“The Amber Light”: Regional and Superpower Politics in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War
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“The Amber Light”: Regional and Superpower Politics in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War

Adam Giancola

“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.”

– Wm. Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim

On the 29th of November 1947, the newly formed United Nations assembled to discuss the fate of the Palestine Mandate. In the aftermath of the discussions, Britain relinquished its mandate over the region and what emerged was a partition resolution for the establishment of two distinct states: Israel and Palestine. Although Palestinian Jews welcomed the arrangement, it was rejected by the Arabs, who dismissed the imposition of boundaries in a region they argued had a predominantly Arab population. In effect, it can be argued that the tension that first characterized the Jewish and the Arab world in the Middle East was realized in conjunction with a broader involvement of foreign powers in the affairs of the region. Therefore, in addressing the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, it is worth considering the extent by which ‘international superpowers’ interacted with regional politics in the origins and outcomes of what has been termed the ‘Six-Day War’.

By reviewing current scholarship found in Wm. Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim’s edition of The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences, I will argue that the war that broke out on June 5th 1967 was neither accidental nor deliberately planned. Rather, it was the outcome of a “crisis slide”, an action in which both Israel and Egypt, the major actors in the conflict, looked to their respective foreign allies for a ‘green light’ to move forward. While the conflict that emerged was self-generated, it only came to fruition when local leaders perceived that their actions were supported by superpower interests. To defend this position, I will provide an analysis of the historical narrative of Israeli and Egyptian actions in the lead-up to the war, casting each in the broader light of Israeli-American and Soviet-Egyptian relations. Ultimately I will argue that the cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict originated from an unconfirmed belief that both Israel and Egypt had the support of the United States and the Soviet Union respectively. To arrive at this conclusion, I will describe how the Israeli and the Egyptian leaders, first in their decision to instigate the conflict and followed by their subsequent choice to opt for war, were grounded in a calculated set of maneuvers aimed at rallying the support of foreign allies. Unlike the

1956 Suez conflict, the direction of regional politics in 1967 depended firmly upon the support of superpower nations.

The period leading up to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war was defined by a series of decisions on the part of both the Israeli and Egyptian fronts which ‘tested the waters’ of new arrangements within the Middle East. In 1963, Levi Eshkol became the third elected Prime Minister of Israel, adopting the nation’s official position of “not interfer[ing] in the internal politics of the Arab states but only act[ing] in self-defense against the Arab aggression.”³ In the shadow of the 1956 Suez War, Israel had been granted access to the Suez Canal, UN forces were stationed along the Straits of Tiran to secure the right to navigation, and military conflicts with neighbouring Arab states had been temporarily halted through the intervention of foreign powers.⁴ By 1960, the landscape of the region was defined by a pan-Arabic military coalition known as United Arab Command under the Arab League.⁵ For Israel, the decision to re-engage in a conflict with the Arab states depended primarily on the possibility of gaining the diplomatic and military support of foreign allies. For this reason, when Eshkol identified Syria as a principal threat to Israel in the years preceding the war, he “preferred to defer action until avenues for a diplomatic solution had been exhausted.”⁶ Unlike the events of the 1956 conflict, Eshkol and his government were unwilling “to go to war without the backing of America and other western powers” – even after the closing of the Straits of Tiran.⁷ Thus, even before the conflict had emerged as a genuine possibility, Israeli leaders were opting for a strategy that took into consideration the broader interests of international powers.

In the case of Egypt, the political landscape in the years preceding the war suggests that Egypt’s actions too were motivated by a desire to mediate the interests of superpower nations. On one hand, the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser believed that if a military conflict should arise, he could ensure an Egyptian victory in coalition with the surrounding Arab powers against an isolated Israeli state.⁸ Simultaneously, President Nasser also viewed the United States as the “primary enemy,” and the new face of imperialism in the Near East.⁹ Given his beliefs about Israel and the United States, Nasser proceeded under the assumption that any local conflicts would be exhausted by the superpowers, presuming that they would make a joint effort to prevent the possibility of war. He further believed that if a war did break out, the Egyptian military could hold off Israeli forces long enough to call a ceasefire. Under these assumptions, Nasser believed that Egypt would emerge with a new international prestige, regardless of the outcome.¹⁰ In effect, in the political landscape preceding the Arab-Israeli conflict, Nasser’s underestimation of Israeli capabilities and his assurance of an Arab victory depended upon a belief about the involvement of the superpowers.

