WHAT WERE THE CAUSES OF THE SIX DAY WAR?

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The Six Day war one of the most pivotal and landmark six days in the history of the Arab Israeli Conflict and the 20th century. This paper however, will focus on the causes of the June 1967 War otherwise known as the 6 Day War. It will discuss the miscalculations, overconfidence, and overestimations by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. It will assess the significance of the false information that the USSR gave Nasser which the Egyptian President probably suspected was false. The paper will also analyze Israel’s role in the lead up to the conflict. Furthermore, the research paper will assess the roles played by Syria and the Palestinian Militias such as Fatah in provoking a conflict. Finally, the paper will determine with which side responsibility primarily lay with.

Did President Nasser Miscalculate the Egyptian Army’s Prowess and Soviet Support?

After the 1956 Suez War Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser vowed not to involve his army in a major war with Israel unless he was certain of victory. This means that he would only mobilize Egyptian troops into war if they were fully trained and ready and the international situation and circumstances permitted. Another reason for his decision not to engage his army in a war was due to Israel’s increasing military and economic power and backing from the West and many developing countries. For example, due to Israel’s policy of heavy retaliation and the unpreparedness of the Arab States, Nasser refused to assist Syria’s attempts to prevent Israel’s water-diversion scheme. He also did not help Jordan repel Israeli strikes against as-Samu “except to insist to King Hussein that responsibility for repulsing Israel reprisal raids rested with the individual countries”. Furthermore, the President preserved Egyptian disengagement and its distance during an air battle, over Syria including Damascus, between the Israeli and Syrian air forces. It is estimated that 130 aircrafts were involved and where Israel breached under international law (The Law of Land, Sea, and Air) Syria’s airspace, struck down 6 MiGs, and buzzed the Syrian capital (and historic capital of the Umayyad (Arab) Caliphate) Damascus.11(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163)22(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 3)

However, after 11 years of building and restructuring the Egyptian army (including amassing huge military hardware), Nasser developed false conclusions about the strength of the Egyptian armed forces. This along with Egypt’s declining economic situation would prove detrimental to Egyptian military hopes. Nasser also mistakenly believed that he had the support of the Russians and thus ”went to the brink”.33(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163 & 165) One could also argue that because Nasser was the populist leader of Egypt44(Kissinger, 2014, p. 114), meaning he relied heavily on the ‘emotional’ and nationalistic support of his people, that it constrained his ability to function in a more diplomatic manner.

Was False Information Passed on by the USSR to Egypt?

The Russian role in provoking the conflict has long been a study of controversy and interest. In early May 1967 Soviet intelligence passed on false warning and information to Egypt about Israeli troop concentration amassing on the Syrian border11(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163); Ginor (2003, vol. 7 (3)) and “an Israeli contingency plan for an attack on Syria”.22(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163) The long-held belief was that this was a genuine mistake on the part of the Soviet Union that provoked and precipitated a war that it neither wanted nor anticipated. However, new evidence has emerged from Soviet and Warsaw Fact
documents (archives) from memoirs, and a secret speech shortly after the war by then General Secretary and leader of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev all refute the accepted historical version. According to Isabella Ginor, in her article “The Cold War’s Longest Cover-Up: How and Why the USSR instigated the 1967 War”, it was intentional disinformation by the Soviet Union. In fact, she argues that it was part of a ‘master’ plan agreed at the highest echelons of the Kremlin leadership to trigger Egyptian military action that would result in Israeli military action. Soviet intervention against the “aggressor” Israel was to follow and was planned “well in advance”.3(Ginor (2003, vol. 7 (3))

On the one hand some claim that USSR intelligence (the KGB) possessed both precise knowledge of Israeli intentions to undertake a war against the Arabs and the dates that Israel planned to strike. On the other hand, there is no mention of this in the first official Kremlin account of the conflict. While one version of the event (which quotes Lieutenant General Aleksandr Sakharovski head of the KGB’s First Main Directorate (foreign intelligence) argues that Russian intelligence likely knew that the information was inaccurate but out of a duty passed on to the Egyptian leadership.4(Ginor (2003, vol. 7 (3)) “On May 8, 1966, a TASS cable from Damascus made the first mention of a suspicious concentration and movement of Israeli troops sighted lately on the border with Syria”.5(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 3) In fact, Bickerton and Klausner state that the Russians and probably Nasser knew that the concentration of huge number of Israeli troops on the Syrian border was false.6(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163)

