Six Day War: Israel vs. the Arabs
June 1967
By Joseph Miranda

Background

The Six Day War was the culmination of a series of crises in the Middle East, mainly focused on Israel, though also reflecting the struggle for geostrategic position among the various Arab powers. The First Arab-Israeli War, fought in 1947-49, confirmed the United Nations’ declaration of Israeli statehood. It also indirectly brought about the overthrow of several of the Arab governments that had led their countries to defeat.

The most notable of those coups was in Egypt, where the “Free Officers Movement” seized power in 1952. One of that movement’s leaders, Gamal Abdel Nasser, became president (dictator) two years later and began to promote radical Arab pan-nationalism. He saw Egypt as the center of the overlapping spheres of the Arab states, the Islamic cultural realm and Africa. His objectives were to
An Israeli armor unit mobilizing for deployment.

An Israeli civilian militia mobilizes to guard their rural kibbutz just prior to the start of the war.

The 1956 War

The Six Day War wasn’t the first time the Israelis fought their way across the Sinai. In 1956, Britain, France and Israel formed an alliance to take on Egypt. The governments of all three had reasons to be rid of Nasser. He had nationalized the Suez Canal, a vital strategic thoroughfare for Britain, which still held imperial interests around the globe. France saw Nasser as a threat due to his support of insurgents in their colony of Algeria. The Israelis were dealing with Palestinian guerrillas who were infiltrating across the border from Egyptian-administered Gaza.

The plan the three countries adopted was codenamed Operation Musketeer. According to it, the Israelis would drive across the Sinai while an Anglo-French airborne and amphibious force, supported by both those nations’ fleets and airpower, would land at Port Said and advance up the canal. The political and media cover story for that portion of the invasion was that it was a necessity in order to shield the canal from being engulfed in the Sinai fighting. The combined effect was hoped to be a destabilization of the Egyptian government that would force Nasser from office.

Musketeer began on 30 October 1956, with the Israelis driving across the Sinai as planned. British and French airpower then quickly destroyed the Egyptian Air Force, while their airborne and amphibious units seized Port Said. As has often been the case historically, though, military success turned into political disaster. International—particularly American—pressure forced the Anglo-French expeditionary force to withdraw. The Israelis, thereby left isolated, then also evacuated the Sinai. A United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) eventually moved into the peninsula as peacekeepers.

Both sides drew lessons from the 1956 war. For the Egyptians, they proved to be the wrong ones. Nasser was hailed as a hero throughout the Arab world for having successfully defied the former imperial powers of Europe. The defeat of the Egyptian Army in the Sinai was attributed throughout the Arab world as having been due to the need to fight Britain and France as well as Israel. The deficiencies of the Egyptian armed forces were glossed over in the euphoria about the political outcome that had won the day for Nasser.

As for the Israelis, they were impressed by the power of the Anglo-French air forces as well as that demonstrated by their own mobile units on the ground. Over the next decade the IDF built up its airpower and armor, and then used them as a war-winning combined arms force in 1967.

The Anglo-French expeditionary force easily seized Port Said while the Israelis cleared the Sinai; however, US and international opposition was then sufficient to force the withdrawal of those forces from Egypt. With the former imperial powers out of the way, the Israelis basked on their side of the border, Nasser staked claim to the moral leadership of the entire Arab world.

Those events ultimately led the US into a de facto alliance with Israel, as a counterbalance to both the Soviets and nascent Arab nationalism. While Washington was moving closer to Jerusalem, though, the Americans couldn’t get close for fear of fully alienating otherwise pro-Western Arab countries. If nothing else, those countries controlled petroleum resources vital to the Western world.

In 1958 Nasser masterminded a uprising between Egypt and Syria, calling the new federation the United Arab Republic (UAR). With the founding of the UAR came the implication the other Arab states would ultimately join in order to form one combined regional hegemon.

Underneath the façade of unity there was considerable infighting among Nasser and Syria’s leaders. Nasser’s status was also disputed by the heads of the other Arab countries, many of whom had their own claims to make. For example, in 1960 the Syrians sponsored an attempt to assassinate King Hussein of Jordan, who was considered by them as too pro-Western. The attempt came close to killing the monarch, who nearly went to war in retaliation. Further, Egyptian dominance of the UAR was increasingly resented by the Syrians, who finally withdrew from it in 1961.

As for Nasser, since he’d declared himself the moral leader of the Arab world, he couldn’t afford to back down without loss of prestige, something that might then easily rebound into a coup or revolt against him in Egypt. Consequently he upped the rhetoric against Israel, reaffirming his credentials as the most militant of the Arabs.

Even so, throughout the early 1960s Nasser wasn’t really preparing for war against Israel. Much of the Egyptian Army was tied down in Yemen, supporting that country’s government in a civil war against deposed royals. Nasser was also realistic enough to understand that, until there was a single united Arab military command...
Nasser’s rivals exploited that gap between his stated policy and the situation on the ground. They claimed that, while Nasser made propaganda about liberating Palestinians living under Israeli rule, he wasn’t willing to go to war over the issue. In comparison, the Syrians were actively supporting Palestinian raids into Israel from their territory. Tensions escalated to the point where, in April 1967, the Israelis launched some air attacks in retaliation.

Seeing the Syrians taking the lead in the Arab world, Nasser upped the ante. In May 1967 he ordered UNEF out of the Sinai, and on 22 May declared a blockade of the Straits of Tiran in order to effectively close Israel’s southern port of Eilat. He also ordered mobilization of the Egyptian armed forces, moving several divisions into forward positions in the Sinai.

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Nasser hadn’t actually launched a war against the Israelis no matter how hot his rhetoric became. With UNEF stationed along the Sinai-Israeli frontier, Nasser couldn’t actually launch a war against the Israelis no matter how hot his rhetoric became.

The Israelis had another advantage in superior logistics. The Brink

Numbers

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Military Manpower</th>
<th>Tanks</th>
<th>Combat Aircraft</th>
<th>Artillery Pieces</th>
<th>Warships</th>
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Note. Numbers vary depending on sources. Israeli combat aircraft include converted trainers. "Warships" includes patrol boats.

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