

LBJ and the June 1967 War: Lessons from the American Role

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A panel of distinguished scholars and former U.S. officials discusses what Washington can learn from the Johnson administration's ambiguous role in a war that reshaped the modern Middle East.

*On June 1, Dennis Ross, Nicholas Rostow, and Michael Mandelbaum addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ross is the Institute's William Davidson Distinguished Fellow and author of [Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama](#) (2015). Rostow is the Charles Evans Hughes Visiting Chair of Government and Jurisprudence at Colgate University and former special assistant to Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush. Mandelbaum is a professor emeritus of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University and author of *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (2016). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

DENNIS ROSS

Despite President Johnson's deep emotional commitment to Israel, he was slow to come to Israel's defense during the buildup to the 1967 war. Resolving that paradox requires understanding the pressure created by Vietnam and the U.S. national security bureaucracy's attitude toward Israel.

Johnson was the most emotionally committed to Israel of any American president -- a fact that is not popularly known but is clear from his background. As Senate majority leader, he tried to persuade President Eisenhower to avoid imposing sanctions on Israel for not pulling out of the Sinai. He was also the first president to give Israel offensive weapons systems, despite opposition from the State Department.

Still, during the weeks between May 14 and June 5, he was missing in action. At the time, Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser asked the UN Emergency Force to leave, sent six divisions to Israel's border, declared the Straits of Tiran mined, and told his parliament that the results of the 1956 and 1948 crises would be reversed. Meanwhile, King Hussein of Jordan flew to Cairo and put his forces under Egyptian leadership, while the Iraqi president declared he would wipe Israel off the map.

The Vietnam War's overwhelming ability to consume policymaking oxygen explains this contradiction. The Pentagon did not want to divert resources, Johnson had lost his moral authority with Congress domestically, and there was no interest in playing a military role in the Middle East. Vietnam also distracted the administration, seemingly affecting its ability to respond efficiently to emergencies elsewhere. For instance, when Nasser closed the straits, Israel reminded Washington about Eisenhower's commitments to keep them open, but State Department staffers struggled to locate the relevant agreements. Similarly, Johnson could have pushed the UN to delay the removal of peacekeepers from Sinai, which would have slowed the escalation to war, but the administration made no real effort to do so.

Within Johnson's national security team, some staffers saw Nasser as a cool customer who would not launch a full-scale war, but this view did not account for the massive popularity boost he received from aggressive acts toward Israel. These staffers underestimated how the pressure to preserve his regional standing could trap Nasser into an aggressive stance. Separately, the administration appeared to fixate on constraining Israeli actions despite the fact that Nasser changed the status quo, as shown by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Johnson separately cautioning Israel against striking first.

The president seemed interested in helping Israel, particularly with opening the straits, but he felt constrained by limited resources and procedural hurdles. Once war broke out, however, his sympathetic instincts toward the Israelis won out. He did not begin pressuring them until June 10, the last day of the war, when their forces appeared to be moving toward Damascus and the Soviets threatened intervention.

On June 19, the Israeli cabinet voted in secret on a resolution to return to the international borders with Egypt and Syria in return for peace. The Labor Party was divided on what to do with the West Bank, and some cautioned about the dangers of occupation, but Israel did not have enough time to think these things through.

After the war, Israelis felt as though they had to be able to defend themselves without external help. Yet they still sought U.S. security reassurances and guarantees as part of peace deals.

NICHOLAS ROSTOW

The fact that UN Security Council Resolution 242 remains the only framework for Arab-Israeli peace shows the continued relevance of the 1967 war. In May of that year, Israelis thought their lives were at stake, and Arab leaders seemed to confirm this fear with their talk of wiping the country out. But the United States did little to constrain Soviet efforts to fuel the crisis, assuming that Israel could stand up for itself.

Israel's actions in 1967 epitomize self-defense under international law; the country acted proportionally under imminent threat in the absence of outside intervention. UN forces had withdrawn quickly, and there was no reasonable basis for concluding that continued diplomacy would restore the UN Emergency Force or reverse the Tiran blockade.

The U.S. position was to use all diplomatic assets toward preventing a war. Yet Johnson concluded that Nasser had "slit our throat" by closing the straits, while Secretary Rusk repeatedly noted that Washington could not renege on its commitments in Southeast Asia in order to fulfill its commitments to Israel. The United States did try to assemble a flotilla to test the Tiran blockade, but this initiative failed; meanwhile, the Soviets egged Cairo on with the goal of trapping America in another Vietnam. Through it all, Washington expected Israel to win.

After the war, Johnson gave an important speech on the Middle East that laid out the main ideas embodied in Resolution 242: namely, that every nation had a fundamental right to live in peace and have that right respected by its neighbors; that threats to eliminate neighbors had become a burden to world peace; that nations had to agree to these principles if they wanted to be part of the UN Charter; that a new respect for refugees was needed; that maritime rights had to be respected; that arms races had to be curtailed; that respect for the political and territorial independence of all states was essential; and that all parties should respect the three major religions linked to Jerusalem. The most fundamental point was that Israel would not be forced out of the territories it conquered without peace. Each of these points became part of 242. The process of getting there was arduous, but states were more willing to look at the problem rationally after the pressure of war had come to an end.

Today, however, people don't talk about this history at the UN's International Court of Justice -- they behave as if Israel woke up one day and decided to grab more territory. They do not recognize that the Six Day War was an act of self-defense.

Even so, Israel never truly stood alone in the conflict. LBJ may have felt constrained, but he alone was willing to start the arms supply regime with Israel that has endured for decades, and to lay out the requirement that all states have to recognize and accept Israel.

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

The 1967 war had long-term regional consequences for the United States. The overriding result was the establishment of Israeli military supremacy, which [continues to be a major strategic asset](#) for Washington. Since 1945, the principal goal of American foreign policy, inherited from the British, has been to prevent any single hostile power from dominating the three great arenas of geopolitical contention (Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East). During and after the Six Day War, the principal threat in each arena was the Soviet Union. Yet unlike in Europe and East Asia, the United States did not have to deploy troops on the ground in the Middle East because of Israel's military strength. In fact, the Israelis actively rejected the presence of American troops on their territory. Israel has remained a reliable surrogate ever since, allowing the United States to remain an offshore balancer in the region for long stretches of time.

Over the years, Israel has successfully stood up to various actors that challenged American interests in the Middle East, even when these actors were backed by major foreign powers such as Moscow. In 1967, Nasser seemed set to resume his quest for regional dominance with Soviet backing. Saddam Hussein posed another challenge in 1991; while the United States handled that conflict itself and asked the Israelis to stay out of it, their previous destruction of Iraq's nuclear facilities made it possible to wage the war much more safely. Israel also stood up to

Syria on Jordan's behalf and prevented a potential war.

More recently, however, the Obama administration failed to adequately utilize Israel's military prowess when countering Iran's nuclear ambitions. Tehran is currently seeking to dominate the Middle East like Egypt and Iraq did in the past, and pursuing nuclear weapons was part of this plan. Usually, the outcome of an international negotiation reflects the strengths of the parties, but Washington made disproportionate concessions in the Iran talks. The outcome and perceptions may have been quite different if Obama had accepted Israel's willingness to give negotiators more leverage, mainly by emphasizing the credible threat of an Israeli military strike on Iran's facilities.

This summary was prepared by Mitchel Hochberg.