

# **The Path to the Six Day War**

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The Six Day War, also known as the Third Arab-Israeli War, was initiated by Israeli surprise attacks on Egypt on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1967. Though unexpected, it has been agreed by many in hindsight that the war was the inevitable accumulation of the rising tension in the region. The Six Day War resulted in a victory that saw Israel acquire much of the disputed territory it holds today and has therefore often been seen as the escalator of the continuous Arab-Israeli conflict. Though the situation in the region is quite different now than it was at the time, a study of the causes of the Six Day War can be useful and relative for the study of conflict-prevention, both in the region and globally.

This paper will explain the events leading up to the Six Day War through the theoretical lens of inter-state rivalry and the steps to war theory in order to determine what lessons can be drawn from the conflict. In order to do this, the conflict must be summarized into the key events leading up to it.

When analysing the origins of the Israeli-Arab conflict, it becomes clear that the major motor of war between the two sides is rivalry, rooted in territorial and ethno-religious issues. Before the creation of an Israeli state in the Middle East through the Balfour declaration of 1917 and David Ben-Gurion's declaration of independence of 1948, there was little notable hostility in the area (Oren, 2002: pp. 2-5). It wasn't until the mass-immigrations of 1920s that tensions broke out in the region, which would support the claim that the conflict is at its source, a territorial one (Shlaim, 2009: pp. 12 & 17).

This suggests that at its origin, Senese and Vasquez' Steps to War theory would explain the causes of the two sides' animosity. The theory argues that wars are largely

caused by individual issues that are mishandled. Vasquez and Valeriano state that territorial disputes are the main cause of divide as well as being the most difficult issue to resolve (Vasquez & Valeriano, 2012: pp. 158-159). Conflict is also often caused or deepened by power politics, where actors follow realist policies and arm themselves to the teeth, resulting in arms races and continuous tension (Valeriano & Marin, 2010: pp. 1-2 & 6).

The territorial aspect is definitely an important one in explaining the origins of the Israeli-Arab conflict, but some would argue that it does not fully explain the lasting nature of the conflict and would struggle to fully explain the Israel-Palestine situation. This is where the concept of inter-state rivalry figures. Valeriano argues that the major cause of war is rivalry (Valeriano & Marin, 2010: pp. 10-11). Valeriano and Vasquez also reiterate this, stating that territorial grievances are likely to result in rivalry (Vasquez & Valeriano, 2012: p. 158). The concept of international rivalry as a motor of conflict doesn't always fit with the rationalist theory of war, as rivals very often act irrationally (Levy & Thompson, 2010: pp. 63-64). A perfect example would be the multiple clashes throughout the Israeli-Arab conflict, where either side would go to war regardless of the cost-benefit ratio involved. Much about the Arab-Israeli conflict can be pinned down to territorial or ethno-religious rivalry. Though beginning as a dispute over territory, power politics deepened tensions and ethnicity and religion quickly became an excuse for mutual animosity.

In 1967, the issue of territory was still a hot one, with the Six Day War resulting in Israel capturing key geographic positions in Sinai, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oren, 2002: pp. 306-307). It is thought that, until the

Khartoum Resolution, Israel had hoped to use its acquired territories in a 'land for peace' negotiation (Oren, 2002: p. 306).

When explaining the Steps to War theory, Vasquez and Valeriano speak of the importance of power-transition (Vasquez & Valeriano, 2012: p. 158). The appearance of an Israeli state was definitely a disruption to the regional hegemony; in addition to territorial issues, Israel was a new power with a different ideology. Israel immediately became the 'foreign object' in the Middle East and it is therefore of no surprise that tensions developed.

The concept of rivalry and the Steps to War theory accurately explain the events leading up to the Six Day War, as they account for both the territorial and the ideological aspects of the conflict. These theories can be of great importance in explaining the steps leading up to the outbreak of the war.

The earliest steps to the Six Day War can be traced back to a couple of years before the outbreak. Tensions were already high in the region since the Arab nations' failed attempt to invade Israel in 1948 and the Sinai campaign of 1956 (Shlaim, 2009: pp. 124-126). The context of the Cold War also had its toll; Soviet influence on Arab states was increasing and as tensions rose between the USSR and the US, so they did between Israel and its rivals (Shisham, 1967: pp. 163-164).

Strains over Israel's diverting of water from the Jordan River to the Negev Desert resulted in multiple clashes with Syria throughout 1965 and 1966 (Oren, 2002: pp. 19-20). Terrorist incidents also multiplied throughout the 1960s with creation of the PLO

and the Fatah, slowly turning the Golan Heights and the West Bank into serious conflict zones (Oren, 2002: pp. 22-25). These issues were small pulses in the rivalry, adding to the animosity and the regional tension.

A variety of 'steps' added to this regional tension, ultimately escalating the situation, leading to Israel's surprise attack on Egyptian airfields on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1967 (Shisham, 1967: pp. 53-54). The first major 'step' that put the two sides on a path to war, was the change of government in Syria in February 1966 (Oren, 2002: p. 13). The extremist and socialist Ba'ath Party came to power in Syria through a coup, making the new government's policy one of a unified nation that strongly opposed Israel. As a result, clashes multiplied throughout 1966 as Ba'athist Syria ignored both international pressure and law. Border relations quickly deteriorated, leading to a large clash between Israel and Syria near the Sea of Galilee (Oren, 202: pp. 7 & 19).

