Causes and consequences of the Six-Day War (1967)

PART 1: THE CAUSES OF THE WAR

What was the background to the war?

Israel's War of Independence ended in early 1949 with armistice agreements that left Israel in a formal state of war with all its neighbours, defending precarious borders and cut off from Jewish places of religious, historic and national significance in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The War also created approximately 750,000 Palestinian refugees in Jordanian, Lebanese, Egyptian and Syrian controlled territory. Israel's territory was the size of Wales, and in 1967 its population was less than three million.

Surrounded by hostile neighbours on all sides, Israel had extremely vulnerable borders and no strategic depth. The narrowest point between the West Bank and the Mediterranean was nine miles, and Jordanian and Egyptian artillery weapons could hit most Israeli cities and civilian infrastructure. The recent memory of the Holocaust heightened the Israeli sense of insecurity and fear of genocide. Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban said of the pre-1967 borders that they are, "*for us equivalent to insecurity and danger. I do not exaggerate when I say that it has for us something of a memory of Auschwitz* ".
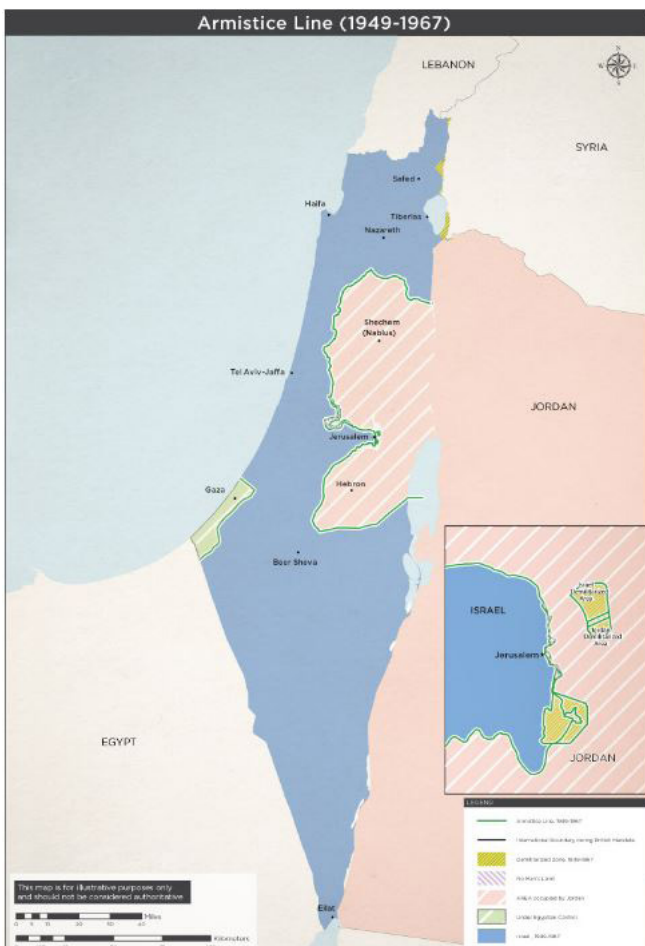

Armed Palestinian fighters (Fedayeen) frequently launched raids into Israel, especially from Jordan and Lebanon, with Syria a key supporter of the fighters. These raids became more regular and deadly during the immediate years prior to the war, and culminated in what is often referred to as the precursor to the Six-Day War, the Samu Incident of 13 November 1966. Israel sent up to 3,000 soldiers and tanks into the Jordanian-held village of Samu, in the West Bank, in an attempt to stop Fedayeen attacks and to force Arab states to more aggressively prevent cross-border attacks under their control. The Samu Incident did not produce its intended outcome; in the first four months of 1967 Israel recorded 270 border incidents along the West Bank and Syrian borders (a 100 per cent increase from the last four months of 1966) which triggered Israeli reprisal raids.

