Six Day War Essay, Research Paper

The six-day, Arab-Israeli War of 1967, was an important event in modern Middle East history. This paper will analyze the causes of this “definitive event” which include: military and diplomatic encounters, terrorist attacks against Israel, blockades of Israel s ports by Arabs, and most importantly the impact of Russian/Communist and Western policies and participation in the region. The Israeli s had had a strong victory against the Arab states in 1956, and this had strengthened their self-assurance However, the Six-Day War in June 1967 demonstrated to the Israeli s that watchfulness was still essential. The success of Israel in this war was beyond all normal expectations. Israel went to war on June 5 for sheer survival. On that date, Israelis crossed into the Sinai and won the war in less than a week. The Israeli Cabinet had by then determined that nothing would come of peaceful efforts to end aggressions being committed against the small nation. Israelis were certain that the Arabs were preparing to commit mass murder, and they acted first.

It is difficult to pinpoint any one event that made hostilities inevitable. The closing of the Straits of Tiran and the attempted strangulation of the southern port of Eilat made war certain. The problem was apparent by May 13. On that date, unfounded reports reached the governments of Egypt and Syria that the Israelis were moving between eleven and thirteen brigades towards the Syrian border. Nasser believed this report and determined to show force and deter the anticipated Israeli attack on Syria.

The roots of this conflict reach back centuries, but there were many immediate causes of this war. In a sense it was a result of a whole series of miscalculations and misjudgments on the part of President Nasser of Egypt. Nasser had been warning repeatedly since the end of the 1956 war that it was dangerous to take action against Israel that might begin a drift toward war before Egypt was even prepared and circumstances were right. Nasser did precisely what he had cautioned against in spite of the fact that he admitted more than once just before May 1967 that these conditions were not ripe. He allowed himself to be backed into a position where he was begging for a showdown, and by that time he had convinced himself that the necessary strategic and diplomatic conditions had been created within a space of two weeks. One of the most important factors prompting him to press his initiatives was the nature of the Israeli response to his moves. This response was marked by timidity and hesitation, in contrast to everyone’s expectations. It was the Russians who passed the lie to Cairo concerning the Israeli brigades. Actually, the Israelis had no more than a company consisting of 120 men in this particular area, waiting to ambush Syrian saboteurs. The United Nations confirmed that there were no troop movements on May 19. However, the Russians, who were alarmed by the possibility that Israel might carry out a punitive raid on Syria, wanted Nasser to commit his forces in the Sinai to deter Israelis from making such an attack. The allegations were completely fabricated.

The Russians at this time provided unlimited diplomatic support for the Egyptian blockade of the Suez Canal aimed at Israeli ships, for Syrian efforts to divert the headwaters of the Jordan, and for Syrian attacks along the de-militarized zone. This was in part a reflection of Moscow s concern for the demise of Socialist regimes elsewhere: in Algeria, Indonesia, and Ghana. Unrest was mounting against the government in Syria, and Moscow assumed that Washington was manipulating events behind the scenes.

Clearly, there was an unstable equilibrium maintaining in this region at the time, and this had been true since the end of the war in 1956. Still, the two main antagonists, Egypt and Israel, had not resorted to force against one another for ten years. The new element, as noted, was injected into the conflict from the outside. During the period after 1956, it was possible to discern what conditions were necessary to bring on another conflict, and there were five such conditions: 1) a continuing campaign of Arab terrorism against Israel accompanied by Israeli military retaliation: 2) a significant imbalance in the level of arms available to both sides; 3) blockade of the Straits of Tiran to prevent shipping from the Israeli port of Eilat; 4) Arab military pacts and troop movements encircling Israel; and 5) a marked shift in the policies of the Communist and western powers concerning Israel and the Arab states. The danger of conflict reaches a boiling point when all five of these influences come together.

The most disturbing new element in the conflict was the Soviet Union, for all the other elements had been present before and had receded as the Soviets advanced. During the early sixties, the old pattern of raids and reprisals in the area had started once again. A battle was also taking place in the United Nations between the Soviet ‘Union and Western powers over this same issue. By 1965, the formation of another Arab-Israeli war was clearly taking shape.

