6. Eleven Years of Fighting, Six Days of War

This is the sixth part of our series, "A Short History of Israel". If you wish to read the preceding parts, see the **Table of Contents** for links to them. We welcome comments and criticisms. Do tell us what you think.

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When Israel declared independence, the Arab League's boycott of Jews in Palestine became the anti-Israel boycott, enforced by law in every Arab country, and was then broadened in scope and institutionalised: individuals or companies anywhere in the world that had any dealings with Israel were not permitted to do business anywhere in the Arab world; companies that did business with *those* companies were also boycotted. Travellers with an Israeli stamp in their passports were not permitted to enter any Arab country. Many multinational companies complied with the boycott. Many did not, but in 1993 a study by the Israeli Chambers of Commerce estimated that the total loss to the Israeli economy caused by the boycott had been some $45 billion.

Arab governments also used boycotts and other pressures to have Israel excluded from international organisations. As a result, for instance, Israel is to this day the only country in the world not permitted to join the International Red Cross. It is the only member of the United Nations not permitted to sit on the Security Council. It is also not permitted to participate in the World Court, and is excluded from most United Nations organisations such as UNICEF.

Syria built a military base on the Golan Heights, with gun emplacements cut out of the rock and invisible from the air, and a complex system of fortifications linked by underground tunnels. From there, long-range artillery dominated a region of northern Israel and caused a steady stream of deaths, injury and destruction.

France continued to sell weapons to Israel. In 1957, Israel began building a nuclear reactor and research facility at Dimona in the Negev, purchasing French technology to do so, and used this to manufacture its own nuclear weapons.

In 1959, the Egyptian Army suddenly crossed the Sinai peninsula. Israel's intelligence and early warning systems failed to detect the

threat until hundreds of Egyptian tanks were at the border, where

they faced no more than thirty tanks on the Israeli side. Israel was unprepared and took a further 24 hours to mobilise an army and rush it southwards to face the invasion. But the Egyptians did not invade. Instead they gradually withdrew.

One of the perennial strategic facts of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been that because of Israel's small population, the only way it can raise an army large enough to repel a full-scale invasion is by mobilising more or less every eligible citizen. Such a mobilisation can be achieved in the remarkably short time of 48 hours; however, this is at the cost of shutting down most of Israel's civilian economy, so each such mobilisation is in itself a major economic disaster, and to remain mobilised for very long would bankrupt the country.

Israel's options for defending itself against attacks other than invasion were similarly limited. It adopted a policy of retaliation. When Arab soldiers had killed Israelis or collaborated with terrorists, the IDF might retaliate by shelling or bombing military installations or other valued property of the country in question. When terrorists could be identified as coming from a particular village, the IDF might raid that village, order the inhabitants out, and blow up houses. The IDF also became skilled at guarding the border, so that infiltrators were often killed there before they could do any further harm. And Israel developed a formidable intelligence service, the Mossad.

In 1962, President Kennedy initiated a historic change in the United States' attitude towards the Middle East (against the State Department's fervent opposition) by authorising the first ever sale of American weapons – Hawk anti-aircraft missiles – to Israel. The British government, too, was willing to overrule the opposition of the Foreign Office and authorise arms sales to Israel.

In 1964, Syria proposed to the Arab League that the Palestinian Arab refugees, who were still being kept in camps in various Arab countries, could be used to destabilise Israel. The proposal was accepted, and the Arab League set up the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) with the purpose, according to its founding manifesto, of 'liquidating Israel'. Despite its name, the PLO did not campaign for self-government for Palestinian Arabs, nor was any attempt made to install the PLO, or any Palestinian Arabs, as the government of those parts of Palestine that had already been 'liberated' in 1948 (namely Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem). The PLO soon fragmented into factions with widely differing ideologies and allegiances, but all agreeing on the basic purpose (Arab government over the whole of Palestine, and the destruction of Israel), and using the same basic means: murder of Jews. Arafat's Fatah movement, which had been in the process of formation at around the same time, became the largest single faction.

The Soviet Union, as part of its massive, mainly secret campaign to destabilise the West by supporting terrorist organisations, provided extensive training and other services for the PLO. The PLO was far

better armed and funded than any other terrorist organisation

before or since – and it gradually made its presence felt in an increasingly ferocious and spectacular campaign of murder.

