

# AN ALTERNATIVE LOOK AT THE SIX DAY WAR

BLAIR GRAHAM

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In light of recent speculation concerning possible annexation of the West Bank, there is no more apt an occasion to review just how this territory came to be under Israeli occupation in the first place. If Israel is to be believed, the Six-Day War – which resulted in the occupation of not only the West Bank, but East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip – was a necessary security measure as the very “existence of the Israeli state hung by a thread” (Hasan, 2017) on account of threats stemming from Egypt and its Arab allies, the country’s then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol insisted. Thanks to Israel’s preemptive warfare, the “hopes of the Arab leaders to annihilate Israel were dashed”, Eshkol continued (Hasan, 2017).

The official Israeli narrative of the war also represents scholarly conventional wisdom. By way of example, the respected Just War theorist Michael Walzer (1977: 84) argues that in the weeks leading up to the war, “Israeli anxiety” was “an almost classic example of ‘just fear’”, and, accordingly, the “Israeli first strike” was a “clear case of legitimate anticipation”. Similarly, Michael Oren maintains that in going to war all “Israel strove for was an end to an immediate threat, and for an indefinite period of quiet thereafter” (Oren, 2002: 169).

This essay seeks to challenge this interpretation of events, arguing that the orthodox account just alluded to is a serious exaggeration of reality and that Israel, in fact, did not sincerely

fear for the continued existence of their state. Tel Aviv’s preemptive actions were instead in no way defensive and were far more self-serving in nature. Before delving into the specifics of what actually took place, however, a more detailed review of the official narrative is in order.

## THE OFFICIAL STORY

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According to the official telling, the war’s origins date back to some time in mid-May 1967. The catalyst was false Soviet intelligence reports informing Egypt of a mass build-up of Israeli forces along the Syrian border. In response to this news, Egypt placed its own forces on ‘maximum alert’ before deploying large numbers of their own forces into the Sinai peninsula. Such a build-up would not have sat well with the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) – stationed in the Sinai following the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 – which is probably why Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser ordered their removal very shortly thereafter (Aburish, 2005: 252). To make matters worse, Egypt proceeded to sign a series of defensive pacts with a number of Arab states, who themselves began to amass troops along the Israeli border.

Escalating matters further still, on May 22, Nasser ordered the blockade of the Straits of Tiran, thereby preventing Israeli access to this vital shipping lane. This was an unacceptably aggressive act on Egypt’s part as, Oren (2002:81) informs us, the Straits of Tiran constituted “a

lifeline for the Jewish state". It is for this reason, Walzer (1977: 83) argues, that the war could be said to have begun on "May 22, and the Israeli attack of June 5 described simply as its first military incident".

The implicit argument of the above is that Egypt had committed an act of war against Israel with its attempts to destroy the Israeli economy through its blockade. This, coupled with the huge troop presence on Israel's border, left Tel Aviv with no choice but to launch its preemptive strikes in June. There is, of course, one problem with this interpretation of events: it is a serious distortion of reality. As General Mattityahu Peled, the Israeli chief of Logistical Command during the war, put it, the official narrative was "nothing but a bluff which was born and bred after the war" (Hasan, 2017). Peled was not the only senior figure to reveal the true nature of Israel's official portrayal. Mordechai Bentov, a member of the war-time government, stated "this whole story about the threat of extermination was totally contrived [...] to justify the annexation of new Arab territories" (Hasan, 2017). So, if the war was not a product of Israel's sincere fears stemming from Egypt and its Arab allies, what, then, did happen?

### THE COUNTERVAILING EVIDENCE

Contrary to the assertions of Israel and much of academia, the roots of this war date back much further than May 1967. In fact, an honest portrayal of events will place the war's origins as early as November of 1966. Specifically, on November 13, Israel launched a massive raid on the Jordanian village of Samu, in response to what they insisted were incursions from guerillas. The air-strikes reportedly killed 15 soldiers and a further five civilians, triggering a massive outcry in the Arab world (Schemes and

Tlamim, 2002: 152).

