Six Day War Essay, Research Paper

The Six Day War broke out on June 5, 1967, following three weeks of tension which began on May 15, 1967 when it was known that Egypt had concentrated large-scale forces in the Sinai peninsula. Egypt’s force buildup in the Sinai was accompanied by other serious steps: the United Nations Emergency Force stationed on the border between Egypt and Israel and Sharm el-Sheikh in 1957 and which had provided an actual separation between the countries was evacuated on May 19 upon the demands of the Egyptian president at the time, Gamal Abdel-Nasser; the Egyptian navy blocked the Straits of Tiran, located at the end of the Gulf of Eilat, on the night of May 22-23, 1967, preventing the passage of any Israeli vessels; and on May 30, 1967, Jordan joined the Egyptian-Syrian military alliance of 1966 and placed its army on both sides of the Jordan river under Egyptian command. Iraq followed suit. It agreed to send reinforcement and issued a warning order to two brigades: Contingents arrived from other Arab countries including Algeria and Kuweit. Israel was confronted by an Arab force of some 465,000 troops, over 2,880 tanks and 810 aircraft.

In this way, a direct threat on the whole length of Israeli territory was created. The Egyptian Army was deployed in the Sinai, the straits were closed signaling the failure of Israeli deterrence, and Jordan joined the military alliance closing the circle of the states threatening Israel?s borders. As the situation deteriorated, Israel increased its reserve forces call-up which had already been underway and established a National Unity government which included representatives of the opposition parties at that time. Moshe Dayan was appointed Minister of Defense. Though the Government of Israel viewed the closing of the straits as a belligerent act and a warning bell, the government tried to solve the crisis through political channels. The government of Israel approached the Great Powers who had guaranteed the freedom of Israeli navigation. Britain and France renegged on their commitment and the President of the United States proposed a plan for breaking the blockade by an international armada. Israel agreed to wait and give the plan a change and Prime Minister Eshkol announced his Government?s intentions in a radio broadcast on 28 May. Israel?s decision to wait was taken despite the fact that it was well aware that the main threat had now become the Egyptian deployment in the Sinai and not the closing of the straits. When it became clear later that the political demarches had failed, the Government, on May 4 gave approval to the Israel Defense Forces to undertake military offensive to eliminate the threat to Israel?s existence.

This dramatic development was the height of continued deterioration in the relations between Israel and her neighbors. The state of war that had existed since 1948 was already intensified between 1964-67 with the increase in the number of dangerous incidents on the Syrian border following Israel?s activation of the National Water Carrier from the Sea of Galilee to the Negev in 1964. This tension came against the backdrop of Syrian attacks on Israeli farmers cultivating land in the demilitarized zone and on Israeli fishing boats and other craft in the Sea of Galilee. The Arabs opposed the National Water Carrier project and tried to destroy it by diverting the subsidiaries of the Jordan river located in the territories. In addition, at the start of 1965 Palestinian terrorist organizations, under the patronage of both Syria and Egypt, began to operate against Israeli settlements. Their attacks led to Israeli military reprisals against their bases located in neighboring countries. The Arabs were strengthened in their stand by the consistent support of the USSR, through both the supply of weapons and military advisers and through political support in the framework of the cold war between the East and West. It was the Soviets who spread the false report in 1967 that Israel had concentrated large forces on the border with Syria in preparation to attack, after the Syrians had already “heated up” the border area. This fraudulent report was the declared reason for the concentration of Egyptian forces in Sinai, in confirmation with the military alliance between Egypt and Syria. This concentration of forces gradually led the Arabs to believe that an opportunity had been created to realize their 19-year aspiration to destroy Israel. In the light of this development, Israel had no choice but to preempt.

The Six-Day War started with a far-reaching air attack, code named ?Moked?, to shatter the Arab air forces while their aircraft were still on the ground. The attack was planned even before General Mordechai (Moti) Hod, had been appointed Air Force Commander. The main element of the plan was to carry out a massive, simultaneous attack of Israeli first-line aircraft against all Egyptian air force bases – the main Arab air force. This required exact and detailed planning of departure times and approaches of each of the attacking forces, in order to ensure the element of surprise on every target. On the morning of June 5, the aircraft of the IAF took off from their bases and attacked Egyptian air force bases in Sinai and Egypt. During the first wave, eleven fields were hit (among them some that had also been attacked in the first wave).

