

A TALE OF TWO OUTCOMES:

HOW NASSER WON AND LOST THE SUEZ AND SIX DAY WARS

The middle of the twentieth century was the golden age for Arab nationalism. Regimes across the Middle East were being overthrown to make way for populist leaders. Gamal abd al-Nasser represents one such populist leader that came to power during this time. Nasser had many accomplishments like land reform and modernization but his biggest achievement was the nationalization of the Suez Canal. In 1956, he wrested control of the canal from Britain and France and claimed it for Egypt. Although he had great success in confronting foreign powers in 1956, Nasser encountered great failure in the 1967 Six Day War. In the 1967 War, Egypt lost the Sinai Peninsula and lives of thousands of its soldiers. Even though the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Six Day War were only a decade apart, they had vastly different results. The difference in outcomes of these two conflicts was the result of changing United States foreign policy, shifting alliances, and overconfidence on the part of Nasser.

In 1956, the President of Egypt, Gamal abd al-Nasser tried to secure funding for the construction of the Aswan Dam, a project requiring vast amounts of money that Egypt did not possess. After being rebuffed by the United States and other international organizations for loans and other monetary assistance, Nasser came to the conclusion that he had to nationalize the Suez Canal to gain the revenue from the canal for use in his project. Unsurprisingly, the British and French were not pleased with this development since they jointly owned the canal at the time so they enlisted the help of their ally, Israel. As part of a ploy to allow Britain to place its military in Egypt, “Israeli forces invaded the Egyptian Sinai peninsula and headed for the Suez Canal.”<sup>1</sup> The Israeli, British, and French military forces were successful in their military campaign and “after some fierce fighting, the Egyptian air force was destroyed and key ports

---

<sup>1</sup> Brands, H. W., *Into the Labyrinth: The United States and the Middle East, 1945-1993* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994) 64.

along the canal were occupied.”<sup>2</sup> The attack was a resounding victory for Israel, Britain, and France but the United States interfered and the situation drastically changed.

The Suez Crisis occurred under the leadership of United States President Eisenhower. At the same time, the Hungarian Revolt, where the United States denounced Soviet imperialism in suppressing the revolt, broke out. Eisenhower thought it would appear hypocritical for the United States to support its allies, France and Britain, in their aggression to secure the Egyptian canal when it condemned the Soviet Union’s actions in Hungary. Furthermore, the president was angry that Great Britain made an illegal power play and had not consulted America at all. Eisenhower decided to put an end to the aggression and especially targeted Britain. In the president’s mind, “the most effective form of coercion was economic pressure from the United States.”<sup>3</sup> This economic pressure included “two mainstays of modern warfare: money and oil.”<sup>4</sup> The United States refused to grant a loan to Great Britain and also blocked a British loan request to the International Monetary Fund (ironically the same situation as with Egypt and the Aswan Dam Project). In addition, the United States prevented Britain from obtaining more oil supplies. This effectually forced Prime Minister Eden to withdraw his troops and allow Egypt to retain control of the Suez Canal.

An important fact to note is that Egypt militarily lost to Britain, France, and Israel. The Egyptian military had been badly damaged and had lost control of the Sinai Peninsula to Israel. Without outside intervention, Gamal abd al-Nasser would never have been successful in holding the Suez Canal. With his military in tatters, Nasser would not have been able to force Britain, France, and Israel out of his country because he did not have the military might to do so. “In the

---

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (PublicAffairs, 2008), 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Brands, 67.

end it was Eisenhower who saved Nasser's regime" because Eisenhower forced the tripartite powers to leave.<sup>5</sup> With the acquisition of the Suez Canal, Gamal abd al-Nasser further increased his popularity within Egypt as the leader who stood up to the imperialists. Even though they were "defeated militarily, Gamal Abdul Nasser and the Egyptians were the big winners politically."<sup>6</sup>

