea the Americans and the British had was the so-called Red Sea Regatta, the proposed naval task force that would force open the Straits of Tiran.

But the US and British admirals and politicians hated the idea. They worried it might not work, and that they would be handing Nasser another victory.

On Friday 2 June, Israel's generals put the definitive case for war to the cabinet defence committee. They told the politicians that they could beat Egypt, but the longer they had to wait the harder it would be.

A few days earlier Meir Amit, the head of Israel's spy agency Mossad, had travelled to Washington DC on a false passport, in disguise. He did not want to wait longer for war; he was deeply concerned about the shutdown in the economy caused by the mobilisation of most of the male population under the age of 50.

Amit told me in 2002 about a crucial meeting he had with the US defence secretary, Robert McNamara.

"I said… 'I'm going to recommend a war'.

"McNamara asked only two questions. 'How long?' I said it would take a week. 'How many casualties?' I said less than the war of independence, which was 6,000. McNamara said 'I read you loud and clear'."

The Americans had given a clear signal. They had been told that Israel would be going to war and had made no attempt to stop it happening.

Amit travelled back to Israel with the Washington ambassador, Abe Harman, on an aircraft full of gas masks. They arrived in Tel Aviv on the evening of Saturday 3 June.

A car took them straight to Eshkol's apartment, where he was waiting with his key ministers. Amit wanted an immediate war. Harman wanted to wait another week or so.

Dayan disagreed: "If we wait for seven to nine days, there will be thousands dead. It's not logical to wait. Let's strike first and then look after the political side."

Everyone who was there had no doubt that the decision had been taken. Israel was going to war. The cabinet ratified it the next morning.

In Egypt, Nasser predicted Israel would attack on 4 or 5 June. He based his observation on the progress of an Iraqi armoured division, which was heading towards the Jordan Valley and Israel. He knew Israel would not tolerate such a change in the balance of forces.

Surprise attack

By 07:40 on 5 June, Ezer Weizman could hardly stand the suspense in the Air Force command centre in the ministry of defence in Tel Aviv.

The Israeli war plan depended on a surprise attack, called Operation Focus, which would destroy the Arab air forces on the ground, starting with Egypt.

They had trained for it for years and the first wave of attacks was about to go in.

Unlike the Egyptians and the other Arab armies, the Israelis had done their homework. They had flown hundreds of reconnaissance missions over the years to build up an accurate picture of every airbase in Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Pilots had a target book, giving the details of their layouts, call signs and defences. From radio intercepts they even built up voice-recognition files of the main Arab commanders.

It was a huge success. Field Marshal Amer and the Egyptian top brass were meeting at Bir Tamada, an airbase in Sinai. They were just starting the meeting when the first Israeli jets started their bomb runs. One of the generals was so surprised by the attack that the first thing that flashed through his mind was a coup or some other kind of Egyptian betrayal.

Amer's plane was able to take off but at one point had nowhere to land as every Egyptian airbase was under attack.

In Tel Aviv, Ezer Weizman was ecstatic. The attacks were going better than expected. They had achieved complete surprise over the enemy. He phoned his wife: "We've won the war," he shouted.

Later in the day Israel destroyed most of the Jordanian and Syrian air forces. Israel controlled the skies, and after that it was matter of finishing the job.

Israel warned King Hussein not to enter the war. But his mind was already made up, and he had put Jordan's efficient army under the command of a less than capable Egyptian general.

Just before midday fighting started in Jerusalem. The Jordanians opened fire. King Hussein ignored Israeli signals that Jordan would be spared if it stayed out of the war. After the Samua raid in 1966 he didn't believe Israeli assurances; and he was convinced that if he reneged on the military alliance he had entered with Egypt he would lose his throne.

Further south, Israeli ground forces had pushed into the Sinai desert, and were moving forward rapidly in three broad thrusts. The Egyptians fought bravely from fixed positions but unlike the Israelis had not been trained to improvise, or to be flexible or speedy.

In the army headquarters in Cairo the commanders were increasingly gripped by panic. General Salahdeen Hadidi slumped in his chair, convinced that the war was at least half lost. It was worse than that for Egypt.

But outside on the streets the people were celebrating. Crowds poured into the city by evening on buses provided by the ruling party. Voice of the Arabs was their trusted source of news and truth, and it was pushing out fantasy.

By 20:17 it was reporting that 86 Israeli aircraft had been destroyed and that Egyptian tanks had broken into Israel. At the headquarters of the Sinai front, General Mohamed Abdel Ghani Gamasy listened "with growing horror" to what he knew was a pack of nonsense.

Years later I asked Ahmed Said why he had told outright lies on air. In his crumbling, once-grand apartment overlooking the Nile, he defended himself.

"You're asking people to fight, not dance… we believed the broadcasts were our most powerful weapon… many of our listeners were illiterate, so radio was the most important way to reach them."

Back in 1967, as real news of the defeats came through, Nasser and Amer had retreated to their villas. Anwar Sadat, who later as president made a historic peace deal with Israel and was assassinated by his own guards as a result, went for a long walk through the streets of Cairo.

"Dazed and broken-hearted" he watched Nasser loyalists marching up and down the main avenue leading to the pyramids, chanting and dancing to fake reports of an imaginary victory.