

June 12, 1967

**Minutes of meeting between Yugoslav President
Josip Broz Tito and top Yugoslav officials about the
situation in the Middle East**

Citation:

"Minutes of meeting between Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito and top Yugoslav officials about the situation in the Middle East", June 12, 1967, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Tito Presidential Archives, KPR I-5-c Bliski Istok, Belgrade, Serbia. Translated by Milorad Lazic. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/111016>

Summary:

Minutes of a meeting between Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito and top Yugoslav officials about the crisis in the Middle East. Yugoslav Vice President Koca Popovic recounts his meeting with UAR President Gamal Abdel Nasser in which Nasser told of his actions leading up to and immediately following the Israeli attack. The leaders then discuss the actions of Algerian leaders and brainstorm how best to react, especially how to work with India to develop a common stance for the non-aligned movement.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Original Language:

Serbo-Croatian

Contents:

Translation - English

Minutes from meeting attendend by, in addition to President Tito, the following comrades: Edvard Kardelj, Koča Popović, Mika Špiljak, Ivan Gošnjak, Veljko Vlahović, Mijalko Todorović, Milentije Popović, Vladimir Popović, general Nikola Ljubičić i Marko Nikezić

The meeting was held on June 12, 1967 at 18:00 h.

Comrade Koča Popović reports on conversations with Nasser and some comrades from our Embassy.

President Nasser received me this morning and outlined the following:

1. The war was virtually over in the first two hours with the destruction of almost the entire Egyptian air force along with the airports.

He tells me what he has already told [Yugoslav ambassador to the UAR Salko] Fejić that on the same night (I think between June 3 and 4), the American and Soviet ambassadors came to him personally to ask him not to launch an armed attack on Israel, because negotiations to prevent the worst are ongoing. He believed them, namely accepted the requested obligation.

Two days before the Israeli attack, Nasser warned his general staff and other competent military factors, based on intelligence, that Israel would attack on Monday morning, as it did in reality. Nasser goes on to say that none of those he told this believed it (he doesn't explain why or why he limited himself to just telling these people this without issuing proper orders).

Immediately on the second day of operations, he addressed the Russians - Kosygin personally - asking him to immediately send airplanes, so that he could continue the fight, because without the air force - destroyed - it was impossible. The Russians gave him a very evasive answer: that they were not available, that they could not do it so quickly, there was a problem of flyovers - they also mentioned certain interferences by Yugoslavia, which Nasser said he knew and knows that did not exist, etc.

I ask what his explanation for such Russians' posture is (I ask in a way that would make him think that the Russians really couldn't have acted differently then, or that it was too late to turn the situation around like this). Nasser says, convinced and briefly: They were scared.

But, Naser adds, they are now intensively sending us what we were looking for at the time, directly and through Algeria.

I'm asking how they're doing with the pilots. Nasser replies: "We have them to spare."

He talks afterwards about what an extremely difficult position he was in after his military defeat. He meant it when he resigned. He quickly realized that the masses were asking him to stay, and so were many allies and friends. He realized that he had no right to leave, to leave his people and others at the most difficult moment. He agrees that his departure under the circumstances would have immense consequences and would only facilitate the achievement of the goals of imperialists and Israel. That's why he stayed.

The problems are enormous in all areas, military, political, economic, moral.

He did not capitulate before Israel but in the face of superior power, primarily the US, which was determined not to allow Israel's defeat. He has now assured himself that there are no two superpowers, but only one, which imposes its will on the world: Vietnam, Guatemala, the overthrow of progressive leaders in Africa, Indonesia, and now the Arabs.

With Israel, the war didn't stop. The fact is, Israel now holds part of Arab territory. Such a condition cannot be accepted or tolerated, the UAR is rearming; he's preparing to, if Israel doesn't back down, renew military operations within weeks.

Algerians accuse him of agreeing to a ceasefire, but, Nasser says, in the current situation what else I could have done.

And here, in the UAR, there is great bitterness toward the United States, understandably against Israel, but there is also deep resentment against the Russians.

Algerians also strongly condemn the Russians. They're exaggerating. Besides, it doesn't make sense when we are supposed to get weapons from them?

He advised Boumédiène to go to Moscow, to see on the spot what the Russians think, [what] they intend, what they are ready to do, how far they want to go. Boumédiène is likely to go via Belgrade, that is, he will stop in Belgrade on his way. He himself, Nasser, did not expect the Russians to intervene directly in the armed conflict. But then, on the second day, he did believe and expect that they would deliver the requested weapon.