Nasser's successful attainment of the Suez Canal was placed in sharp contrast with an event occurring nearly ten years later: the 1967 War. After receiving faulty intelligence from the Soviet Union that Israel was amassing troops on the Israeli-Syrian border to initiate an attack, Nasser knew that the Soviets were trying to deceive him but he decided to honor his defense pact with Syria anyway. Nasser's course of action was to move Egyptian troops to the Israeli-Egyptian border as a show of strength. However, this show of strength was not as strong as it seemed. While Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt had more weapons, equipment, and soldiers combined, "from a military standpoint, it was not the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) that was in danger when the Egyptian army amassed troops on the Israeli border, but the Egyptian army."<sup>7</sup> This was due to the fact that while the Arab armies were larger overall, "Israel's army substantially outnumbered the Arab troops at the borders."<sup>8</sup> Israel also knew it would have the upper hand if it struck the Arabs first. Because it was a small country, "Israel needed the element of surprise. Had it waited for an Arab invasion, Israel would have been at a potentially

---

<sup>5</sup> Freedman, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ian J Bickerton and Carla L. Klausner, *Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Pearson Education, Inc., 2015), 148.

<sup>7</sup> Miko Peled, "Six Days in Israel, 45 Years Ago," *Mideast Resources Blog*, June 6, 2012, Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://mideastresources.blogspot.com/2012/06/six-days-in-israel-by-miko-peled-2012.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Nikles, "Why a False Understanding of the 'Six Day War' Still Matters," *Mondoweiss Blog*, June 17, 2014, Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/06/understanding-still-matters>.

catastrophic disadvantage.”<sup>9</sup> The 1967 War “was actually started by an Israeli strike on Egypt”<sup>10</sup> on the morning of June 5<sup>th</sup> where “Israeli planes destroyed most of Egypt’s air force on the ground.”<sup>11</sup> Israel took large swathes of land from Jordan, Egypt, and Syria in a resounding victory that made Israel “more than three times its previous size.”<sup>12</sup> This extraordinary increase in size took most by surprise. As Fogelman explains, “if someone had taken the broadest brush to demarcate the biggest and widest borders he could propose for Israel, he would not have gone one kilometer beyond what the IDF reached in this war.”<sup>13</sup> Israel was the undeniable military victor in the Six Day War.

Between 1956 and 1967, the United States’ policy towards Egypt and Nasser had changed. While Eisenhower had supported Nasser by pressuring Israel, France, and Britain to leave Egypt in 1956, the new leader at the time, President Johnson, was against Nasser’s blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba. Johnson issued a statement proclaiming that “the Egyptian blockade [was] illegal and gravely threatening to world peace.”<sup>14</sup> This statement was a strong condemnation of Egypt and demonstrated that the United States would not support Nasser in a move that Johnson deemed illegal.

This rocky relationship between the United States and Egypt did not manifest overnight but rather through increased tensions. During the Kennedy administration, the United States “develop[ed] a ‘special relationship’ with Israel...becoming Israel’s chief weapons supplier.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell G Bard, “Myths & Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, No Date, Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/myths3/MF1967.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Kharabeesh Street, “The Actual Truth About Palestine in Response to Danny Ayalon,” *Youtube*, uploaded November 6, 2013, Video, Accessed February 24, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBYkBgY1-LM&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>11</sup> Bickerton, 167.

<sup>12</sup> Freedman, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Shay Fogelman, “The Palestinian State of Ishmael, As Envisioned by Rehavam Ze’evi,” *Haaretz*, October 15, 2010, Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/the-palestinian-state-of-ishmael-as-envisioned-by-rehavam-ze-evi-1.319271>.

<sup>14</sup> Brands, 105.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 101

Although the United States never explicitly allied with Israel, supplying weapons to Israel was generally recognized as support for its government. In becoming good friends with Israel, the United States alienated many Arab countries. Under the Johnson administration, there was even more tension. Neither Nasser nor Johnson liked the other man. While Nasser “feared that the United States might move to oust him...Johnson himself was not attuned to the sensibilities of foreign leaders and he had little patience with Nasser.”<sup>16</sup> With such unfriendly relations, it is no surprise that the United States did not support Egypt in its conflict with Israel. However, this lack of support was an important factor in Nasser’s loss in the Six Day War. As aforementioned, Nasser only succeeded in nationalizing the canal because he had the backing of the United States. With the United States’ unofficial help given to Israel and not Egypt in the 1967 War, Nasser was unable to win. The Israelis only withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula during the Suez War and because “they had succumbed to international pressure to give up territory won in fighting.”<sup>17</sup> This was not the case in the 1967 War because Egypt was condemned as the aggressor. The Israelis, the British, and the French should have won the Suez War because they had defeated the Egyptian army but the United States pressured these three countries to leave. Without American backing in the 1967 War, Egypt was extremely likely to fail against a superior Israeli military force.