Cold War military alliances: In the late 1950s and early 1960s Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser aligned with the Soviet Union, receiving vast amounts of arms and financial support. In fact, from 1956 to 1967 the Soviet Union invested US$2bn in military aid alone in its Arab clients – 1,700 tanks, 2,400 artillery pieces, 500 jets, and 1,400 advisers – of which 43 per cent went directly to Egypt. Due to the Soviet Union clientelism, Israel's Arab neighbours were outspending Israel in defence expenditures by US$1,481m to US$628m.
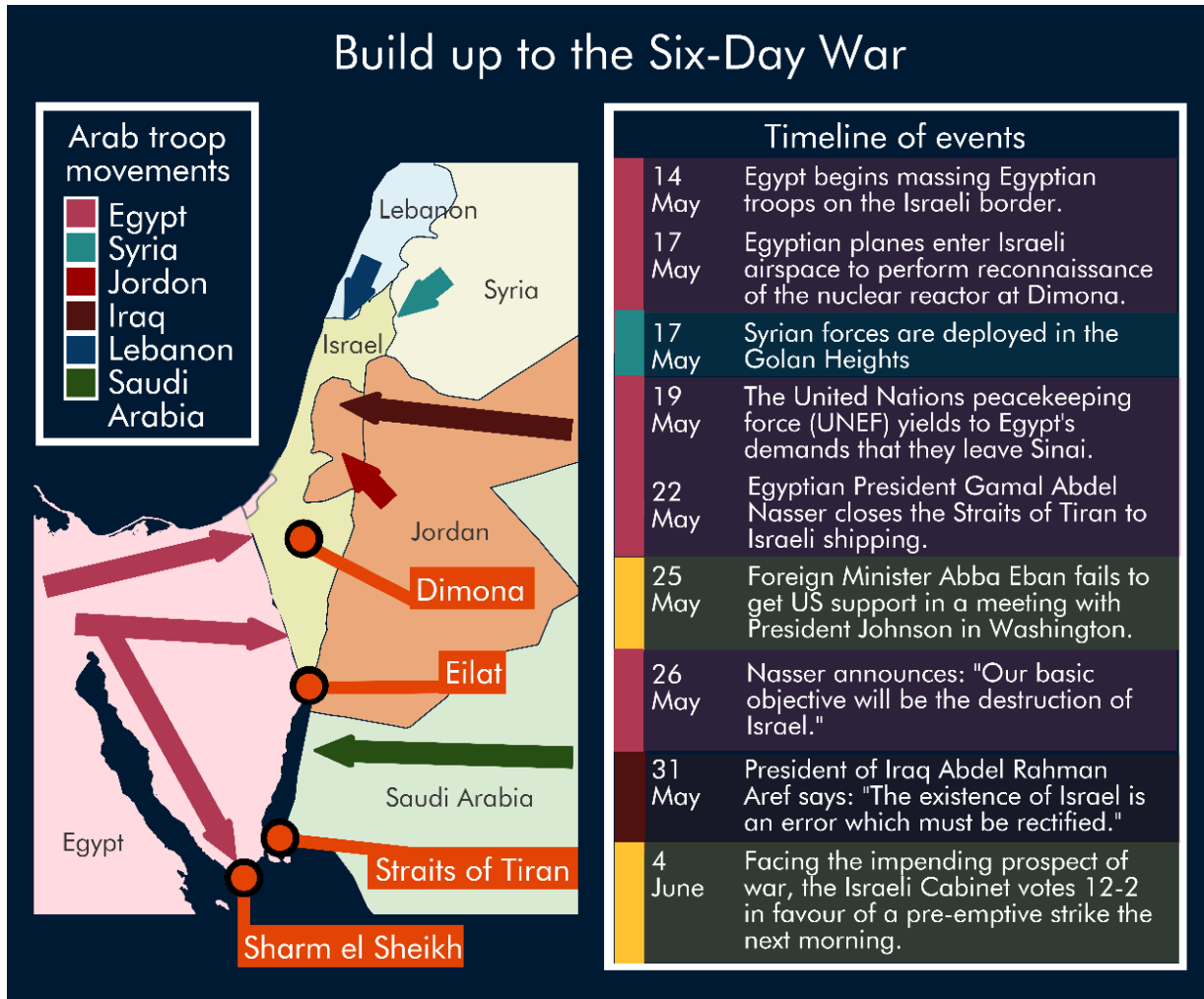
Israel's diplomatic vulnerability: Israel's strongest Western ally and arms provider was France. However, after Charles De Gaulle was elected in 1958, France shifted to align itself more with Arab interests, placing an embargo on offensive weapon sales to the Middle East, a move affecting only Israel. British leaders had sympathy for Israel but placed emphasis on its relations with oil rich Arab states, whilst the US-Israel strategic relationship was in its infancy.

Tensions over the sources of the Jordan River and Israeli land cultivation on the border, led to clashes between Israel and Syria. Syria attempted to divert the sources of the river, to thwart the construction of Israel's National Water Carrier, vital for Israel's development. A major clash between Syria and Israel occurred on 7 April 1967, when Syrian artillery on the Golan Heights fired on an Israeli tractor farming in the demilitarised zone which subsequently escalated into an air battle in which Israel shot down six Syrian MiG 21 fighters.

