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SIX DAYS OF WAR

June 1967 and the Making of
the Modern Middle East

Michael B. Oren

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Features a conversation with Michael Oren conducted by renowned Middle East scholar Fouad Ajami



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*June 1967
and the Making of the
Modern Middle East*

MICHAEL B. OREN

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addressing Israeli troops from the Mount of Olives,
the Dome of the Rock below. (Israel Government Press Office)

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*For my wife, Sally,
and for our children—Yoav, Lia, and Noam.*

Each We seized for his sin and against some We unleashed a storm. Some were seized by the cry and some the earth swallowed and some We drowned. God would never wrong them, but they wrong themselves.

The Qur'an, 29:39

But though they roar like breakers on a beach, God will silence them. They will flee like chaff scattered by the wind or like dust whirling before a storm.

Isaiab, 17:13

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A NOTE ON SOURCES AND SPELLINGS

MANY AND DIVERSE SOURCES were employed in the writing of this book. The bulk of the research is based on diplomatic papers from archives in North America, Britain, and Israel, observing the thirty-year declassification rule. The protocols of Israeli Cabinet meetings remain for the most part classified, however, as do all but a segment of Israel Defense Forces papers. Archives in the Arab world are closed to researchers, though several private collections—Cairo’s Dar al-Khayyal, for example—are accessible. Also, a significant number of Arabic documents fell into Israeli hands during the war, and can be viewed at the Israel Intelligence Library. Russian language documents are, in theory, available at archives in Moscow, though these are poorly maintained and highly limited in their holdings. The French files from 1967 have not yet been released to the public.

In the notes, names of archives are abbreviated as follows:

BGA	Ben-Gurion Archives
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
IDF	Israel Defense Forces Archives
ISA	Israel State Archives
LBJ	Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library
MPA	Mapai Party Archives
NAC	National Archives of Canada
PRO	Public Record Office (FO=Foreign Office, CAB=Cabinet Papers, PREM=Prime Minister’s Office)

SFM	Soviet Foreign Ministry Archives
UN	United Nations Archives
USNA	United States National Archives
YAD	Yad Tabenkin Archive

Oral history interviews represent another important source for the book. The majority of these were conducted by the author, though in several highly sensitive cases, the author provided written questions to a research assistant who, for reasons of personal security, wished to remain anonymous. I have attempted to interview as many of the war's principal figures as possible. Several, such as Gideon Rafael and Kings Hussein and Hassan, passed away during the course of my research; others—Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat, for example—declined to be interviewed.

Transliteration, particularly in Arabic, presents a formidable challenge, as names often have both popular and literary spellings. For clarity's sake, preference is given to the former. Thus: Sharm al-Sheikh rather than Sharm al-Shaykh, Abu 'Ageila and not Abu 'Ujayla. Personal names are also formally transliterated except in cases in which the individual was accustomed to a specific spelling of his or her name in English. Some examples are Gamal Abdel Nasser (instead of Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir), Yasser Arafat (Yasir 'Arafat), and Mohammad El Kony (Muhammad al-Kuni). Many place names—Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus—have been preserved in their English equivalents, rather than in the original Arabic or Hebrew.

FOREWORD

THE WAR OF ATTRITION, the Yom Kippur War, the Munich massacre and Black September, the Lebanon War, the controversy over Jewish settlements and the future of Jerusalem, the Camp David Accords, the Oslo Accords, the *Intifada*—all were the result of six intense days in the Middle East in June 1967. Rarely in modern times has so short and localized a conflict had such prolonged, global consequences. Seldom has the world's attention been gripped, and remained seized, by a single event and its ramifications. In a very real sense, for statesmen and diplomats and soldiers, the war has never ended. For historians, it has only just begun.

Many books have been written about what most of the world calls the Six-Day War, or as the Arabs prefer, the June 1967 War. The literature is broad because the subject was thrilling—the lightning pace of the action, the stellar international cast, the battlefield held holy by millions. There were heroes and villains, behind-the-scenes machinations and daring tactical moves. There was the danger of nuclear war. No sooner had the shooting stopped than the first accounts—eyewitness, mostly—began appearing. Hundreds more would follow.

