

# Looking Back at the June 1967 Middle East War



JUNE 2017 IS THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY of the 1967 Middle East War—the June War or, as Israelis like to call it, the Six Day War.

Why should we care today about this historical event? For one, the war—with its resulting conquests, refugees, and shifting alliances—helped define the modern Middle East and make it one of the world’s great flash points for further conflict. But there are other reasons as well why this war bears re-examination.

The 1967 war helps us focus on the question of when war is justified. To pacifists, all war is unjust. But most people, including most leftists, don’t agree that war is always wrong. They believe that under certain limited circumstances war can be justified. But what exactly are those rare circumstances that would permit going to war? Self-defense or defense of others might be such situations. What about preemptive self-defense? To normalize preemption would make the world a much more dangerous place, undercutting the strong presumption that ought to obtain against the use of force in international affairs. But is preemptive self-defense sometimes permissible? Many analysts point to the June War not only as a case of justified war, but as a case—the strongest case, perhaps the only case—of justified preemptive self-defense.<sup>1</sup> So reflecting on the origins of this war will allow us to consider what is

widely held to be the strongest case for preemptive war.

Re-examining the June War is also important because Israeli apologists continue to defend the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories with claims that Israel acted justly fifty years ago. Now, even if it were the case that the 1967 war were wholly defensive and justified on Israel's part, this cannot justify the continued rule over Palestinians. Even if Egypt, Jordan, and Syria were totally at fault in the war, Palestinians would not lose their right to self-determination or to be free of foreign military occupation. But if Israel acted unjustly fifty years ago, then its occupation is all the more objectionable.

### **Was an Attack Imminent?**

In May 1967, following various Israeli threats against Syria, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser declared his intention to deter an Israeli attack on Syria and sent his forces into the Sinai Peninsula. On May 18, Nasser ordered the UN peacekeeping force, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), to leave the border, and on May 23 he announced the closing of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. Blood-curdling rhetoric about throwing the Jews into the sea was blaring from Radio Cairo, and many people around the world were deeply worried for Israel's safety.

But those who understood the military situation—in the Israeli and U.S. governments—knew that Israel would prevail over any combination of Arab forces, even if the Arabs attacked first.<sup>2</sup> (And this doesn't even take account of Israel's possession of primitive nuclear weapons, unknown to U.S. officials.<sup>3</sup>) Until the historical record became clear, it was difficult for contemporary observers to accurately assess the situation, which is why, for example, someone such as Richard Falk, a later champion of Palestinian rights, at first judged Israel to have acted in legitimate self-defense (a view he changed as

more evidence became available).<sup>4</sup> But knowing what we do now, it is evident that Israel did not face the danger of destruction.

Moreover, commentators are agreed that no Egyptian attack was imminent on June 5. The Egyptians were deployed defensively. "On the morning of 5 June, when Israel launched her air attacks against Egypt's airfields, the Egyptian armed forces had orders to hold in a defensive posture, ready to absorb an Israeli first strike."<sup>5</sup> Far from preparing to initiate hostilities, on June 4 "Egyptian generals were seen on the tennis courts of Cairo," and the Egyptian commander of the Sinai front was vacationing in Ismailia when the Israelis struck.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that some captured Egyptian documents showed plans for offensive operations does not change things. Many military plans include counter-attacks as part of a defensive strategy. Ben Gurion biographer Michael Bar-Zohar has described a May 25 Egyptian attack plan, but he explains, "It should be mentioned that this attack, as well as an airborne offensive against the Israeli airfields, was to take place only in the event of an outbreak of hostilities in the area."<sup>7</sup>

U.S. intelligence examined the disposition of the Egyptian forces and concluded they were defensively deployed. British intelligence and the UN came to the same conclusion. When Israeli officials warned on May 25 that an Egyptian attack was imminent, Lyndon Johnson ordered the intelligence community to "scrub the data," and they reported back that three U.S. intelligence agencies, looking specifically at the evidence pointed out to them by the Israelis, rejected the Israeli assessment.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, however, in assessing Israel's actions we will be interested to know what Israeli officials reasonably thought

at the time. Did they believe that an attack was imminent? The evidence shows that they did not. On June 1, the head of the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, told U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara "that there were no differences between the U.S. and the Israelis on the military intelligence picture or its interpretation."<sup>9</sup> Menachem Begin, who was invited to join the cabinet the week before the war began, commented in 1982, in a speech at the Israeli National Defense College, "In June 1967, we again had a choice. The Egyptian Army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him."<sup>10</sup>

And in his memoirs, Israeli Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin reported the argument that Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan put forward on June 1:

The urgency regarding our attack, he felt, was related to the question of how long we could operate before international intervention halted the fighting. We would probably be limited to a time span of three or four days. As long as the Egyptian army was not fully fortified in the Sinai, we could break through its lines swiftly and complete the opening phase of the war in a relatively short time. This would give us more time to rout the Egyptian troops and solidify our gains. But if we dallied, the breakthrough phase would take longer; and if we failed to complete our operations, a partial victory would be interpreted by Egypt as a setback for us. In a nutshell, Dayan's message was that the longer it took to decide, the less we stood to gain from a war. And war, after all, was really the only option open to us.<sup>11</sup>

So it was not the imminence of an Egyptian attack that concerned Dayan, but the imminence of Egypt becoming "fully fortified."