Although the United States’ support for Egypt in the 1967 War would have been instrumental in securing a victory for Egypt, there were other factors that changed between 1956 and 1967 that damaged Egypt’s ability to defeat Israel. After the 1956 Suez War, Israel began to make many new economic partnerships, largely due to the Gulf of Aqaba. Because the Gulf of Aqaba linked Israel to Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia via the Indian Ocean, “trade flourished, as

---

<sup>16</sup> Bickerton, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Brands, 115.

did contacts and friendly relations with scores of nations in the developing world.”<sup>18</sup> One key Israeli partner was Iran because Iran supplied oil to Israel and was significantly closer to Israel than Israel’s previous oil supplier, Venezuela. In this time of war, fast and secure access to oil provided more mobility for military forces and was a valuable asset. With increased trade between Israel and many other countries, “useful diplomatic connections were made that helped buttress Israel’s position in an increasingly hostile United Nations.”<sup>19</sup> More allies in the UN meant that the UN was less likely to pressure Israel into backing away from hostilities with the Arab countries.

But while Israel was gaining allies and partnerships, Egypt was losing them. Around the time of the 1956 Suez War, Gamal abd al-Nasser was renowned one of the leaders of the Third World and had many allies in the Bandung conference. But by the time of the 1967 War, “Nasser’s friends from the Bandung conference and in the third world, leaders like Nehru, Sukarno, Ben Bella, and others, were no longer in power.”<sup>20</sup> Without the same leaders in power, Nasser couldn’t count on those countries’ support. In addition to losing Third World allies, Nasser was having many difficulties with his Arab neighbors. For example, Nasser “cast aspersions against King Hussein (of Jordan)...as the ‘dwarf from Amman’ and the ‘Hashemite harlot’” while “the Jordanians and the Saudis countered by attacking Nasser, accusing him of cowardice, fear of Israel, and unwillingness to live up to his promises.”<sup>21</sup> With Egypt and its neighbors distrustful and often disdainful of each other, it was difficult to mount a united military front against Israel during the 1967 War.

---

<sup>18</sup> Bickerton, 152.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Another factor that changed between the Suez War and the Six Day War was Nasser's assessment of his allies and military forces. Because "Moscow evidently thought Syrian pressure on Nasser would encourage unity between the primary radical regimes of the region," the Soviet Union strongly encouraged Egypt to fulfill commitments made to Syria in a mutual defense pact.<sup>22</sup> Nasser assumed that prodding by the Soviet Union meant that they supported him and that the "Russians would now stand behind him [with] whatever action he took."<sup>23</sup> Belief in Soviet support made Nasser more brazen in his dealings with Israel because he thought he had a world superpower ally. In addition to lack of actual Soviet support, "Nasser had a false estimation of Egyptian strength based on the great amount of military hardware he had amassed."<sup>24</sup> Although he had acquired more weapons prior to the 1967 War than he had prior to the 1956 War, his military was still not strong enough to defeat Israel. With these factors leading to his overconfidence of a victory against Israel, Nasser was more liable to confront Israel, even though his country was not as militarily powerful. Overconfidence led Nasser to engage in actions that were not the best strategic decisions.

Although there were many other factors that contributed to Nasser's loss of the Six Day War, many of those factors were also present at the time of the Suez War and so they cannot be attributed to being the reasons why Nasser won the Suez War but lost the Six Day War. For instance, the economy of Egypt at the time of the Six Day War was "a fundamentally failing economy."<sup>25</sup> A strong economy would have surely helped Nasser to secure more supplies and armaments but Egypt was having economic problems during the Suez War too. The Suez War was fought over Nasser's attempt to nationalize the Suez Canal in order to fund the Aswan High

---

<sup>22</sup> Brands, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Bickerton, 163.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Brands, 107.

Dam, indicating that his economy was struggling to pay for an infrastructure project. Nasser was searching for a way to find more money because his economy did not have the money to finance its own improvements. The prevalence of economic problems in both 1956 and 1967 would not explain the difference in outcomes between the two years but it certainly did not help that Nasser was having economic problems in 1967.