The crisis that eventually led to the war built up for six months prior to the start of hostilities. Terrorist activities directed against Israel had increased in October and November of 1966. Syria and Egypt signed a defense agreement in November. The Israelis took major punitive action in certain incidents. Russia, however was the nation most fearful of losing a foothold in this region at that time, and Nasser was encouraging Soviet hopes concerning penetration into the Middle East. The Russians were determined at all costs to maintain their position, and they therefore began dropping hints to Israel about the “possible consequences” of further military action against Syria.

The false information provided by Russia to Egypt can be seen as an attempt to bring this threat to its future. Egypt’s armed forces were immediately put on Maximum alert, and combat units were marched into Sinai. The Egyptian press printed the explanation that there were fears Israel would attack Syria, and that Egypt would then enter the battle if this happened. Israel naturally reacted to these preparations for war in Egypt by calling in reserves for active duty and mobilizing her own troops. On May 22, Nasser announced that he was closing the Gulf of Aquaba to Israeli ships and to all ships carrying “strategic material” to Israel.

The blockade of the Straits annihilated Israel’s only remaining benefit from the earlier Sinai campaign, and the nation was suddenly faced with almost the identical circumstances that it had faced ‘in 1956: the same vulnerable borders, the danger of strangulation, a hostile foe massed in strength on her very doorstep, and a wavering international community that showed no inclination to resist Arab aggression. In 1956, the French and British acted very differently, for now they were urging that Israel take no action at all. After May 15–the date when large numbers of Egyptian troops were moved into the Sinai-4he Israelis waited for three weeks as the crisis grew and various diplomats did what they could to end the blockade and avert war. Tension and rising anger gripped Israel, and one former supporter after another deserted this small nation. The Arabs argued that the actions taken by Nasser were necessary to forestall Israeli aggression, and they also claimed that Nasser, having achieved a position of strength, was trying to de-escalate the situation. The Israelis could find no evidence of this, and instead it seemed that the Arabs were moving toward a “total way’ to destroy Israel. Jordan and Iraq signed military pacts with Egypt, and Kuwait, Morocco, and Algeria promised to send reinforcements. The feeling was that the Arabs had committed themselves to war, and that by waiting Israel was giving all the advantage to the enemy. Nasser was trapped by his own words and deeds, and indeed by years of calling for the destruction of the Israeli State. The Israelis believed that the Arabs were about to embark on a war of mass murder, and this led to Israel’s striking first.

The outlook for Israel was exceedingly dubious by this time. Military strategists believed that the Arabs were planning a three-power attack mounted by Egypt, Syria, and Jordan to destroy Israel before the United States or any friendly force could come to the rescue. It is now believed that it is exactly what would happen if Israel had taken the advice of the U. S State Department to wait patiently. Nasser made many mistakes during the days before the outbreak of the war, and the decision to impose the blockade was perhaps the greatest. In doing so, Nasser was acceding to the requests of his Cabinet and of the other Arab government. He sent two Egyptian submarines, a destroyer, and four missile-launchers through the Suez Canal. He made the following statement: “The State of Tiran is part of our territorial waters. No Israeli ship will ever navigate it again.” The threat to Israel had been constant for years, but this was a mortal blow. Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba were Israel’s gateway to Africa and Asia. Eilat in 1966 had accommodated more than one million tons of cargo. It was Israel’s key oil port. Nasser certainly understood what his action meant. The maritime nations had declared ‘in 1957 that the Gulf of Aqaba was an international waterway. Even Moscow was astonished that Nasser was risking was by violating a clear-cut legal precedent.