In a short, efficient and decisive blow, approximately 300 Egyptian aircraft, including bombers, combat planes and helicopters, were destroyed in less than 2 hours. The main air threat against Israel was eliminated and the Israel Defense Forces achieved air supremacy when Jordanian, Syrian and Iraqi aircraft attacked targets in Israel. Once it was clear that King Hussein, the Jordanian leader, had chosen to undertake a military campaign on the Jerusalem front, the Israel Air Force turned to the Jordanian airfields in Amman and Mafrak and destroyed a large part of the Jordanian Air Force. When the confrontation was further extended on the same day over Syria and Iraq, Israeli aircraft continued their combat against these countries and also destroyed their aircraft. Airfields attacked in Syria included Damascus, Damir and Seikel. In Iraq, the H-3 airfield in the vicinity of the Jordanian border was attacked. Before the end of the first day of fighting, the air forces of the participating Arab states had been destroyed, thereby determining the fate of the entire war. Israeli armored forces could then fight the battle under ?clear skies?, and air force pilots were free to provide support to IDF ground forces in all the sectors, the breakthrough and transportation axes without leaving the rear of the State of Israel in danger of air attack. Israel Air Force losses in the fateful day of the battle were a total of 20 aircraft. Twelve pilots were killed, five were wounded and four captured.

The main effort of Israeli armor was directed toward the Egyptian forces deployed in fortifications in the eastern parts of the Sinai and in the Gaza Strip, which consisted of 7 divisions with a total of about 100,000 soldiers, approximately 1,000 tanks and hundreds of artillery pieces. The Israel Defense Forces went against this disposition with a force of three divisions composed of armored, infantry and paratrooper brigades, as well as an independent mechanized brigade and an independent infantry brigade reinforced with paratroopers and armor. The fighting lasted four days, in a single, continuous momentum. Aware of the fact that the war could well last only a few days and that it was imperative to achieve a rapid victory, the IDF concentrated all of its armored strength in order to break through the Egyptian disposition. This was a fast attack forward, without securing the flanks and transportation axes. Very quickly, the Egyptian dispositions were broken through despite their initial resolute resistance.

The battle on the Egyptian front was conducted by the commander of the Southern Command, General Yishayahu Gavish. Under his command, breakthroughs were achieved along three main axes. The northern axis, and the Rafah-El Arish axis were allocated to General Israel Tal’s division. After difficult breakthrough battles in the Khan-Yunis and Rafah areas on the first day of the war, the combat units continued onward past Sheikh-Zuwayd and from there in the direction of El-Arish, although the enemy quickly regrouped in the fortified El- Jiradi positions, the road to El-Arish was only opened up that day after bitter combat. All the Egyptian forces which faced the division were either destroyed, dispersed or taken prisoner.

The task of the division under the command of General Ariel Sharon was to conquer the large Egyptian fortified disposition in the Umm-Kateif Abu Awegeila-Quseima area. The force displayed excellent maneuverability against the dug-in and well-organized army, which had the advantage of much larger numbers. Combined forces of armor, paratroopers, infantry, artillery and engineers attacked the Egyptian disposition from the front flanks and rear, cutting the enemy off. The breakthrough battles which were in sandy areas and minefields, continued for 3 and-a-half days.

The division under the command of General Avraham Yoffe penetrated between the sectors covered by these two divisions, through Wadi Haroudin, a sand dune area considered impassable to mechanized units. Its aim was to reach the rear of the Egyptian forces. On the first night of the war, the force captured the Bir- Lahfan junction, cut-off of the Egyptian army forces between the two other combat sectors and prevented the approach of reinforcements from the heart of Sinai.

