Introduction

The June 1967 War was a turning point in the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and a watershed moment in the history of the modern Middle East. A vast literature on this war, popularly known as the Six-Day War, covers the subject from all angles. But the time has come for reassessment. Many previous accounts deal with the military operations on the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian fronts during the period of 5–10 June 1967. In this volume, the focus is not on the military operations but on the political aspects of the conflict, especially during the prolonged period of crisis that eventually erupted in all-out war. The aim is to reconstruct in some detail and in some depth the history of this fateful war from the perspective of its principal protagonists. These include the great powers and the regional powers. A major theme of the volume is the relationship between the great powers and their local allies on the road to war.

The contributors to this volume are area specialists. One of its strengths is that the authors have examined recently declassified material not only in English, French, and Russian but also in Hebrew and Arabic. The volume, however, is not merely a collection of articles with up-to-date material regarding different aspects of the war by different scholars. All the contributors were guided by the same overarching plan. Our collective aim has been to reinterpret the history of the June 1967 War by drawing as much as possible from the official documents and primary sources now available in all the relevant languages.

One objective of this volume is to reassess the outbreak of the war, the origins of which were as complex as its consequences have been far-reaching. Of the manifold causes that contributed to the outbreak of this war, three are of paramount importance: the long-standing hostility

between the Arab states and Israel; inter-Arab politics; and the involvement of external powers in the affairs of the region. The secondary literature about the origins of the war is extensive, but there is no consensus on the relative weight of these three contributing causes. The authors have shed new light on all three dimensions and on the complex interplay among them.

A pronounced asymmetry between the primary sources available on the Arab and Israeli sides exists. Israel follows the practice prevalent in liberal democracies of reviewing and declassifying its official documents. Arab countries do not. Official Israeli and British documents for 1967 were recently declassified under the thirty-year rule. American documents for this period are readily accessible in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. A large selection of documents is also published in the relevant volumes of the Foreign Relations of the United States series. A substantial collection of documents for 1967 was published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris in 2008 under the title *Documents Diplomatiques Français*. One needs privileged access to see official documents from the Russian Foreign Ministry, the General Staff, and the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*, or Committee for State Security) in Moscow, but photocopies of at least some of the documents regarding the June 1967 War are also available at the Cummings Centre for Russian Studies at Tel Aviv University. Arab governments do not normally open their records for research by independent scholars, but a substantial body of memoirs by Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian politicians and soldiers deal with the war.

The other major objective of this volume is to reassess the consequences of the war. Some of the results are obvious: the military balance shifted dramatically in Israel's favour. Pan-Arabism suffered a shattering defeat. Israel expanded its territory considerably by capturing the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula. Israel's neighbours went from simply supporting the Palestinians to having a direct stake in the conflict. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) emerged as a major player in the struggle for Palestine. A longer perspective suggests that Israel gradually began to lose international legitimacy in the aftermath of the war as a result of its intransigence, while the PLO began to gain international recognition as a national liberation movement. Over and beyond that, this volume establishes the war as marking not only a political and military transformation of the Middle East but also a shift in the emotional and intellectual climate of the region. The two concluding chapters of the

volume are an overview and an examination of the scope and nature of this transformation.

A substantial part of the existing literature views the war from a Western perspective; we have tried to redress the balance by paying more attention to the local powers. Western scholars have often written about the international politics of the Middle East as if the local powers hardly mattered. We do not deny the importance of the great powers in shaping the history and politics of the region. We do, however, believe in devoting equal attention to the role played by the local powers. In short, we examine this major event in the history of the region not only from the outside looking in but also from the inside looking out.

In this introduction, we try to place the June 1967 War in its historical context. The Middle East has been one of the most volatile and violent subsystems in the international political system since the end of the World War II. Postwar history in the Middle East has been punctuated by an unusually high number of armed conflicts: full-scale, interstate, and civil wars. A major source of this instability has been the conflict between Israel and the Arabs. This was one of the bitterest, most profound, and most protracted conflicts of the twentieth century and the principal precipitant of wars in the Middle East.

