



THE
1967
Arab-Israeli
WAR

Origins and Consequences

Wm. Roger Louis
Avi Shlaim

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The 1967 Arab-Israeli War

Origins and Consequences

The June 1967 War was a watershed moment in the history of the modern Middle East. In six days, the Israelis defeated the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and seized large portions of territory including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. With the hindsight of four decades and access to recently declassified documents, two veteran scholars of the Middle East bring together some of the most knowledgeable experts in their fields to reassess the origins of the war and its regional reverberations. Each chapter takes a different perspective from the vantage point of a different participant, those that actually took part in the war, and the world powers – the United States, Soviet Union, Britain, and France – that played important roles behind the scenes. Their conclusions make for sober reading. At the heart of the story was the incompetence of the Egyptian high command under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the rivalry between various Arab players who were deeply suspicious of each other's motives. Israel, on the other side, gained a resounding victory for which, despite previous assessments to the contrary, there was no master plan.

Wm. Roger Louis is the Kerr Professor of English History and Culture at the University of Texas at Austin and Honorary Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford. A past President of the American Historical Association, he is the editor-in-chief of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*. His books include *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951* (1984) and *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez, and Decolonization* (2006).

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The 1967 Arab-Israeli War

Origins and Consequences

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Chronology of the June 1967 War

- 29 May 1964 Creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)
- 23 February 1966 Left-wing coup in Syria followed by increased PLO activity against Israel
- 9 November 1966 Syria and Egypt sign mutual defence treaty
- 13 November 1966 Israeli raid on West Bank village of al-Samu‘
- 7 April 1967 Israeli aircraft shoot down six Syrian MiGs
- 5 May 1967 Attacks by Islamic opposition in Syria against the neo-Ba‘thist regime
- 7 May 1967 Syria shells Israeli village of Ein Gev
- 9 May 1967 Soviets receive information from Tel Aviv indicating possible Israeli operations against Syria
- 12 May 1967 Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin threatens Syria; reprimanded by Prime Minister Eshkol
- 13 May 1967 Soviet Union delivers secret message to Nasser about Israel amassing troops on the Syrian border
- 14 May 1967 Nasser deploys troops in Sinai
- 18 May 1967 Nasser requests withdrawal of UN Emergency Force from Sinai
- 21 May 1967 Egyptian troops occupy Sharm al-Sheikh
- 22 May 1967 Nasser closes the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping
- 23 May 1967 President Johnson warns Egypt against interfering with shipping rights in the Gulf of Aqaba; Israel’s Ministerial Committee on Security Affairs discusses the army’s recommendation to launch a preemptive war
- 26 May 1967 Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban meets President Johnson after talks with de Gaulle and Wilson
- 27 May 1967 Israel sends request to meet with the Soviet leadership; Nasser cancels operation against Israel planned for the following morning

- 28 May 1967 First meeting between Israeli government and Israel Defence Force (IDF) high command; Eshkol delivers hesitant speech to the nation
- 30 May 1967 Egypt and Jordan sign mutual defence pact in Cairo
- 31 May 1967 Mossad chief Meir Amit meets with U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials
- 1 June 1967 Government of National Unity formed in Jerusalem, with Moshe Dayan taking over as Minister of Defence; Egyptian General Riad assumes command of the Jordanian armed forces
- 2 June 1967 Second meeting between the Israeli government and high-ranking military officials; Nasser warns senior officers of imminent Israeli strike
- 4 June 1967 Israeli Cabinet decides to go to war; CIA alerts King Hussein of impending Israeli attack on Egypt
- 5 June 1967 Israel launches surprise attack on Egypt's air force, destroying most of it on the ground; Israel urges King Hussein to stay out of the war; Jordanians open hostilities against Israel; Israeli air force destroys most of Syrian air force
- 6 June 1967 IDF conquers Gaza; Egypt orders a general retreat; Jordan retreats from the West Bank
- 7 June 1967 IDF captures East Jerusalem; Nasser turns down UN ceasefire initiative
- 8 June 1967 IDF occupies Hebron and destroys Jordanian bridges; Israeli forces attack USS *Liberty*; Egypt accepts ceasefire
- 9 June 1967 United Nations passes Resolution 235 calling for immediate end to hostilities between Syria and Israel; IDF captures the Golan Heights; Israeli forces reach the Suez Canal; Nasser accuses United States and Britain of aiding Israel
- 10 June 1967 The Soviet Union breaks off diplomatic relations with Israel
- 27 June 1967 Israel annexes East Jerusalem
- 1 September 1967 Arab League summit at Khartoum rejects negotiations and reconciliation with Israel
- 22 November 1967 UN Security Council Resolution 242 calls on the Arabs to make peace with Israel and calls on Israel to withdraw from the territories it occupied during the war