On the second day of the war, 6 June, 1967, General Tal’s division made its way through northern Sinai, proceeding towards the Suez Canal in two axes (El-Arish Qantara axis and El-Arish Bir-Lahfan-Ismailiya axis) while engaging Egyptian forces in heavy combat. The Egyptian disposition at Bir-Lahfan was defeated, and a coordinated attack with General Yoffe’s division blocked the western retreat lines of the Egyptian army in this sector. General Yoffe’s division, composed of reserve soldiers, captured the Jebel-Libneh camps and destroyed the Egyptian reinforcements sent to the Umm-Kateif Abu Awegerila camp, where General Sharon’s division completed the cleaning-up operation and continued south in the direction of Quseima. On the same day, complete control of the Gaza Strip was achieved, and on the afternoon of the following day Khan Yunis was captured.

On the third day of the war, 7 June, 1967, General Tal’s division continued its advance towards the Suez Canal along the El-Arish-Qantara and El-Arish-Bir- Lahfan-Ismailiya axes, while conducting heavy armored battle against Egyptian forces. The important Bir-Gafgafa junction was captured and attempts by the Egyptian army to cross over the Canal in this sector were repressed. General Yoffe’s division advanced on Bir-Hassneh and Bir El-Thamada and blocked the rear Egyptian armored columns retreating west from the Sinai towards the Mitla Pass. The mountains passes became a large killing ground for Egyptian vehicles, with the air force providing air support. A long line of obstacles blocked the retreat path to cross the Canal for Egyptian personnel and vehicles gathering at the approaches. General Sharon’s division captured Quseima and continued its advance south-west in the direction of Nakhl.

The independent tank brigade under the command of Colonel Albert defeated the Kuntila outpost north of Eilat and continued to confront the Egyptian force posted in the sector and threatening to cut-off the town. Another force gained control of the Ras E-Nakeb Egyptian border post near Eilat. On the same day, Sharm El-Sheikh was captured without a fight. The Egyptians retreated following an air attack, and the Israel Navy landed personnel. In addition, paratroopers were landed in Sharm El-Sheikh and E-Tur and they started their advance northwards along the coast of the Gulf of Suez. By capturing the area, the Straits of Tiran were opened for the passage of Israeli and other vessels to and from Eilat.

On the fourth day of the war, 8 June, 1967, the Egyptian forces were defeated. General Tal’s division conquered Qantara on the banks of the Suez Canal and continued south along the canal in order to join up with the main force of the division which continued from Bir-Gafgafa to the Suez Canal in the Ismailiya sector. South of them, General Yaffe’s division also continued towards the canal along two axes in the Suez sector, while another force of his division continued on another route to Ras-Sudar on the Gulf of Suez, south of the Canal. From there, the force continued south along the Gulf of Suez and reached Abu- Zenima, where it met up with the paratroopers coming from E-Tur. General Sharon’s division continued its advance south-west to the heart of Sinai and conquered Nakhl. In a more southern sector, Colonel Albert’s independent tank brigade fought and defeated the Egyptian armored force which threatened to cut-off Eilat.

The possibility of war breaking out in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem intensified the tension and preparedness of the Central Command under the command of General Uzi Narkiss. Although all the forces were prepared for defense rather than attack, during the morning hours the news on the radio announced the start of the battle on the Egyptian front. A short time afterwards, the first shots were fired in the Jerusalem sector, first from light weapons and quickly followed by heavy Jordanian artillery shelling along the while length of the cease-fire line with Israel. When the Jordanians opened fire, the Central Command pressured the General Staff that it be allowed to react. However the General Staff rejected this demand since it did not want to open up another front while the IDFs main effort was being directed at the Egyptian front. Israel sent a message to Jordan that she had no hostile intentions and if Jordan would not enter the war, Israel would even understand a “salvo of honor” on Jordan?s part, an expression of their identification with the Egyptians and part of their obligation towards the Arab world.

However, the continuation of the barrage led to an understanding that the Jordanians had decided to open their own front. Indeed, Jordanian army forces penetrated and took control of Government House, the house used as the headquarters for the UN observers. The Israeli response was fast. At 3:35 p.m. on 5 June, 1967, a task force of the Jerusalem Brigade gained control of Government House and routed the Jordanian soldiers from the rooms. On completion of the short battle at Government House, the Jerusalem brigade continued under the command of Colonel Eliezer Amitai to conquer a series of neighboring Jordanian posts, up to Tsur Bakdar and the ?Bell? position, eastern Jerusalem from the South. At the same time as the Jerusalem force fought in the south-east sector of the city, the armored forces of the Harel Division under the command of Colonel Uri Ben-Ari started their advance on the Jordanian posts in the areas of Radar Hill, Sheikh Abed El-Aziz and Bet-Ihse in the north-west of the town and enemy deployments along the Jerusalem-Ramallah highway.