The Israeli-Palestinian dimension and the Israeli-Arab dimension are the two major dimensions of this conflict. The origins of the conflict go back to the end of the nineteenth century, when the Zionist movement promoted the idea of building an independent state for the Jewish people in Palestine. Zionism met with strong opposition on the part of the Arab population of the country. The upshot was a clash between two national movements for the possession of Palestine. There were two peoples and one land – hence the conflict.

The neighbouring Arab states became involved in the conflict on the side of the Palestinian Arabs during the late 1930s. In 1947, the struggle for Palestine entered its most critical phase. In February of that year, Britain announced its decision to relinquish its mandate over Palestine, which it had received from the League of Nations in the aftermath of World War I. On 29 November 1947, the United Nations, the successor to the League of Nations, passed a resolution calling for the partition of mandatory Palestine into two states: one Jewish, one Arab. The Jews accepted the partition resolution; the Palestinians, the Arab states, and the Arab League rejected it and went to war to prevent it. This long war was divided into two main phases. The first phase lasted from 1 December 1947 until 14 May 1948, when Britain's mandate over

Palestine expired and the state of Israel was proclaimed. During this phase, the Palestinians suffered a military defeat, Palestinian society was decimated, and the first large wave of refugees was set in motion. The second phase began on 15 May 1948 with the invasion of Palestine by the regular armies of the neighbouring Arab states, and it ended with a cease-fire on 7 January 1949. This phase also ended with a Jewish victory and a comprehensive Arab defeat. After the guns fell silent, Israel concluded armistice agreements with all its neighbours: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. These agreements gave Israel the only internationally recognized borders it has ever had. The main losers in the first Arab-Israeli war were the Palestinian Arabs. About 730,000 Palestinians, more than half the total, became refugees, and the name "Palestine" was wiped off the map.[1]

Regarding the basic cause of the conflict there are widely divergent views. Most Arabs maintain that the root cause is the dispossession and dispersal of the Palestinian Arabs, an original sin that was compounded by Israel's subsequent territorial acquisitions. In their view, Israel is an inherently aggressive and expansionist state and the real source of violence in the region.[2] Most Israelis maintain that the fundamental cause of the conflict is not territory but is the Arab rejection of Israel's very right to exist as a sovereign state in the Middle East. According to this view, the basic Arab objective is the liquidation of the state of Israel, whereas Israel acts only in self-defence and in response to the Arab challenges.[3] But whatever one's view are of the origins and nature of the Arab-Israeli dispute, there can be no doubt that the dispute has been a major cause of wars in the Middle East.

A second source of tension and instability, which at least on one occasion, in June 1967, helped tip the balance in favour of war, is to be found in the relations among the Arab states. In theory, all Arab states subscribe to the ideal of Arab unity, but in practice, inter-Arab relations are characterized more by conflict than by cooperation. Israel is widely held to be one of the few solid pillars propping up Arab unity, the one issue on which all Arabs, whatever their other differences, usually agree. Opposition to Israel follows naturally from the belief that the inhabitants

[1] Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; 2nd ed., 2007).
[2] See, e.g., David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977).
[3] See, e.g., Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Strategies and Israel's Response* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

of the various Arab states, including the Palestinians, form a single nation and that Israel has grossly violated the sacred rights of this nation.

A distinction needs to be made, however, between the rhetorical and operational levels of Arab foreign policy at the time. Whereas, at the rhetorical level, the Arab states were largely united in their commitment to oppose Israel, at the operational level they remained deeply divided. The conservative states tended to advocate containment of the Jewish state, while the radical states tended to advocate confrontation. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the conflict with Israel has imposed enormous strain on the inter-Arab system.[4] Far from serving as a unifying force, the question of how to deal with Israel has been a serious source of dissension and discord in inter-Arab politics.