Although Israel may have nominally won the 1967 Six Days War, Israel encountered many problems after the war. After gaining the West Bank, a settlement where multitudes of Palestinian refugees resided, it was now Israel's duty to address the refugee problem. Although it militarily won the Six Day war, "Israel is losing the 1967 Six-Day War" because it has failed to find a permanent solution for the Palestinian refugee problem.<sup>26</sup> While Israel has been trying to establish a two-state system, this system is not working because of continued Israeli construction of settlements in the West Bank. In places like Jerusalem with significant Arab populations, "a policy was in place to reorient the geopolitical reality."<sup>27</sup> Israel counters these assertions by claiming that "Israel's presence in the West Bank is the result of the war of self-defense."<sup>28</sup> While both sides may claim different things, it is evident that there were unforeseen consequences of the 1967 War.

In the 1956 Suez War, Israel, Great Britain, and France fought Egypt for control of the Suez Canal but Egypt eventually gained control despite a military defeat. During the 1967 Six Day War, Israel swiftly defeated Egypt and other surrounding Arab countries because foreign policy in the United States had changed, allies to both Israel and Egypt shifted, and Gamal abd

---

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "Did Israel Actually Lose the 1967 War?" *Mideast Resources Blog*, November 18, 2011, Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://mideastresources.blogspot.com/2011/11/did-israel-actually-lose-1967-war-by.html>.

<sup>27</sup> The Palestine Center, "By the Maps: Understanding Israel's Increasing Grip on Jerusalem," *Youtube*, uploaded March 26, 2010, Video, Accessed February 24, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v-Tpg9xN5k>.

<sup>28</sup> Danny, Ayalon, "Israel Palestinian Conflict: The Truth About the West Bank (Shorter Version)," *Youtube*, uploaded July 19, 2011, Video, Accessed February 24, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc9imoJWgPI>.

al-Nasser became overconfident in his military might. Though Nasser won the Suez War, this was not a guarantee that he would win the Six Day War nearly a decade later. Following the Six Day War, both Israelis and Arabs suffered long-lasting consequences that would affect both peoples for many years to come.

## Bibliography

Ayalon, Danny. "Israel Palestinian Conflict: The Truth About the West Bank (Shorter Version)."

Youtube, uploaded July 19, 2011. Video. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc9imoJWgPI>.

Bard, Mitchell G. "Myths & Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict." *Jewish Virtual Library*, No Date. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/myths3/MF1967.html>.

Bickerton, Ian J and Carla L. Klausner. *Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Pearson Education, Inc., 2015.

Brands, H. W. *Into the Labyrinth: The United States and the Middle East, 1945-1993*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1994.

Fogelman, Shay. "The Palestinian State of Ishmael, As Envisioned by Rehavam Ze'evi." *Haaretz*, October 15, 2010. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/the-palestinian-state-of-ishmael-as-envisioned-by-rehavam-ze-evi-1.319271>.

Freedman, Lawrence. *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*. PublicAffairs, 2008.

Goldberg, Jeffrey. "Did Israel Actually Lose the 1967 War?." *Mideast Resources Blog*, November 18, 2011. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<http://mideastresources.blogspot.com/2011/11/did-israel-actually-lose-1967-war-by.html>.

Kharabeesh Street. "The ACTUAL Truth About Palestine in Response to Danny Ayalon."

Youtube, uploaded November 6, 2013. Video. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBYkBqYI-LM&feature=youtu.be>.

Nikles, Roland. "Why a False Understanding of the 'Six Day War' Still Matters." *Mondoweiss Blog*, June 17, 2014. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<http://mondoweiss.net/2014/06/understanding-still-matters>.

The Palestine Center. "By the Maps: Understanding Israel's Increasing Grip on Jerusalem."

Youtube, uploaded March 26, 2010. Video. Accessed February 24, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v-Tpg9xN5k>.

Peled, Miko. "Six Days in Israel, 45 Years Ago." *Mideast Resources Blog*, June 6, 2012.

Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://mideastresources.blogspot.com/2012/06/six-days-in-israel-by-miko-peled-2012.html>.