

SIX DAYS THAT SHAPED THE MIDDLE EAST

Six Days of War:

June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East

by Michael B. Oren

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The modern state of Israel is a mere tiny sliver of land in the Middle East, which has been fought about and prayed for since its establishment in 1948. For almost two thousand years the Jews were in dispersion but had returned again. Countless Christians rushed to their Bibles to seek an answer to the question of Israel and prophecy. Some evangelicals think political Israel (including territorial claims to the land) is still critical in God's scheme of things. They expect the temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem as an indication of a mass conversion of Jews to Christ. For this reason Jerusalem and the former temple area must be in Jewish or Christian hands, whatever the cost. Many Reformed Christians argue that the Jews have forfeited all claims to God's special covenant because of their repeated rebellions. And there are many variations of opinion in between. However, regardless their views on prophecy, the majority of evangelicals are at present the strongest non-Jewish supporters of the State of Israel.

For many people in the West the establishment of the state of Israel is a compensation for the suffering of the Jews in the Second World War. Six million Jews perished; most of those who survived had no land, no homes, no means of a livelihood, not even elementary security. For example, Holland had a prewar population of 145,000 and at the end of the war was left with a remnant of 28,000. How can anyone deny the horrors of the Holocaust? How can anyone forget the death of six million people, almost one-third of the total population of world Jewry of some 18 million? These people have suffered so severely in history.

For the world of Islam the state of Israel has been and still is a thorn in the flesh. Muslims could not understand why tiny, poverty-stricken Israel with its few immigrants from Europe could resist and overcome five Arab armies in 1948, and even become a new power in the Middle East. And then, after a couple of decades came the unbelievable Arab defeat of the Six Day War, in June 1967, one of the shortest in history with an enormous loss of life. Israel had conquered 42,000 square miles and was now three and a half times its original size.

Muslims asked, "Was not that terrible event a sign that God had forsaken them, because they had first forsaken his ways by flirting with various secular ideologies?" Having achieved their independence in the middle of the 20th century, several Muslim countries espoused socialism as the way to catch up with the rest of the world. But the

1967 defeat of the Arab world by the much smaller state of Israel proved to many in the Arab world that all ideologies such as nationalism and socialism were failures. Consequently, what was left was their religion, which turned into a fertile soil for radical Islamic movements and the hope of Islamic states. The Modern Middle East was radically changed by the Six Day War, or as the Arabs prefer, the June 1967 War. Some Middle East experts regard it as the date for the resurgence of radical Islam. In fact, Islamic fundamentalism would not have enjoyed the success over the past thirty years if it had not been for the continuing existence of Israel.

Many books have been written about the Six Day War. The literature is broad because the subject is thrilling – the vast armies, the lightning swiftness of the action, and the danger of nuclear war. In his gripping and provocative new study, Michael Oren, an American and a longtime resident of Israel, provides a fresh assessment. He wanted to recreate the Middle East of the 1960s, to animate the extraordinary personalities that fashioned it, and to relive a period of history that profoundly impacts our own. He based his findings on multi-archival research, enjoying access to recently declassified diplomatic papers from North America, Britain, and Israel, having himself met and interviewed many key political and military figures. The result of his research is a book that is both timely and fascinating. To aid his readers in understanding the dynamics of the 1967 War, Oren highlights some of its key themes.

Lack of Foresight

Oren argues that Israeli leadership, military and political alike, entered the war with lack of foresight and clearly defined objectives. The leaders appeared all but oblivious to the potential long-term political consequences of the way they handled the crisis. They feared that even an appearance of weakness or appeasement would undermine their credibility and invite the destruction of Israel. Consequently, instead of having a well-worked out plan of action, they improvised as events developed. As Oren quotes one Israeli general: "The objectives rose from the bottom up, from the military to the political echelon. Only after the war did the government draw circles around our accomplishments and declare that these were its original goals."

Lack of Unity in Israel's Leadership

The lack of foresight and strategic planning led to a conflict between the military and civilian leadership, which reached crisis proportions at the eve of the war.