¹⁰ James, “Egypt,” 58.
Nasser’s reliance on foreign commitments was also central to his decision to instigate conflict in May of 1967. As part of the Arab League, Nasser was compelled to work in alliance with the interests of Syria, leading him to act in a manner which undermined the international arrangement of 1956. In addition, the decision of Nasser to support Syria was encouraged on the basis of superpower dynamics. Avi Shlaim reports that, “after receiving a report from Moscow that Israeli troops were massing in force on the Syrian border, the Egyptian troops mobilized on full alert, the aim of which was to deter Israel from aggression against Syria, rather than to start a war.” Only after receiving word from the Soviets about an Israeli threat against Syria did Egypt decide to act. Unsurprisingly, “the heavy emphasis laid by the Soviet Union on the warning of troop movements seemed an opportunity not to be missed, implying an invitation for Egypt to confront its enemies with Soviet support.” If one considers both instances, what is clear is that Egypt’s actions were stimulated by both a compliance with Soviet interests and an antagonism towards Israeli-American interests. In the midst of such local politics, Nasser responded by deploying his troops in the Sinai close to Israel’s border, expelling the UN Emergency Force (UNEF), and, on May 22nd, 1967, closing the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, thereby instigating what historians consider to be the start of a path to war.

On both fronts, it is clear that the origins of the conflict emerged out of a perception of superpower involvement in the Middle East. Yet the important question remains: What specific signals did the Americans or the Soviets actually give to recommend the path to war? In other words, was the outcome of war the result of local or international politics?

In the wake of the closing of the Straits of Tiran, it is necessary to examine the causal relationship that existed between Israel’s close ties to the United States, and Israel’s decision to declare war on Egypt on June 5th, 1967. During the Suez Crisis of 1956, then President Dwight Eisenhower expressly warned Israel not to attack Egypt. Under the administration of President Lyndon Johnson on the other hand, American policy took a much more sympathetic view towards Israel. Though not uncritical of the prospect of aggression, the political arrangement of the United States government arguably created adequate conditions for American support in the face of an Israeli strike. Immediately following Egypt’s cancellation of the 1957 mandates, Prime Minister Eshkol sent Israeli diplomat Abba Eban to “secure international action to reopen the Straits of Tiran”. During his visit to Washington, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson agreed to work towards that end, but “warned against the initiation of hostilities by Israel”, later stating that “Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone.” Nonetheless, within a few days, American policy itself had shifted “from the legal issue of the straits to the strategic issue of the Egyptian forces in Sinai.” Through a willingness to provide Israel with diplomatic support at the United Nations, political backing in the event of direct Soviet involvement, and military support if the need arose, the American position expressed itself as a passive acceptance of Israeli intentions within the Middle East.

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11 James, “Egypt,” 58.
12 James, “Egypt,” 60.
14 Shlaim, “Israel,” 34.
Given this exchange, historians like Avi Shlaim have characterized the American response by what may be termed “the amber light,” a cautionary stance that neither condoned nor precluded the actions of the Israeli state. In examining the origins of the ‘Six Day War,’ Charles Smith argues that the gradual evolution of American policy suggests that the “idea of not objecting to an Israeli strike” while indicating a clear promise to support Israel’s claim to Tiran, created the conditions for Israel to justify its decision to finally launch war on Egypt. As a result, “America 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.” Nonetheless, while there is clear evidence verifying an American promise to support Israeli efforts in the conflict with Egypt, the very nature of its ‘amber light’ response was one of caution and silence. When Israel launched its first strike days later, Smith describes how “after learning of Israeli responsibility for the attack, the United States immediately alerted the Soviets,” claiming that they were not responsible for the attack on Egypt. Clearly the United States was willing to support Israeli politics within the Middle East, but only insofar as their support was not interpreted as a direct threat to their Soviet rivals. Evidently, superpower politics had provided a justification, but not the impulse, for local outbreak of war in the Middle East.