Brigadier-General Aharon Yariv, the head of military

intelligence who had favored an Israeli first strike on May 22, well before any suggestion of an Egyptian attack,<sup>12</sup> told the cabinet on June 4 that he was in possession of Egyptian orders indicating a planned assault before the next day.<sup>13</sup> But if he really believed this then he would have insisted that Israel's June 5 attack be moved up. And if the cabinet believed him, they surely would have demanded an immediate initiation of hostilities. On the contrary, several members of the cabinet—including Begin—suggested postponing the June 5 attack.<sup>14</sup>

### **Operation Dawn**

Michael Oren, an American-born Israeli historian and later Israel's ambassador to the United States, argues that in fact there was an Egyptian plan to attack Israel on May 27, Operation Dawn, but that Nasser, warned by the Soviet Union that the Israelis were expecting the strike, cancelled it at the last moment.<sup>15</sup> This argument fails on several grounds.

- The United States had directly told the Egyptians on May 25 that the Israelis said they expected an imminent attack,<sup>16</sup> so there was no new information on May 27 that would have led Nasser to change his mind.<sup>17</sup>
- Oren's evidence for claiming that Nasser ever approved the first-strike plan is very thin. He ignores the testimony of foreign ministry official Salah Boussiany, who recalled that when Nasser learned that Field Marshal Abdel Hakim 'Amr reported that there had been a leak of Egyptian plans, Nasser asked, "Why is 'Amr upset? Does he think we shall start the war?"<sup>18</sup> Whatever Field Marshal 'Amr or Defense Minister Shams Badran may have favored, it was Nasser who had the last word, and he had not opted for war.<sup>19</sup>
- Even if Nasser had approved air strikes on May 27, this

would only be relevant if Israel knew about it, which seems highly unlikely.<sup>20</sup> Israeli officials did tell the Americans that they feared an imminent attack, but we know something of what went into that warning. On May 25, the director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry wanted to inform Washington that Israel was about to initiate an all-out assault. Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol stated, "Better say there is a danger of an attack on Israel." And Chief of Staff Rabin declared, "We'll say there is a danger of a comprehensive Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israel."<sup>21</sup>

- Israel told U.S. officials that an Arab attack was imminent,<sup>22</sup> but the CIA reported that it did not consider this a serious estimate: "We think it is probably a gambit intended to influence the U.S."<sup>23</sup> This was the same view held by Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, who—writing after the events, when he would have had access to information that he might not have been aware of at the time—referred to the Israeli warnings as "hypochondriac."<sup>24</sup> The CIA and Eban were correct: The Israeli intelligence assessment was not reporting any imminent attack.<sup>25</sup> On a copy of the telegram sent to the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Eshkol wrote, "All to create an alibi."<sup>26</sup>
- Oren's argument also fails from a logical point of view. His claim cannot justify Israeli preemption because whatever Egypt may have been planning on May 27, no Israeli preemption of those plans took place. The Israelis launched their attack more than a week later, after (on Oren's reading) Nasser cancelled Operation Dawn, after Nasser had agreed to send his vice president to Washington for talks, after Nasser had made categorical promises to UN Secretary-General U Thant<sup>27</sup> and to various U.S. and Soviet emissaries, publicly and

privately,<sup>28</sup> that he would not initiate hostilities. Abba Eban has recorded what he told the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, when Goldberg reported to him what Nasser had said to U Thant: "I said that I found this assurance convincing. Nasser did not want war; he wanted victory without war."<sup>29</sup> Such a view clearly doesn't indicate an imminent attack that had to be preempted. And interviews with Egyptian participants indicate that Nasser told his commanders on June 2 that Egypt would not strike first.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Dangers of Waiting**

Any assessment of the justification for preemption must take account of the dangers of failing to preempt. That is, if failing to preempt would lead to national extinction, there would certainly be a stronger case for preemption than if what was at stake was a somewhat higher casualty rate in a future war. Any country could argue that by refraining from striking first it might suffer higher casualties than if it waited, and if this justified preemption then every country would have the right to attack any other country. The case for preemption must be based on a more substantial danger than this.

U.S. experts were confident that Israel would win a war against its Arab neighbors. Lyndon Johnson told Abba Eban that U.S. intelligence analysts were unanimous that if Egypt attacks, "you will whip the hell out of them."<sup>31</sup> Note that this assessment was not just about the result if Israel struck first, but if Egypt did.

Even if an attack was not imminent, would waiting have constituted an existential threat to Israel? Would waiting have led to an increasingly precarious military position for Israel or to Israeli economic collapse?