Some of these books were meant for a scholarly audience, while others addressed the general public. All, however, were based on similar sources: previously issued books, articles, and newspapers, together with a spattering of interviews, largely in English. Most of the books focused on the military phase of the war—examples include Trevor N. Dupuy's *Elusive Victory*, and *Swift Sword*, by S.L.A. Marshall—and dealt only superficially with its political and

strategic facets. The authors, moreover, tended to be biased in favor of one of the combatants, either the Arabs or the Israelis. There was no one book that drew on all the sources, public as well as classified, and in all the relevant languages—Arabic, Hebrew, Russian. No single study of the war examined both its political and military aspects in a manner that strove for balance.

A change began to occur in the 1990s with the release of secret diplomatic documents, first in American archives and later in Great Britain and Israel. The fall of the Soviet Union and the easing of press restrictions in Egypt and Jordan also yielded some important texts that could not have been published earlier. Many of these new sources were incorporated into two superb academic works, Richard B. Parker's *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East* and William B. Quandt's *Peace Process*. Readers were for the first time afforded a glimpse of the complex diplomacy surrounding the war and insights into international crisis management. Parker and Quandt also achieved a degree of neutrality and scholarly detachment unprecedented in the study of the 1967 war, a refreshing departure from the previous partisanship.

Still missing, however, was the comprehensive book about the war: a book that would draw on the thousands of documents declassified since Quandt and Parker wrote, on the wealth of foreign language materials now available, and on interviews in all the countries involved. Needed was the balanced study of the military and political facets of the war, the interplay between its international, regional, and domestic dimensions, a book intended for scholars but also accessible to a wider readership. This is the book I have set out to write.

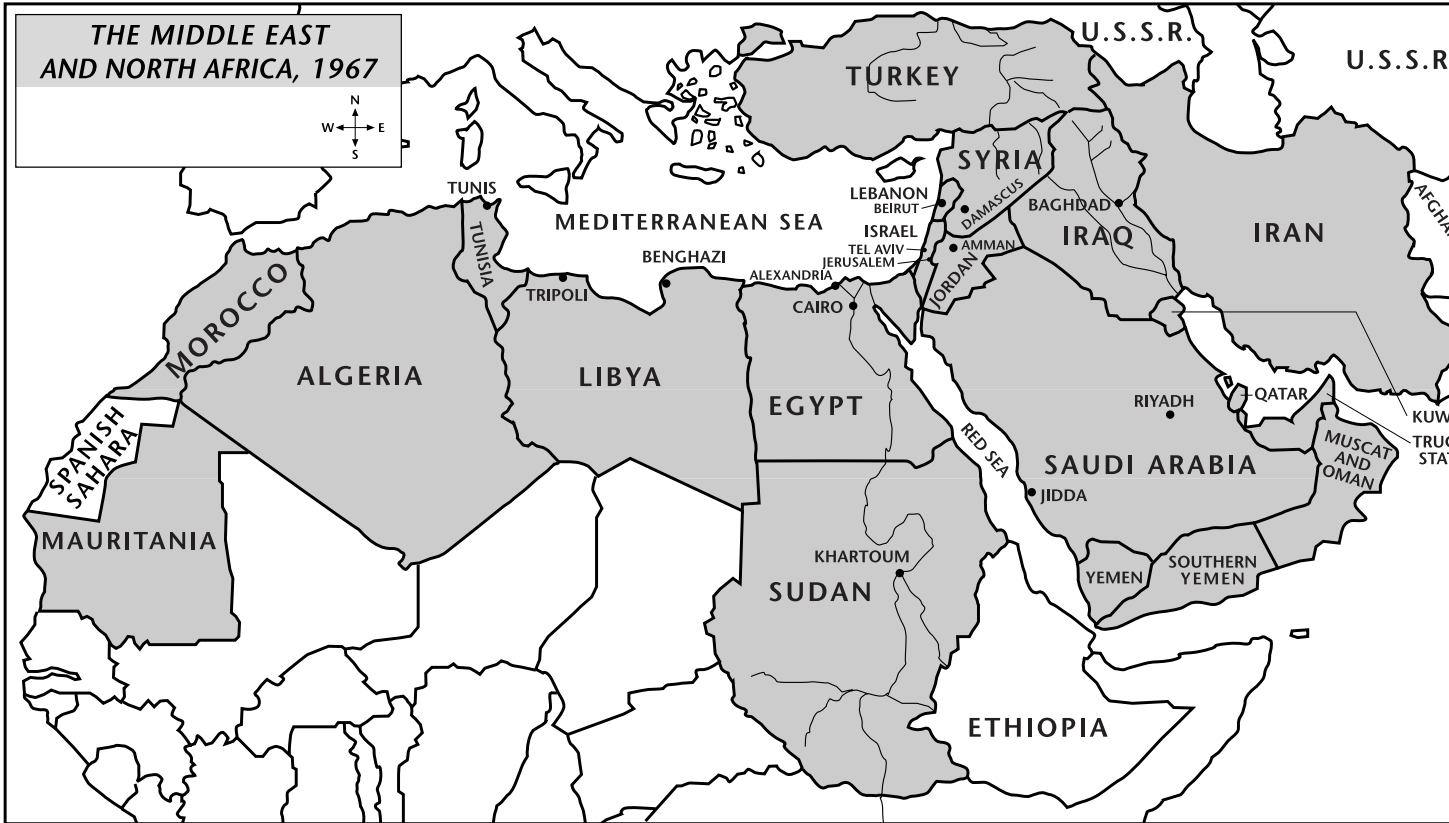
The task would prove formidable, due not only to the vastness of the research involved, but also to the radically controversial nature of Arab-Israeli politics. Great wars *in* history invariably become great wars *of* history, and the Arab-Israeli wars are no exception. For decades now, historians have been battling over the interpretation of those wars, beginning with the War of Independence, or the Palestine War of 1948 and progressing to the 1956 Suez crisis. Most recently, a wave of revisionist writers, Israelis mostly, have sought to amplify Israel's guilt for those clashes and evince it in the debate over the borders, or even the legitimacy, of the Jewish state. That debate is now sharpening as historians begin to focus on 1967 and the conquest of Arab territories by Israel, some of which—the Golan, the West Bank—it still holds, and whose final disposition will affect the lives of millions.