On May 24, Nasser visited Bir-Gafgafa and was told by his pilots that they were certain that the cities of Israel were at their mercy. Photographs of Nasser at this meeting were reproduced all over the world, leaving no doubt that it could be no longer avoided. Still, the Egyptian leader’s decision to escalate was a surprise to everyone, including the Egyptian people. Within Syria, there were other problems, which contributed to the rise in war fever, though still there are uncertainties about what these crisis had to do with what took place later. There was a domestic threat to the existing Syrian regime, which may have contributed to the sudden Syrian alarm over the alleged external danger from Israel. A general strike broke out in Damascus on May 6 as a protest against the arrest of a religious leader who had made a speech denouncing an anti religious article in the Syrian army. The following day, the strike spread to other cities, and several thousand arrests were reported ‘in Aleppo, one of the hardest hit. This would not be the first time that a week, unpopular regime resorted to a foreign-war scare to bolster its domestic position.

Israel was soon prepared for war on her domestic front, and a grim mood enveloped the country. This mood was not of despair, however, but of impatience and frustration. Israel’s armed forces were given time to prepare by this delay, but still it was taking a psychological toll on the country. At the same time, an apparent crisis of leadership developed. Prime Minister Eshkol made a broadcast to the nation, and his performance was a disaster. To the audience, it appeared that the government was in a dilemma and the governors powerless. After Nasser closed the Strait, General Rabin was overcome with despair at the indecision of the government and suffered a nervous breakdown. The nation was in effect without decisive leadership at one of the gravest moments of its existence. There followed a period of demand by the public for a change ‘in the Cabinet to make up for this lack of leadership and to install a government of national unity. Dayan was set forth as the man to become Prime Minister, and on June 1 he took this post as Eshkol gave up the fight and stepped down. Public trust ‘in the new leader was tremendous, and national unity was indeed achieved. The confidence of the armed forces and the nation at large was restored. 18

Looking at the crisis on the Egyptian side, it can be seen that Nasser held the initiative throughout. The answer to all of Nasser’s actions would be simpler if he had operated to force a military showdown from the outset, because then his moves would constitute a logical succession of steps. However, all the evidence is to the contrary. Rather, Nasser made his first move with a limited objective in mind, and it was the repercussions of the move and the circumstances in which the move was made that suggested to Nasser the next step and then the next.

One factor influencing Nasser was Egypt’s decline “in standing in the Arab world and the apparent collapse of the drive for Arab unity, and these were related ‘in turn to the economic difficulties at home, the failure to win the Yemen War or bring it to an honorable conclusion, and the loss of maneuvering room in the international political arena as a result of the decline in the role of the nonaligned countries. If a dramatic move could be taken against Israel, and particularly if that move were taken to bail Syria out of a situation they could not handle themselves, Egypt might be put back in the Arab limelight and Nasser restored to a position of prestige and stature leading to political benefits.

At the same time, Nasser was being shaken in his certainty toward his policy. While Egypt and the other Arab states were having difficulties, Israel developed its capacities so fast that the gap ‘in the relative size of the gross national product of Egypt and Israel war reduced from a ratio of four to one in 1949 to one and a half to one in 1967. Time had worked in favor of Israel, but Nasser had been saying time would operate in favor of Egypt. He was now aware that Egypt would never achieve a sufficient margin of conventional military superiority to win a decisive offensive war, and this required a change of strategy if Egypt was to maintain its objective of overcoming Israel.

All of these elements came together in 1967 to ‘increase the tensions that had remained since 1956, and since 1948. It is always possible to trace the antagonisms toward Israel to ancient times, and of course their roots are in that period. In terms of immediate causes, however, the lowering prestige of Egypt and the growing influence of Russia were probably the most important elements in what happened in 1967. Specifically, the closing of the Straits by Nasser forced Israel to come to terms with the crisis. The Russians lied about the troops massing on the Syrian border, and it seems they were as surprised as anyone was by the results of this lie. Nasser did not even try to verify the statement, but simply massed his own army and made move after move which forced Israel into a position where war was inevitable.

For her own part, Israel was surrounded by enemies and eventually took the only course that seemed possible at the time–strike first and win a decisive victory to forestall finisher aggressions from other Arab states–and this is precisely what was done. Had Israel waited as advised to do, the entire nation would likely have been destroyed before anyone could come to offer assistance. Tensions were increased to the point where no other course, except war, was possible. Since that time, attempts have been made to prevent the crisis from escalating to that point again.

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