Another reason why the Soviets might have passed on the false information to Nasser, was due to the situation on the Syrian-Israeli front before the war. The unstable and weak Salah Jadid regime in Syria “raised the stakes in the north without much” success and adventured on ‘an aggressive and provocative’ policy that instead of crippling the Israeli army had the counterproductive effect of provoking possible massive Israeli armed retaliation. Therefore, Soviet aims in Syria looked uncertain and in danger. The Soviet Union calculated that they could only exert control over the situation, through President Nasser and Egypt restraining and keeping Salah Jadid and Syria in check and balancing out Israel thereby deterring its action. Moreover, the Russians were determined to push Egypt into its commitment to the ‘Joint Defense pact’ it signed with Syria in early November 1966.8(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, pp. 162-163)

What Was The State of Israel’s Role in the Build up to the 1967 War?

Several reasons based on national interest calculations led Israel to undertake pre-emptive military action on June 6, 1967. Firstly, was the Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran and therefore the Gulf of Aqaba (Israel’s lifeline) to Israeli vessels and all shipping to and from Israel.1(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 1; Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 164; Laqueur & Rubin, 1984, pp. 215-216) In addition, the maritime powers including the United States (which claimed that it would view any such action undertaken by Egypt as causi belli) powers did not honor their promise and commitment that they made to Israel following the 1956 Suez-Sinai War to resist any blockade set up by Egypt.2(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 1; Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 165)

Secondly, was the role played by the United Nations inadvertently escalating tensions. On May 18, 1967 President Nasser demanded that the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) in the Gaza Strip and on United Arab Republic’s territory be withdrawn (a right Egypt possessed under international law and through an agreement with the UN Secretary General3(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 162)). The United Nations and Secretary General Uthant acquiesced4(Laqueur & Rubin, 1984, p. 215; Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163) and the peacekeeping troops stationed in the Sinai on both sides of the border, which had managed maintain a cease fire was no longer there to fill that role. Without the presence of UN troops, the Egyptian army “began to rumble across the Sinai and to take over UN positions”.5(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 163) Egyptian troop concentration in Sinai increased every day from May 14 to May 23, 1967, with Israel taking similar steps. Furthermore, it was legal under international law for any nation to place its armed forces in any part of its territory6(Laqueur & Rubin, 1984, p. 215) and Sinai was and is Egyptian. Notwithstanding this fact, the build-up of very hostile opposing armies across narrow borders bent on destroying each other is not congenial to peace.7(Laqueur & Rubin, 1984, p. 215)
Thirdly, were the increasing Fedayeen attacks from Syria and Gaza in which America promised that it would view any such action as causi belli. Moreover, Article 51 of the United Nations Charter gave Israel the right to self-defense in the event any of the aforementioned three events occurred as they would threaten Israel’s national: economic and security interests. Israel relayed this information (regarding the Article and Israel’s right to self-defense) to the Americans.88(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2)

As a matter of fact, in the event that the UN withdrew, as it did, from Egypt and the Egyptian-Israeli border, the U.S., Great Britain, and the French Republic agreed to support Israel. They agreed however, only if the Israeli State was threatened by Egyptian aggression and forced to take self-defense measures.99(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2) Therefore support would only come if Israel was not the aggressor; President Johnson’s warning to Israel not to do a preemptive strike is proof of the U.S.’s stance on this.1010(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 165) However, despite assurance on paper, in practice it was a different matter. The Johnson’s administration’s support for Israel in challenging Nasser’s blockade of the Straits of Tiran was hollow (remember till 1967 the U.S. was not 100% committed to the State of Israel). France under President Charles De Gaulle pursued a pro-Arab policy and refused to military support Israel any longer (even though from 1954-1967 France and not America had provided Israel with the bulk of its military aid). Moreover, the British (who had played their historic role as the balancer) were starting to withdraw from the Persian/Arabian Gulf (east of the Suez).1111(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 171)