A reserve brigade of paratroopers under the command of Colonel Mordechai (Motta) Gur was brought to Jerusalem. Their task was to make a nighttime breakthrough of the Jordanian lines at the Police School posts and Ammunition Hill in the northern part of Jerusalem, from where they would be able to join up with the defenders of Mount Scopus enclave. One battalion broke through the area of the Police School conquering it and Ammunition Hill. The second battalion broke through in the Nahalat Shimon sector to capture Wadi Juz and the American Colony. The third battalion followed after the second and proceeded towards the walls of the Old City and the Rockefeller Museum. The night battle, which started at 2.00 a.m., was cruel and bloody. The Jordanian outpost on Ammunition Hill held firm and its fighters refused to surrender. The battle ended with sunrise. The paratroopers gained control of Ammunition Hill and the Police School, while other members of their unit advanced through the alleyways of the east of the city through to the walls of the old city and the Rockerfeller Museum, at the same time as joining up with the besieged Israeli enclave on Mount Scopus.

At that time, General Elad Peled’s division which had been allocated for combat by the Northern Command was active in the Samaria area. The division, which was composed of two armored brigades and infantry forces, concentrated its efforts to gain control of the Dotan valley and the nearby junctions. Jenin was encircled and the hills surrounding the town were under Israel control. Most of the time, infantry forces from the Central Command returned fire against Jordanians in the Tulkarm and Qalqilya areas.

On the second day of the 6-Day War, 6 June, 1967, the fighting continued. Latrun was captured with daybreak, providing retribution for the blood of the fighters lost there in the War of Independence. The conquering force, an infantry brigade under the command of Moshe Yotvat, advanced in the direction of Beit Horon and joined up with the tanks of the Harel brigade in the southern entrances to Ramallah. During the morning hours, the Harel brigade was forced to advance twice on the Mivtar Hill, the key to the northern entry to Jerusalem, until the enemy resistance was overcome. The conquer of French Hill, Givat Shaul (Tel El-Ful) and Shuafat completely opened the Israeli approach to Mount Scopus and cut off the city from the north. By the evening of the second day, the Harel brigade tanks entered Ramallah and gained control of the city.

Along the narrow waistline of the state, in the Qalqilya area, the Givati infantry brigade under the command of Zeev Shacham and reinforced with tanks started its advance eastwards to the back of the mountain which was to be taken the following day. At the Kabatiya junction, there was a fierce fight between an armored brigade from Peled’s division and a Jordanian armored brigade which reached the area from the Damya bridge. A little further north from there, IDF troops completed the defeat of Jenin. The Northern Command added an additional tank division to the fight, which fought battles with Jordanian tanks along the way to Tubas. The Jordanian army attempted to supply reinforcements of additional tanks, but they were trapped by the air force on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem and destroyed. The paratroop brigade, continued to gain control of east Jerusalem up to the walls of the old city. Their advance in the populated area was difficult, since many houses became the source of fire from Jordanian army soldiers. The Jerusalem Brigade, who captured in the Abu-Tor district in the south of the city, also faced similar prolonged house to house combat.

The eagerly awaited command to take the old city was given at sunrise on the third day of the war, 7 June, 1967. The Command assigned this task to the paratroopers, who started with an attack on the Augusta-Victoria hills and the Mount of Olives, overlooking the old city. After firing in the direction of the breakthrough path, the Lions Gate, the force from the east advanced forward very quickly and broke through into the old city. The paratroopers ran towards the Dome of the Rock, located next to the last remains of the Temple, the Western Wall, where, in the presence of the sector commander and the deputy head of the armed services, General Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the chief chaplain of the IDF blew a long blow on the rams horn, announcing the release of the Western Wall and the old city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the divided and split capital of Israel, was reunited.

In the mountains of Samaria, the Harel brigade completed the capture of mountain between Ramallah and Nablus, and two battalions of the brigade continued into the Jordan valley along two axes, captured Jericho and in cooperation with a Golani infantry brigade, gained control of Nablus.