They have already sacked the military executives and appointed new ones. [Zakaria] Mohieddin is still sitting there with the soldiers. Otherwise, you know what it is like in these situations, each blaming responsibility on the other. The blow suffered is very, very severe; And of course, we have made very big mistakes (he does not go into an explanation which ones; I, of course, do not insist on). That is why he understands how necessary it is for him to stay, not just for the UAR.

He wanted [Abdel Hakim] Amer to remain in office. Amer himself refused because he believes he bears the main and direct responsibility. He let him leave Cairo. Let him rest, pull himself together, and we will see about that later.

He also received a telegram from Zhou Enlai: he encourages him to fight, in big words.

He thanks us emphatically for our posture and support, especially for the activities of the comrade President. He is also grateful for my visit; it is also a sign of trust and determination in continuing co-operation and assistance.

He sends greetings to the President. He repeats what he had told Fejić about the comrade President's departure to Moscow: that this was primarily to influence engagement in favor of the UAR. He would very much like to meet with him, for the sake of fully open talk, exchanges, appraisals, and opinions. He will try to be here as soon as things are sorted out: for a day, to leave in the morning, to come back in the evening. No formalities. He cares deeply about meeting with the president.

One more thing, earlier in the conversation, Nasser says for the first time last night he had time to reflect on something that is not related directly to the immediate course of past events and operational affairs.

He asked himself: When things are like this, when world fronts are lined up like this, what purpose it could have and still has a policy of non-alignment.

I ask him: have you come up with any answers, do you see any alternatives? Nasser replies: No.

2. I briefly explained to him why the president sent me.

I emphasized the almost crucial importance of his staying, not only from the point of view of the UAR and the Arabs, but from the widest [perspective].

That it is clear that the only correct orientation now is, even though the suffered blow is a difficult one, not giving up on fighting, rebuilding and gathering forces, which is a prerequisite for the more successful political fight ahead. It is understood that we will support them to the maximum. After the Moscow meeting and the declaration, in which a more decisive confrontation to imperialist powers and Israel is clearly manifested, stronger engagement of socialist countries in political activity, as well as their political and material support, can be expected.

It seems important to me, both for them in the UAR and for all of us, to analyze as boldly and objectively as possible the cause of what happened, what factors worked, how, etc. That is why we have to meet, exchange opinions, negotiate. Nasser agrees.

I do not think the policy of non-alignment has lost its meaning. On the contrary. It is now more necessary than ever to make new efforts to jointly act with all progressive forces, and also to gain new friends. This requires proper political conception and political action. And in the future, it is understood, arming should be necessary, namely taken from the USSR, but at the same time they should rely even more on their own forces, training in all areas to consolidate and defend their independence, i.e., for long and long-term resistance, even if it would seem to take more time than is usually expected from, let's say, one powerful military attack. That, of course, requires proper policies. To some extent, a similar problem is posed for us too.

It is that one serious military battle has been lost. But now you should not give in to that negative fact. But on the contrary, work on all those positive potentials that still

exist, in the country and on the international front.

I mention that I personally suffered a much more difficult, complete military defeat in Spain (Nasser is surprised, he did not know); and a series of partially transient defeats during our NOB [Narodno-oslobodilačka borba - People's Liberation Struggle].

I say, in my own opinion, that at certain stages of the development of the situation, perhaps the Russians could have been more energetic even though they wanted to avoid a direct confrontation. But maybe they did not properly evaluate all the elements, and above all, the level of engagement that the US had accepted and what the US was prepared to do. It seems that the US was more willing to take risks, perhaps because they assessed that the Russians could not go all the way, and also because they deemed that they are already in that space, with their fleet, economic presence and interests, bases, influence, etc. while the Russians were just approaching [there].

I inform him that we will probably send someone of a higher rank to the UN, to highlight the importance of the political battle ahead and to maximize our efforts in it. And tough and persistent battles will have to be fought there, regardless of the UN's known weaknesses.

That is where Nasser misunderstood me, thinking I was suggesting they send someone and say, "Think someone like [Mohamed] Fawzi." I explain that I was thinking about us, but that, I think, it would be really good for them to do the same.

During the conversation, Nasser also gave the character of [Lyndon] Johnson's personality - that in fact, on all the big issues he decides, that he believes only in force and prepares it to use it everywhere where he believes it is in the interests of the United States.

