

New York Times perpetuates myth Israel was 'fighting for its very survival' during 1967 war

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On January 25, the *New York Times* posted an article by their Israel correspondent, Jodi Rudoren, about a new Israeli film, "Censored Voices," which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival this past weekend. Directed by Mor Loushy, "Censored Voices" is "the latest in a series of movies by leftist Israeli filmmakers who have won awards abroad by presenting harsh looks at their own society." The film deals with Israeli war crimes committed during the 1967 war between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. But while Rudoren's article performs a valuable service in drawing attention to the film, it also perpetuates one of the main myths about that war.



Based largely on interviews with Israeli soldiers—conducted in 1967, and heavily censored at the time—"Censored Voices" documents Israeli soldiers "summarily executing prisoners and evacuating Arab villages in a manner that one fighter likened to the Nazis' treatment of European Jews." Israeli atrocities in that war have been known for quite a while, but film is certainly a more powerful medium than newsprint.

The film (which I haven't yet seen) seems important, and especially useful at a time when the Israeli military is under investigation for atrocities committed in its recent Gaza assaults. It is increasingly hard for anyone to believe that Israeli soldiers are "blessed with special moral values," in the words of a 1995 statement from the office of then-Prime Minister (and 1967 Chief of Staff) Yitzhak Rabin. Rudoren's article also provides the significant information that even "Censored Voices" was censored and hence doesn't tell the full story of the war crimes that occurred: "Israel forbids the filmmakers to reveal how much they were forced to change, and the military censor's office refused to discuss it."

But Rudoren and apparently Loushy give an extremely inaccurate context for the atrocities committed in 1967. Rudoren describes that war as one in which Israel "started out fighting ... for its very survival." The film, says Rudoren, could lead to fodder for Israel's critics if "viewed without consideration for the existential threat Israel faced at the time." The movie, she writes, "does make clear the imminent threat to Israel—and then the stunning turnabout that military historians have long considered a marvel." And Loushy is quoted as saying that "This is the story of men who went out to war feeling like they had to defend their life, and they were right, of course...."

But they were not right, and nor are Rudoren or Loushy.

Yes, Israeli soldiers, like much of the world, believed at the time that Israel faced an existential threat, as Arab armies poised on Israel's borders while Radio Cairo broadcast bloodcurdling threats. But military and intelligence leaders in both Tel Aviv and Washington knew better.

Consider the testimony of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, a member of the cabinet in June 1967:

"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.”

Or that of General Matti Peled, one of the twelve members of the Israeli Army’s general staff in 1967:

“I am convinced that our General Staff never told the government [of Levi Eshkol] that there was any substance to the Egyptian military threat to Israel, or that we were not capable of crushing Nasser’s army which had exposed itself, with unprecedented foolishness, to the devastating strikes of our forces.... While we proceeded towards the full mobilization of our forces, no person in his right mind could believe that all this force was necessary for our ‘defense’ against the Egyptian threat....To pretend that the Egyptian forces concentrated on our borders were capable of threatening Israel’s existence not only insults the intelligence of any person capable of analyzing this kind of situation, but is primarily an insult to Zahal [the Israeli Army].”

Or that of General Ezer Weizman, chief of operations in 1967 and later a prominent rightwing politician, who declared that “There never was a danger of extermination,” and that this hypothesis “had never been considered in any serious meeting.”

Or that of Haim Bar-Lev, Deputy Chief of Staff in 1967, and later a cabinet member: “We were not threatened with genocide on the eve of the Six-Day War and we had never thought of such a possibility.”

Or that of 1967 cabinet member Mordecai Bentov, a member of the leftist Mapam Party, who voted against launching the war in 1967 because he was convinced that political and diplomatic means of avoiding war had not been exhausted: “This whole story about the threat of extermination was totally contrived, and then elaborated upon, *a posteriori*, to justify the annexation of new Arab territories.”

The same view was held in Washington. On May 26, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara “said that the U.S. agreed with the Israeli view that Israel would prevail in a conflict, even if hostilities were initiated by Egypt.” The chair of the Joints Chiefs of Staff “General Wheeler restated the American view of Israel’s military superiority and said that, although we recognize that casualties would be greater than in 1948 and 1956, Israel would prevail.” President Lyndon Johnson “said ... if Israel is attacked, our judgment is that the Israelis would lick them,” and told the Israeli foreign minister “if the UAR attacks ‘you will whip hell out of them.’” The CIA predicted not only that Israel would win, but the day on which they would do so.

The evidence is thus overwhelming that Israeli policymakers did not go to war in response to an existential threat. Why does all this matter today? If Israel’s conquest of the West Bank and Gaza (as well as the Golan Heights) were all inadvertent consequences of a war against an existential threat, then Israeli responsibility for the occupation is somewhat mitigated.

Of course, even if Israel had been forced to go to war by an existential threat, it still would have had choices. It could have offered Palestinians the option of an independent state of their own or a binational state. Justice was always possible. Indeed, every year since 1967 Israel has had the choice of whether to seek to reverse the occupation and seek security through building ties to Palestinians rather than by extending their oppressive occupation, and it has consistently chosen the latter. In the same way, every year since 1947 Israel had a choice of whether to welcome back the refugees or to accelerate their dispossession. Again, Israel has consistently chosen the latter. Nevertheless, knowing what happened in 1967 is important because the absence of an existential threat

undermines the chief Israeli talking point for its ongoing occupation.

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." When later that summer U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk reminded Foreign Minister Abba Eban of Eshkol's statement, Eban "simply shrugged his shoulders and said, 'We've changed our minds.'"¹ But in fact, we know that several key Israeli policymakers wanted to acquire more land before the first shot was fired. The Minister of Labor, 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."² Prime Minister Levi Eshkol told his wife the evening before the war, "We have to take back Jerusalem."³ And more generally David 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.⁴

Did Israel occupy these lands simply as bargaining chips for peace? Hardly: almost immediately it annexed East Jerusalem; expelled several hundred thousand Palestinian residents of the occupied territories, and began moving settlers into the occupied territories⁵—a policy their legal advisor told them was in contravention of international law. This is what you do when you are interested in creating "facts on the ground" for permanent border changes, not bargaining chips for peace.

All this history is occluded by Rudoren's gloss of the 1967 war as representing an existential threat to Israel. To be sure, Rudoren didn't have to present in her news story a full historical analysis of the 1967 war, with a careful assessment of all the evidence. But to offer up the pro-Israel myth as if it were undisputed fact is simply propaganda.

Notes

1. Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 388.
1. Michael Brecher with Benjamin Geist, *Decisions in Crisis: Israel, 1967 and 1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 100. The article was published after the war but written before.
1. Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem: the Six Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1984), p. 195.
1. Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 321.
1. Morris, *Righteous Victims*, pp. 327-29. See also Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005, translated 2007), pp. 523-42.