Egypt signed a mutual defence agreement with Syria in 1966, placing all army units under the command of the Egyptian military, in effect

Build up to the Six-Day War

Arab troop movements
- Egypt
- Syria
- Jordon
- Iraq
- Lebanon
- Saudi Arabia

Map labels: Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Dimona, Eilat, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Straits of Tiran, Sharm el Sheikh

Timeline of events

Date	Event
14 May	Egypt begins massing Egyptian troops on the Israeli border.
17 May	Egyptian planes enter Israeli airspace to perform reconnaissance of the nuclear reactor at Dimona.
17 May	Syrian forces are deployed in the Golan Heights
19 May	The United Nations peacekeeping force (UNEF) yields to Egypt's demands that they leave Sinai.
22 May	Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser closes the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping.
25 May	Foreign Minister Abba Eban fails to get US support in a meeting with President Johnson in Washington.
26 May	Nasser announces: "Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel."
31 May	President of Iraq Abdel Rahman Aref says: "The existence of Israel is an error which must be rectified."
4 June	Facing the impending prospect of war, the Israeli Cabinet votes 12-2 in favour of a pre-emptive strike the next morning.

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limiting Israel's ability to respond to specific attacks without potentially causing a massive retaliation.

What led to the crisis in May-June 1967?

False intelligence from the Soviets who reported to Egypt in mid-May 1967 that Israel was massing troops to attack Syria. No such preparation was underway.

Egypt sent four brigades into the Sinai on 14 May and ordered out the 3,400 UN peacekeepers stationed there as an integral part of the ceasefire agreement hammered out after the 1956 Sinai-Suez conflict between Israel and Egypt. UN Secretary General U. Thant immediately agreed to withdraw the UN, which Abba Eban likened to "an umbrella which is taken away as soon as it begins to rain". This doubled the number of Egyptian soldiers compared with Israeli soldiers in the area. Israel responded by mobilising its reserves, a considerable proportion of its male population.

Nasser, emboldened by the UN withdrawal, announced on 22 May the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, a violation of international law and long regarded by Israel as a *casus belli.* The closing of the Straits prevented vital goods from entering Israel's Red Sea resort of Eilat and the absence of an Israeli response was perceived as severely diminishing Israel's deterrence, which was vital for its national security. US President Johnson said later: *"If a single act of folly was more responsible for this explosion than any other, it was the arbitrary and dangerous announced decision that the Straits of Tiran would be closed."*

> "The time has come to enter into a battle of annihilation."
> - Syrian Defence Minister Hafez al-Assad

At the end of May, Egypt signed military defence pacts with Jordan and Iraq, in theory unifying their forces under Egypt, and increasing the Israeli sense of a noose being drawn around its neck. On 30 May 1967, King Hussein of Jordan said: *"All of the Arab armies now surround Israel. The UAR, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan, and Kuwait... there*

is no difference between one Arab people and another, no difference between one Arab army and another."

International diplomacy failed to resolve the crisis. A US initiative to break Egypt's blockade of the Straits with a multinational convoy to escort Israeli ships (named Operation Regatta), never materialised due to lack of international support and US resolve.

"Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel"
- President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser

Why did Israel launch a pre-emptive strike?

Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol resisted intense pressure from his military to launch a pre-emptive strike for two to three weeks, and hoped in vain for a diplomatic solution. He wished to avoid war if possible – certainly without overt US support – and feared the diplomatic consequences of being judged the aggressor.
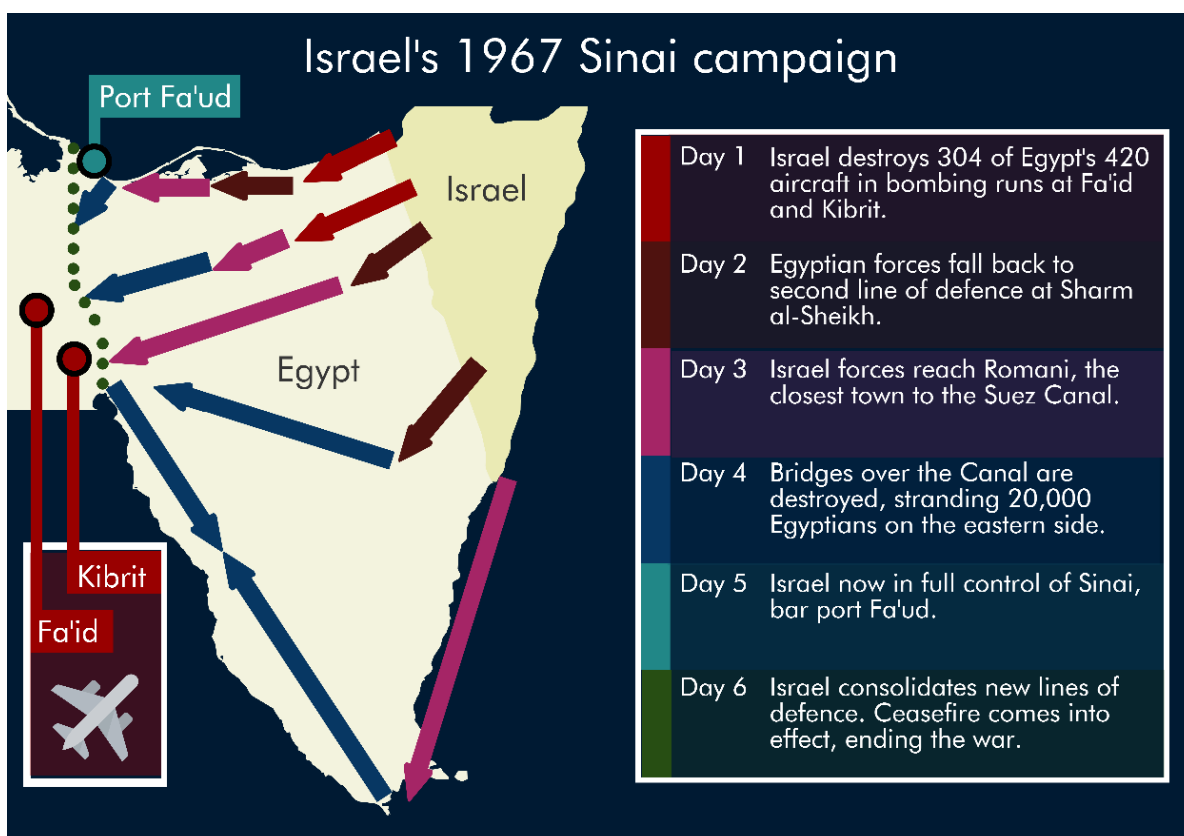
"Expecting Israel to take a possible destructive blow without responding would be like accepting defeat before trying to protect yourself."
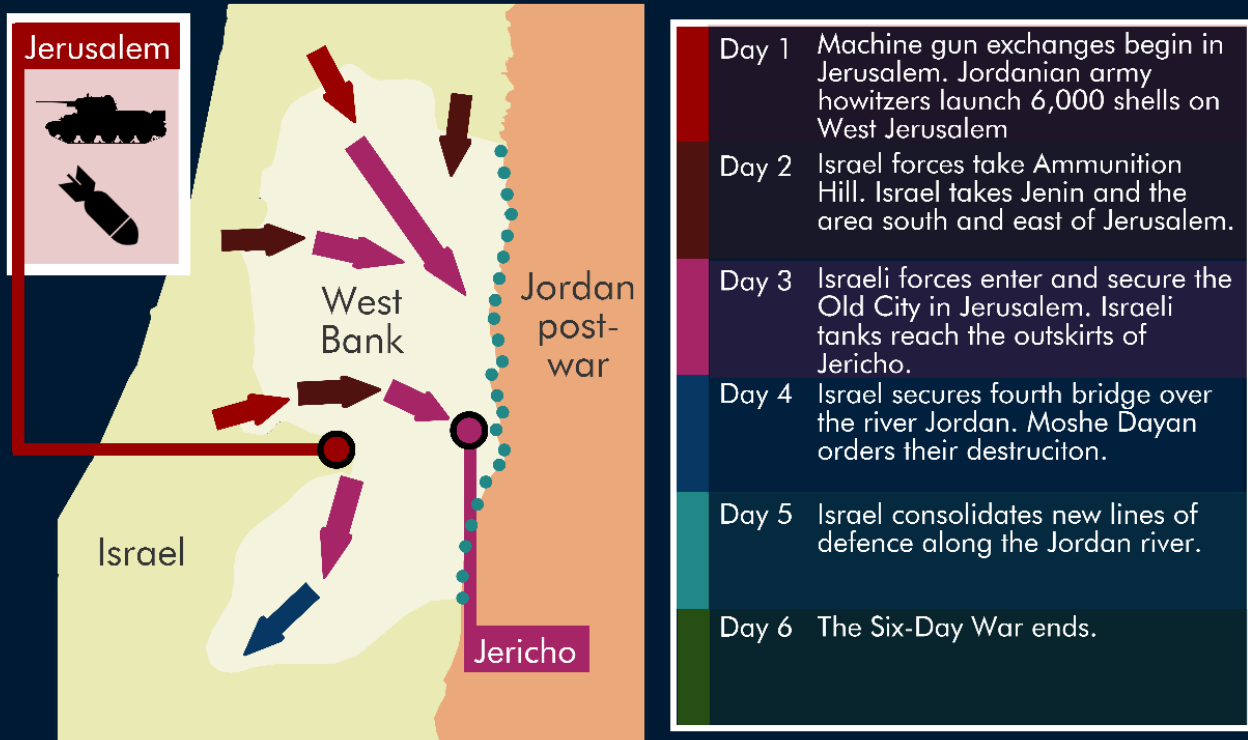- Professor Michael Walzer