MAP I. 1949 Armistice Lines



MAP 2. The Middle East after the June 1967 War

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Introduction

The June 1967 War was a turning point in the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and a watershed moment in the history of the modern Middle East. A vast literature on this war, popularly known as the Six-Day War, covers the subject from all angles. But the time has come for reassessment. Many previous accounts deal with the military operations on the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian fronts during the period of 5–10 June 1967. In this volume, the focus is not on the military operations but on the political aspects of the conflict, especially during the prolonged period of crisis that eventually erupted in all-out war. The aim is to reconstruct in some detail and in some depth the history of this fateful war from the perspective of its principal protagonists. These include the great powers and the regional powers. A major theme of the volume is the relationship between the great powers and their local allies on the road to war.

The contributors to this volume are area specialists. One of its strengths is that the authors have examined recently declassified material not only in English, French, and Russian but also in Hebrew and Arabic. The volume, however, is not merely a collection of articles with up-to-date material regarding different aspects of the war by different scholars. All the contributors were guided by the same overarching plan. Our collective aim has been to reinterpret the history of the June 1967 War by drawing as much as possible from the official documents and primary sources now available in all the relevant languages.

One objective of this volume is to reassess the outbreak of the war, the origins of which were as complex as its consequences have been far-reaching. Of the manifold causes that contributed to the outbreak of this war, three are of paramount importance: the long-standing hostility

between the Arab states and Israel; inter-Arab politics; and the involvement of external powers in the affairs of the region. The secondary literature about the origins of the war is extensive, but there is no consensus on the relative weight of these three contributing causes. The authors have shed new light on all three dimensions and on the complex interplay among them.

A pronounced asymmetry between the primary sources available on the Arab and Israeli sides exists. Israel follows the practice prevalent in liberal democracies of reviewing and declassifying its official documents. Arab countries do not. Official Israeli and British documents for 1967 were recently declassified under the thirty-year rule. American documents for this period are readily accessible in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. A large selection of documents is also published in the relevant volumes of the Foreign Relations of the United States series. A substantial collection of documents for 1967 was published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris in 2008 under the title *Documents Diplomatiques Français*. One needs privileged access to see official documents from the Russian Foreign Ministry, the General Staff, and the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*, or Committee for State Security) in Moscow, but photocopies of at least some of the documents regarding the June 1967 War are also available at the Cummings Centre for Russian Studies at Tel Aviv University. Arab governments do not normally open their records for research by independent scholars, but a substantial body of memoirs by Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian politicians and soldiers deal with the war.

The other major objective of this volume is to reassess the consequences of the war. Some of the results are obvious: the military balance shifted dramatically in Israel's favour. Pan-Arabism suffered a shattering defeat. Israel expanded its territory considerably by capturing the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula. Israel's neighbours went from simply supporting the Palestinians to having a direct stake in the conflict. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) emerged as a major player in the struggle for Palestine. A longer perspective suggests that Israel gradually began to lose international legitimacy in the aftermath of the war as a result of its intransigence, while the PLO began to gain international recognition as a national liberation movement. Over and beyond that, this volume establishes the war as marking not only a political and military transformation of the Middle East but also a shift in the emotional and intellectual climate of the region. The two concluding chapters of the

volume are an overview and an examination of the scope and nature of this transformation.