I, too, have been part of the debate, and have my opinions. Yet, in writing history, I view these preconceptions as obstacles to be overcome rather than as convictions to confirm and indulge. Even if the truth can never fully be ascertained, I believe every effort must nevertheless be exerted in seeking it. And though the distance of over three decades affords invaluable historical perspectives, such viewpoints should never cloud our understanding of how the world appeared to the people of those tumultuous times. Employ hindsight but humbly, remembering that life and death decisions are made by leaders in real-time, and not by historians in retrospect.

My purpose is not to prove the justness of one party or another in the war, or to assign culpability for starting it. I want, simply, to understand how an event as immensely influential as this war came about—to show the context from which it sprang and the catalysts that precipitated it. I aspire to explore, using the 1967 example, the nature of international crises in general, and the manner in which human interaction can produce totally unforeseen, unintended, results. Mostly, I want to recreate the Middle East of the 1960s, to animate the extraordinary personalities that fashioned it, and to relive a period of history that profoundly impacts our own. Whether it is called the Six-Day or the June War, my goal is that it never be seen the same way again.

Jerusalem, 2002

Six Days of War



THE CONTEXT

Arabs, Israelis, and the Great Powers, 1948 to 1966

NIGHTTIME, DECEMBER 31, 1964—A squad of Palestinian guerrillas crosses from Lebanon into northern Israel. Armed with Soviet-made explosives, their uniforms supplied by the Syrians, they advance toward their target: a pump for conveying Galilee water to the Negev desert. A modest objective, seemingly, yet the Palestinians' purpose is immense. Members of the militant al-Fatah (meaning, "The Conquest," also a reverse acronym for the Movement for the Liberation of Palestine), they want to bring about the decisive showdown in the Middle East. Their action, they hope, will provoke an Israeli retaliation against one of its neighboring countries—Lebanon itself, or Jordan—igniting an all-Arab offensive to destroy the Zionist state.