Then comrade Koča told what he has heard from our journalists and comrades at the Embassy:

It seems incredible how that war went. The Israeli Air Force operated in formations of one to four aircraft and thus very effectively destroyed targets. It did not come across any defenses. One part of the UAR army slept in a literal sense, and the other part took cover. Most of the pilots stayed alive. It is alleged the officers' desertion was massive. Their way of life is all but negative. They represent a caste that had nothing to do and nothing in common with the people and its problems and needs.

There are about 30 Russian generals in Cairo and a huge number of advisers. They were not in operational units, but in schools and academies. By all accounts, they failed to understand the specific situation of the UAR because they were guided by Russian plans and doctrines in their lectures. They did not anticipate that Israel could make such a successful breakthrough.

When asked if the surprise factor played a crucial role and whether in the reverse case the outcome of the war would have been different, the answer was negative. This confirms the poor evaluation that is normally given to the command staff. It is claimed that the army, by squatting in the desert, exposed to all sorts of difficulties, was weakened and less capable every day. On those occasions, the gap between officers and soldiers has deepened even further.

The Egyptians did not expect the UN to withdraw its troops. After launching their own initiative to withdraw them, they found themselves unable to ask to stay later.

Based on the disclosed, comrade Koča suggests that we should consider how and to what extent to engage in these situations, to which President Tito remarks that there are many wisecracks now.

Comrade Koča continues that to him, a participant in two wars, it all seems strange. On the surface nothing has changed. Cairo was not bombed. In it, life flows almost normally, except it is blacked out. Only among responsible statesmen certain mood crises is observed. [Abdul] Riad, for example, was completely hors de combat. He is not even able to connect sentences. And Fawzi, though cold, is totally absent. The army and the wounded are coming back. Their losses range from about 30,000 dead and missing. Israel is said to have only about 600 dead. Let it be five times that many, it still shows that there was virtually no resistance. Everyone denies that the tank battle was as significant as it was portrayed. Our military envoy says that he

always had the impression that high-ranking officers knew very little, and also that they refused to check their knowledge with the Russians out of vanity. For officers and soldiers, he claims to have had very little or almost no technical experience in handling modern weapons. Everyone agrees and underlines that the command cadre has completely capitulated without even *fellah* showing any fighting mood.

Frontline operations were developing 80% like in 1956. [Moshe] Dayan is said to have used the plans and maps that were made for the operations at the time. The Israelis were up to the task. They have achieved their main goals. They destroyed the Egyptian air force first, and then the ground forces. Israel advanced toward the Sinai with only four brigades effectively aided by aviation.

To this, comrade Vlado Popović notes that, according to [Andrei] Grechko's remarks at a meeting in Moscow, the Israelis subsequently transferred to the Sinai part of the forces that were deployed on the Syrian border.

Comrade Koča continues: Egypt's division in Ismailia did not take effect at all, and Russian missiles were only used 6%.

The comrade President is interested in where Nasser's missiles were, on which he worked on with the Germans, adding that it seemed to be just a bluff. He alleges that the very same Germans gave Israel an excellent anti-tank weapon.

Comrade Kardelj asks if he was interested in the Moscow meeting and the reasons for our presence.

Koča Popović: Nasser realized that comrade Tito was going there to help him.

Comrade president wonders if he has said anything about politics and tactics over outstanding issues such as sailing the Gulf of Acab and if he has finally accepted Israel's existence. Of course, he cannot be expected to make it public, but whether he is at least thinking about it.

Koča Popović: That is not what he was talking about. Some comrades at the Embassy think it is impossible for him to give up on his present policy towards Israel. He did not mention the negotiations at all, but said they could not bear for Israeli troops to remain on their territory and would go to war again in a few weeks. He was not interested if we will cut diplomatic relations with Israel.

Asked by comrade Kardelj if he was talking about inter-Arab relations, comrade Koča said he did not, except when Algerians criticised him.

President Tito says Boumédiène asked him to influence Nasser not to lay down his arms, adding that he does not think Boumédiène is ready for capitulation. Comrade President thinks we must come to Nasser's aid but that we need to think hard about how. He will need help to consolidate politically and militarily in order to be as capable as possible for negotiations.

Koča Popović: It was in this sense that I stressed to him the importance of a more thorough overhaul in the army and the state apparatus. But you cannot expect him to do that in the short term.

