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**MOSHE DAYAN AND THE ATTACK ON THE UNITED STATES SHIP
LIBERTY**

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BY

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The background and key reasons for the Israeli attack on the United States Ship LIBERTY on June 8, 1967 rest squarely on the Israeli Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan. The latter's character and record prior to Dayan becoming Minister of Defense on June 5, 1967 shows a person who was a supreme risk taker and one who had demonstrated on several occasions a capacity to make reckless decisions that led to failure and controversy. Dayan was a self-willed man who never failed to either take charge or make a command decision when the situation demanded. His recklessness was equaled by indefatigable courage and determination, and a fighting spirit that took him to the top of the Israeli Army as Chief of the General Staff. His impetuous and poor judgments may have been the chief reasons for his failure to secure the highest office, Prime Minister of Israel.

Moshe Dayan had a strategic goal to seize the Golan Heights and, if the situation demanded and the opportunity permitted, invade Syria and take Damascus. The reasons were to provide a key security barrier for Israel. There may also have been additional reasons related to the acquisition of more agricultural land. There remain some disagreements about this latter point. Dayan later regretted his impetuous decision to take the Golan Heights. The Syrians were not a serious threat to Israel and the Israelis had provoked far more border clashes with the Syrians than the Syrians had with Israel.

The most significant point of all is that Dayan made a unilateral decision to take the Golan Heights. He did not consult either the Israeli Prime Minister or the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army. He went ahead and gave specific orders without any consultation.

In 1976-1977 I interviewed the United States Secretary of State in 1967, Dean Rusk, on three occasions. Secretary Rusk was totally open and he provided insights and facts that revealed why he had gone on record as saying that the attack on the USS LIBERTY was *not an accident, but deliberate*. He made it very clear to me that the culprit was the renegade Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, who had in effect taken the law into his own hands and ordered the attack on Syria. Dayan was very much aware of the role, missions, and likely location of the LIBERTY and that she was undoubtedly collecting key SIGINT against Israel and the other protagonists. Rusk was adamant – the Prime Minister and the other key Israeli leaders had no role at all in the decision to attack Syria and the USS LIBERTY. Dayan wanted his actions totally unmonitored during the crucial day of June 8, 1967 when Dayan ordered the attack on Syria. Dayan was gambling on both surprise and decisive military action while silencing the one intelligence asset that he assessed could monitor his every move – the USS LIBERTY. He wanted to achieve a massive military victory on the Golan Heights before anyone could react – a fait

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accomplish by occupation that the Syrians and Russians would not be able to reverse. The last thing Dayan wanted was US intervention with his Prime Minister to say *stop right now and do not even contemplate such aggression against Syrian territory and an attack on a United States warship*. LIBERTY held the keys to unravelling his plans and reporting them instantly to Washington. There were several other intelligence assets in place and in the region of which Dayan was totally unaware. The notion that Dayan wanted to draw the United States into the conflict in the event that Egypt was accused of attacking and destroying the LIBERTY, thereby invoking US retaliation, is not supported by any known evidence. Dayan had no desire or motivation in bringing the United States into the war because he was confident that Israel would achieve alone all her military and strategic objectives. Indeed the United States would remain the countervailing power to the Soviet Union and its Middle East client states. The calls between the White House and Moscow in which Secretary Rusk was the centerpiece with the President did indeed lead to Israel ceasing its advance beyond the Golan Heights and brought the conflict to a conclusion. Dayan had, therefore, achieved his strategic objectives, none of which would have been approved by his own leadership if he had been consultative and sought prior authority to act.

For Dean Rusk and President Johnson the attack on Syria was the most frightening event in the Middle East conflict and an event that would trigger Soviet support for its ally, Syria. A potential disaster was in the making. Dean Rusk told me that for him June 8, 1967 represented the worst day for American security since the climatic day during the Cuban Missile crisis when the Soviet Union backed down. In effect, Moshe Dayan was taking the West to the brink with the Soviet Union by attacking Syria. Dayan's personal decision and order to attack the US spy ship listening to his communications was not just egregious in the extreme, it could, potentially, along with the attack on Syria, have taken the Soviet Union over the edge if the United States had mistaken the perpetrator and taken action against, for example, Egypt. Dean Rusk and I discussed in detail the events of that day and the subsequent exchanges with Moscow and the urgent need to deter the Soviet Union from air lifting into Syria a large force that would confront Israel – a disaster in the making both for Israel and US national security.