The U.S. National Security Council concluded if Israel waited

a week it would still win. The "Israeli concern about delaying a war which they fear is inevitable is based primarily on their concern about a deterioration in their political and diplomatic position rather than on military factors."<sup>32</sup>

In the weeks before the war, arms were pouring into Israel from Europe, especially from France, which had "opened its armories to Israel."<sup>33</sup> On the eve of the war, France declared an embargo on arms to Israel, and Israeli officials suggested that this made it imperative to go to war before the military balance shifted.<sup>34</sup> In fact, however, the French embargo covered heavy equipment, but not spare parts, which continued flowing until 1969.<sup>35</sup> More importantly, the French embargo was a (failed) attempt to prevent the impending war. As De Gaulle told the Israeli ambassador, the embargo would last "as long as it is not clear if you will not go to war."<sup>36</sup> Had Israel been able to assure France that it had no intention of launching a first strike, French arms could have continued flowing. So Israel's defensive military position was not at risk of declining after June 5, only its ability to carry out an offensive war. As Lyndon Johnson advised Israel, "If Israel is attacked, our judgment is that the Israelis would lick them. Time would not work against Israel, it would not lose by waiting. ... During this period there would not be any deterioration in the Israeli military position."<sup>37</sup>

If there was no great military danger from waiting, what about the economic danger? Did the economic costs of having called up its reserves make the Israeli mobilization unsustainable, leading to collapse if maintained much longer?

The first point to note is that the burdens of mobilization impinged not just on Israel. The Egyptian army on the eve of the war (excluding those tied down in Yemen) included 80,000 reserves.<sup>38</sup> Egyptian boys of 17 to 18 had been hastily



recruited, given weapons, and sent to Sinai with no training.<sup>39</sup> Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow told the Israelis that Washington had taken steps to put financial pressure on Egypt, and reported that “we see signs UAR [Egyptian] forces [are] beginning to hurt from lack [of] food and water in their desert deployment”; Rostow indicated that it was the U.S. view that Egypt would “likely suffer more from long mobilization than Israel.”<sup>40</sup> But whatever the impact on Egypt, a lengthy mobilization did not spell disaster for Israel because U.S. officials made clear that they would compensate Israel for the costs of mobilization.<sup>41</sup> At \$1 million a day,<sup>42</sup> the amounts were hardly beyond the capabilities of the United States. And the amounts would be no more an affront to Israel’s spirit of self-reliance than the massive amounts of foreign aid provided by Washington following Israel’s recourse to war in 1967.

## **Last Resort**

In judging the justice of a preemptive war, we need to look not just at the imminent threat, but—as in judging any war—whether the resort to war was in fact the last resort: whether there were means short of war that might have addressed the problems. In the case of the June War there were several steps that Israel could have taken that would have substantially mitigated the dangers of an Egyptian attack.

When Nasser demanded the removal of UNEF from the Egyptian side of the border with Israel, this increased the danger of war because at that point the two adversaries faced each other directly without the presence of UN troops between them. UNEF had first been deployed in 1957, following the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Egyptian territory after the combined Israeli-British-French invasion of Egypt in 1956. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld raised with Eban (then the Israeli ambassador to the UN) the possibility of UNEF being placed on both sides of the armistice line, but Eban

“ridiculed this matter and refused to discuss it.”<sup>43</sup> Hammarskjold as well as U.S. officials worried about the “mortal danger to life of UNEF, which is implicit in Israeli unwillingness to station it on her side of demarcation line.”<sup>44</sup> Secretary of State Dulles instructed his UN ambassador to tell Hammarskjold regarding the necessity of stationing UNEF on both sides of the demarcation line, “In this case Israel is very much in the wrong. The Secretary-General should make clear Israel’s refusal to agree to this. He should press this point hard in public and make it clear to all the world.”<sup>45</sup>

In May 1967, when Nasser withdrew his consent to UNEF being stationed on Egyptian territory, Secretary-General U Thant, as well as the governments of the United States, Britain, and Canada, asked Israel if it would be willing to accept the UNEF troops on its side of the border. The Israeli UN ambassador dismissed the idea out of hand: “Ridiculous, Israel is not the Salvation Army and would not be willing to accept UN discards from Egypt.”<sup>46</sup>

Israeli officials noted, correctly, that repositioning UNEF on the Israeli side of the border would not address the problem of the Gulf of Aqaba. (The presence of UNEF forces on Egyptian soil at Sharm al-Sheikh had prevented Egypt from closing the Gulf to Israeli traffic. Nasser had formally ordered the withdrawal of UNEF on May 18 and declared the straits closed to Israeli vessels and strategic cargoes on May 23.) We will consider the closure of the straits below, but here it is sufficient to note that Sharm al-Sheikh, which did not border Israeli territory, had no relevance to the question of an Egyptian armed attack on Israel. Therefore, Israel’s refusal to accept UNEF on its territory undermines its argument that its preemptive strike was justified by the threat of imminent attack. U Thant and Odd Bull, the chief UN observer in the region, both believed that Israeli agreement to reposition UNEF on its side of the border might have averted war.<sup>47</sup>

## **Was Closing the Straits of Tiran the First Strike in a War?**

Many Israeli officials and advocates have argued that Israel's attack on June 5 was justified not so much by the threat of an imminent attack by Egypt, but because the war had already begun: Nasser's closing of the Straits of Tiran was an act of war in violation of international law, an act that Israel had warned in 1957 would justify Israeli action in self-defense. So in this view the war began on May 22 or May 23—with the closing of the straits—and Israel's June 5 actions were a response to and not an initiation of war.<sup>48</sup>

But almost all others—including many who supported Israel's position that it was entitled to unimpeded access to the Gulf of Aqaba—rejected this notion of what constituted the first shot. Lyndon Johnson and numerous other U.S. officials warned Israel not to “make itself the guilty party by starting a war”<sup>49</sup>—a warning that would make no sense if the war had already begun. The French government too did not believe that the first shot had already been fired.<sup>50</sup> And, of course, the Israeli government refers to the 1967 war as “the Six Day War,” not the “19 Day War.”

