

1967, Israel: Six Days to Defeat the Arabs

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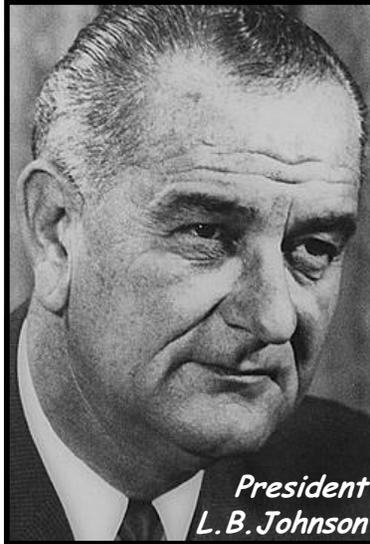
In six days during June 1967, the Israeli military devastated the air and ground forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan and occupied the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the West Bank (an area west of the Jordan River), including East Jerusalem. The Six-Day War established Israel as the premier military power in the Middle East. Israel's might was a product of American money, French armaments and dedicated personnel. The war also established the idea of Israel as a U.S. strategic asset in the region.

Before discussing the U.S. role in the war, it is necessary to briefly explain how and why the war was fought. Its start is generally treated as a preemptive, defensive strike by Israel, necessitated by mortal threats from its neighbors. The facts show otherwise. Kennett Love, a former *New York Times* correspondent and a scholar of the Suez crisis, wrote that Israel drew up "plans for the new war... immediately after the old.... The 1956 war served as a rehearsal for 1967." That is important because it bears on the Arab reaction to the U.S. role, a reaction that has shaped subsequent developments in the region.

After the 1956 Sinai campaign, the Israeli-Egyptian border was quiet, partly because of the presence of the UN Emergency Force. That was not true of the border between Israel and Syria. The specific causes of friction between the two countries were disputes about fishing rights in Lake Tiberias, Israeli settlement activity in the demilitarized zone established after the 1948 war, guerrilla incursions into Israel, and an Israeli water project involving the Jordan River.

Israel retaliated against the guerrilla activity with massive raids into Syria and sometimes Jordan. Syria, which left the United Arab Re-

public in 1961, had a left-wing Ba'athist coup in 1966 and had good relations with the USSR. Syria pointed to the quiet Israeli-Egyptian border and the lack of Egyptian response to the attacks on Syria as evidence that Nasser was not up to leading the Arabs. Nasser was accused of hiding behind UN forces. Intra-Arab rivalries were assuming greater importance in the mid-1960s, with Nasser frequently bearing the brunt of Arab criticism.



President L.B. Johnson

While declaring an arms embargo on the area, Johnson secretly authorized shipments of spare parts, ammunition, bomb fuses and armored personnel carriers to Israel. The U.S. vetoed a UN resolution calling for Israel to return to its prewar boundaries, and Johnson refused to criticize Israel for starting the war.

Syrian-Israeli friction continued throughout early 1967. In April, Israel said it would cultivate the entire demilitarized zone between the countries, including land that Syria contended was the property of Arab farmers. On April 7, the Israelis moved a tractor onto the land and Syrians fired on them. To retaliate, 70 Israeli fighters flew over Syria and shot down six Syrian warplanes. There was no response from the United Arab Command, an essentially paper military organized by Nasser in 1964.

Over the following weeks, Israel threatened Syria. On May 11, Gen. Yitzhak Rabin said on Israeli radio that "the moment is coming when we will march on Damascus to overthrow the Syrian Government, because it seems that only military operations can discourage the plans for a people's war with which they threaten us." Israel's director of military intelligence added that Nasser would not intervene. The Jewish state also directed massive military action against al-Fatah to stop infiltrations. Meanwhile, Israeli leaders

did all they could to have their country appear in mortal danger.

The situation worsened when the USSR told the Egyptians that Israel had massed forces on the Syrian border for a mid-May attack. The UN found no evidence of this, but on May 14 Nasser moved troops into the Sinai. U.S. and Israeli intelligence agreed that the action was, in Foreign Minister Abba Eban's words, "no immediate military threat." In 1972, Gen.

Ezer Weizmann admitted that "we did move tanks to the north after the downing of the aircraft." Israel quickly and fully mobilized, prompting the Egyptians to ask the UN Emergency Force to leave the Sinai. The request did not mention the two most sensitive locations of the UN force, Sharm el-Sheikh (where it protected Israeli shipping) and the Gaza Strip. UN secretary general, U Thant, surprised everyone by replying that a

partial withdrawal was impossible. Faced with a choice between the *status quo* and a complete UN withdrawal, Nasser chose the latter. When the UN offered to station its forces on Israel's side of the border, Israel refused (as it had in the past). President Johnson, fearing the Israelis would "act hastily," asked Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to inform him in advance of any Israeli action. Israel replied that a blockade of the Strait of Tiran would be a *casus belli*.

Nasser told the Egyptian press that he was "not in a position to go to war." Israeli military leaders believed him. Gen. Rabin said later, "I do not believe Nasser wanted war. The two divisions he sent into Sinai on May 14, would not have been enough to unleash an offensive against Israel. He knew it and we knew it." Ben-Gurion himself said he "doubt[ed] very much whether Nasser wanted to go to war."