A third source of instability and violence in the Middle East has been the involvement of the great powers in the affairs of the region. Two features of the Middle East help account for the interest and rivalry it has evoked among them: its geostrategic importance and its oil reserves. Great power involvement is not a unique feature of the Middle East, but instead affects, in varying degrees, all regions of the world. What distinguishes the Middle East is the intensity, pervasiveness, and profound impact of this involvement. No other part of the world has been so thoroughly and ceaselessly caught up in great power rivalries. No other subsystem of the international political system has been as penetrated as in the Middle East.[5]

The dominant great powers in the Middle East throughout the course of the twentieth century were the Ottoman Empire until its dissolution in 1918; Britain and France until, roughly, the Suez Crisis of 1956; the United States and the Soviet Union from Suez until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991; and the United States alone since 1991. So much stress has been laid on the role of these external powers that the history of the modern Middle East, in the words of Malcolm Yapp, has often been written as though the local states were "driftwood in the sea of international affairs, their destinies shaped by the decisions of others."[6]

[4] Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958–1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[5] L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 4.

[6] M. E. Yapp, *The Near East since the First World* War (London: Longman, 1991), 3.

Yet this is a false picture, popular as it is with Middle Easterners and outsiders alike.

The dominant feature in the relations between international and regional powers is the manipulation of the former by the latter. A survey of the period from 1955 to 1967 by Fawaz Gerges reaches the conclusion that the superpowers were rarely able to impose their will on the smaller states of the Middle East.[7] Although the local states depended on their superpower patrons for diplomatic support, economic aid, and the supply of arms, they managed to retain considerable freedom of action. Yet, obviously, no account of the origins of Arab-Israeli wars would be complete if it ignored the role played by outside powers.

When the role of the great powers is considered alongside the Arab-Israeli disputes and inter-Arab relations, we begin to get some idea of why the international politics of the Middle East are so complex, endemically unstable, and prone to violence and war. Against this background, what is surprising is not that eight full-scale Arab-Israeli wars have erupted during the postwar period, but that some of the other crises in this volatile region stopped short of war. Our next task is to review briefly the specific events that catapulted the Middle East into a third Arab-Israeli war.

Our main conclusion is that the June 1967 War was not the result of deliberate planning, and was still less a grand design on the part of any of the participants, but was rather the result of a crisis slide, of a process that no one was able to control. Accounts that attribute the outbreak of war to a deliberate decision fall into two categories: those that claim Israel instigated the war in order to expand its territory, and those that claim President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt wilfully chose to embark on the path to war in order to defeat Israel. We maintain that both Israel and Egypt on the whole simply reacted to events. The claim that Israel planned the war from the beginning simply does not stand up to serious critical scrutiny in the light of the evidence. From Israel's perspective, this was a war of self-defence, not a war of conquest. Nasser's motives are much more difficult to pin down. Chapters 2 and 6 of this volume are devoted to Nasser's motives, and several of the other chapters deal with how these motives were interpreted by the other participants. The consensus we reach is that Nasser neither wanted war nor expected a war to take place. What he did do was to embark on an exercise in brinkmanship that went over the brink.

[7] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955–1967* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

It is undeniable that Nasser appeared to challenge Israel to a duel. On 13 May 1967, he received a Soviet intelligence report claiming that Israel was massing troops on Syria's border. Nasser responded by taking three successive steps that made war virtually inevitable: he deployed his troops in the Sinai close to Israel's border, he expelled the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai, and, on 22 May, he closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. In Israeli eyes, this was a *casus belli*, a cause for war. On 5 June, Israel seized the initiative and launched the short, sharp war that ended in a resounding military defeat for Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.