In this time of crisis, Arabs turned to their de-facto leader, Nasser, and demanded that he act in response to Israel's aggressive acts. Yet Nasser was very reluctant to escalate matters further. Contrary to the popular portrayals of his Western detractors at the time, Nasser was not a warmonger and harboured no illusions about Egypt's relative strength against Israel. He was fully cognisant that a military contest with his Israeli neighbour was not one he would win and, therefore, sought to avoid it at all costs. Accordingly, ignoring the demands of his people, Nasser forewent retaliating for the Samu raids.

Nasser's military reticence became far more unsustainable, however, following Israel's April 1967 downing of six Syrian planes. Just as with the Samu raid, there were calls from all quarters of Arab society for the Egyptian president to respond to these seemingly unending acts of aggression. Radio Jordan, for example, mocked Nasser's restraint and prodded the Egyptian leader to "hit Israel where it hurts" (Finkelstein, 1995: 127). Seeking to placate domestic critics but not actually escalate matters with Israel, Nasser opted for a series of symbolic responses (Pappe, 2017). In an internal memo, U.S. National Security Adviser Walt Rostow perfectly captured Nasser's thinking, stating that Egypt's president "probably feels his prestige would suffer irreparably if he failed a third time to come to the aid of an Arab nation attacked by Israel" (Office of the Historian, 1967a).

It is in this context that we can begin to understand the aforementioned troop deployment in the Sinai. Although ostensibly a provocative move, some authors have argued that Nasser never intended for these forces to pose any real threat to Israel – as Tel Aviv instantly recognised and has subsequently

acknowledged (Finkelstein, 2018). Despite the insistence of Israeli historiography that the Sinai build-up constituted an existential threat to the Jewish state, the then-IDF Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin has, for example, conceded “the two divisions he [Nasser] sent into the Sinai on May 14 would not have been enough to launch an offensive. He knew it and we knew it” (Finkelstein, 1995: 134). Similarly, former prime minister Menachem Begin, who served in the Unity Government at the time of the war, candidly admitted “the Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us” (Finkelstein, 1995: 135). In an eerily familiar manner, then-foreign minister Abba Eban remarked “Nasser did not want war; he wanted victory without war” (Remnick, 2007). In other words, Nasser was merely seeking to achieve his political goal of standing up to Israel in the face of their aggression, without having to resort to force to do so.

With respect to removing the UNEF, Nasser never actually sought their full withdrawal; instead, he simply desired that they re-position themselves on the peninsula. It was only after being informed by the then-U.N. Secretary General U Thant that such a “face-saving” option would not be permitted that Nasser ordered their complete withdrawal (Finkelstein, 1995: 127). In other words, this was not quite the provocative act proponents of the official narrative insist. Moreover, also omitted from the orthodox account is the U.N.’s follow up proposal. After failing to reach a compromise with Egypt, U Thant proposed that Israel house the UNEF on their side of the border. This offer, needless to say, was steadfastly rejected by Tel Aviv (Oren, 2002: 72).

Nasser’s second symbolic response was the closing of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and preventing foreign vessels from reaching Eilat, an important Israeli port city. The reality of this measure is totally at odds with the hysterical proclamations of Israel and much of scholarship who maintain the blockade constituted an “act of war” for it was an “attempt at strangulation” of Israel, as Eban put it (Finkelstein, 1995: 137). Firstly, the survival of Israel’s economy was not dependent on free passage through the Tiran Straits as just 5% of Israeli trade travelled through Eilat (Finkelstein, 2012: 167). Moreover, as Finkelstein (2012: 167) observes, the only “significant commodity possibly affected by a blockade was oil, which could have been rerouted to the ports of Haifa and Ashdod, and anyhow Israel held in reserve an ample supply of oil carrying it over for many months to come”. So, on this evidence, it is quite clear the continued existence of Israel was not in immediate jeopardy, meaning the blockade was not necessarily a threat which necessitated large-scale preemptive action, as Israel insists.