But even if the war didn't begin on May 23, was the Egyptian action in closing the gulf an act of war, entitling Israel to take military measures in response? This is a two-part question: first, whether the Egyptian move violated international law, and second, what Israel's legal recourse was.

The U.S. government and many other maritime powers took the view that the Gulf of Aqaba was legally an international waterway and that Egypt had no right to restrict access to it. There were many good arguments in support of this position, but there were some good counter-arguments as well.<sup>51</sup> The Convention on the Territorial Sea adopted at the Law of the Sea conference in 1958 supported the right of innocent passage

in the gulf, but the relevant section was adopted in committee by the far-from-overwhelming vote of 31-30, with 10 abstentions.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, under international law, a convention binds a state only if the state itself has ratified it, unless the convention is reiterating existing law. Egypt did not accede to the convention, and, according to the head of the U.S. delegation to the conference, the relevant section of the convention represented a "new" rule,<sup>53</sup> thus at least raising doubts as to whether it bound Egypt.<sup>54</sup>

Under international law the right of innocent passage normally even permits the passage of warships that are not acting in a manner prejudicial to the coastal state. But the state of belligerency between Israel and Egypt made this not a normal situation. In 1957, UN Secretary-General Hammarskjold had advised that if Israel tried to send warships through the straits, he would consider Egypt justified in stopping Israeli commercial shipping in the gulf.<sup>55</sup> And, tellingly, from 1957 to 1967 Israel—normally so quick to assert its rights—never sought to have its military vessels transit the straits.<sup>56</sup> Because of the issue of belligerency, Charles Yost, Lyndon Johnson's special envoy to the Middle East, stated that the legal case for free passage "is at least open to doubt."<sup>57</sup> But even more significantly, in private "Israel was not at all sure about its legal right to freely pass through the Straits."<sup>58</sup>

Even if Israel's right of passage were clear-cut, however, that doesn't mean that Egypt's declaring the straits closed justified a military response from Israel. On March 1, 1957, Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir had declared that the country considered interference with its shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba to be a *casus belli*. But such declarations do not by themselves provide justification for a military response. In 1967, the State Department's legal adviser wrote a memo

arguing that there was grave doubt whether international law gave Israel the right to initiate the use of armed force against Egypt in the absence of an actual armed attack and that closure of the straits and even mining did not in themselves constitute an armed attack.<sup>59</sup> And even if Israel were entitled to use force in self-defense in response to an actual armed attack on its shipping through the straits, the legal adviser noted, this would not justify the all-out attack on Egypt that Israel in fact launched.<sup>60</sup>

Though Abba Eban told U.S. officials that denying Israel access to the Gulf of Aqaba would be like requiring Israel to “live on one lung,”<sup>61</sup> this dramatically overstated the economic importance of Nasser’s blockade. First, the blockade covered only Israeli-flagged ships or strategic cargoes, including oil, on non-Israeli ships. Israeli-flagged ships arrived at Eilat rather infrequently—117 ships over ten years. In May 1967, Washington asked Israel for this data; Israel collected it but then promptly declared it to be classified, fearing that U.S. officials would conclude that this sea traffic wasn’t substantial enough to wage a war over.<sup>62</sup> But the rarity of Israeli flags was known. UN officials reported that an Israeli-flagged ship had not gone through the straits in almost two years,<sup>63</sup> and the French foreign minister considered the number of Israeli ships that used the straits to be “insignificant” and not enough to justify going to war.<sup>64</sup>

As for non-Israeli ships, Israeli exports were not barred at all (except presumably for weapons sales) since nonstrategic cargoes were not affected. So the only significant interruption in Israeli trade was the import of oil. But Eilat was not Israel’s only source for oil: It could enter via Israel’s Mediterranean coast, and Venezuelan oil via Haifa was cheaper and had roughly the same shipping cost as Iranian oil.<sup>65</sup>

One might argue that even if access to the straits was of no practical value at all it was important for Israel to challenge the announced blockade simply on principle: One shouldn't allow aggressors to benefit from their aggression. But this principle cuts two ways. Before 1956, Israeli ships were barred from the straits. Then, following the Israeli-French-British aggression on Egypt, Israel was able to use the straits. As Nasser wrote to Lyndon Johnson on June 2, 1967, Egypt's position "indeed aims at removing the last vestige of the tripartite aggression, in consonance with the moral principle which rules that no aggressor be rewarded for his aggression."<sup>66</sup> Ten years earlier, President Eisenhower had enunciated the same principle, noting that Israel was unjustly insisting on conditions for its withdrawal from territory it had seized in the Suez war.<sup>67</sup>

One way to resolve the legal issues regarding the status of the Gulf of Aqaba would be to submit the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ or World Court). Over the years, Israeli officials were petrified by this prospect.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, in May to June 1967, Egyptian officials gave several indications that they would be willing to submit the matter to the ICJ, and even that they might have been willing to let oil go through while the court was deliberating.<sup>69</sup> Israel's attack preempted any possibility of a legal resolution.