It is in that context that the following events must be interpreted. On May 21, Nasser mobilized his reserves. On May 22, with the UN forces gone

U.S. Air Force pilots flew RF-4Cs - with white Stars of David and Israeli Air Force tail numbers painted on them - over bombed air bases in Egypt, Syria and Jordan taking pictures for Israel. Once the enemy air forces were destroyed, the RF-4Cs traced Arab troop movements at night, so the Israelis could bomb the troops the next morning. Johnson said publicly that the U.S. provided no assistance



and under the taunting of Syria and Israel, Nasser blocked – verbally not physically – the Strait of Tiran, which leads from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba and the Israeli port city of Elath. The strait’s importance to the Israelis was more symbolic than practical; no Israeli flag ship had used it in nearly two years, although Iranian oil was shipped to Israel through it. Nevertheless, the closure was a worrisome precedent for the Israelis.

Despite a blizzard of diplomatic activity in and outside the UN, tensions rose until June 5, when Israel attacked Egypt – thereby launching “the Six-Day War.” (Israel told the UN Truce Supervision Organization that its planes had intercepted Egyptian planes – a patent falsehood.) Israel quickly destroyed the air forces of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Israel prepared a letter to Johnson assuring him that Israel, in the shorthand of U.S. ambassador Walworth Barbour, “has no, repeat no, intention [of] taking advantage of [the] situation to enlarge its territory, [and] hopes peace can be restored within present boundaries.”

On June 8, Egypt, having lost the Sinai to Israel, accepted the UN cease-fire. The next day, Syria also accepted it, but Israel launched additional offensive operations. By June 10, Israel controlled the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, Sharm el-Sheikh, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. With the road to Damascus open, the Soviets threatened intervention if Israel did not stop. The Johnson administration confronted the Soviets by turning the Sixth Fleet toward Syria.

The unseen side of the Six-Day War was Israel’s nuclear capability. Although Prime Minister Eshkol had promised in 1966 that Israel would not be the first nation to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East, it had been developing a nuclear capability almost since its founding. Israel appar-

ently received help over the years from the U.S. firm NUMEC, the French and the U.S. government, including the CIA. It probably had operational nuclear weapons in 1967. Israel never signed the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has not allowed inspection of its nuclear facilities since the late 1960s. According to Mordechai Vanunu, a former technician [who blew the whistle on the Israeli nuclear weapons program], the inspectors were consistently deceived in the early 1960s. Israel had 12-16 warheads by 1969, according to the Nixon administration. A CIA report said Israel tried to keep other Middle Eastern countries from developing nuclear weapons by assassinating their nuclear scientists.

U.S. Role in the War

What was U.S. policy before and during the Six-Day War? In the tense days before the war, Johnson moved the Sixth Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean. On May 23, while declaring an embargo on arms to the area, he secretly authorized air shipments to Israel of important spare parts, ammunition, bomb fuses and armored personnel carriers. After the war started, the U.S. vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for Israel to return to its prewar boundaries, and Johnson refused to criticize Israel for starting the war.

Stephen Green has written that pilots of the U.S. Air Force flew RF-4Cs – with white Stars of David and Israeli Air Force tail numbers painted on them – over bombed air bases in Egypt, Syria and Jordan to take pictures for the Israelis. They flew 8 to 10 sorties a day throughout the war, and the U.S. pilots carried civilian passports so they would appear to be contract employees if caught. When the enemy air forces were destroyed, the RF-4C mission was changed to tracing Arab troop movements at

night, which enabled the Israelis to bomb the troops the next morning. They also flew reconnaissance sorties around the Golan Heights. Johnson said publicly that the U.S. provided no assistance of any kind to the Israelis.

A critical question is whether the U.S. government gave Israel a green light to go to war. Israeli officials frequently consulted with U.S. officials in the days before June 5. They were looking for support, claiming that Israel had been promised access through the Strait of Tiran in 1956. U.S. officials often told the Israelis that “Israel will only be alone if it decides to go alone.” Some Israelis interpreted this as a nod to go ahead. Secretary of State Dean Rusk reportedly told a journalist, regarding the U.S. attitude toward Israel: “I don’t think it is our business to restrain anyone.” Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban said of his visit to Washington in late May: “what I found...was the absence of any exhortation to us to stay our hand much longer.”

Johnson seems to have been motivated by a desire to win Jewish American support for the Vietnam war and to advance the “strategic relationship,” begun by President Kennedy, with Israel against the Soviet Union.

The cost in Arab alienation was great. Johnson had assured the Arabs that Israel would not attack and that he would oppose aggression. Yet he never called on Israel to withdraw from the conquered territories or to resolve the Palestinian question. Rather, the U.S. gave Israel substantial help, including diplomatic support that facilitated Israel’s conquest of neighboring territories by providing critical delays.

Source: Excerpt, “Ancient History: U.S. Conduct in the Middle East Since WWII and the Folly of Intervention,” *Cato Policy Analysis* Aug. 16, 1999. <www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-159.html>