A substantial part of the existing literature views the war from a Western perspective; we have tried to redress the balance by paying more attention to the local powers. Western scholars have often written about the international politics of the Middle East as if the local powers hardly mattered. We do not deny the importance of the great powers in shaping the history and politics of the region. We do, however, believe in devoting equal attention to the role played by the local powers. In short, we examine this major event in the history of the region not only from the outside looking in but also from the inside looking out.

In this introduction, we try to place the June 1967 War in its historical context. The Middle East has been one of the most volatile and violent subsystems in the international political system since the end of the World War II. Postwar history in the Middle East has been punctuated by an unusually high number of armed conflicts: full-scale, interstate, and civil wars. A major source of this instability has been the conflict between Israel and the Arabs. This was one of the bitterest, most profound, and most protracted conflicts of the twentieth century and the principal precipitant of wars in the Middle East.

The Israeli-Palestinian dimension and the Israeli-Arab dimension are the two major dimensions of this conflict. The origins of the conflict go back to the end of the nineteenth century, when the Zionist movement promoted the idea of building an independent state for the Jewish people in Palestine. Zionism met with strong opposition on the part of the Arab population of the country. The upshot was a clash between two national movements for the possession of Palestine. There were two peoples and one land – hence the conflict.

The neighbouring Arab states became involved in the conflict on the side of the Palestinian Arabs during the late 1930s. In 1947, the struggle for Palestine entered its most critical phase. In February of that year, Britain announced its decision to relinquish its mandate over Palestine, which it had received from the League of Nations in the aftermath of World War I. On 29 November 1947, the United Nations, the successor to the League of Nations, passed a resolution calling for the partition of mandatory Palestine into two states: one Jewish, one Arab. The Jews accepted the partition resolution; the Palestinians, the Arab states, and the Arab League rejected it and went to war to prevent it. This long war was divided into two main phases. The first phase lasted from 1 December 1947 until 14 May 1948, when Britain's mandate over

Palestine expired and the state of Israel was proclaimed. During this phase, the Palestinians suffered a military defeat, Palestinian society was decimated, and the first large wave of refugees was set in motion. The second phase began on 15 May 1948 with the invasion of Palestine by the regular armies of the neighbouring Arab states, and it ended with a ceasefire on 7 January 1949. This phase also ended with a Jewish victory and a comprehensive Arab defeat. After the guns fell silent, Israel concluded armistice agreements with all its neighbours: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. These agreements gave Israel the only internationally recognized borders it has ever had. The main losers in the first Arab-Israeli war were the Palestinian Arabs. About 730,000 Palestinians, more than half the total, became refugees, and the name "Palestine" was wiped off the map.¹

Regarding the basic cause of the conflict there are widely divergent views. Most Arabs maintain that the root cause is the dispossession and dispersal of the Palestinian Arabs, an original sin that was compounded by Israel's subsequent territorial acquisitions. In their view, Israel is an inherently aggressive and expansionist state and the real source of violence in the region.² Most Israelis maintain that the fundamental cause of the conflict is not territory but is the Arab rejection of Israel's very right to exist as a sovereign state in the Middle East. According to this view, the basic Arab objective is the liquidation of the state of Israel, whereas Israel acts only in self-defence and in response to the Arab challenges.³ But whatever one's view are of the origins and nature of the Arab-Israeli dispute, there can be no doubt that the dispute has been a major cause of wars in the Middle East.

A second source of tension and instability, which at least on one occasion, in June 1967, helped tip the balance in favour of war, is to be found in the relations among the Arab states. In theory, all Arab states subscribe to the ideal of Arab unity, but in practice, inter-Arab relations are characterized more by conflict than by cooperation. Israel is widely held to be one of the few solid pillars propping up Arab unity, the one issue on which all Arabs, whatever their other differences, usually agree. Opposition to Israel follows naturally from the belief that the inhabitants

¹ Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; 2nd ed., 2007).

² See, e.g., David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977).

³ See, e.g., Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Strategies and Israel's Response* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

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