In triggering the crisis that led to the June 1967 War, inter-Arab rivalry was decisive. It may sound ironic to suggest that the war owed more to the rivalries between the Arab states than to the dispute between these states and Israel, but such a view is supported by the facts. The Arab world was in a state of turmoil arising from the conflicts and suspicions between the radical and conservative regimes. A militant Ba'th regime rose to power in Syria in February 1966 and started the push for a war to liberate Palestine. President Nasser came under growing pressure to stop hiding behind the United Nations and to come to the rescue of the embattled regime in Damascus. Nasser suspected his Syrian allies of wanting to drag him into a war with Israel, while they suspected that if push came to shove, he would leave them to face Israel on their own. Nasser's first move, the deployment of the Egyptian army in the Sinai, was not intended as a prelude to an attack on Israel but as a political manoeuvre designed to deter the Israelis and to shore up his prestige at home and in the Arab world. This move, however, started a chain reaction that Nasser was unable to control.

In early May 1967, the old quarrel between Israel and the Arabs seemed almost irrelevant. As Malcolm Kerr observed in *The Arab Cold War*, the Arabs were more preoccupied with one another than they were with Israel. A football analogy seems appropriate because the World Cup was on everyone's mind during the spring of that year. Even when the Israelis first appeared on the scene, they were merely there as a football for the Arabs, kicked onto the field first by the Syrian hotheads and then again by Nasser. The Israelis, however, took a different view of themselves. It became a case of the football kicking the players.[8]

The superpowers did little to prevent the slide towards war. The Soviets gave Nasser a misleading report about Israeli troop concentrations and supported his deployment of Egyptian troops in the Sinai in the interest

[8] Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 126.

of bolstering the left-wing regime in Damascus and in the hope of deterring Israel from moving against it. Their subsequent attempts to restrain Nasser had little effect. They probably hoped to make some political gains by underlining their own commitment to the Arabs and the pro-Israeli orientation of American foreign policy. But they seriously miscalculated the danger of war and were swept up in a fast-moving crisis that they had helped unleash.

America features prominently in Arab conspiracy theories purporting to explain the causes and outcome of the June 1967 War. Mohamed Heikal, Nasser's confidant, for example, claims that President Lyndon Johnson was obsessed with Nasser and that Johnson conspired with Israel to bring him down.[9] Such explanations, however, are transparently self-serving in that they assign all the blame for the war to America and Israel and overlook the part played by Arab provocations and Arab miscalculations.

The war provides a striking illustration of the perennial predicament of the Arab states: they cannot act separately and they cannot act collectively; they keep getting in one another's way. On this occasion, the level of incompetence displayed by the Arab leaders was staggering. After ten years of preparation for what was often referred to as the battle of destiny, and after raising popular passions to a fever pitch with their blood-curdling rhetoric, the leaders of the confrontational states were caught by complete surprise when Israel took their threats at face value and landed the first blow.

The United States did not plan the war. The American position during the upswing phase of the crisis was hesitant, weak, and ambiguous. President Johnson initially tried to prevent war by restraining Israel and issuing warnings to the Egyptians and the Soviets. Because these warnings had no visible effect and because American forces were tied down in Vietnam, some of Johnson's advisers toyed with the idea of unleashing Israel against Egypt. American policy was neither clear-cut nor constant: it evolved gradually and eventually underwent a significant shift. As a result of these domestic constraints, President Johnson sent Israel mixed messages. His last signal to the Israelis amounted to what William Quandt termed "a yellow light," but like most motorists, Israel treated the yellow

[9] Mohamed Heikal, *1967: Al-Infijar* [1967: The Explosion] (Cairo: Al-Ahram, 1990), 371–2.

light as a green one.[10] America thus played a critical role in the outbreak of war by leaving Israel a free hand to respond as it saw fit to the perceived Egyptian challenge. Thus, although the crisis of May 1967 sprang out of inter-Arab rivalries, Israel's decision to go to war could be reached only after it had secured the tacit support of its superpower ally.