Egypt, Syria and Jordan again established a unified military command structure to prepare for war with Israel. Arab leaders made increasingly bellicose speeches. In 1965, Nasser said: "we aim at the destruction of the State of Israel. The immediate aim: perfection of Arab military might. The national aim: the eradication of Israel."

In 1967, Syria stepped up its artillery attacks from the Golan Heights. Cross-border artillery duels followed. Several Syrian fighter aircraft were shot down in dogfights over the Heights. The Soviet Union gave Syria fabricated evidence that Israeli armour was massing in northern Israel preparing to invade. Syria massed its forces on the border and invoked its defence treaty with Egypt. Jordan then signed the treaty too.

In mid-May, Nasser again moved the Egyptian army across Sinai to the Israeli border, ordering the UN to withdraw its Emergency Force, which it did immediately and without objection. He again sealed the Straits of Tiran to Israel-related shipping. The United States proposed international action to break the blockade, but no country was enthusiastic to take any action, and none was taken. The Israeli government pointed out that the blockade was an act of war and threatened to lift it by force. Nasser replied "The Jews threaten to make war. I reply: Welcome! We are ready for war." Iraq joined the alliance with Egypt, its President saying: "The existence of Israel is an error which must be rectified. This is our opportunity to wipe out the ignominy which has been with us since 1948. Our goal is clear – to wipe Israel off the map." All over the Arab world, huge demonstrations clamoured for this. Ahmed Shukeiry, the leader of the PLO, declared in a speech in (Jordanian-occupied) East Jerusalem that after the forthcoming victory, all Israelis not born in the country would be expelled. When he was informed that the majority of Israelis were born in the country, he replied: "Those who survive will remain in Palestine, but I estimate that none of them will survive."

The Soviet Union sent seventy warships to the Eastern Mediterranean and again made ominous hints about protecting its allies, especially Syria.

The IDF, on high alert since the Egyptian deployment in Sinai, was now fully mobilised. Even so, it was nominally the weaker force. Its total strength was 264,000 soldiers, 80% of whom were reservists, with 800 tanks and 300 combat aircraft. It was facing three armies, totalling 347,000 soldiers, most of whom had been training for this moment for years, with 1,900 tanks and 700 combat aircraft – and few Iraqis had yet arrived.

Israel struck first. Its air force attacked the Egyptian air force. Many Egyptian aircraft were destroyed on the ground, and others in combat. At Nasser's behest, the Syrian and Jordanian air forces attacked Israel. They were effectively destroyed. Britain, France and

the United States imposed an immediate arms embargo on both

sides. The Soviet Union continued to supply weapons to the Arabs. The IDF, now with air supremacy, attacked on the ground in Sinai and defeated the Egyptian army. Soon they had captured the whole peninsula, opened the Straits of Tiran, and halted at the Suez Canal. Then, despite their fear of direct Soviet intervention, they attacked and captured the Golan Heights.

On the first day of the war, the Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol had sent a secret message to King Hussein of Jordan via the UN: "We are engaged in defensive fighting on the Egyptian sector, and we shall not engage ourselves in any action against Jordan, unless Jordan attacks us. Should Jordan attack Israel, we shall go against her with all our might." But thanks to the fog of war and erroneous reports from Nasser of Egyptian victories, King Hussein believed that Israel was about to be defeated. Even when Jordanian forces began shelling West Jerusalem, the IDF still held off for several hours. The Knesset building was among those hit, and members adjourned to the cellar. Finally the IDF attacked, captured East Jerusalem in fierce street-to-street fighting, defeated the Jordanian Army and captured the West Bank. Lebanon, which had not participated in the threats against Israel, was not attacked.

All these engagements were decisive victories and took only six days (hence this war is known as the Six Day War) but they were not easy victories. All three Arab armies fought competently and bravely in many engagements. Their effectiveness and morale were impaired mainly by the elimination of their air power during the first hours of the war, an action which cost Israel itself nearly a quarter of its fighter aircraft. In all, Israel lost 777 dead and 2,586 wounded during the six days – proportionately more than the United States lost during the Vietnam war. Nevertheless, among Israelis, grief was now combined with an overwhelming sense of relief that they had survived.