These leaders involved were remarkable characters. Prime Minister **Levi Eshkol**, utterly devoid of charisma, was reluctant to act in the face of mounting Egyptian provocations, hesitating to risk war without the tacit approval of the United States, refusing to approve a preemptive strike. He was famous for his ability to avoid commitments. "Sure I promised, but did I promise to keep my promise?" was one of his favorite sayings. But that same elusiveness often made him seem indecisive.

Israel's chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) **Yitzhak Rabin** was richly experienced, and a man of decisive action. He had seen some of the heaviest fighting in the 1948 War of Independence, commanding elite troops in the battle in and around Jerusalem. He was certain that Israel was facing an immediate threat to its very existence,

and wanted to take immediate action. Because Rabin and others in the military believed there was no time to waste, they began to work around the Prime Minister, who found his authority progressively curtailed. Rabin, pushed into making decisions on matters well beyond the military realm, suffered a nervous breakdown.

Efforts to resolve the internal crisis led to the appointment of **Moshe Dayan**, the colorful former chief of staff, who had turned to politics. He was a steady critic of Eshkol's government, and a stickler for military discipline, prone to show contempt for the law. As one former classmate remembered, "He was a liar, a braggart, a schemer, and a prima donna – and in spite of that, the object of deep admiration." Within two days of joining the government, Dayan had seized control over much of Israel's decision making, guiding it inescapably toward war. He was not a harmonizer, and was prone to make momentous decisions on his own, such as ordering the IDF to seize the Golan Heights, without bothering to consult the cabinet.

Another prominent figure was **Abba Eban**, Israel's famously eloquent statesman, its ambassador to Washington and the UN. After the war he used his rhetorical powers to try to persuade a skeptical world that Israel was acting properly in seizing the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai desert, the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem.

Lack of Arab Unity and Military Competence

In 1967 the idea that Arab nations were united behind the leadership of Egyptian President **Gamal Abdel Nasser** (1918-1970) was a complete fiction. Nasser clashed continuously with rivals jostling for primacy in the Arab world. Arab leaders spoke frequently about unity and solidarity, but they were divided among themselves. They were incapable of unity when their vital interests were at stake. Nasser was a determined and energetic figure, the head of a police state, who could capture his audience with his eloquence. He was in close alliance with the Soviet Bloc where he obtained his weapons arsenal.

The Egyptian leadership's preoccupation with the Palestinian problem kept them from facing their real problems realistically, such as the challenge of modernity, the population explosion, and massive poverty. Egypt's ministry of religious affairs even declared a state of holy war to liberate Palestine from the Jews. Egypt seemed to believe the destruction of Israel was a child's game. The military leaders were incompetent. High-ranking officers were appointed on the basis of personal connections and political reliability, and not on merit. Most senior officers fled the battle scenes well in advance of their men. **Abd al-Hakim Amer**, Egypt's First Vice President and Deputy Commander-in Chief of the Armed Forces, was mentally unstable. His convoluted relationship with Nasser translated into anarchy in the field. As field marshal of Egypt's armed forces he handed Israel the control of Sinai within a single day. He was held responsible for the debacle in the war, and either resigned or was dismissed. In August 1967 he was accused of plotting a military coup and was arrested; he committed suicide in prison in September 1967.

The mere existence of the Jewish state was abhorrent to Arabs. The vitriolic verbal onslaught directed at Israel before and after 1967 was abominable. But Oren makes it clear that inter-Arab manoeuvring even more than anti-Zionism as such, created the conditions that exploded in war on June 5. But the anti-Semitic rhetoric has not

changed. There is no let up of anti-Semitic propaganda. For example, today Hizbullah's television station al-Manar from Lebanon broadcasts a program "The Spider's Houses," which presents an "expert" on Jews who are described as "lying, treacherous, and greedy."

Arab Lies and Hatred

During the war truth was the first casualty. Arab leaders lied to each other, to their own people, and in the end, when defeat loomed, they lied to themselves. Arab mass media published fake victory reports. The Arab people thought that their forces were at the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Their leaders were heroic in talk, but stayed away from the battlefield. The only Arab ruler to come anywhere near the actual fighting was King Hussein of Jordan, who lost one-half of his kingdom, along with its principal sources of revenue – tourism and agriculture.

