



The June, 1967 War: Fifty Years On

Conference Background Paper

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will convene an academic conference covering the June, 1967 war and its wide-ranging repercussions for the Arab world from May 20-22, 2017. At its core, the three-day meeting will address the long-standing lack of official Arab histories covering the June War and the defeat it represented for their countries: the writing of history has long been made subservient to the expediencies of the ideological propaganda war which pitted the various Arab states against each other over who was more to blame for the loss. Some of the scarce histories that were written focused on the societal, political and economic factors which left the Arab world weak before the fighting in 1967; a subset of these engaged degenerated into a frenzied self-flagellation and denigration of Arab culture. In terms of military histories, however, Arab historiography has simply made way for official Israeli accounts.

The events in question begin on June 5, 1967, when Israel launched the third Arab-Israeli war with simultaneous attacks on the territories of Jordan, Syria and Egypt. Israeli action began with attacks on the air forces of the three Arab countries and dominance of their airspace, and extended to the sea and land. The fallout of the ensuing “Six-Day War”, the results of which came to be known in Arabic as the *Naksa* reverberated not only throughout the Arab region but also had implications for military strategies across the globe, given how the military conquests of the Israelis fundamentally altered the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

One immediate consequence was that the entire historical territory of Palestine had come under outright Israeli control, with Israeli forces now in command of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as the Gaza Strip. Israeli control of the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights also put them in command of Egyptian and Syrian territories, too. Even limited to these results alone, the consequences of the 1967 war can be shown to be no less far-reaching than the Palestinian *Nakba* of 1948.

In fact, the Israeli political leadership had long believed that the 1948 wars which established Israel at the expense of the Palestinian *Nakba* had yet to achieve the aim of establishing an Israeli polity across Palestine. It seemed to this leadership that the securing of Israeli stability required official recognition by the Arab states, even if a tacit acceptance, and that this required a new war. The territories gained from this latter war could then be used as a bargaining chip for negotiations with the neighboring Arab states and therefore as the basis for coveted relations with the countries which surrounded Israel.

The Lead-up to War

From the late 1950s through to the six days of fighting in June, 1967, the Arab regional landscape was defined by a sharp divide which pitted “Republican” (“radical”) Arab regimes against their Monarchical (“traditionalist” or conservative) counterparts. This Arab cold war, in fact occasionally pitted even countries purportedly in the same camp (such as Egypt and Syria) against each other, and came to dramatic life in Yemen, where some Egyptian forces were tied up in the five years leading to the *Naksa*. Israeli provocation during this period intensified in tandem with intra-Arab infighting, reaching a high water mark with Israeli efforts to divert the source of the Jordan River Syria. By the summer of 1966, aerial sorties had developed into violent dog-fights in the skies over the northern Galilee and the Golan Heights, with Israeli air strikes striking increasingly deeper into Syrian territory against both air force sites and water infrastructure.

Israeli aggression expanded down river, with Israeli forces flattening all of the houses in the Palestinian town of Samu in the outskirts of Hebron in November of 1966. The official media of Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia sought to placate massive public rage by placing the blame on Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser for failing to protect the smaller Arab states. Nasser’s response was to ask an expert group to explore the possibility of withdrawing UN forces stationed on the Sinai Peninsula since the end of the Tripartite Aggression in 1956. Although this working group cautioned against such a move, recommending instead that Nasser limit himself to issuing a written protest to the UN Secretary General explicitly stating Cairo’s right to request the withdrawal of UN monitors, the Egyptian president did ultimately demand that the

international observation force leave the Sinai. Nasser's move, which came on May 15, 1967, was a response not only to Arab protests but also to information provided by the Soviets which indicated that the Israelis were amassing their forces on the frontier with Syria, where they were purportedly planning a massive military operation. One week after the Egyptian ultimatum, Cairo moved to block Israeli ships from the Tiran Straits, providing Israel with the *casus belli* it needed to attack.

The Aftermath of Defeat

The official Arab response took the form of an emergency Summit, held in Khartoum on August 29, where Arab heads of state adopted their "Three Nos", insisting that there would be "no reconciliation, no negotiations and no (diplomatic) recognition". Further afield, the United Kingdom sponsored what became, on November 22, UN Security Council Resolution 242. UNSC 242 spelled out specific demands which were quickly adopted as principles of the Palestinian national movement, including:

- The return of Israeli forces to the armistice lines of June 4, 1967
- A "just settlement" of the Palestinian refugee problem
- The preservation of national sovereignty and territorial of all states in the region, through the creation of demilitarized zones

Israeli obduracy on UNSC 242 remained in place, and in parallel the text became enshrined as an expression of Palestinian national demands, as well as a foundation for international mediation efforts aimed at ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's refusal to abide by that Resolution, and its insistence on a pedantic and limited interpretation of the terms of UNSC 242 is clearly a reflection of the fact that Israel's gains during the June, 1967 war surpassed even those it made during the campaign of 1948.

The Repercussions of the 1967 War

For Palestinians, the losses of 1967 served to heighten the importance of informal *Fedayeen* (or "freedom fighter") groups. A Palestinian popular resistance movement became gained

widespread popular support, and in fact came to be the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip helped to expand the battlegrounds on which the Palestinians could now fight Zionist power in Palestine.