Israeli military doctrine, dictated by lack of geographical depth, made it a strategic imperative to strike first. Facing potential war on three fronts, Israel's planners believed a surprise first-strike was essential to take out one threat in order to withstand others if they materialised. Israel's generals also argued that the longer Israel waited, the more costly would be the battle, and the lower the chances of success, since Nasser was using time to entrench his forces. The mobilisation of so many of Israel's male population away from their work places was also crippling economically.

This dilemma created a political crisis in Israel: The pressure of a potentially devastating war coupled with the absence of clear policy directives caused Israel's Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin to suffer from mental and physical exhaustion, which incapacitated him for 48 hours between 22 and 24 May. Political and public pressure ultimately forced Eshkol to hand over the defence portfolio (which he also held) to Moshe Dayan, a military hero.

Israel's alarm grew as Arab leaders, media and publics united around the threat to destroy Israel and slaughter its people. Nasser declared: *"Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel,"* whilst Syrian Defence Minister Hafez al-Assad declared: *"The time has come to enter into a battle of annihilation."* On 1 June, Ahmed Shukeiry, the Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), said: *"We shall destroy Israel*

Israel's 1967 Sinai campaign

Port Fa'ud

Israel

Egypt

Kibrit

Fa'id

Day 1	Israel destroys 304 of Egypt's 420 aircraft in bombing runs at Fa'id and Kibrit.
Day 2	Egyptian forces fall back to second line of defence at Sharm al-Sheikh.
Day 3	Israel forces reach Romani, the closest town to the Suez Canal.
Day 4	Bridges over the Canal are destroyed, stranding 20,000 Egyptians on the eastern side.
Day 5	Israel now in full control of Sinai, bar port Fa'ud.
Day 6	Israel consolidates new lines of defence. Ceasefire comes into effect, ending the war.

Israel's 1967 Jordanian campaign

	Day	
	Day 1	Machine gun exchanges begin in Jerusalem. Jordanian army howitzers launch 6,000 shells on West Jerusalem
	Day 2	Israel forces take Ammunition Hill. Israel takes Jenin and the area south and east of Jerusalem.
	Day 3	Israeli forces enter and secure the Old City in Jerusalem. Israeli tanks reach the outskirts of Jericho.
	Day 4	Israel secures fourth bridge over the river Jordan. Moshe Dayan orders their destruciton.
	Day 5	Israel consolidates new lines of defence along the Jordan river.
	Day 6	The Six-Day War ends.

and its inhabitants and as for the survivors – if there are any – the boats are ready to deport them."

Ultimately, the filling of the Sinai with an Egyptian army capable of a devastating strike coupled with the closure of the Straits of Tiran and the failure of diplomacy made war inevitable. As the expert in 'just war' theory Professor Michael Walzer said: *"Expecting Israel to take a possible destructive blow without responding would be like accepting defeat before trying to protect yourself."*

However, Israel sought to keep Jordan out of the hostilities sending an appeal to King Hussein on the first day of the war via three channels – the US State Department, the British Foreign Office, and via General Odd Bull, Chief of Staff of the UN Truce Supervision Organisation in Jerusalem – urging him to show restraint. Arthur Lourie at the Israeli Foreign Ministry told General Bull *"to convey to King Hussein that Israel will not, repeat not, attack if Jordan maintains the quite. But if Jordan opens hostilities, Israel will respond with all its might"*.

Why did Israel win?

On the morning of 5 June, Israel launched a devastating opening strike against Egypt's air force, effectively destroying it on the ground within minutes. Israel committed 95 per cent of its planes to this operation, which minimised Egypt's ability to launch a ground attack and freed the IAF to attack Jordanian and Syrian air forces on the same day. The successful land battles on the Sinai and Jordanian fronts were won in the first 24 hours thanks to air superiority. This enabled Israel to then divert forces to capturing the Golan Heights from Syria.