This, al-Fatah's maiden operation, ends in fiasco. First the explosive charges fail to detonate. Then, exiting Israel, the guerrillas are arrested by Lebanese police. Nevertheless, the leader of al-Fatah, a thirty-five-year-old former engineer from Gaza named Yasser Arafat, issues a victorious communiqué extolling "the duty of Jihad (holy war) and . . . the dreams of revolutionary Arabs from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf."¹

A singularly limber imagination would have been required that New Year's Eve night to conceive that this act of small-scale sabotage, even had it been successful, could have triggered a war involving masses of men and matériel—a war that would change the course of Middle Eastern history and, with it, much of the world's. Yet al-Fatah's operation contained many of the flashpoints that would set off precisely such a war in less than three years. There was, of course, the Palestinian dimension, a complex and volatile issue that plagued

the Arab states as much as it did Israel. There was terror and Syrian support for it and Soviet support for Syria. And there was water. More than any other individual factor, the war would revolve around water.

Yet, to claim that that first al-Fatah operation, or any one of its subsequent attacks, brought about a general Middle East war, would be far too simplistic and determinist. “A beginning is an artifice,” wrote Ian McEwan in his novel *Enduring Love*, “and what recommends one over another is how much sense it makes of what follows.” The observation certainly applies to history, where attempts to identify prime causes are often at best arbitrary, at worst futile. One could just as easily begin with early Zionist settlement in Palestine, or with British policy there after World War I. Or with the rise of Arab nationalism, or with the Holocaust. The options are myriad and equally—potentially—valid.

While it may be useless to try to pinpoint the cause or causes of the Middle East war of 1967, one can describe the context in which that war became possible. Much like the hypothetical butterfly that, flapping its wings, gives rise to currents that eventually generate a storm, so, too, might small, seemingly insignificant events spark processes leading ultimately to cataclysm. And just as that butterfly needs a certain context—the earth’s atmosphere, gravity, the laws of thermodynamics—to produce its tempest, so, too, did events prior to June 1967 require specific circumstances in order to precipitate war. The context was that of the Middle East in its postcolonial, revolutionary period—a region torn by bitter internecine feuds, by superpower encroachment, and by the constant irritant of what had come to be known as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A Context Contrived

Even a discussion of a context must have a starting point—another arbitrary choice. Let us begin with Zionism, the Jewish people’s movement to build an independent polity in their historical homeland. The introduction of Zionism into the maelstrom of Middle East politics galvanized what was already a highly unstable environment into a framework for regional war. Facile though it may sound, without Zionism there would have been no State of Israel and, without Israel, no context of comprehensive conflict.

What began as a mere idea in the mid-nineteenth century had, by the beginning of the twentieth, motivated thousands of European and Middle Eastern Jews to leave their homes and settle in unthinkably distant Palestine. The secret of Zionism lay in its wedding of modern nationalist notions to the Jewish people’s mystical, millennial attachment to the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*). That power sustained the *Yishuv*, or Jewish community, in Palestine throughout the depredations of Ottoman rule and during World War I, when many Jewish leaders were expelled as enemy (mostly Russian) aliens. By war’s end, the British had supplanted the Turks in Palestine and, under the Balfour Declaration, pledged to build a Jewish national home in the country.

Under the British Mandate, the *Yishuv* swelled with refugees from European anti-Semitism—first Polish, then German—and established social, economic, educational institutions that in a short time surpassed those furnished by Britain. By the 1940s, the *Yishuv* was a powerhouse in the making: dynamic, inventive, ideologically and politically pluralistic. Drawing on Western and Eastern European models, the Jews of Palestine created new vehicles for agrarian settlement (the communal *kibbutz* and cooperative *moshav*), a viable socialist economy with systems for national health, reforestation, and infrastructure development, a respectable university, and a symphony orchestra—and to defend them all, an underground citizens' army, the *Haganah*.² Though the British had steadily abandoned their support for a Jewish national home, that home was already a fact: an inchoate, burgeoning state.

This was precisely what the Arabs of Palestine resented. Centuries-established, representing the majority of the country's total population, the Palestinian Arabs regarded the *Yishuv* as a tool of Western imperialism, an alien culture inimical to their traditional way of life. Though the Jews had long been tolerated, albeit in an inferior status, by Islam, that protection in no sense entitled them to sovereignty over part of Islam's heartland or authority over Muslims. No less than their co-religionists straining under French rule in Syria and North Africa, or under the British in Iraq and Egypt, the Palestinian Arabs earnestly sought independence. They, too, had received promises from Britain, and demanded to see them fulfilled.³ But independence under Jewish dominion could never be an option for the Arabs, only a more odious form of colonialism.