The 1967 war has often been described as a premeditated war on the part of Israel. But Chapter 1 shows that the archival records and other contemporary evidence reveal almost the opposite. Military officers in the Israel Defence Force (IDF) had occasionally made reckless and belligerent public statements, but the government of Levi Eshkol had no intention of provoking a war with the Arabs and still less of expanding the dominion of Israel. Territorial aims developed during the war. The Israelis responded to Nasser's actions: the deployment of troops in the Sinai, the demand for the withdrawal of the UNEF, and on 22 May, the closing of the Straits of Tiran, which virtually everyone in the Israeli Cabinet regarded as an act of war. During the previous weeks, Eshkol had kept his eye on the most vital part of the problem – to make sure that the U.S. government and the president would not respond negatively to the IDF's engagement with the Egyptian army. Moshe Dayan, who became defence minister in early June, summed up the Israeli mood when he said that it would be "lunacy" to wait any longer. Dayan guided the course of the war, often giving orders that should have been issued by the Chief of Staff. Dayan's actions were erratic, contradictory, and irresponsible, but he got away with it because of the resounding military victory. Once wound up and released, the Israeli war machine sprang into action with devastating speed, first in the destruction of the Egyptian air force and army, then in the occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and finally in the hard-fought battle over the Golan Heights.

No master plan existed. Israeli tanks rolled to a halt mainly along natural frontiers such as the River Jordan and the Suez Canal. As a result, the war rekindled irredentist aims, especially on the eastern front. What began as a war to destroy the Egyptian army led to the occupation of territory inhabited by more than a million Arabs and, in the north, the conquest of a region that embittered Syrians at the time and has continued

[10] William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 48.

to do so. The Old City of Jerusalem was the unintended prize, the result of a Jordanian decision to follow Nasser's lead and to attack Israel. Within the Israeli government, Eshkol proved to be an effective leader, despite near rebellion of the younger corps of officers in the IDF and the virtual insubordination of Dayan. None of the military or civilian members of the government would have predicted the outcome. The territorial aims were confused, convoluted, and complex, but the result was a "Greater Israel" that largely endures to the present.

For Nasser, the destruction of the Egyptian air force and a substantial part of the army was an unprecedented disaster. Chapter 2 uses contemporary evidence and postwar testimony of Egyptian generals and others within the authoritarian elite to explain Nasser's own misconceptions and mistakes. The Egyptians as well as the Arabs generally believed their own extravagant rhetoric and underestimated Israel's military capacity. Nasser thought that the United States was the archenemy and that Israel would follow American orders. He needed to be careful not to make Egypt appear to be the aggressor and thus to sustain an Israeli attack. He believed the Egyptian army could engage the IDF without provoking American intervention while bringing about an international crisis that would work to Egypt's advantage. Such assumptions can be detected in his response to one of the air force generals, Sidqi Mahmoud, who told him realistically that the Egyptian air force could not survive a first strike by Israel: "Sidqi," replied Nasser, "do you accept the first attack or do you want go fight the United States?" Nasser calculated that Egypt could endure a prolonged defensive battle that would bring about "global confrontation" – which in turn would result in a cease-fire favourable to Egypt. The other part of the gamble was that war might be averted. If there were no war, Nasser would achieve a pan-Arab victory. In either case, Egypt would emerge victorious.

Nasser actually thought that the Israelis might attack on 5 June. But such was the mistrust within the Egyptian government that his generals refused to believe him. Nasser accepted assurances that the Egyptian armed forces were capable of holding the IDF at bay, which seemed to be the only plausible strategy because the Egyptian army was trained for defensive and not offensive warfare. Throughout the crisis, Nasser remained confident. His three moves of deploying troops in the Sinai on 14 May, demanding the withdrawal of the UNEF on 16 May, and closing the Gulf of Aqaba on 22 May were taken to shore up his prestige in Egypt and to sustain his credibility as the leader of the Arabs. His decisions were not made as part of a plan, but neither were they accidental. Nasser knew