When the Arab armies were on the run, the United States became a convenient scapegoat. Cairo's *Voice of the Arabs* broadcasted, "The United States, oh Arabs, is the enemy of all peoples, the killer of life, the shedder of blood, that is preventing you from liquidating Israel." Despite the resounding defeat and the wars fought with the Israelis since, the Palestinian question remains the main axis of Arab and international policies. The Arabs still look for "the liberation of the entire Arab homeland." As Ibrahim Makhous, Syria's foreign minister, testified, "Palestine is a sacred cause that will never die." Yet the Arabs have done little to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians. With their billions of petrol dollars the Arabs still let the Palestinians rot in refugee camps. And in general, the Arab masses are worse off today than when they were under the British and French colonial rule. Furthermore, **Yasser Arafat**, the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, is still a militant menace to be reckoned with. In 1964 he issued a communique extolling "the duty of Jihad (holy war) and...the dreams of revolutionary Arabs from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf." His actions today are still irresponsible and self-destructive.

Conclusion

From the perspective of Israel and its few friends, the 1967 war was necessary. The Israelis had no other choice! The very existence of their nation was at risk. They had no other place to go to. We should remember that the state of Israel is not possible apart from being Jewish. For example, secular Judaism undermines the reason for Israel's existence. If a Jewish state no longer believes it has a claim to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, it is no match for Islam that does. For the moment Israel agrees that "the Arabs have as good a claim to it as we have," it is dead.

Israel is a nation under siege. A persistent danger continues to haunt every aspect of Israel's life. Today Israelis are still not safe within their own borders. They cannot stroll in a market or ride a bus without putting their lives at risk. The question remains: How can Israel's military superiority translate into peace with its neighbors? Oren concludes his book with the chilling assessment, "Today, Arab demonstrators, many bearing posters of Nasser, are demanding a showdown with the West and with Israel. The Israelis wait, meanwhile, and weigh the risks of preemption. The war that never quite

ended for statesmen, soldiers, and historians, is liable to erupt again." A sobering thought!

Is Israel worth defending? I believe it is. Israel's only reliable friend in the West is the United States. It still depends on its support. Furthermore, Christians should pray and work for reconciliation and for a peaceful coexistence of Israelis and Arabs. The ultimate solution for the deep-seated problems in the Middle East is the Gospel. As we spread the Good News of reconciliation, let us prayerfully and actively wait for the return of our Lord, the Prince of Peace, Who said, "Surely I come quickly."

Please print the following as a separate sidebar

A Brief Timeline of the Six-Day-War

November 4, 1966 – Egypt and Syria signed a defense treaty, committing them to assist each militarily during war.

May 16, 1967 – Egypt sends tanks into the Sinai, Egyptian territory bordering on Israel. The same day Egypt asks the United Nations to withdraw its peacekeeping forces from the Sinai. The UN agrees.

May 20-24 – Egypt blockades the Strait of Tiran, preventing Israel from accessing the Red Sea. At the same time 9,000 Egyptian soldiers, along with 200 tanks are moved into position on the border with Israel.

May 30 – Jordan signs a treaty with Egypt putting Jordan's forces under Egyptian military command.

June 5 – The Israeli air force attacks at 9 am and within 2 hours destroy almost the entire Egyptian air force. While the Israelis lose nine aircraft the Egyptians lose more than 100 and 13 airbases. Jordanian artillery begins shelling Israel at 1 pm.

June 7 – Israeli forces defeat the Jordanians and capture the West Bank.

June 8 – Israel beats back the Syrians and takes the Golan Heights - high ground, which the Syrians had used to shell Israel.

June 10 – The fighting ends leaving Israel in control of East Jerusalem (which had been controlled by Jordan), the Sinai (formerly part of Egypt) and the Golan Heights (previously controlled by Syria). 700 to 800 Israelis died. 10,000 Egyptians soldiers are killed while Jordan loses several thousands and Syria loses about 200.