So it happened that every wave of Jewish immigration into Palestine—in 1920, 1921, and 1929—ignited ever more violent Arab reactions, culminating in the 1936 Arab revolt against both the Jews and the British. The insurrection lasted three years and resulted in the deportation of much of the Palestinian Arabs' leadership and the weakening of their economy. The *Yishuv*, conversely, grew strong. Yet victory was denied the Jews. Fearful of a backlash by Muslims throughout their empire, Britain issued a White Paper that effectively nullified the Balfour Declaration. Erupting shortly thereafter, World War II saw Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion declaring his movement's intention to "fight the White Paper as if there were no war and to fight the war as if there were no White Paper." By contrast, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the British-appointed Mufti and self-proclaimed representative of the Palestinian Arabs, threw in his lot with Hitler.⁴

The Arab revolt of 1936–39 had another, even more fateful outcome. If previously the conflict had been between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine, it was now between Zionism and Arabs everywhere. Palestine's plight aroused a groundswell of sympathy throughout the surrounding Arab lands, where a new nationalist spirit was blossoming. Pan-Arabism, another outgrowth of modern European thought, proclaimed the existence of a single Arab people whose identity transcended race, religion, or family ties. That people was now called upon to avenge three centuries of humiliation by the West, and to erase the artificial borders (of Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Palestine, and Iraq) created by colo-

nialism. Though the dream of a single, independent Arab state extending from the Taurus Mountains in the north and the Atlas in the west, from the Persian Gulf to the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, would remain just that—a dream—the emergence of an Arab world bound by sentiment and culture had become a political fact.⁵ From the late 1930s onward, increasingly, incidents in Palestine could set off riots in Baghdad and Cairo, in Homs and Tunis and Casablanca.

Nobody understood this process better, or feared it more, than the Arab leaders of the time. Lacking any constitutional legitimacy, opposed to free expression, this assortment of prime ministers, princes, sultans, and emirs, were highly sensitive to outpourings of public opinion—the Arab “street.” The leaders’ task, then, lay in discerning which way the street was heading and maneuvering to stay ahead of it. The street was fulminating against Zionism. Responding to that rage, locked in bitter rivalries with one another, Arab regimes became deeply embroiled in Palestine. The conflict would never again be local.

The British, meanwhile, shrewdly took advantage of Zionism’s neutralization during the war to placate Arab nationalism, fostering the creation of an Arab League whose members could display their unity and preserve their independence all at once.⁶ But then, with victory in Europe assured, Zionism came back with a vengeance. Incensed by the continuation of the White Paper, inflamed by the Holocaust, many of whose six million victims might have lived had that document never existed, the Zionists declared war on the Mandate—first the right-wing *Irgun* militia of Menachem Begin, then the mainstream *Haganah*.

War-worn, hounded by an American president, Harry Truman, who was publicly committed to the Zionist cause, Britain by 1947 was ready to hand the entire Palestine issue over to the United Nations. The consequence came with the passage of UN General Assembly Resolution 181. This provided for the creation of two states, one Arab and the other Jewish, in Palestine, and an international regime for Jerusalem. The Zionists approved of the plan but the Arabs, having already rejected an earlier, more favorable (for them) partition offer from Britain, stood firm in their demand for sovereignty over Palestine in full.

On November 30, 1947, the day after the UN approved the partition resolution, Palestinian guerrillas attacked Jewish settlements throughout the country and blockaded the roads between them. The Zionists’ response was restraint, lest the UN, shocked by the violence it wrought, deem partition unworkable. But Palestinian resistance proved too effective, and in April of 1948, the Jews went on the offensive. The operation succeeded in reopening the roads and saving the settlements, but it also expedited the large-scale flight of Palestinian civilians that had begun in November. Spurred by reports of massacres such as that which occurred at the village of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem, between 650,000 and 750,000 Palestinians either fled or were driven into neighboring countries. Most expected to return in the near future, after the combined Arab forces intervened and expelled the Zionist “usurpers.”

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