Israeli officials did consider sending a ship through the straits to have it fired on, as a way to provoke and justify going to war, but they rejected the idea for fear it would warn the Egyptians that an attack was imminent, thereby undermining their surprise attack.<sup>70</sup>

### **Was War Inevitable?**

Was there a possibility of a negotiated solution to the

crisis? On June 2, Nasser offered to send his vice president to Washington and to accept Vice President Humphrey in Cairo for talks. Some U.S. officials saw some promise in these talks,<sup>71</sup> others were skeptical.<sup>72</sup> What is clear, however, is that no vital interests of either Israel or Egypt or any other Arab state were at stake, given that the shipment of strategic cargoes through the straits was not essential to the Israeli economy, as noted above, and that Israeli access to the straits had not in fact led to passage by military vessels that might have threatened Arab security. Nevertheless, states sometimes fear concessions on nonvital interests out of concern that this will lead to a Munich: a series of incremental reductions in security, none of which is vital, but that cumulatively undermine a vital interest.<sup>73</sup> Many believed that the appetite of the aggressor was whetted by appeasement.

But looking at Israeli-Arab relations, it was not obvious that Israel had been the one victimized by continual aggression.

- In 1953, an Israeli raid on the Jordanian village of Qibya killed 69 civilians, even though Jordan had offered full cooperation in tracking down the infiltrators (not from Qibya) responsible for killing three Israelis. The Security Council, with the affirmative vote of the United States, expressed its "strongest censure" of the Israeli action, while privately the Israeli foreign minister told his colleagues that the attack had "presented us to the entire world as bloodthirsty bandits," and the "stain ... would not be washed away for many years."<sup>74</sup>
- In 1954, Israeli military intelligence activated a terrorist cell in Egypt to set off bombs in public places.<sup>75</sup>
- In 1956, of course, Israel had joined with France and Britain to launch an attack on Egypt that world

opinion—including the U.S. government—considered an act of unjustified aggression. Even when Israel withdrew from Sinai—under international pressure—it did so in a manner befitting a bully. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) “on Ben-Gurion’s instructions ... left scorched earth. All military camps and buildings were destroyed; railway lines were dismantled and carted back to Israel; roads were plowed up and certain areas mined.”<sup>76</sup>

- In subsequent years, Israel had many border clashes with Syria. Syria surely bore some responsibility for these, but the evidence seems clear that the primary responsibility was Israel’s.<sup>77</sup> The Israelis, wrote the commander of the UN Truce Supervision Organization, were “always encroaching on Arab-owned property,” in a policy of “deliberate poaching.”<sup>78</sup> UN observers reported that 9 out of 10 shooting incidents were provoked by Israel;<sup>79</sup> Moshe Dayan said he thought at least 80 percent of the incidents were intentionally provoked by Israel.<sup>80</sup> In 1964, a U.S. State Department official reported that whereas Syria basically was seeking to retain the situation envisioned in the Armistice Agreements, “Israel consistently sought [to] gain full control.” Most UN observers, the official went on, credited the Syrians with restraint in the face of Israel’s seizing control of the demilitarized zones by force or threat of force.<sup>81</sup>
- In November 1966, Israeli forces attacked the Jordanian village of Samu, allegedly in response to Palestinian terrorist raids. U.S. officials considered Jordan’s efforts to control these raids “active and sincere,”<sup>82</sup> even “extraordinary,”<sup>83</sup> but in any case, “retaliation is not the point in this case. This 3,000-man raid with tanks and planes was out of all proportion to the provocation and was aimed at the wrong target.”<sup>84</sup>



- Later that month, Israel shot down two Egyptian MiG-19s. Israel claimed that the planes had entered their airspace, but U.S. officials expressed doubts as to whether Israel's behavior was "as 'innocent' as it claims. We have some difficulty in understanding how aircraft allegedly destroyed over Israel territory happened to fall in" Egypt.<sup>85</sup>
- On April 7, 1967, Israel launched 130 planes over Syria, penetrating deep into the country, hitting numerous targets, and downing six Syrian planes.<sup>86</sup> "Have you lost your mind?" Moshe Dayan screamed at Ezer Weizman, head of military operations. "Can't you see that you are leading this country into war?" David Ben Gurion too thought Prime Minister Eshkol was recklessly turning each reprisal into an act of war.<sup>87</sup>
- In May, the Russians informed the Egyptians that Israel was preparing a major strike on Syria. The specific information relayed by Moscow—that Israeli troops were concentrated on the border—was almost certainly false. But there really were serious threats issued by Israeli officials (at least one of these made it into the CIA's daily brief of the president<sup>88</sup>), and if the attack was to come from the air, border deployments wouldn't be necessary.

Given this background of Israeli aggression, provocations, and threats, it seems hard to suggest that Israel had to go to war rather than accept a compromise that might have whetted the appetite of an aggressor.

### **Justified War?**

There are three additional considerations that should lead us to doubt the Israeli claim that it was acting in justified anticipatory self-defense.