President Tito: Well, he should be oriented on the long term, and in the meantime not to let unfavourable solutions to be imposed on him.

Ivan Gošnjak thinks Israel will not be able to keep conquered territories occupied for long, as it requires extraordinary measures in the economy and administration that will inevitably lead to many complications.

Koča Popović discusses the genuine plebiscite support the people have manifested in urging Nasser to stay in the post. In one of those events, the crowd almost beat someone up because they thought he was Muhiedin [sic; literal transcription]. He then describes a sharp caste division that is still strongly present in Egyptian society, especially in the vast bureaucracy, as well as among the officer's staff, where the division is underlined by the strict separation between officers of different ranks.

Ivan Gošnjak reminds that Nasser only stopped the practice three years ago, in which only sons from wealthy families were recruited to military academies. He notes that interpersonal relations in the army were terrible. Soldiers were bullied in various ways and often beaten.

Edvard Kardelj says he was once told by Ali Sabri how that was one of the army's main problems.

Ivan Gošnjak thinks that these castes did not approve at all and therefore adopted Nasser's socio-political goals and his appropriate actions. He notes that Egyptian military leaders have taken interest several times in political work in our army, but none of this has been applied.

Marko Nikezić believes that it is not only a problem in relations in the army, but that it is about deeper socio-political issues in general. The revolution has not encompassed the masses, because it has been carried out from above.

President Tito recommends that we take a hard look at what were the decisive reasons for this outcome. Clearly, in addition to the above mentioned factors, other factors, especially foreign policy, played an important role. Therefore, they should finally understand what is possible under the circumstances and what is not.

Edvard Kardelj thinks Nasser could and should use this defeat as a cause for fundamental reform in the army, the state apparatus and the social structure in general.

Koča Popović says he has no impression that he has time to think about these major problems, as he is all preoccupied with the immediate needs of the reorganisation.

At comrade Koča's information that Nasser had told him that some blamed him because he had not taken the initiative against Israel, comrade Tito notes that it would have been much more tragic if he had gone to war first.

Then Comrade Koča informs him of a conversation with the Algerian ambassador who travelled with him on his return to Belgrade. The ambassador talked about their problems and difficulties and in relation with it with conspicuous indignation talked about the East Germans. When asked what happened to Ben Bella, the ambassador replied that he was living an almost normal life, that is, that he was actually under surveillance, not in prison. Then the ambassador recalled how he proposed to Fejić an unofficial meeting between one group of their executives with ours, to which comrade Koča replied that at the time he tried with [Abdelaziz] Bouteflika to arrange it but it did not work.

President Tito believes Algerians are exaggerating their difficulties, and comrade Kardelj adds that they are asking socialist countries for more than they can give, and in fact they are compromising them.

Ivan Gošnjak thinks that in this situation, the pipelines and the Suez Canal are the strongest weapons of the Arabs, to which comrade Tito notes that Boumédiène did not react very positively when he told him that the taps on the pipelines should now be closed well. He feels like Algerians are not willing to sacrifice much. He adds that in addition to the fact that the Israelis in the Sinai asked Egypt for water, which they refused, it shows that it will not be easy for Israel to stay there for long.

When asked by President Tito what about our equipment in the Sinai, comrade Gošnjak replies that it was fully charged in dollars.

Comrade Nikezić cites [Ivo] Sarajčić's conversation with [Lord] Chalfont, under which the English stand on the view that everyone should stay where they are at the time of the ceasefire, and then arrange the talks through the Security Council. Asked by Sarajčić what their position would be in the event of an Arab advance, Chalfont said it would further complicate relations between the major powers. Regarding the suspension of oil supplies, comrade Nikezić says the English are aware that they will be damaged, but they are counting on the damage to Arab countries over time as well, and that this will impose the need for a solution on both sides.

Veljko Vlahović believes the West will now incite trouble inside Syria and Cyprus.

Ivan Gošnjak, suggests that after comrade Koča's presentation it should be considered what kind of help to provide to the UAR, to which comrade Tito says that Syria has also asked for help and that this should be seen as well.

Comrade Nikezić raises the issue of the content of his talks with Indira [Gandhi]. He thinks she should be told that in addition to the actions already taken, we will be particularly engaged within the UN to maximise acceptance of the UAR's positions, i.e., for condemning the aggressor and withdrawing troops to starting positions. The elements will be lacking in assessing with how much realism the Egyptians are looking at the current situation and whether they are willing to accept Israel's existence.