Although outnumbered, Israeli forces were far better prepared while Arab forces were poorly led and organised. Israel's victory was a result of the military's planning, intelligence and preparation. Jordanian forces, which had been placed under Egyptian command, were sent to southern areas of the West Bank, exposing Jerusalem. Syrian troops had low morale, and suffered from lack of resupply and poor communications. Moreover, the politicisation of the Egyptian army had resulted in the appointment of incompetent and inexperienced senior commanders and large gaps in the military's chain of command. By May 1967, about half of Egypt's armed forces were bogged down fighting in Yemen, costing the country about US$100m per year and Egypt's rapid military expansion during the preceding decade (from 80,000 to 180,000 soldiers) resulted in a deficit of experienced officers, who spread the military too thinly along the Sinai border and gave conflicting orders.

Israel's 1967 Golan campaign
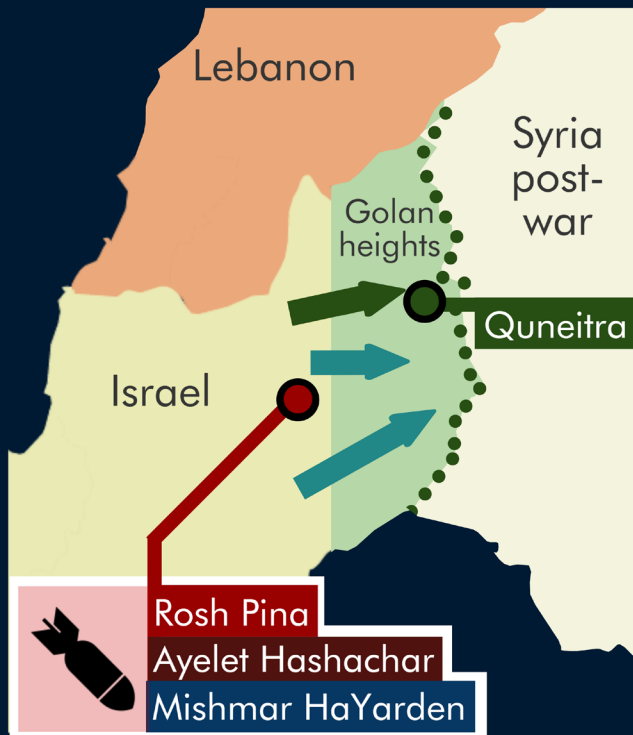
Day 1	Syrian shelling of Israeli settlements near the border begins. Israeli bombers attack Syrian airfields.	
Day 2	Attempted Syrian tank invasion is halted by Israeli forces.	
Day 3	Israeli government considers invasion of the Golan Heights.	
Day 4	Syria continues shelling of Israeli kibbutzim and communities.	
Day 5	Israel attacks the central Golan Heights. Qala', Za'ura, Tel Fakhr, Tel 'Azzaziat and Darbashiya fall to Israeli forces.	
Day 6	Israel takes Quneitra and consolidates new lines of defence. Ceasefire comes into effect, ending the war.	

Map labels: Lebanon, Syria post-war, Golan heights, Quneitra, Israel, Rosh Pina, Ayelet Hashachar, Mishmar HaYarden

PART 2: THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR

What were the consequences for Israel?

Victory transformed Israel strategically, psychologically and politically. Israel's victory resulted in its control of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. These territories were three and a half times larger than Israel itself and created a feeling of deliverance and release from a sense of siege.

Especially emotive was reunifying Jerusalem and restoring Jewish access to the Jewish quarter of the Old City and the Western Wall (Kotel), which is the most important place of worship for Jews. The Jewish Quarter had been captured by Jordan in 1948 and its synagogues destroyed.

The fears before the war and the elation of victory also impacted Jews around the world, instilling enormous pride, helping restore Jewish confidence after the Holocaust and deepening Jewish sense of commitment to Israel, and Israel's centrality in Diaspora Jewish life.

The capture of the territories also created a new divide in Israeli politics, between those who favoured negotiating withdrawal from territories in return for peace treaties with the Arab states, and those who wished to see Israel maintain a permanent presence, especially in the historically and strategically important West Bank.

Religious-Zionists saw a divine hand in the events, with the return of the Jewish people to the biblical cities in the historic 'Land of Israel' (especially Jerusalem and Hebron in the West Bank) marking for them the beginning of redemption. Religious Zionists were empowered with ideological fervour with a new generation of leaders who would subsequently spearhead settlement in the West Bank and become a major political force.