For the sake of argumentation, however, if we were to accept that the blockade of the Straits of Tiran did pose a real threat to Israel’s economy, Tel Aviv’s subsequent actions remain indefensible. Article 2 (3) of the *United Nations Charter* unequivocally states that all disputes between nations must be settled using “peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice are not endangered” (Charter of the United Nations, n.d.). Simply put, all diplomatic initiatives available must first be exhausted to settle interstate disputes before war is even contemplated. With respect to the Straits of Tiran, only one party was prepared to abide by their international commitments. Egypt proposed to Israel that the issue be taken to the International Court of Justice for arbitration, but

to no avail.

All of this, however, is academic. In truth, there was no 'blockade' of the Straits of Tiran. Just days after closing the shipping lane to Israeli vessels, Nasser quietly lifted the blockade, privately informing Israeli officials that they could travel freely through the straits as before. As touched on above, Nasser did not wish to seriously respond to Israel's aggression; rather, he wanted to merely appear as though he was coming to the Arab world's defence, without actually doing anything tangible that risked triggering a conflict with his militarily superior neighbour. It was for this reason that Israeli officials internally described the blockade as a "not crucial" issue and a simple "political symbol" on Nasser's part (Finkelstein, 2012: 168). Similarly, Abba Eban said that Nasser had "decided not to disrupt shipping" but simply to put himself in a "position where he could brandish this sword" (Finkelstein, 2012: 404).

What we have seen so far, then, is that the two central justifications for war – the troop deployments and blockade of the Straits of Tiran – were not actually sincerely viewed as threats by Israeli officials. It should be noted, Israel was not the only party to recognise the true nature of the Arab 'threat'. On June 1, 1967, the then-head of Mossad, Meir Amit, travelled to Washington to request intelligence. Amit firstly asked his American counterparts about the likelihood of an Arab attack against the Jewish State. The response was that there was absolutely no American intelligence to suggest that Egypt or its Arab allies had any plans for initiating a war against Israel. As an internal American intelligence assessment read, "our best judgement is that no military attack on Israel is imminent" (Office of the Historian,

1967). In response to this information, Amit asked a follow up question. Hypothetically, he inquired, if there were to be an Arab attack, what would Israel's prospect of success be? To this, President Johnson emphatically replied that "you will whip the hell out of them" (Finkelstein, 2012: 172). In fact, Defence Secretary McNamara would later boast of his prescient prediction that the war would last between six and ten days. Put simply, Israel was unequivocally and unambiguously informed by the world's leading intelligence-gathering power that the threats from its neighbours were non-existent. Not that they needed reminding, though. Amit informed his U.S. hosts that their intelligence "agreed entirely" with Israel's own conclusions (Finkelstein, 2012: 172). Naturally, this raises an important question: if Israel did not in any way feel threatened by Egypt or any of its other Arab neighbours, why, then, did they attack on June 5?

### A LONG PREMEDITATED WAR?

During its 'War of Independence' in 1948, Israel forewent incorporating the West Bank into its new state, instead allowing Jordan to annex the territory. This, the country's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion would later remark, was a "fatal historical mistake" (Pappe, 2017a: 69). It was for this reason that Israeli planners sought any opportunity they could find to right this historic wrong. One such opportunity presented itself in 1956. During the planning phase of the aforementioned British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt, Ben-Gurion suggested to his French counterpart Guy Mollet that the invasion be extended into Jordan to allow Israel to help itself to the West Bank. This may have gone ahead had Washington not gotten wind of this conversation and vetoed the proposal (Pappe, 2017b: 17).

Israel would not have to wait long for its next opportunity, however. In April of 1957, Jordan

was in the midst of political chaos, with King Hussein's position at serious risk. Sensing an opportunity to satisfy their territorial ambitions, Tel Aviv believed they could take full advantage of this instability and launch an invasion of Jordan, certain that the Jordanian army would be too distracted and weakened to stop Israeli forces from occupying the West Bank. Unfortunately for Israel, they waited too long to act. By the time they had drawn up their war plans, the situation in Jordan stabilised, depriving Tel Aviv of the opening they needed (Pappe, 2017b: 17).