First, there is the matter of the lies on June 5, and well

after, as to who fired the first shot. Israel insisted—falsely—that Egypt attacked first. Cover-ups are not usually engaged in by innocent parties. Note that the lie was not just battlefield deception trying to confuse the Arabs. The lie was told to the United Nations and even to the United States, and was repeated long after the guns had fallen silent.<sup>89</sup> At a minimum, Israel's lying suggests that it didn't think its claimed right of preemption under the circumstances would be widely accepted.

Second, there is the matter of Israel's territorial aggrandizement. Consider the case of a defendant explaining that he killed his neighbor for fear that the neighbor was about to kill him. The credibility of this claim would be seriously undermined if, after the killing, the defendant had looted the neighbor's property. This is, of course, not a *decisive* refutation of the claim: The preemptive killing could have been carried out in utterly good faith, with the defendant deciding to commit the theft only afterwards. Nevertheless, we would certainly be suspicious.

On June 5, when Israel launched its offensive, Prime Minister Eshkol publicly declared that Israel had no territorial ambitions and Defense Minister Dayan told his troops, "Soldiers of the IDF, we have no objectives of conquest."<sup>90</sup> When later that summer Dean Rusk reminded Abba Eban of Eshkol's statement, the Israeli foreign minister "simply shrugged his shoulders and said, 'We've changed our minds.'"<sup>91</sup> But in fact, we know that several key Israeli policymakers wanted to acquire more land before the first shot was fired. Yigal Allon wrote an article before the outbreak of fighting in which he stated we "must not cease fighting until we achieve total victory, the territorial fulfillment of the Land of Israel."<sup>92</sup> Levi Eshkol himself told his wife the evening before the war, "We have to take back Jerusalem."<sup>93</sup> And more generally, Ben Gurion had been saying since 1949 that Israel's

failure to conquer East Jerusalem and the West Bank in the War of Independence was “a lamentation for generations,” a phrase used by many Israeli politicians over the subsequent 18 years.<sup>94</sup>

This is not to say that in April 1967, Israel had a master plan to seize the territories it did. Clearly there was much that was unpredictable about the way things developed, and appetites grew as the opportunities for conquest became available.

It might be argued that Israel’s holding on to East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights for the next half-century are not evidence of territorial aggrandizement, but simply a bargaining chip for achieving peace, as occurred with Egypt, to whom the Sinai was returned following the Camp David Accords. But there are several reasons for thinking that expansionism has been the consensus view of Israel’s leaders, whether or not they all held this view before June 5: (1) Numerous Israeli officials stated early on that Israel would never go back to the 1967 borders.<sup>95</sup> (2) The Israeli cabinet formulated an early peace proposal that offered the Sinai and the Golan Heights to Egypt and Syria in return for peace treaties. Even if this is taken as sincere—and not a maneuver knowing that the Arabs would never accept a deal that failed to include the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem<sup>96</sup>—holding on to these latter territories cannot be reconciled with a lack of territorial ambitions.<sup>97</sup> (3) Israel annexed East Jerusalem on June 27, 1967. (4) Several hundred thousand Palestinian residents of the occupied territories were expelled and most of them denied the right to return to their homes,<sup>98</sup> policies consistent with conquest, not bargaining chips. And (5) Israel began moving settlers into the occupied territories within months of the war’s end<sup>99</sup>—a policy their legal advisor told them was in contravention of international law<sup>100</sup>—and again,

consistent with creating “facts on the ground” for permanent border changes, not bargaining chips.

The third consideration bearing on the Israeli claim of having acted in justified self-defense relates to Syria and Jordan. These two countries fired at Israel before Israel fired at them, so it might seem that this was a clear case of self-defense—not preemptive self-defense, but self-defense when “an armed attack occurs.” Indeed, Israeli officials note that they issued a plea to Jordan’s King Hussein to stay out of the war, and attacked him only when he rejected their plea and struck Israel first. This argument is not compelling, however, because Syria, Jordan, and Egypt all were joined in a defensive military alliance. Article 51 of the UN Charter allows both individual and collective self-defense in the face of an attack. When there is a defensive alliance, an attack on one gives the victim’s allies the right to join in the defense. Few argue, for example, that the British and French declaration of war against Germany in 1939 was an act of aggression after Germany attacked their ally.

So if Israel’s attack on Egypt was unjustified, then Syria and Jordan had every right to come to the assistance of their ally as part of collective self-defense. But in fact, despite their right to do so, they barely did:

- “While the IAF [Israeli Air Force] pummeled the Egyptian Air Force, the Syrians, Jordanians and Iraqis launched desultory air raids against Israel—all of which failed to find their targets and none of which did any significant damage,” in the words of U.S. security analyst Kenneth Pollack.<sup>101</sup>
- “Both the Syrians and the Jordanians did their absolute minimum to help the Egyptians during the war,” said Israeli security expert Zeev Maoz.<sup>102</sup>
- The Syrians from the start of the crisis “were prepared to stand immobile on the sidelines while Israel pounded

their ally, Egypt, and Jordan.” And “during the initial days of the war, until the Israeli attack commenced on the Golan Heights, the Syrians kept a low profile. Their conduct did not deviate from Syrian behavior patterns from the days before the outbreak of the crisis,” according to Israeli historian Eyal Zisser.<sup>103</sup>

- The “Syrians have done the bare minimum to help out since beginning of conflict,” reported the U.S. Embassy in Amman on June 6.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, military necessity could not have been the justification for seizing the West Bank and the Golan Heights.