The war also brought over one million Palestinians under Israeli military control yet

> The balance struck [in UNSCR 242] reflected the broadly held international view that Israel had acted in self-defence, and that its security and legitimacy were valid concerns that had to be addressed alongside territorial withdrawal.

with no Israeli consensus and no international framework for returning the populated territories to Arab control, the situation is unresolved to this day.
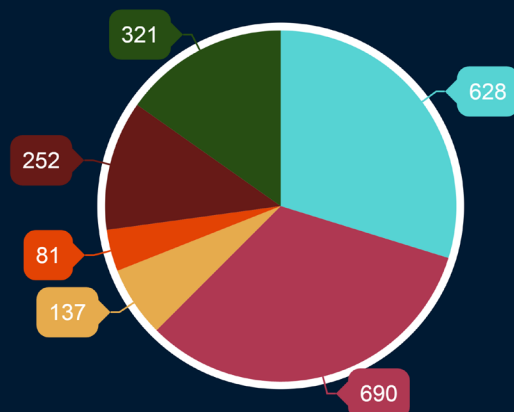
How did the international community react?

In November 1967 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which established a framework for resolving the conflict based on two parallel principles: the "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict"; and that all states in the region – including Israel – were entitled to secure and recognised boundaries. The balance struck reflected the broadly held international view that Israel had acted in self-defence, and that its security and legitimacy were valid concerns that had to be addressed alongside territorial withdrawal. British Ambassador to the UN Lord Caradon played a key role in formulating the final version of the resolution which enabled it to be accepted unanimously.
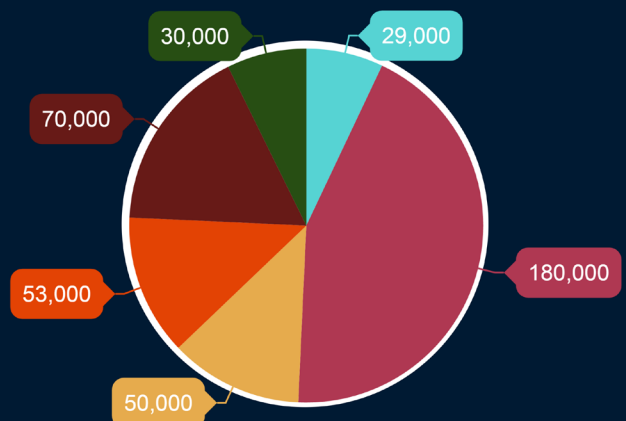
In the months after UNSC 242 was passed, Israel formally accepted it as a basis to resolve the conflict. Indeed, just a week after the war the Israeli Cabinet secretly agreed to return the Sinai to Egypt and to return the Golan Heights to Syria in return for peace and demilitarisation of those territories and also showed a willingness to reach understandings with Jordan over the future of the West Bank.
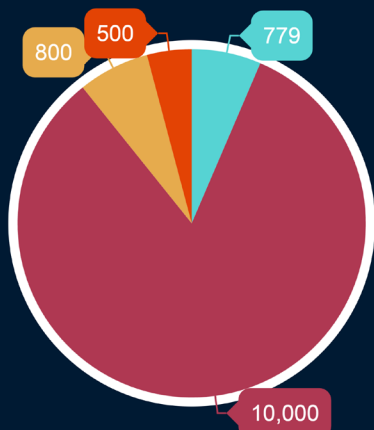
Israel and Arab armed forces in 1967

Defence expenditure
(in millions of pounds)

Israel: 628
Egypt: 690
Syria: 137
Jordan: 81
Iraq: 252
Saudi Arabia: 321

Size of standing army*

Israel: 29,000
Saudi Arabia: 30,000
Iraq: 70,000
Jordan: 53,000
Syria: 50,000
Egypt: 180,000

Six-Day War Casualties**

Israel: 779
Jordan: 500
Syria: 800
Egypt: 10,000

Key

- Egypt
- Syria
- Saudi Arabia
- Israel
- Iraq
- Jordan

*Figures for 1968 standing armies excluding reserves. With reserve forces Israel's army was 275,000 in size.

**Egyptian losses are estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 1968-69; Benny Morris, Righteous Victims.

The Arab failure of 1967 was a humiliation which exposed the façade of secular Pan-Arabism and Nasserism, shattering Nasser's credibility and regional dominance. It subsequently fuelled the growth of alternative Islamist ideologies, which explained the defeat as a consequence of misplaced trust in secular ideologies and a lack of Muslim faith. A modicum of pride was restored for Egypt and Syria in 1973, when they caught Israel with a surprise attack, but then too Israel turned the tide and secured military victory.

Arab humiliation was reinforced by state propaganda which described comprehensive Arab victories on the first day of the war. Anwar Sadat, the future Egyptian President, reported on the 5 June: *"I just went home and stayed in for days… unable to watch the crowds…. chanting, dancing, and applauding the faked-up victory reports which our mass media put out hourly."* Such lies led to greater humiliation and later anger on the Arab street once the troops returned from the front lines.