Just one year later, another regional crisis presented itself as a new window of opportunity. In May 1958, civil war broke out in neighbouring Lebanon, which was followed by revolution in Baghdad just two months later. Israeli planners had no designs on either Lebanon or Iraq, however, they were hopeful that the radical spirit gripping these countries could spill over into Jordan reigniting the political crisis of the previous year. If this were to transpire, Israel would once again have the opening they needed for intervention (2017b: 20). Accordingly, the Israeli army drew up blueprints for a small military operation in the West Bank with a view to taking over the territory (2017b: 23). However, revolution did not return to Jordan, meaning this plan never came into fruition.

Despite their repeated failures to achieve their aforementioned ambitions, Israel's will would not be broken. In 1960, Israel provocatively entered the no man's land on its border with Syria, leading to a sharp rise in hostilities. In response to these increased tensions, Egypt stationed its forces in the Sinai. Israeli policymakers viewed this as a potential

opportunity for preemptive strikes and launched *Operation Rotem*. The plan called for, among other things, the military takeover of the West Bank, along with the Gaza Strip. Although tensions diffused shortly thereafter and Israel did not need to put its plan into action, this experience "turned out to be a grand rehearsal for 1967", as Pappe (2017b: 24) observes.

Finally, perhaps in opportunistic anticipation of a looming crisis, in 1966, Israel was preparing for the administrative, legal, and military takeover of both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Pappe (2017b: 27) points out, these plans were based on "the one already implemented in the Arab areas of Israel" taken over as a result of the 1948 war. This therefore meant that "the army was prepared, as was the framework, for occupation". All that was needed was the opportunity that presented itself in the spring of 1967.

It seems clear, then, that the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was not the necessary result of a defensive war Israel was forced into. Rather, the empirical record strongly suggests the Occupied Territories were long-coveted by Israel, and 1967 merely represented the first opportunity for Israel to actualise this long-standing objective.

## CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to Israel's talking points and the assertions of much of mainstream scholarship, the Six-Day War was not a necessary security response in the face of existential threats to the Jewish State's existence. Almost every aspect of the popular narrative of this conflict does not withstand serious scrutiny. Firstly, the orthodox account omits the crucial context of Israel's periodic aggressive acts against its Arab neighbours; most notably, the bombing of Samu and the downing of Syrian fighter jets. These



provocative acts resulted in mounting pressure on the Arab World's de facto leader, Nasser, to do something in response. Yet, harbouring no illusions about Egypt's relative strength versus Israel, Nasser did not wish to seriously retaliate; instead opting for symbolic gestures. It is in this context that we must understand the two principal threats invariably cited by supporters of the war: the mass troop build-up and the blockade of the Straits of Tiran. Both of these measures did not pose a significant threat to Israel, as Tel Aviv instantly recognised and have since acknowledged (or, at the very least, a number of earnest officials did in retirement). With respect to the former, the troop presence was so infinitesimal that it could not have possibly mounted a serious challenge to Israel. As for the latter, the blockade lasted no more than a few days and was very quietly re-opened to Israeli shipping as before; meaning, in short, that the 'blockade' also could not have possibly posed a serious threat to Israel – and this is ignoring the fact that Israel's reliance on this shipping lane was grossly exaggerated. This gives us strong grounds to look for alternative explanations for the war. An examination of the internal record reveals one such explanation. More than a decade before the commencement of the Six-Day War, Israeli planners were already desperately searching for opportunities to take over the West Bank, along with the other territories they would eventually occupy. For a variety of reasons, Israel's plans were scuttled. 1967, then, was not so much a fight for Israel's survival but, rather, merely the first opportunity Israel was able to successfully exploit to satisfy its long-standing territorial ambitions.

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