After Jordan’s perfunctory military efforts and Israel’s strong response, King Hussein desperately sought an end to the fighting. He prevailed upon Washington to try to arrange a ceasefire directly with Israel, but, in the words of Avi Shlaim, the Jordanian monarch’s leading biographer, the “American request prompted the Israeli government to order the army to take the Old City of Jerusalem before the Security Council had a chance to order a ceasefire.”<sup>105</sup> At 11 p.m. on June 6, the council did order an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, but the IDF did not respect it. “On the contrary, it intensified its offensive in order to gain as much territory as possible.” It was “only after military intelligence reported ... that King Hussein had ordered his forces to retreat across the [Jordan] river that Dayan ordered the capture of the entire West Bank.” Washington and London urged Israel to accept the ceasefire, but it refused, leading the British prime minister to tell “the Israeli ambassador that Israel’s refusal to respond to Hussein’s offer of a ceasefire cast doubt on its claims that its war aims were defensive and not territorial.”

On the Syrian front, Defense Minister Dayan at first prohibited an Israeli offensive. When kibbutz residents near the border urged an attack, Dayan commented that it would be

better to move a few kibbutzim 15 kilometers back, out of range of Syrian artillery, than to conquer the Golan Heights. But he then changed his mind and ordered Israeli forces to take the territory. Was there a new Syrian threat that compelled this reversal? On the contrary. Dayan insisted at the time and later that the capture of the Golan Heights “was unnecessary”; that “the Syrians on the fourth day of the war were no threat to us”; that “we did not have to enter into war with Syria because of their initiatives.” What *did* occur between Dayan’s two decisions was that the Egyptians had been defeated, the Syrians accepted a ceasefire, and the danger of Soviet intervention seemed reduced. As historian Eyal Zisser concluded, “it seems that the determining factor was the desire of the decision-makers in Israel ... to settle accounts with the Syrians for their conduct over the previous two decades of prolonged conflict between the two countries.”<sup>106</sup>

## **Consequences**

United Nations Security Council resolution 242 famously refers to the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war. This principle applies both to offensive and defensive wars, but when the war is a war of aggression, the crime of occupation is far greater. Some would argue that it is sometimes permissible to strike first, when one is preempting an imminent enemy attack. But this was not the situation in 1967, which was a clear case of Israeli aggression.

Occupation was only one result of the 1967 war. Israel’s decisive military victory led to a tremendous growth of hubris among Israel’s leaders. The forces of militarism and maximalist positions were greatly strengthened and those favoring diplomacy and compromise sidelined.

France, once Tel Aviv’s closest ally, was replaced by the United States. Before 1967, U.S. support for Israel had been rather minimal; now Washington became Israel’s strongest international backer, providing massive military aid and

diplomatic protection. From the record, it's not entirely clear whether the Johnson administration gave Israel a green light to go to war, or just an amber one.<sup>107</sup> Either way, with half a million troops in Southeast Asia battling on behalf of militarily incompetent allies, Washington was now delighted to have a partner that could bloody those backed by Moscow without any need for deploying U.S. personnel.

For many American Jews, the 1967 war led to a dramatic increase in support for Israel. For some, it was the pride of being "tough Jews," and no longer passive victims. For others, it was now possible to support Israel while supporting U.S. foreign policy, with no risk of raising the issue of dual loyalty.<sup>108</sup>

Israel's alliance with the United States, however, no more promoted justice for the people of the Middle East—Palestinians, Jews, and others—than did Zionism's and Israel's earlier alliances with other imperial powers. Peace and dignity for all the region's people have always required breaking with Western imperialism. But nor would justice come from the Arab states, whether Nasserist, feudal monarchy, or Ba'athist dictatorship. These regimes have continually pursued their narrow national and class interests and always betrayed the interests of Palestinians.

A socialist alternative to war needs to be built on other foundations: on a real resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue, on an end to occupation, and on true self-determination and social justice for all the people of the Middle East. Zionism claimed its purpose was to offer a safe haven for persecuted Jews. Israel today is instead one of the most dangerous places in the world for Jews to live. The security and well-being of some requires the security and well-being of all.

## Footnotes

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4. See citations in John Quigley, *The Six-Day War and Israeli Self-Defense: Questioning the Legal Basis for Preventive War* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 125, 135.
5. George W. Gawrych, "The Egyptian Military Defeat of 1967," *Journal of Contemporary History* (vol. 26, no. 2, Apr., 1991), 280; Moshe Shemesh, *Arab Politics, Palestinian Nationalism and the Six-Day War* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), x, 200-201.
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7. Bar-Zohar, *Embassies in Crisis*, 120.
8. FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:61, May 25, 1967; FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:72, May 26, 1967; FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:73, May 26, 1967;



FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:77, May 26, 1967; FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:80, May 27, 1967. See also FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:79, May 26, 1967.

9. FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:124, June 1, 1967.

10. Address by Prime Minister Begin at the [National Defense College](#), August 8, 1982.

11. Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Little, Brown, 1979), 96-97. See also Ami Gluska, "Israel's Decision to Go to War, June 2, 1967," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (vol. 11, no. 2, June 2007), 4.

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13. Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East* (Metropolitan Books, 2005, translated 2007), 335.

14. Segev, *1967*, 336.

15. Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 92-97, 119-21.

16. FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:65, May 26, 1967.

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18. Richard B. Parker, ed., *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 45.

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Decision Making in Egypt on the Eve of the Six-Day War," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (vol. 9, no. 2, June 2005), 33-34.

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21. Segev, 1967, 256.

22. FRUS, 1964-1968, XIX:63, May 25, 1967; FRUS, 1964-1968, XIX:71, May 26, 1967.

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33. FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:77, May 26, 1967 (quote from Eban).
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42. FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:130, June 2, 1967 (McNamara).
43. FRUS, 1955–1957, XVII:152, Feb. 26, 1957 (U.S. UN ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge reporting account of UN Under-Secretary-General Ralph Bunch).
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*East* (Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1984), 70.

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58. Barak, "Between Reality and Secrecy," 672.
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62. Barak, "Between Reality and Secrecy," 679.
63. Rikhye, *Sinai Blunder*, 78. See also Parker, *Politics of Miscalculation*, 47, and Thant, *View from the UN*, 235.
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65. Barak, "Between Reality and Secrecy," 679.
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20, 1957 ([The American Presidency Project](#), John T. Woolley & Gerhard Peters, Santa Barbara, California.

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81. July 21, 1964, telegram from U.S. Consulate, Jerusalem, to secretary of state, printed in Stephen Green, *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (William Morrow & Co., 1984), 346-48.
82. FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:330, October 31, 1966.
83. FRUS, 1964–1968, XVIII:332, November 13, 1966.
84. FRUS, 1964–1968, XVIII:333, November 15, 1966. The U.S. later revised the scale of the attack downward, but it was still the largest IDF operation since Suez.
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88. [CIA Daily Brief](#), May 13, 1967. See also FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:4, May 15, 1967; Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 59; Gat, "Air Power," 1213; Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 304; Parker, *Politics of Miscalculation*, 224; Parker, *Six-Day War*, 7, 14-15 (L. Carl Brown & Parker); Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly," 287-88; Thant, *View from the UN*, 228; Yost, "The Arab-Israeli War," 309; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (Norton, 2001), 236-37.

89. Oren, *Six Days of War*, 169; Segev, *1967*, 337; Odd Bull, *War and Peace in the Middle East: The Experiences and Views of a UN Observer* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1976), 113; Parker, *Six-Day War*, 100; FRUS, 1964–1968, XIX:169, June 5, 1967; Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 210.

90. Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 388; Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 313. For further quotes along these lines, see Sami Hadawi, *Bitter Harvest: A Modern History of Palestine* (Olive Branch Press, 1989), 222-23.

91. Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 388.

92. Brecher with Geist, *Decisions in Crisis*, 100. The article was published after the war but written before.

93. Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 195.

94. Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 321.

95. See, e.g., the quotes in Hadawi, *Bitter Harvest*, 223-26; Seth S. King, "Dayan Rules Out Total Pullback from Arab Areas; Links Security of Israel to Occupied Territories," *New York Times*, August 11, 1967, 9. Note that Israel indicated its refusal to return to the 1967 lines *before* the Arab states' September 1, 1967, Khartoum Conference with its famous "three nos." On Jerusalem, Dayan declared on June 7, "We have returned to the holiest of our holy places, never to part from it again." (Quoted in Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 233.)

96. As Patrick Tyler (*A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* [Farrar Straus Giroux, 2009], 103) suggests.

97. The offer to Egypt and Syria was probably never communicated to them. (Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 253-54.)

98. Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 327-29. See also Segev, *1967*, 523-42.



99. The government resolution on settling Golan lands was adopted at the end of August 1967 and "classified top secret." (Segev, 1967, 574-75.)

100. Donald Macintyre, "Secret memo shows Israel knew Six Day War was illegal," *The Independent* (London), May 26, 2007; Segev, 1967, 576. About six months after the war there were more than 800 settlers. (Segev, 1967, 580.)

101. Kenneth Pollack, "Air Power in the Six-Day War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (vol. 28, issue 3, June 2005), 474.

102. Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land*, 310. See also van Creveld, *Sword and Olive*, 179-80, 191.

103. Eyal Zisser, "June 1967: Israel's Capture of the Golan Heights," *Israel Studies* (vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 2002), 172, 181.

104. Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 229.

105. Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan*, 249, 245, 251.

106. Zisser, "Israel's Capture...," 188, 168, 169, 185, 189, 187. As Lt. Gen. Haim Bar-Lev put it, "I do not want to think of a situation where the war ends without the Syrians getting what they deserve." (Ibid.)

107. Shlaim, "Israel," in Louis & Shlaim, 38; Gluska, *Israeli Military...*, 249.

108. Paul Breines, *Tough Jews* (Basic Books, 1990); Norman G. Finkelstein, *Knowing Too Much: Why the American Jewish Romance with Israel Is Coming to an End* (OR Books, 2012), 36-43.