The governmental change in Syria was soon followed by a pact between Syria and Egypt. Signed in November 1966, the pact strengthened both Syria's and Egypt's position, who increased their pressure on Israel (Oren, 2002: pp. 30-31). As the Steps to War theory suggests, alliances can be a major factor in escalating conflict; the pact tied the fates and responsibilities of Egypt and Syria. In line with the Steps to War theory, numerous attacks following the pact led Israel to adopt a hardline position in which attacks would no longer be taken lightly (Valeriano & Marin: pp. 1 & 11-14). In response to the increasing threat of an allied Egypt and Syria, Israel launched a raid on 3 villages in the West Bank in 1966. The escalation of the situation was a direct consequence of the rising menace from Israel's neighbours.

The first major clash was that of the Syrian and Israeli air forces on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 1967. An attack from the Golan Heights by Syria on a tractor farming in the demilitarized zone quickly escalated when Syria sent in MiG jets and Israel responded accordingly. The Israelis gunned down 6 MiG 21 fighter jets and chased the remainder out of the area (Oren, 2002: pp. 29-30). Refusals by Syria and Egypt to obey international regulations reflect a failure and weakness in institutions that would become increasingly apparent as the war drew near (Oren, 2002: p. 124 & Shisham, 1967: pp. 153-154). This first major collision between the two sides also shows, once again, the importance of territory in the rivalry.

In May 1967, the Soviet Union became involved in the escalation of the conflict. A false intelligence report given by the Soviets to Nasser's assistant, Anwar Sadat, was a major step towards war. Soviet Leader Podgorny told the Egyptians that Israel was mobilizing troops in preparation of an invasion of Syria (Shisham, 1967: p. 164). The pact between Egypt and Syria motivated Nasser to react instantly, sending troops into Sinai. Though being informed by his intelligence advisors that the report was false, Nasser had already deployed his troops and preferred to move on than to face the humiliation of withdrawing his army so soon after sending it into Sinai (Shisham, 1967: pp. 163-165). The fact that Nasser would move so quickly on behalf of an ally and risk so much shows how critical the tensions were between Israel and the Arab states as well as highlighting the importance of alliances in the escalation of war. Such quick and uncalculated actions are indicative of the fact that the conflict had gone beyond rationality and into the realm of rash rivalry. Sending his troops into Sinai, Nasser disregarded international regulations once again by expelling the United

Nations Emergency Force that had been stationed in the region (Shisham, 1967: p. 166).

In a political move to bolster his position, Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran. Israel had already stated in the past that a blockade of the Straits would be considered an act of war. Nasser however ignored Israel's warning thinking that the act would only antagonize his rival, failing to realize that he was providing Israel with its long-awaited 'Casus Belli'.

The region was already on the brink of war; tensions were at an all-time high, Israel felt threatened and Nasser's actions had given Israel a justification for warfare. The situation was only worsened by Jordan joining the mobilization and signing a mutual defence pact with Egypt on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1967, furthering the alliance and the reality of imminent war (Shisham, 1967: p. 27). These steps led to a mobilization race that saw the three-way Arab alliance deploy over 200,000 troops, 1500 tanks and 700 aircraft and Israel engage 250,000 troops, 1000 tanks and 2000 planes (Shisham, 1967: pp. 25-26 & 153-154). Territorial and ideological rivalry had reached its pinnacle and the realist policies of power politics had pushed the actors to a point of no return. Throughout the escalation of the conflict, international institutions were mute and powerless. As a result, bad diplomacy led to the intensification of tensions between actors who had neither the desire, nor the ability to make peace. Rather than wait to be attacked, Israel decided on a pre-emptive strike on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June (Levy & Thompson, 2010: pp. 30 & 46-47). It wasn't long before Israel had single-handedly defeated 3 of the most powerful Arab nations and their allies, making the transition of power in the region complete.

There are important lessons to be drawn from an analysis of the events leading up to the Six Day War. The war was about rivalry and the escalation of it by a number of triggers. The issues at stake vary and include legitimate territorial disputes, the agenda of leaders, power politics, religion and the transition of power in the Middle East.

When analysing the key events that set Israel and its neighbours onto the path of war, it becomes clear that especially in the case of rivalry, the prevention of war depends on the resolution of individual 'grievances', as the Steps to War theory suggests (Vasquez & Valeriano, 2012: pp. 159-160). This specific example clearly demonstrates an inability of the various actors to compromise, resulting in a snowball effect of issues.

Addressing individual grievances can be effective, as shown recently by the chemical weapons crisis in Syria. The Syrian example highlights the role that international organizations and institutions should play in resolving disputes. This is obvious in the case of the Six Day War, where the actors were left to their own subjective and flawed devices because a weak UN and a fragile political climate under the Cold War did little to prevent the various steps to war. Nasser's blockade of the Straights, the rhetoric surrounding the conflict and the Khartoum Resolution are all symbols of the weakness of international organizations of the time. A third-party can be vital in resolving a rivalry (Valeriano & Marin, 2010: p. 8). The anti-Zionist movement has transformed in the past decades and is no longer confined to national borders as the Ba'athist movements of the time. This requires functioning and fair institutions more than ever; international organizations are necessary in combatting international



movements. Strong UN involvement and pressure on the actors to obey international law could greatly further the peace process in the Middle East.

The Six Day War might have been brief, but the escalation that led to warfare was not. An intense rivalry based on territorial and ideological issues developed between Israel and its Arab neighbours for decades. Paired with certain triggers and a weak United Nations, the tension in the region eventually resulted in war. Due to their irrational nature, political and military rivalries cannot be resolved over night. It is however possible, as Vasquez and Valeriano argue, to address and resolve the individual issues that continuously deepen conflict in the Middle East and pave a path for peace rather than war.

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