The massing of the concentration of Egyptian, Syrian, and even Lebanese troops on the borders, looking at it from the Israeli perspective, can be viewed as a possible invasion (being poised) against it from three fronts.1212(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2) This might have provoked Israel to execute its strategic military and security policy of offensive warfare and massive retaliation as the best form of defense. This policy was related to Israeli security interests; due to Israel’s borders and surrounded by enemies on three sides (Jordan until 1994, Syria, and Lebanon), Israeli military and security thinking was based on the assumption that within the 1948 borders Israel would not survive if it was attacked first. Therefore, preemptive strike (or “preemptive counterstrike” as Yigal Allon called it) was adopted to avoid such a scenario. However, other historians disagree with this notion and instead blame Nasser for the escalation of tensions. They argue that without President Nasser’s provocations through closing the Strait of Tiran and Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping, no evidence exists that suggests that the Israeli State “would have launched a full-scale war against Egypt. This in spite of “military contingency plans”: formulated in 1964 for possible attacks directed against Egypt.1313(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, pp. 165-166-167)

Furthermore, there were continued attacks from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on Israeli controlled West Jerusalem (“held by Israel since 1948”) “and on the United enclave around Government House”.1414(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2) In spite, of Israeli assurances made to the Jordanians first to King Abdullah and then to his grandson King Hussein that Israel would not attack if Jordan remained neutral and dissociated in any Arab-Israeli Conflict.1515(Oren, 2003, p. 184) These attacks emanating from Jordan include attacks by and infiltrations into Israeli territory by the Palestinian Fedayeen, freedom fighters for most Arabs and terrorists for Israel and the West generally. In addition, there were the Palestinian attacks from Syria and Lebanon on Israeli property and territory.1616(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 3) Threats to its national security are one of the best arguments that resulted in a preemptive Israeli action starting with the absolute destruction of the Egyptian air force on the ground.1717(Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 167)

Water along with oil was another contentious issue in this conflict, but unlike oil, water is scarce in the region. Former Commander of the United Nations Forces in the region General Odd Bull claims that the roots of the 1967 Six Day War were set in 1964.1818(Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2; Odd Bull, 1976, pp. 72-78) On May 28, 1964 Israel began pumping water from the Jordan River into the Negev Desert for irrigation purposes. Based on the 1955 Eric Johnson plan of dividing and sharing the River Jordan and its three tributaries between Israel and its Arab neighbors, Israel was extracting that which was allocated to it. The Arab States objected, at a September 7, 1964 meeting, to Israel diverting water from the Jordan River to the Negev. In response they also voted to divert water from the Hasbani in Lebanon and the Banyas in Syria (two of the tributary rivers to the Jordan Bank (River)) east and southwards into the River Yarmuk instead.
Israel informed and warned both the Armistice Commission and the United Nations Security Council that it would perceive the enactment of this plan, agreed on September 7, 1964, as a violation of the Armistice Agreements and a bellicose move.\textsuperscript{19} (Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2)

Syrian attempts, within its own borders, to re-channel the Banyas tributary to the River Yarmuk resulted in an aggressive Israeli response. This retaliation was executed through three ground and air attacks on the Banyas.\textsuperscript{20} (Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2) This was part of Israel’s policy of extreme reprisal and offensive warfare as the best form of defense. However, General Bull’s assumptions that the conflict over water began 1964 are false though accurate in that it escalated matters. However, as Dr. Adler points out, the battle for the region’s water shortages began on December 23, 1920; when the British Empire transferred control of the “headwaters of the Jordan to France” as per the December 23, 1920 ‘Franco-British (Boundary) Convention’.\textsuperscript{21} (Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 2)

The role played by the Soviet Union also provoked or pushed Israel into a war with Egypt and Syria. A combination of hostile Soviet pronouncements and encouragement to Syria to engage in detrimental actions (“which indeed provoked a forceful Israeli response climaxing on April 7, 1967”)\textsuperscript{22} (Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 3) were part of a purposeful policy designed to prepare the ground for harnessing Egypt for confrontation and to provoke an Israeli strike against Egypt at the same time.\textsuperscript{23} (Dr. Adler, 2006, p. 3)

Were Provocatory Actions by the Syrian Army and the Palestinian Militias (Fatah) Committed?

