

From Diplomacy to War: The 1967 War Revisited

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Brief Analysis

On June 4, 2007, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy held a symposium marking the fortieth anniversary of the June 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The purpose of the symposium was to grapple with the failure of U.S.-led diplomacy on the eve of the war, exploring the period from a variety of perspectives. The following is a summary of the day's events.

Written summaries, streaming video, and downloadable audio of each session are available individually:

- [Opening Remarks, featuring Robert Satloff and Yuval Rabin](#)
- [Session I, featuring Robert Parker and Nicholas Rostow](#)
- [Special Video Presentation, featuring David Makovsky and Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan](#)
- [Session II, featuring Moshe Raviv and Michal Bar-Zohar](#)
- [Session III, featuring Samuel Lewis, Wendy Chamberlin, and Dennis Ross](#)

The symposium formally opened with remarks by Yuval Rabin, the son of Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's chief of staff during the 1967 war.

A lively discussion of American diplomatic efforts on the eve of the war followed. Ambassador Richard Parker, who served in the U.S. embassy in Cairo during the crisis, explained that American diplomats lacked sources close to Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser. The problem was exacerbated by the absence of a U.S. ambassador to Egypt in the crucial months before the war. As a result, American policymakers lacked a clear understanding of Nasser's political objectives and his strategy for achieving them.

Nicholas Rostow, whose father Eugene was a critical player in the State Department's efforts to manage the crisis and whose uncle Walt was national security advisor at the time, described the mix of factors that limited President Lyndon Johnson's effectiveness during the crisis. The deepening American involvement in Vietnam, Rostow said, limited Johnson's ability to win broad congressional support for leading an international fleet, known as the regatta, to break Egypt's blockade of the Straits of Tiran. Moreover, Rostow said that his father believed that the Pentagon shared little enthusiasm for the regatta project, because Department of Defense officials feared it would evolve into a military confrontation with Egypt. Rostow said his father speculated that Defense officials also believed that Israel could achieve a military victory on its own against Egypt -- not an unwelcome prospect at a time when American military resources were heavily invested elsewhere and when Nasser had often opposed U.S. interests in the region.

Speaking by satellite in an interview with Institute senior fellow David Makovsky recorded the day before the

symposium, Jordan's Prince Hassan bin Talal recalled his own involvement in the flurry of diplomatic activity in the weeks leading up to the conflict. The brother of Jordan's King Hussein, Prince Hassan was recalled from university studies at Oxford to assist in his brothers regional diplomacy. Prince Hassan explained cross-currents of pressure that Amman faced as it contemplated an alliance with Nasser on the eve of the war. Jordanian decisionmaking, the prince said, was profoundly shaped by the growing tide of the Jordanian public's identification with Nasser.

After the interview with Prince Hassan, the symposium explored the events leading to war from the Israeli perspective. Michael Bar-Zohar, who served as Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan's spokesman during part of the war, explained Dayan's rise to his key post on the eve of war. Dayan attracted Israeli public support as he recognized from the start of the crisis that diplomacy would not be able to halt the march to war. Moreover, Bar-Zohar described the course of events that shifted elite opinion within parts of Israel's governing coalition away from hope that David Ben-Gurion would emerge from retirement to lead the country in battle. Ben-Gurion insisted that Israel must win explicit support from Washington for the war; this led some of his supporters to turn instead to Dayan for leadership in the crisis.

Moshe Raviv, who served as an aide to Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban in 1967, moved the discussion from the military side of Israeli policy in the crisis to the diplomatic perspective. Raviv outlined his and Eban's frustrating visit to Paris, London, and Washington on the eve of the war. Raviv said that Eban finished the mission with a "heavy heart," because it was clear that neither French president Charles de Gaulle nor Johnson was willing to stand foursquare behind each country's 1957 commitment to keep the Straits of Tiran open to international shipping. For Israel, the Straits were a lifeline for oil supplies. Raviv said the failure of the United States and France to stand behind their pledges in 1967 was a seminal, traumatic moment for Israel, casting enduring doubt on the value of exchanging tangible Israeli concessions for international guarantees.

The symposium closed with a shift back to U.S. and international diplomacy during the crisis, and the enduring implications for policy today. Ambassador Samuel Lewis and Ambassador Dennis Ross, veteran American diplomats who have played a key role in defining U.S.-Israeli relations for decades, both pointed to the failure of Washington and Paris to live up to their 1957 commitments on keeping the Straits of Tiran open as important factors contributing to the war.

Lewis voiced his agreement that the failure to maintain those commitments in 1967 undermined Israel's belief in international assurances and reinforced the Zionist ethos of self-reliance. Lewis sought to put this failure in context, pointing to both the U.S. arms embargo in 1948 and the 1981 effort to dissuade Israel from striking Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osiraq as further examples of American inability or unwillingness to meet what Israel defined as existential interests. Regarding the latter incident, Lewis said that the United States and Israel held secret talks in 1980 and 1981 on preventing Iraq from achieving nuclear weapons capability. The inconclusive talks served as a pretext for the Israeli strikes.

At the conclusion of the day's discussion, Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin, an experienced U.S. diplomat, joined Ross and Lewis in expressing hope that a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians would be reached and become the lasting legacy of the 1967 war. Changing the human dimensions that played so critical a role on all sides in the events leading to the war, Chamberlin said, is a prerequisite to attaining a lasting Arab-Israeli peace. ❖



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