The position of the foreign powers during the events of the war articulates the gap that existed between local politics in the Middle East and the broader diplomatic relations at the international level. While it is clear that the Soviets publicly supported the Arab nations diplomatically, internally they were greatly displeased with Egypt’s decision to close the Straits of Tiran. Nonetheless, the Middle Eastern crisis was always understood to be an issue of “pure power politics.” Rami Ginat makes the argument that the impulse leading up to the Israeli strike was not limited to the politics of the Middle East. He suggests that the Soviets believed that, “no matter how it went, and whether or not there was an Israeli-Arab war, the United States would suffer a disastrous blow to its prestige and influence.” In effect, by providing support to Egypt, the Soviet Union was positioning itself not for the sake of an Arab victory, but concocting a conflict which held Israel and its Western allies, including the United States, accountable for the crisis. Nonetheless, there was a strong desire to publicly remain ‘hands off’ regarding their involvement with the Arab-Israeli conflict. When war did finally arrive, Ginat describes how the United States “hastily informed Moscow that Israel had not been given a green light to go ahead with its military operation.” In effect, “the United States hoped that they might act together with the Soviet Union in order to bring an immediate end to the hostilities.” Ultimately, while there is

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evidence to suggest that the 1967 conflict extended beyond its Middle Eastern frontiers, in many ways the superpowers equally sought to distance themselves from being labeled as the ‘architects’ of war.

For this reason, the outcomes of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war best articulate the changing dynamics between local and superpower states within the Middle East. When Israel defeated the Egyptian armies, it had gained for itself a whole new set of territories along the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In the peace agreement that followed, the United States helped provide the basis for UN Resolution 242, “which set the principle that peace in the Middle East should be established by adjusting the frontiers of territories lost in the war.” The resolution meant that Israel did not have to return the territories to the way they were before the outbreak of war, exposing President Johnson’s decision in the aftermath to affirmatively adopt a pro-Israel stance. This was most clear in the American decision to effectively “replace France as the principal supplier to Israel of military equipment, including tanks and jet aircraft.” So too did the Soviet Union emerge as the champions of Egypt and Syria during the peace agreements at the United Nations. On one hand, it is clear that the end of the conflict spelled a greater dependence of the Arab world on Soviet interests. On the other hand, the overwhelming Israeli victory over the Egyptians demonstrated not only a victory for the Jewish state in the Middle East, but was cast in the light of a larger chronicle of Cold War triumph in which the United States emerged as victor over the Soviet Union. The event of war had pulled the superpowers into the framework of Middle Eastern politics, with or without their explicit consent.

Unlike the events of the 1956 Suez War, the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict was defined by a set of decisions on the part of local leaders to rally the support of their foreign allies to justify increased hostilities within the Middle East. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that in doing so, both Israel and Egypt unavoidably fell into the trap of impending war, acting on the false belief that they were fully supported by the superpower nations. In the case of Egypt, the Soviets had informed them of the Syrian threat and recommended precautionary measures to be taken against Israel, but the decision to evict the UNEF on the frontier with Israel and to blockade the Gulf of Aqaba was made by Nasser without Soviet consultation. In the case of Israel, Prime Minister Eshkol consulted with the United States for support in order to justify its decision to go to war. When it interpreted American cautiousness as ‘the green light’ for war, it launched the first strike. In both cases, local leaders interpreted what has been termed ‘the amber light’ by superpower nations as the rationalization for the origins of the 1967 conflict. In doing so, regional politics co-opted superpower politics into the region, definitively drawing lines between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East for decades to come.

Bibliography