Approximately 600,000 Palestinians in the West Bank, 70,000 in East Jerusalem and 350,000 in the Gaza Strip came under Israeli military rule. Between 1948 until 1967, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were under the control of Jordan and Egypt respectively yet neither country promoted Palestinian self-determination, nor provided Palestinians with the same level of political status or economic opportunity as that of their own citizens. In the aftermath of the war Israel tried to supress Palestinian nationalism and militancy, and refrained from granting rights of citizenship, but opened up its economy to the Palestinians, who benefitted from employment in Israel and Israeli investment in the territories. According to a 1993 Word Bank report, the economy of the territories grew rapidly between 1968 and 1980, averaging annual increase of 7 per cent and 9 per cent in real per capita GDP and GNP respectively.

The Arab defeat facilitated Palestinians taking the lead in promoting their own national cause. The war and its aftermath reignited Palestinian nationalism with the Palestinians seeking "the independence of decision" to extricate themselves from the control of Arab states.

Unable to function in the territories under Israeli control, Palestinian armed groups led by Yasser Arafat operated from Jordan and Lebanon, and developed an international armed strategy, characterised by terror attacks and hijackings, but also a diplomatic strategy to secure recognition in international fora. The Palestinians ultimately became the focus of international diplomacy surrounding the "Arab-Israeli conflict" and the PLO was recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab League and admitted as an observer at the UN in 1974.

How was peace achieved between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan?

The initial Arab response to the conflict was to continue to reject any recognition of Israel. At a summit in Khartoum in September 1967 Arab leaders declared there would be *"no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it".* These three noes had, Abba Eban observed, "slammed shut the door to peace".

However the military defeat ultimately disabused Arab leaders of any hope that Israel could be destroyed militarily, and laid the basis for the Arab-Israeli peace process of later years. After the 1973 war, an Arab-Israeli peace process began when the US brokered disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Syria in 1974 and 1975, and in 1977 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (who replaced Nasser in 1970) famously flew to Israel and addressed the Knesset. In 1979 Israel and Egypt signed a peace agreement based on UNSC 242. Israel withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula in return for normalising of relations and demilitarization of the Sinai. This agreement ended any prospect of another general Arab-Israeli war and has been a cornerstone of regional stability for nearly 40 years.

Israel and Jordan signed a peace agreement in 1994. Jordan renounced their claim on the West Bank in 1987 in favour of the establishment of a Palestinian state. This decision, coupled with the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO in 1993, made peace between Israel and Jordan possible. The countries enjoy deep cooperation on security, especially in countering Islamic extremists, and Israel is set to become a major gas supplier for Jordan in the near future.

Israel and Syria tried and failed repeatedly to negotiate a land for peace deal, most recently in 2007 with indirect talks brokered by Turkey. The Syrian civil war has removed any prospect of such a deal. Israel applied Israeli law to the Golan Heights in 1981 and Syrian Druze there enjoy access to full civil rights in Israel, and are increasingly taking up Israeli citizenship.

Why does the Palestinian issue remain unresolved?

Under the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, the Palestinians established for the first time in their history autonomy in a part of former Mandatory Palestine. The agreements established as an interim solution Palestinian Authority control over 40 per cent of the West Bank and 95 per cent of its Palestinian population, and set a time frame for a permanent status agreement. Whilst the two-state solution was not explicitly mentioned in the Oslo Accords, it has become the aspirational goal for the majority of Palestinians and Israelis, and endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council.

In 2005 Israel withdrew completely from the Gaza Strip, handing control over to the Palestinian Authority. After a Palestinian election in 2006 and internal armed Palestinian conflict in 2007, the area fell to the Palestinian armed Islamist movement Hamas. The rise to power of an armed Islamist movement backed by Iran, in territory from which Israel withdrew, has increased Israeli wariness about withdrawing from the West Bank. At the same time Israelis are aware that continued control over a large Palestinian population threatens Israel's character as the nation state of the Jewish people.

Repeated negotiations, primarily during Camp David in 2000, the Annapolis Process of 2007-08 and the Kerry Talks in 2013-14 have failed to resolve final status between the sides. However, some Israeli analysts believe that too much focus on resolving issues from the Six-Day War has obscured the core roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Asher Susser has suggested that the crux of the conflict does not only revolve around the so-called "1967 file" which relates to borders, settlements and security but primarily to the "1948 file," which includes Palestinian refugees and the Jewish people's right to self-determination in part of their ancestral homeland.

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