



The Six Day War:

- Yitzhak Rabin: Chief of Staff in the War
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Overview

During 6 days in June of 1967 Israel became a regional power in the Middle East. Under the command of Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Yitzhak Rabin, the IDF defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; occupied the Sinai Peninsula, West Bank and Golan Heights; and unified Jerusalem returning the Temple Mount to Israeli control. As a result of pre-emptive strikes and resulting victory, Israel increased the amount of territory controlled more than three times over. Living in this new territory were approximately one million Palestinian Arabs - against their will- creating complicated security and economic issues that remain to this day. In 1968 Yitzhak Rabin was appointed to his first diplomatic post: Ambassador to the United States.

Yitzhak Rabin: Chief of Staff in the War

Waiting Period

Yitzhak Rabin became chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces in 1964, and was responsible for enhancing the strength of the army and its strategic readiness for war. On Israel's nineteenth Independence Day (May 14, 1967), Egypt violated the cease-fire agreements and sent military forces into the Sinai Peninsula. In the days to come, it closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and expelled the UN forces stationed in Sinai. Egyptian President, Gamal Abdul Nasser, assured the Egyptian masses of the imminent destruction of Israel. King Hussein of Jordan was dragged against his will into the situation, and signed a defensive alliance with Egypt, while the Syrian army carried out emergency preparations for war in the Golan Heights.

The next three weeks, dubbed the “waiting period,” were characterized by uncertainty and anxiety, and the vacillation of the political and military leadership as to the proper course of action. As June drew near, the level of tension in Israel increased. The political leadership in Israel was unable to reach an unequivocal decision on whether to go to war. Public pressure and a sense of shared fate gave way to the establishment of a national unity government. Menachem Begin's Herut party, in its reincarnation as Gahal, the Herut-Liberal bloc, joined the government, for the first time since the Israel became a state. Additionally, Moshe Dayan was appointed defense minister.

The waiting period ended when the government of Israel directed the IDF to launch a pre-emptive strike to destroy Egypt's air force on the ground on Monday, June 5, 1967 at 7:45 a.m. Nearly every assault aircraft of the IAF took part in the attack. In three successive waves of assault that continued until 11:00 a.m., 180 Egyptian planes were destroyed, many of them

on the ground. In addition, Jordanian and Syrian air bases were attacked that same day, in an action that succeeded in paralyzing the air forces of those countries.

The Six-Day War

On Monday, June 5, 1967, Israel went to war against the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Only a few hours after the beginning of the Six-Day War, with aerial superiority achieved, the ground assault began. The IDF was successful on every front. On the Egyptian front, the IDF conquered the entire Sinai Peninsula reaching the Suez Canal. On the Jordanian front, the Paratrooper brigade liberated the Old City. Its commander, General Motta Gur, radioed these famous words to the General Staff, "The Temple Mount is ours." The IDF also captured the entire West Bank from Jordan, and gained control of all of the large cities. In the future, this occupation of areas populated by hundreds of thousands of Palestinian residents would constitute one of the most complex and protracted military, political, social and moral problems ever confronted by the State of Israel. On the Syrian front, Israel conquered the entire Golan Heights in the last two days of the war. The outcome of the war increased the amount of territory controlled by Israel 3 ½ times, nevertheless, only Jerusalem was officially annexed to Israel, immediately after the war. During the six days of the war, approximately 800 Israeli soldiers were killed.

The War of Attrition

The Six-Day War was over, but exchanges of gunfire began not long afterward along the border with Egypt. The War of Attrition had begun. It continued for three years.

President Nasser of Egyptian wished to rejuvenate and reinforce the Egyptian army and liberate the Egyptian territory conquered by Israel in the Six-Day War. He declared his wish to wage a steadfast, unrelenting war against Israel in the Suez Canal region. His aim was to exhaust the IDF forces, cause Israel numerous casualties, generate international pressure on Israel and engineer its withdrawal from Sinai.

During the War of Attrition, Yitzhak Rabin served as Israel's ambassador to the United States. In this capacity, he pursued complex diplomatic activities between the Americans, the Soviets, Israel's neighbors in the Middle East and Israel itself. The War of Attrition may have been fought between Israel and Egypt, but the interests of other nations were also at stake, particularly those of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, which were concerned with the balance of power among the superpowers in the Middle East region.

Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin proposed that the IDF step up its military response and decide the war in Israel's favor. Rabin suggested that air force planes strike military targets deep in Egyptian territory.

In the summer of 1970, a cease-fire was declared. The War of Attrition was over. A total of 721 Israelis were killed in the war, including 594 soldiers.

Impact of the War on Israeli Society

Before the War – A Small Country Surrounded By Enemies

The waiting period leading up to the outbreak of the Six-Day War was a difficult time for the State of Israel, for Israeli society and for Jews throughout the world. Intense feelings of isolation, danger, threat and confusion became an exhausting everyday routine. This period reinforced the conviction that had existed among the public since the establishment of the state - that Israel was a small country under perpetual siege.

The austere mind-set of the public generated a crisis of trust in the leadership, reflected in widespread doubt as to the abilities of the leaders to run affairs of state during the emergency primarily Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, who did not have any exceptional security credentials or aura -. The public and political pressure resulted in the formation of a “national unity government” on June 1, 1967. Among the changes around the cabinet table, Moshe Dayan, who was considered a charismatic figure the public could trust, became Defense Minister, and opposition leader Menachem Begin was appointed to the cabinet for the first time ever, as a Minister without portfolio.

Despite the imminent danger, or perhaps because of it, the waiting period was characterized by mutual assistance and a spirit of public volunteerism. The army reserves were drafted in their entirety and many citizens who were not drafted volunteered to assist in maintaining the essential civil services and readying the civilian economy for war.

Impact of the War on Israeli Society

The Six-Day War had a far-reaching impact on Israeli society. First, the transition from the perplexity of the waiting period to the sweeping victory triggered a sense of euphoria and national pride that bordered on conceit and overconfidence in the strength of the IDF. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan’s declaration that, “Israel is waiting for a phone call from the Arabs” was the political expression of a prevailing feeling among the public that the status quo created by the war fit in well with Israel’s long-term regional interests.

Second, the wave of solidarity with Israel among Diaspora Jews led to the arrival in Israel of thousands of Jewish volunteers. They brought with them the spirit of a liberal, Western-oriented youth culture that was then prevalent in the world. This constituted the opening of Israel’s door to the West and its emergence from the virtual cultural cloister in which it had spent the ‘50s and ‘60s.

Third, the conviction that Israel was a small country under siege was supplanted by an immense surge of relief at having the yoke of siege thrown off. At the same time, the aftermath of the war reignited the dispute over the country’s borders (an argument that was suspended when the Yishuv embraced the UN resolution to partition Palestine). The renewed encounter with sites cited in the Bible as belonging to the People of Israel and the encounter with the holy places in particular, led to the formation of the “Greater Land of Israel Movement.” Some of the founders of this movement were closely aligned with the Labor movement, as well as to messianic zeal and political extremism among large segments of the religious-Zionist public, which until 1967 had staked out very moderate political positions.

Nevertheless, the sense of euphoria was short-lived, due to the War of Attrition. The numerous casualties along the Suez Canal and in the Jordan Rift and the long-term nature of a war that continued from 1968 to 1970 eroded the sense of victory among the public and led to initial expressions of protest, albeit minor, against the policies of the Israeli government.

Israel and the Palestinian Problem

When the dust had settled on the Six-Day War, Israel found itself not only in possession of territories that tripled it in size, but also with approximately one million Palestinians living in these areas. "Citizens or not, they are people," said Rabin. "They have to live, eat and travel. And they hate us." Following the occupation of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip by Israel, a new reality came into being: One in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs were under Israeli military control, against their will.

This reality had various consequences. First, in the military realm: the IDF was compelled to take on a role that is usually assumed by police forces that come into contact with civilian populations. The objective of keeping the peace and acting against terrorist cells while making efforts not to harm the civilian population required the army to develop a new operational doctrine and spawned difficult moral dilemmas with which the soldiers had to contend. Second, in the economic realm, links were forged between the Israeli and Palestinian economies. Goods were shipped from Israel to the territories and from the territories to Israel, and employment of Palestinian workers in Israel became routine. In addition, the infrastructures in the territories became dependent on Israel. The supply of electricity, fuel and water became Israel's responsibility. Third, Israel's control of the territories affected its political and diplomatic ties. Various approaches to the essence of the Palestinian-Israeli problem began to develop, including ideas on ways to solve it.