At the end of the war, Israel controlled more than three times as much territory as it had six days earlier. This time it did not annexe it (with the exception of Jerusalem – see below) or expel anyone from it (though some 325,000 Arabs chose for various reasons to leave the West Bank for Jordan). Instead, it proposed a peace plan to the Arab countries, via the United States government, under which it would return all the territory it had just captured, with the exception of East Jerusalem and some border adjustments, in return for recognition of Israel's right to live in peace within those borders. The Arab leaders did not respond to the Israeli proposal as such, and formulated no peace plan of their own. In the Declaration of Khartoum, they demanded that Israel withdraw from all the territory it had captured during the Six Day War, without receiving peace or recognition. The Declaration set out the: "main principles by which the Arab States abide, namely, no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it, and insistence on the rights of the Palestinian people in their own country." The latter rights were, principally, the right to undo the partition of Palestine and establish a unitary Arab state there. Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban commented: "I think that this is the first war in history

that on the morrow the victors sued for peace and the vanquished

called for unconditional surrender."

The UN Security Council then issued its deliberately ambiguous **Resolution 242** which Israel interpreted as being similar to its own land-for-peace proposal and the Arab countries interpreted as endorsing their demand for unconditional withdrawal.

Part 7. Settlements

eleven years of fighting, six days of war

A very good article! It's well written, it's factual, and it covers nearly all of the relevant bases from that period.

An interesting point that is NOT made (although the basic facts are there) is the nature of changing alliances vis-a-vis Israel. Prior to 1967, France was Israel's primary military ally, and the United States preferred a hands-off approach. After the Six-Day War (and because of it),
France refused to sell any military equipment of any sort to Israel, and refused to deliver equipment that had been paid for; this resulted in the active courting of America. This new relationship was consummated six years later, in 1973, when Israel again had to fight for its life, and the United States stepped in as a true friend -- a role it has assumed ever since. (I hope more details of this reversal will appear in the next installment.)

Another interesting point -- which, again, this article does not make, but for which the facts are available -- is Israel's status as an undeclared nuclear power. Israel had to fight for its very life, in 1967 and again in 1973; by 1973 Israeli nuclear weapons almost certainly existed. That they were NOT used, even at a time of desperate need, is a powerful testament to the high moral standards of Israel as a country and the IDF as a fighting force. (It also stands in contradiction to the alarmist propaganda, currently rampant in the Arab world, about the "global threat" of Israeli nuclear weapons.)

One other comment -- Israel's highly-regarded intelligence services (including the Mossad, the IDF's Military Intelligence apparatus, and others) have contributed greatly to Israel's survival over the years, starting from the very earliest days. It's a pity to see the fascinating tale of Israeli intelligence given short shrift here... but I do recognize that it's beyond the scope of this series.

Please do keep up the good work!

best wishes,
Daniel

About time!

I'm at work right now and found this site via The Dissident Frogman

(which I found via deanesmay.com whom I work with, Mr. Esmay that is).

For a long while I've been looking for factual information dealing with the formation of the modern nation of Israel. While not as detailed as I'd like, which Daniel above pointed out, it's a very good primer and a good jumping off point to start more detailed studies. I read all 6 chapters in one sitting here and found them very interesting. The Six Day War was something I've always meant to study in more detail and this only whets my apitite. As you stated in your introduction, I too am surprised how many people accept falsehood as pact, almost too willingly. And then refuse to accept reality and are quick to label true facts as anything but. Perhaps someone here, or perhaps the author of this series themself, can recommend books for further study. On a topic such as this, or in religious matters, I'm very careful about what I read for obvious reasons.

Keep up the great work,

Kevin

by a reader on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 09:48 | **reply**

Re: About time!

You might like to read the book listed first in the references we gave:

Israel, A History, by Martin Gilbert

by **Sarah Fitz-Claridge** on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 17:38 | **reply**

how israel?

I am a filipino and quite antonish with the way Israel surived and one of the supremes! WHAT MADE THE ARABS HATE SO MUCH THE ISRAELS?

by a reader on Sun, 11/30/2003 - 08:58 | **reply**

Re: how israel?

"WHAT MADE THE ARABS HATE SO MUCH THE ISRAELIS?"

It's *Jews* they hate.

Why? Well, it certainly wasn't the existence of Israel. Look what their attitude to Jews was in 1840: **The Damascus Affair**.

As for the root causes, perhaps there are some pointers here: **Symposium on Islamic Anti-Semitism**.

by a reader on Sun, 11/30/2003 - 19:43 | **reply**