The tank forces of Peled’s division captured the routes to Jordan at the Damya (Adam) bridge and gained control of the northern part of the Jordan valley.

During the morning hours, the Jerusalem Brigade advanced on Bethlehem, the Etzion block and Hebron. Resistance was poor, and only here and there the sound of sharpshooters was heard and silenced. Within a short time, the whole of the Hebron mountain area was in the hands of the IDF.

The battle against Syria, Israel’s bitterest enemy, persisted until the fifth day of the Six-Day War, despite the Syrian’s heavy bombardment of the Hula valley settlements and the Galilee. The delay in the breakthrough of the Syrian attack after the defeat of the Egyptian army across Sinai, the release of Jerusalem, and IDF control of Judea and Samaria, raised a fear that it would be the Syrians, who were the source of the tension and caused the general flare-up in the first place, who would not be affected by the IDF. The main reason for the delay in the attack against Syria was because the Northern Command forces under the command of General David Elazar were confined to the Samarian front, where brigade after brigade was taken to help fight in this unexpected front. However, the delay in the attack on the Syrians enabled the concentration of a force enlarged with reinforcements from both the Egyptian and Samarian fronts, on completion of the battles there. International political pressure threatened to impair the operational plans, and a delegation from the northern settlements traveled to Tel Aviv in an effort to convince the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, and the government to release them from the Syrian threat once and for all. In the end, the command was given to open the attack on the Syrian post on the Golan Heights.

The attacking force had to face very difficult topographical conditions. To scale steep, rugged and rocky heights and open a line for transportation while under constant fire from above. The Syrian army sat safely in its strong fortifications on the Golan Heights. It consisted of six infantry brigades, five National Guard battalions and about 200 tanks.

The breakthrough came at 10:00 AM on the morning of 9 June, 1967, after 2 days of heavy bombardment by the air force. It was spearheaded by Colonel Albert’s tank brigade which came from the direction of Givat Ha’em north of Kfar Szold and showered the Syrian posts to the north, on the top of the Heights. In a complex engineering operation, soldiers from the Engineering Corps cleared the way of mines. They were followed by bulldozers which leveled a route for the tanks on the rocky face. The force conquered the Zaura and Kala positions while under heavy artillery fire. At the same time, the Golani infantry brigade under the command of Colonel Yona Efrat fought a fierce battle to conquer its targets in the sector, which included the Tel El-Fahar post which was the most fatal of all. A force consisting of infantry, Nahal and paratroopers defeated a series of other posts overlooking the Hula valley in the southern sector of the Heights and enables the passage of tanks deep into enemy territory. On the night of June 9- 10 an attack was mounted on Jalabina and enemy positions on the region of the border and the Banyas were captured.

The following day, in the morning of the 10 June, 1967, the forces renewed their advance in the north and central regions of the Golan Heights. The infantry and paratrooper units completed their defeat of targets in the area, and the tank units advanced on a number of axes to beyond the town of Quneitra, which was defeated at 3:30 p.m. without any battle. From there, a brigade continued traveling in the Southern Golan captured Butmiye. Another tank force entered and subdued the area at the foot of Mount Hermon, between Banyas and the Lebanese border, together with a Golani brigade and scout units. After this, they went up onto the Golan Heights and defeated Masada.

The Syrian deployment collapsed and the Syrian forces were in retreat.

On the same day, a tank and paratroop force from Elad Peled’s division went up on the Tuafik posts located south-east of the Sea of Galilee, and from there advanced in a north-easterly direction towards Butmiye. In the afternoon of the same day, paratroop forces from the division were landed in the southern Golan Heights to purge the posts scattered across the sector. At the same, infantry forces were active in purging the area north-east of the Sea of Galilee. Towards night, the IDF already controlled the whole of the Golan Heights and was positioned along the whole line passing from Mount Hermon in the south, around Masada, Quneitra and Butmiye junction and extending to the Yarmuk river bed. A unit from the Golani brigade later arrived on the Hermon mountain and determined seizure by the IDF. On 12 June the cease-fire line was set by UN observers along these milestones.