The CIA has released a sensitive HUMINT report from Tel Aviv that confirms Secretary Rusk's very sensitive statements to me in my interviews with him and his more general comments that he made public about the attack on LIBERTY as being deliberate. The Director of the CIA in June 1967, Richard Helms, a career CIA officer of great distinction, made similar general statements in his lifetime about the attack on LIBERTY being deliberate, but he never provided any detail for very clear security reasons relating to sources and methods inside Israel and other parts of the Middle East, plus collateral HUMINT intelligence from the British, and the whole panoply of hugely sensitive SIGINT and ELINT from both the National Security Agency and its cousin, GCHQ in the UK. The latter had longstanding very special sources and methods in the region. *However, no asset was better placed than USS LIBERTY*. Moshe Dayan knew this and wanted zero collection of Israeli communications. Furthermore he wanted LIBERTY destroyed without trace with no survivors to testify against the attackers. Hence the multiple attacks from the air and torpedo boats with numerous weapon systems that were

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intended to sink LIBERTY and obliterate her crew. On June 8, 1967 Moshe Dayan made two hugely ill considered and monstrous decisions irrespective of the consequences for the United States and its allies, and most of all for Israel itself. It is clear that once the facts became known to Secretary Rusk and President Johnson, with abject apologies from the Israeli Prime Minister, that they were left with a major dilemma, knowing that Dayan was the perpetrator and that the rest of the Israeli leadership had no part in the decision to attack the USS LIBERTY. However, any notion that the attack had ever been a *tragic mistake of identity* is totally inaccurate. To compound Dayan's egregious actions another worst aspect of this series of events was the failure by President Johnson and his Secretary of Defense to support the Sixth Fleet Commander's and his Carrier Battlegroup Commander's decision to continue the flight of US carrier based aircraft dispatched in prompt response to the attack on LIBERTY. The direct intervention from Washington and recall of these aircraft will always remain a very sad blight on the records of both Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara. Those senior US Naval personnel involved in the rescue attempt on LIBERTY have for good reason found it difficult to ever accept the decision of the President and his Secretary of Defense to recall those aircraft outbound to assist a US warship not only under attack but in grave distress.

By any standards of international law the attack on the LIBERTY constituted a war crime.

The CIA report also reflects Israeli harsh criticism of Dayan's decision to order the attack. The Prime Minister and other key Israeli leaders cannot be held accountable for the actions of Moshe Dayan.

The CIA document in the USS LIBERTY Document Center collection supports the other public records regarding the deliberate Israeli attack on USS LIBERTY.

It should be noted that the United States and its major ally, the United Kingdom, do not for very good reasons release highly sensitive intelligence documents even over forty six years after the events of June, 1967. There are several reasons – the most important of which is sources and methods that are still in place today in the region, and which if exposed would reveal the complexity, high quality and location of crucial assets. With regard to HUMINT neither the CIA nor MI6 will ever reveal documents that may be used to trace not just various tradecraft skills, tactics, techniques and procedures, but which also can reveal HUMINT network architectures and likely workings that are still in place today.

Moshe Dayan was not just a great Israeli patriot and leader, he was also personally courageous and gave of his all for his country. The tragedy of Moshe Dayan is that his determination and fearsome patriotism blinded his judgment on several occasions during his career. The events of June 8, 1967 remain not merely a terribly egregious blight on his otherwise fine patriotic record, but a testament to how recklessly misplaced patriotism can take a country, indeed the world, to the brink of disaster.

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For the brave men of the crew of the USS LIBERTY who never knew of Moshe Dayan and his dire actions, or have been privileged to know a great American like Secretary of State Dean Rusk, there always remained the *Why rather than the What and When and By Whom*. It is intended that this short and precise analysis goes some way to explaining the *Why*.

What does remain totally uncontested, and will always remain an enduring beacon for future generations of the United States Navy is the indomitable courage, fortitude and sheer resilience and bravery of the men of the USS LIBERTY – their deeds will long outlive the controversy surrounding the circumstances of the attack on their ship. They remain the most highly decorated ship in the history of the United States Navy, and their courage will endure.

May God bless the USS LIBERTY and the United States Navy.

At Middleburg, Virginia
September, 2013.