In Jordan, the war meant that it lost control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, accounting for a total area of 5,878 km², which the Hashemite Kingdom had controlled since the Arab-Israeli armistice signed at Rhodes in 1949. With its policy of planting exclusively Jewish Israeli settlements across the formerly Jordanian territories which they occupied, the Israelis turned the West Bank and East Jerusalem into a mesh and cut the Palestinians off of the Jordanian economy. With time, Israel also appropriated one half of the territory of East Jerusalem and displaced the Palestinian residents; it also took control of Palestinian water resources. All of this gave the Israelis an added strategic advantage over their neighbors, permanently doing away with the ability of any formal Arab army to threaten the Hebrew state's existence.

In parallel, the Israeli authorities also annexed East Jerusalem to the West Jerusalem neighborhood which the UN's 1947 Partition Plan had designated as part of the Israeli state, declaring that together this now consolidated city would be the "eternal capital" of Israel.

Today, nearly 445,000 Israeli settlers live on the West Bank (260,000) and in East Jerusalem (185,000).

With Israel now in command of both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, in addition to the territories it had captured throughout 1947-1949, the Palestinian public increasingly called for a Palestinian state to be formed once Israel could be pushed out of the Occupied Territories. This, in turn, gave rise to a conflict between Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization over who would represent the national aspirations of the Palestinians. Recognition of the PLO, however, meant that Amman could free itself of its obligations to the Palestinian people and sign a peace treaty with the Israelis.

To the north, the Israelis had captured 1,158 km² of the Golan Heights (a total area of 1,860 km²). The strategic advantage which this new territory gave to the Israelis was beyond question, with the Golan Heights straddling Mount Hermon and the Yarmouk Valley. The region also

directly overlooks the Tiberias Plain and the Upper Galilee. Unsurprisingly, the Israelis regarded a Syrian military presence there before June 5, 1967, as a vital threat. Similarly to its policies in the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, the Israeli occupiers encouraged intensive settlement in the Syrian Golan Heights, with the total number of settlers having reached 20,000 in the intervening decades. This settlement activity and the alteration of the Golan's demographics were made possible by Israel's ceaseless appropriation of Syria's water resources, from the Baniyas and Yarmouk rivers.

For Egypt, the loss of the Sinai Peninsula allowed Israel to exploit Egyptian oil resources, meeting one of the pressing needs of the Israeli economy. The Israelis were also able to make use of the airfields and airports dotted across the peninsula, and to create the menacing Bar-Lev line (named for an Israeli general) along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Israel's control of the Sinai Peninsula gave it the vantage points it needed to threaten sites deep within Egyptian territory. The Egyptian army could only bring an end to this by resorting to Soviet assistance in the construction of an air defense missile system to the west of the Canal Zone.

Egypt was able to recapture parts of the Peninsula during the 1973 war. It also gradually began reclaiming the rest through a combination of peace negotiations starting with the Camp David Agreement of 1978 and international arbitration (1988; the final part of the Sinai to be returned to Egyptian sovereignty was Taba, in 1989). Yet the 1967 defeat irrevocably irreversibly altered the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict by completely sidelining Egypt as a combatant. The Palestinians, meanwhile, have been left entirely stateless, realizing the ambitions of the Israeli architects of the war who had foreseen that by capturing further Arab territories, they could divert attention from the original Palestinian *Nakba* of 1948.

Together with the annexes, the terms of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreements place strict conditions on the extent of Egyptian militarization in the Sinai. Any amendment to these arrangements, which are monitored by UN observers, would have to be ratified by both the executives and the legislatures of both countries. Today, the entire peninsula is cordoned off into security zones which are strictly monitored, as well as the weapons which the Egyptian army may place in any of them. Successive Egyptian cabinets have adhered strictly to these

guidelines; in fact, the Mubarak government even insisted that a new protocol be added to the previous peace agreements before installing an additional 750 Egyptian military personnel in the Sinai in the run-up to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip (which took place in September, 2005).

Although the Middle East has changed dramatically in the five decades since June, 1967—the collapse of the Soviet Union, the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the rise of Arab popular revolutions have all signposted these transformations—the fallout of Israeli expansion is clear for all to see. On the wider, pan-Arab level, the defeat of 1967 shook the foundations of the Arab Nationalist project. The rise of political Islamist movements was another consequence of the June war. In fact, the Israeli occupation of Arab territories which began in 1967—and the Palestinian reaction to it—can be seen as direct causes of many of the changes to have swept through the wider region since that time.

For Israel itself, the victories in 1967 cemented its regional role—no longer a marginal, tenuous state but rather a viable and strong member of the wider Middle East. Henceforth, Israel and her military were pivotal to the furtherance of US regional strategy in the Middle East, and the wider Cold War. With time, Israel was able to benefit from the inflow of massive US military investments, which increasingly strengthened the basis for its alliance with Washington: Israel itself was not immune from the social and economic consequences of its war.

Finally: the roots of the wider re-framing of the Arab-Israeli conflict—and what this meant for the Arab relationship to Palestine—can also be traced to the defeat of 1967.

The Conference

The dearth of Arab histories of the 1967 war and its consequences is fertile ground for academic study in its own right. Our meeting in Doha will seek to allay this by narrating the war from the Arab point of view, taking in the day-to-day military history, a strategic analysis of the war as well as exploring its repercussions for the Palestinian cause. Specifically, participants at the meeting will be invited to submit papers which fit into one of the following themes:

- The prevailing circumstances in the run-up to the war.



- The progress of hostilities along the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian frontlines. This theme is focused on the on-the-ground combat developments.
- Diplomatic activity preceding the conflict and in its aftermath.
- The factors leading to the Arab defeat.
- The regional and global environment on the eve of the war.
- The impact of the war on Arab nationalist thinking and politics.
- Israeli historiography of the Six-Day War.
- The repercussions for Palestinian national aspirations.