Furthermore, Syria under Ba’athist Salah Jadid and the Palestinian Militias such as Fatah were instrumental in provoking a crisis by escalating matters. In January 1965 Fatah, founded in the late 1950s (Yasir Arafat was amongst the founding members), conducted its first important raid into Israel from Syria. Salah Jadid’s emergence into power in 1966 (following the intra Ba’athist military coup which resulted in the overthrow of the Ba’athist civilian regime) led to a substantial increase in armaments and support for Fatah guerrilla campaigns against Israel. There were coordinated attacks by the Syrian armed forces and Fatah against Israeli territory. For example, when Fatah guerrillas carried out raids (especially in Almagor an Israeli settlement) including an attack against Israeli patrols the Syrian army fired at Israeli farmers from the Golan Heights.\textsuperscript{11} (Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 160) While it is true that Israel was recognized by the United Nations therefore giving them political and legal status as a State, one must understand the Arab and Palestinian perspectives. The legality of Israel comes at a moral cost as it comes at the expense of millions of lives. It’s also important to keep in mind that Israel’s recognition came in 1948 right after the Holocaust when the memory of that fateful event was still fresh. Furthermore, the UN was dominated by the Western Nations and the Soviet Block both of who were in favor of a Jewish State. For example, the U.S. was the first country to give de facto recognition and the USSR was the first to extend de jure recognition.\textsuperscript{22} (Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 108) Therefore, there was a lack of representation in the UN when the status on a sovereign Israeli State was being voted upon.

Moreover, the situation worsened on the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Jordanian borders, “exacerbated by Palestinian guerilla activity”. The majority of Fatah’s raids into Israeli territory were from Jordan, “although based in Syria”. The tensions on the borders, the guerrilla campaigns by the Palestinians, and the extreme reprisals by the Israeli army against the States from which the attacks occurred (the Israeli government policy, in this situation, was to retaliate by regular Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) units and hold to account the host country from which the raids are taking place)\textsuperscript{33} (Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, p. 161) brought out many of the inter-Arab tensions which had been simmering under the surface and paved the way for the Six Day War.\textsuperscript{44} (Bickerton & Klausner, 2014, pp. 160-161) The inter-Arab tensions explain the Arabs crushing failure and defeat in the ‘1967 War’. Furthermore, the only ideological issue uniting all Arabs, across the Middle East and North Africa, was their resistance against Israel as an independent and sovereign nation and an internationally recognized home for the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{55} (Kissinger, 2014, p. 116) The fact that common ground was found only in hostility to another entity rather than in true Arab progress explains the lack of unity in other aspects which hinders Arab progress. The most visible illustration is the simmering of tensions within and amongst the Arab countries right before the Six Day War. A united or at least aligned and close Arab world might have been able to avert such a disaster as it might have restrained and even
intimidated Israel due to the Arabs combined size, man power, and strength.

Conclusion

‘All said and done’, which side does responsibility primarily lay with? Clearly the Soviet Union has to incur certain responsibility at the international level. While the U.S. and the USSR jointly as the two superpowers should also have done more to mitigate the situation. In terms of blame at the regional/Middle Eastern level, which of the States or organizations (Egypt, Israel, Syria, Fatah) bare the brunt of the blame, is more difficult to answer. As Bernard Lewis said in his book “The Middle East 2000 Years of History From The Rise Of Christianity To The Present Day”, responsibility for the 1967 Six Day War is difficult to allocate. He also argues that with more information coming out regarding the causes and sequence of events leading to the outbreak of hostilities, that it was similar to a Greek tragedy play where the players were characters forced to take the next step towards the drums of war.11(Lewis, 2000, pp. 364-365) Due to all the aforementioned problems going on in the region amongst Arabs and between the Arab States and Israel along with continuing historic grudges and animosities on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide, a war - whether in June 1967 or at a later date - was inevitable.

References