



## *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* by Guy Laron.

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Political scientist Guy Laron (Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem) has written a true work of international history that few in this burgeoning field could match. For one thing, he (and assistants?) have read widely in archival material relevant to the Six-Day War written in Czech, Bulgarian, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, German, and English.

The author begins by recounting events that led up to the war in formidable, almost week-by-week detail. He explains precisely why Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, countries with military capabilities far inferior to their enemy's, engaged in a war that Israel won in six days, despite the efforts of Arab, Israeli, American, and Soviet diplomats. The defeated nations lost significant territory and underwent leadership changes. Following the war, Egypt abandoned the socialist program of Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency in favor of a free market economy and a new alliance with the United States.

Laron pinpoints two underlying causes of the war: the political dominance of bellicose Arab and Israeli military elites over civilian politicians and the disrupting effects of global capitalism on the economies of many third-world nations. Scholars have pointed out that Egypt has been ruled by a military dictatorship since 1952, apart from a couple of years following the Arab Spring. And Laron stresses that Field Marshall and Defense Minister Abd al-Hakim Amer had total control of the army while Nasser's influence was, by the 1960s, confined to the civilian side of politics. The two leading figures in Syria, Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid, were both military men. After the 1963 military coup d'état, Jadid became the leader of the Baath Party and head of government, while Assad controlled the army. After the war, Assad deposed Jadid and seized control of the country. For his part, King Hussein of Jordan made a fatal mistake, which, though he retained his throne, resulted in a large loss of territory: he allowed his army to be commanded by an Egyptian, who not only favored his own nation's military interests over Jordan's but made serious tactical and strategic errors.

The Bretton Woods Conference<sup>1</sup> (1-22 July 1944) had established a postwar global capitalist economic system that triggered widespread debt crises and caused many ruling elites to explore ways to divert the attention of their despairing citizens. Leaders in Israel and the Arab world looked to foreign adventures and even risked heightening tensions with each other to curry popular favor. Like other scholars, Laron compares the prelude to World War I with the causes of the Six-Day war: Europe's politicians made fatal mistakes in carrying out military mobilizations after the assassination of the archduke of Austro-Hungary, plunging all of Europe into war. Similar mistakes made in the Middle East precipitated a war that civilian leaders in the region and both superpowers tried to forestall.

Laron makes several striking revelations that flout received opinion. First and foremost, he places blame for the war squarely upon Abd al-Hakim Amer, the Egyptian minister of defense. Amer was, he writes, ready to countermand Nasser's defensive "Qader Plan," whereby 100,000 Egyptian troops would hunker down in the mountainous passes of the Sinai and be content to blunt Israeli troop advances. Amer preferred the utterly unworkable offensive "Fajer Plan," involving a military thrust into the Neg-

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1. Formally known as the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference.

ev Desert and the capture of Eilat at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Egyptian forces never practiced such an operation and the Soviets had supplied them with defensive weaponry only.

Laron treats Nasser's role in the crisis too uncritically, effectively whitewashing the Egyptian strongman. As president of the country, Nasser knew full well that Amer had diminished the army's fighting prowess, reducing it to a political instrument and source of patronage. Ignoring the lessons to be learned from his soldiers' actions in the Yemen civil war, Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran after Amer assured him the Egyptian army could stand up to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); this even though the Israelis had made it clear they would consider closing the Straits to be an act of war. Surely Nasser knew Amer's statement was pure bluster, especially since he was aware that the Soviet-provided Egyptian radar system could not track low-flying Israeli aircraft, a fact not lost on IDF commanders.

The author makes it clear that Arab leaders in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan deserved the humiliation they and their nations suffered during the Six-Day War. Nasser hoped the Americans and the Soviets would restrain both the Arabs and Israelis as they had the British, French, and Israelis during the invasion of Egypt in 1956. But President Lyndon Johnson had no love for Nasser or his country, even forcing the Egyptians to pay for American wheat in hard currency. King Hussein, like Nasser, feared being deposed if he did not join the Syrians and the Egyptians. Hence his fateful decision to transfer command of the Jordanian army to an *Egyptian* military officer. Like Egypt and Jordan, Syria was unready for war. Its leaders feared the influence of Nasserism in their country and tried to undermine the popularity of Nasser in Syria by attacking him for hiding behind the UN Emergency Force along the Egyptian-Israeli borders.

Laron also faults the Arabs' military decision making. Had the Jordanians concentrated their forces in Jerusalem, they might have held most of the West Bank. Had Amer not ordered his army to retreat,<sup>2</sup> Egyptian forces could have held at least half of Sinai, allowing the UN, the United States, and the USSR to demand a negotiated settlement. As for the Syrians, had they not withdrawn their forces from the Golan Heights, the Israelis may not have ventured into the area. In short, Arab forces could have lost far less territory to the IDF if they had made better and braver military decisions.

Unlike Arab military leaders, with their defensive weapons and harebrained Fajer offensive plan, Israel's commanders acted forcefully on their expansionist aspirations. They coveted a chance to push what they considered defensible borders as far as the Sinai passes (Moshe Dayan's preferred stopping point) or the east bank of the Suez canal, the west bank of the Jordan River, and the Golan Heights. Though Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and many of Israel's civilian leaders felt the time was not propitious, the military's goals prevailed.

The Six-Day War might well have instigated a showdown between the two Cold War superpowers in support of their respective Middle Eastern allies. But the Johnson administration let Israel know it was on its own, though it hoped for a peaceful, negotiated end to hostilities.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, some Soviet leaders, having seen their client states, Egypt and Syria, badly beaten, contemplated military intervention, which might have occurred if the Israelis had marched on Damascus. Cooler heads prevailed.

Guy Laron's *The Six Day War* is now the definitive study of a conflict that transformed the Middle Eastern and was deeply embedded in the Cold War. It is richly and exhaustively researched and argued with a balance few scholars of the Arab-Israeli dispute have attained. Although the detail can be overwhelming, the payoff for the committed reader is enormous. *The Six Day War* is must reading for Middle Eastern scholars and buffs, but also for journalists and diplomats involved in international relations.

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2. A decision made on the assumption that, like the 1956 retreat from Sinai, it would save the Egyptian army and that, like President Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson would demand that Israel return Sinai and Gaza to Egypt.

3. An American scheme to sail an armada through the Straits of Tiran came to nothing. Fortunately.