

The Six Day War and Its Enduring Legacy

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July 2, 2002

The author of the seminal history of the 1967 war explores the conflict's origins and its lasting legacy.

On May 29, 2002, Dr. Michael Oren, senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Shalem Center and head of its Middle East history project, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. He is the author of Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East (Oxford, 2002). The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The Current Conflict and Its Relation to the Six Day War

Today, there is a familiar scenario in the Middle East, as a Palestinian terror organization run by Yasir Arafat, Fatah, carries out operations against Israel. Fatah's short-term goal is to cause as many Israeli casualties as possible, with a more long-term vision that includes causing instability in the Arab world and exacerbating regional conflict in which Arab countries war against Israel.

A similar situation characterized the three-week period prior to the June 1967 war. Arafat knew Israeli retaliations would trigger unrest in Arab regimes. At that time, many supported Arafat (especially the Syrians), while others held emergency summit meetings but stopped short of calling for war. Israelis were in an economic crisis; indeed, unemployment and economic stagnation were virtually identical to the current circumstances.

Before the 1967 war, politicians worked together by forming a national-unity government, one of the only two formal unity governments in Israel's history (the other being the current government). Israeli raids into the West Bank and Gaza exacerbated Israel's deepening international isolation. The United Nations was condemning Israel. America was too busy with the Cold War and Vietnam to do much in the way of helping Israel.

Geographically Limited, Globally Reaching

Since June 1967, each major event in Arab-Israel relations (War of Attrition, Yom Kippur War, Lebanon, the first intifada, peace process, and so on) has represented an attempt to come to terms with the results of those six days of fighting. No other geographically limited conflict, so short and intense, has had such global ramifications.

For historians, a recent declassification of formerly top-secret documents has shed new light on this war. From documents in North America, Britain, Israel, and Russia, as well as from some recent memoirs of Arab decisionmakers and commanders, historians are provided new interpretations and insights of the period leading up to the Six Day War. In that "context of conflict" that included bitter rivalries among Arab regimes, the perennial aggravation of Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Cold War, a tiny spark could set off a regional conflagration.

Historians tend to look at November 13, 1966, as the real catalyst of the Six Day War. That day, Israel launched a retaliatory raid against the village of Samua. Two days prior, three soldiers had been killed by a mine planted by Fatah. Fighting between the Israeli army and a Jordanian legion ensued, leading to the deaths of fifteen Jordanian soldiers. Palestinians rioted, complaining that Jordan's King Hussein was not doing enough to defend them. Hussein deflected some of the pressure onto Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser by saying that he was "hiding behind skirts of Sinai peacekeeping forces." At the same time, Nasser was seeking an excuse to be rid of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF). On May 12, 1967, a Soviet report (now known to be false) alleged that Israel was amassing troops on its northern border in preparation for an invasion of Syria. Nasser reacted by sending troops to the Sinai, expelling UNEF, and closing the Straits of Tiran (used for Israeli maritime commerce). From there, it was only a matter of time until the events of the Six Day War would unfold.

'The Dawn'

The Israeli raid of November 13 should never have occurred. King Hussein was anti-Zionist in rhetoric but had reached a practical modus vivendi with Israeli leaders in private. Hussein had penned a letter of personal condolence to Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol in response to Arafat's terror attack, saying that he would do his best to restrain Fatah. The letter was sent on a Friday, but its delivery was delayed. On Sunday, Israel launched a raid into Samua. Had the letter reached Eshkol, the raid would not have been launched, certainly not that morning.

Arab calls for war were particularly vocal and widespread in Egypt, which had plans to bomb strategic targets and then dispatch tanks across Israel's Negev Desert to Jordan in order to cut Israel in half. This plan, nicknamed "The Dawn," was the brainchild of army chief Abdul Hakim Amr. Nasser did not want to be blamed for war against Israel, but he was not confident he had the power to tell Amr not to launch Operation Dawn. Originally planned for May 27, 1967, the operation was halted due to last-minute chance events. These included warnings from U.S. president Lyndon Johnson to Egyptian ambassador Mustafa Kamel, based on a "gut feeling" Johnson had about Egypt's war planning, and a message from Russia to Cairo cautioning against any operations lest Egypt be blamed for causing hostilities. Just minutes before Amr was due to launch the operation, Nasser ordered him to desist.

Had the operation been carried out, the results would likely have been as devastating to Israel as was Israel's attack on Egypt nine days later. Even that June 5 operation by Israel was meant to have lasted only forty-eight hours, during which Egypt's air force was to have been eliminated, followed by the neutralization of Egypt's first lines of defense in Sinai. How this limited operation snowballed into a major war that led to the capture of the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and Golan represents a central theme of Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East.

One aspect of the war that the book discusses in detail is the capture of the West Bank and Jerusalem. Israel had issued a strict order that there was to be no firing against the Jordanians. Israel did not want to open up a front along its longest border. Similarly, King Hussein had no interest in a war with Israel, but he could not back out of helping Egypt, for fear of losing his throne and perhaps even his life. He absolved himself of any response by putting his army under Egyptian command. On June 5, Israel sent a message to Hussein urging him not to open fire. Despite shelling into western Jerusalem, Netanya, and the outskirts of Tel Aviv, Israel did nothing. Afraid that Jordan would launch a siege of western Jerusalem along the lines of the 1948 siege, Israel reacted by sending troops to retake Government House Ridge and Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. The Israeli army also moved to silence Jordanian artillery in Jenin.

With its troops at the entrance to the Old City, the Israeli government deliberated for twenty-four hours over whether to enter; a majority, led by Moshe Dayan, advised remaining outside. The United States also counseled against entering Jerusalem, fearing it would lead to the end of the Hashemite dynasty. Eshkol, unable to decide, moved to let Hussein make the decision: via the British, he sent a telegram proposing that Jordan keep the Old City on condition that Hussein remove his army's Egyptian commanders, agree to a ceasefire, and enter into peace talks. When two hours passed without a reply, Israeli forces were ordered to break through the Lion's Gate, winning control of the Temple Mount an hour later.

The Legacy of the Six Day War

Today, like 1967, the Middle East faces a situation in which a large-scale war could be ignited by a relatively small spark. In these circumstances, rational decisionmaking, cogent analysis, and logical reactions to events on the ground are, in the end, often subordinate to the vicissitudes of fortune, the vagaries of war, and dumb luck. Chance and randomness had a profound influence on the conduct of the Six Day War and on the war's impact on the region and the world. Recognizing the power of chance -- then and now -- is both humbling and frightening.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Alan Lowinger.