ASSAULT ON THE USS LIBERTY: DELIBERATE ACTION OR TRAGIC ACCIDENT?

BY

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The USS Liberty was an unarmed electronic intelligence gathering naval vessel patrolling in international waters off the Sinai Peninsula in 1967. It was abruptly attacked by Israel but received no aid from American aircraft in the area. This paper will explore geopolitical conditions at the time, what happened, what the American and Israeli official response was, and bring other facts together from both interviews with surviving crew and memoirs of senior government officials to attempt to develop a complete picture of events related to the USS Liberty. While personal testimony from those directly involved in the incident indicates Tel Aviv may have deliberately targeted the American ship, the question of whether the attack was intentional or the result of a "perfect storm" of command and control failures on both sides, remains unresolved.
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I know nothing about [the USS Liberty]. I don’t want to say I didn’t at the time, but today I have no knowledge of it.

—Robert McNamara

Forty years have passed since that clear summer day on 8 June 1967 when Israel attacked the USS Liberty with aircraft and torpedo boats, killing 34 young American men and wounding 171. Was the USS Liberty attacked intentionally? Tragic accidents have happened to every military force in the history of modern warfare, however, many reasonable people have not been able to accept nor fully understand Israel’s attack as such an accident. Based upon the coordinated effort involving air, sea, and command and control, one must question if this attack was nothing less than intentional. Worse, the Israeli government’s version of the attack disagrees with the eyewitness recollections of survivors. Key American leaders call the attack deliberate. More important, a key eyewitness participant from the Israeli side has told survivors that Israel knew they were attacking an American ship. This paper will cite the conditions of the time and explore US and Israeli official responses along with interviews of surviving crew members. This attack was most likely deliberate for reasons far too sensitive to be disclosed by the US and Israeli government and that the truth may never be known.

The Cold War Environment and the Middle East

The Cold War between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) provided the backdrop and set the conditions in which the assault on the USS Liberty occurred. The US had developed and continued to maintain strong relations with Israel; the USSR had done the same with Arab nations who are the majority in the strategically important oil-rich Mid-East region. In the late 1960s, the US considered its relationship with Israel as part of a broader regional policy that supported the political independence and territorial integrity of all Middle Eastern states as critical to US national interests. Only five years earlier, the US stood its ground against the USSR during the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which US reconnaissance imagery verified that a Soviet nuclear missile installation was being built in Cuba. This was, among other things, a violation of the Monroe Doctrine that had supplied a mandate for American Presidents to oppose European military encroachment in the Americas since the 1830s.

President John F. Kennedy upheld the principles of the Monroe Doctrine and forced the world to stop and take notice of this new development on the international stage by challenging the Soviet Union with US nuclear strike capability and naval power. Over the next 14 days the
confrontation went from hot to cold and back again, but in the end, the Soviet Union backed down. Soon, Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was removed from office by the Central Committee of the party and replaced by Leonid Brezhnev, who pushed the USSR into a major warship construction program with the objective of gaining Soviet command of the seas and the capacity to project power capable of opposing that which was displayed by the US.

Over time, limited superpower naval confrontations followed. Large numbers of Soviet vessels - including the USSR fleet of intelligence collection ships - would shadow US warships and intentionally interfere with and collect intelligence on US operations, particularly in the Mediterranean. Often Soviet or US destroyers would steer on a collision course with their adversaries in a crazy game of "chicken." Ships bumped in many instances. This escalating and extremely dangerous game eventually led to the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement. While both sides continued this insane game on a more limited basis, the agreement called for the following steps to avoid collision and control behavior at sea:

- Not interfering in the "formations" of the other party;
- Avoiding maneuvers in areas of heavy sea traffic;
- Requiring surveillance ships to maintain a safe distance from the object of investigation so as to avoid "embarrassing or endangering the ships under surveillance;"
- Using accepted international signals when ships maneuver near one another;
- Not simulating attacks at, launching objects toward, or illuminating the bridges of the other party's ships;
- Informing vessels when submarines are exercising near them; and
- Requiring aircraft commanders to use the greatest caution and prudence in approaching aircraft and ships of the other party and not permitting simulated attacks against aircraft or ships, performing aerobatics over ships, or dropping hazardous objects near them.2

For example, just prior to the attack on the USS Liberty, and while operating in the Mediterranean, the Commander of the US Sixth Fleet had to send a message to a Soviet missile frigate that was interfering with the fleet's freedom of maneuver by maintaining a less than safe distance:

Your actions for the past five days have interfered with our operations. By positioning your ship in the midst of our formation and shadowing our every move you are denying us the freedom of maneuver on the high seas that has been traditionally recognized by seafaring nations for centuries. In a few minutes the
task force will commence maneuvering at high speeds and various courses. Your present position will be dangerous to your ship, as well as the ship of this force. I request you clear our formation without delay and discontinue your interference and unsafe practices.  

The highly controversial and unpopular Vietnam conflict was ongoing at the time. In fact, on 2 June 1967 US Air Force fighter-bombers accidentally attacked the Soviet merchant ship Turkestan in Cam Pha Harbor in North Vietnam—just when Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin was set to arrive to deliver a speech at the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The hope was Kosygin and President Lyndon Johnson could come to some type of agreement for nuclear de-escalation while he was in the US.  

While in Leningrad, an American diplomat and his wife were spat on by an incited mob; President Johnson had a great desire to win Jewish American support for the Vietnam conflict and maintain the strategic relationship built by President Kennedy at all costs.  

The rapidly deteriorating situation in the Middle East is described at length in Michael B. Oren's book, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. Full-scale war broke out on 5 June 1967 when Israel sent almost its entire fleet of 250 fighter-bomber aircraft to destroy Egypt's Air Force in less than two hours. Many Arab leaders charged the US with supplying the attack aircraft to Israel, even when they knew otherwise. Syria and Iraq signed a military pact to work together and Iraq followed with an agreement to place troops under Egyptian command. Prior to the attack, the Soviets distributed false reports of Israeli military forces deployed along the Syrian border—perhaps a Soviet move to improve or expand their position with Arab countries in the Middle East. Many years later, writing in *On Moscow's Orders*, Captain Nicolai Shashkov tells of his orders to be prepared to fire eight P-6 (SS-12) nuclear missiles at the shores of Israel if the Soviet high command determined that the US and Israel were attacking Syria—an ally and friend of the USSR. Captain Shashkov goes on to say: 

I received an oral instruction from the Commander-in-Chief of the USSR Navy, Fleet Admiral Gorshkov to 'be ready to make a rocket strike on the coast of Israel.' Of course, this was only in the event of the Americans and Israelis launching a beachhead in friendly Syria. In fact, it was there near the shores of Syria; that was my main positioning area.  

Within the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), there were undercurrents of frictions as well. When the war broke out, Israel's Air Force had 65 state-of-the-art Mirage fighter jets, 35 Super Mystère, 35 Mystère Mark IV's, 50 Ouragans, 20 Vatour light bombers, 45 Fougas, and a cadre of well trained and operationally focused pilots. By contrast, the Israeli Navy had only three obsolete destroyers, nine motor torpedo boats [called MTB] (three of the nine deployed in the Red Sea), and other miscellaneous small craft. Israeli inter service rivalries were blatant and