President Tito thinks that at least for now we should not be raising that issue, and comrade Gošnjak adds that there is no need to go into it, because the West will already make it a main condition.

E. Kardelj believes that it is tactically necessary to remain consistent in supporting Arab positions and not to persuade them to give up. Later, political solutions will have to be made anyway, because they certainly won't be able to go to war.

Comrade Koča agrees and thinks that in these conditions there should be absolutely no deviations from the withdrawal request.

Marko Nikezić believes the Egyptians will be able to conduct serious talks only after they train the Army, i.e., when they become a serious threat to Israel. They will not find new paths until they subject their policies so far to criticism. Would not it have paid off if, at the moment when they dominated the situation, they proposed political solutions.

Koča Popović argues that even now, after such an outcome, they are unable to understand and accept it.

Therefore, Comrade Nikezić says, our positions will be closely related to the development of UAR's positions and will evolve with them. We will insist on withdrawal, and only then can negotiations be discussed.

Vladimir Popović draws attention that everyone expects from [Danilo] Lekić to say something about the perspective of the solution.

Edvard Kardelj believes that one can and must insist only on withdrawal, and the word "negotiations" can only be mentioned in such a sense that negotiations cannot be discussed before withdrawal. If we asked the Egyptians for the slightest concession, they would take it as a knife in the back, which it would actually be.

President Tito specifies that a full withdrawal must be insisted on, and then asks what about the severing of relations with Israel.

Marko Nikezić reports that the DSIP [Državni sekretarijat inostranih poslova – State Secretariat of Foreign Affairs] has handed over a note to an Israeli representative condemning their aggression and demanding the immediate withdrawal of troops from the conquered territories, otherwise Yugoslavia will reconsider its position towards Israel.

President Tito thinks we should not hesitate or let a few days go by, because it could become a "wooden rifle" [translator's note: that is, an empty threat, meaning that Yugoslavia's actions against Israel would not be effective].

Koča Popović believes that it will not be of much benefit, but that it should still be evaluated at which point the interruption will be most effective, so that it does not happen as with the CSR's [Czechoslovak Socialist Republic] cessation [with Israel] that went unnoticed.

Edvard Kardelj suggests not doing it rashly, but to wait two, three days, and in the meantime collecting arguments. This way, it would have a more significant political effect.

Mika Špiljak is convinced that Israel will give a number of reasons in the short term on which it will be able to do so easily.

President Tito thinks it can be done even if they do not answer our note. As for the effect, he believes it not the same thing whether it is the CSR or Yugoslavia, because in this situation our weight is the most important after the USSR's [weight].

Mijalko Todorović suggests that in relation to these events, one broader assessment is given to the public and suggest that comrade Tito do that.

President Tito agrees on the assumption that this will be a comprehensive assessment of the general international situation. If it only applies to this conflict, then it is unnecessary. Comrade President questions what else should be said to Indira. He recommends comrade Nikezić to examine Indira's current position in context of the correlation of forces within India.

Marko Nikezić says he will be able to discuss it with her, as she herself recently spoke about it.

Vladimir Popović reminds that Indira asks in her message what concrete steps could be undertaken.

Edvard Kardelj: They should be advised not to offer themselves as intermediaries, as this would weaken Arab positions.

Koča Popović notes that the stance on retreating to starting positions is identical to their position in the conflict with China, and therefore they will not accept a different solution, as it would be an unfavourable precedent for them.

Regarding African countries, President Tito says he will send a message to the Emperor of Ethiopia and possibly to the heads of Kenya and Zambia.

Vladimir Popović reports that [Richard] Nixon requested that he come to Yugoslavia on June 20th. All comrades have spoken out against his visit. Comrade Nikezić says King Hassan receives him, and even [Habib] Bourguiba managed to avoid meeting him.

In the end, President Tito draws attention to the conspicuous increased intelligence activity of Italians who follow every smallest, otherwise common, movement of our units. It raises the question of whether anything has been done about the Greeks regarding their latest manoeuvres.

Comrade Nikezić informs that the DSIP called their ambassador the same evening and asked for an explanation.

Comrade Kardelj thinks that Italians should be warned in some way (not by a note or a demarche) for their activity and frequent violations before [Italian ambassador to Yugoslavia Roberto] Ducci does. It can happen that they, among other things, intensively collect data for that purpose.

The record was kept by Gvido Branica