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## Analysis of the Six-Day War and the Role of Territory in the Conflict

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# **THIS LAND IS OUR LAND: ANALYSIS OF THE SIX-DAY WAR AND THE ROLE OF TERRITORY IN THE CONFLICT**

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**By Michael W. Krupka**

Over the course of human history, many things have changed to match the development of time. Some of these transient aspects of life are technology and culture. However, other aspects have remained constant. One of the most pervasive concepts in human history is war. While it is not a constant condition of states, the threat of war is a permanent factor that plays into the decision-making processes of states. War is costly and destructive, so why do states so often pursue it? Many theories have been brought forward in an attempt to explain this phenomenon. Among them, one of the most prevalent focuses on the role of territory in war. This essay will analyze the way territory manifests itself in the specific case of the Six-Day War of 1967.

The origins of the conflict go back to the establishment of Israel. In response to growing demands for a Jewish state, the United Nations created Israel in 1948. This stirred resentment among the Arabs in Palestine, as well as those in the rest of Southwest Asia.<sup>1</sup> As the only non-Muslim state in its vicinity, Israel quickly found itself to be the odd-man-out in Southwest Asia. This resulted in multiple armed conflicts and wars between Israel and Arab forces in the years prior to 1967.<sup>2</sup> These culminated in the Six-Day War, which once and for all solidified the strength of Israel.

In addition to the obvious disparity of religion, the states of Southwest Asia were all contending for the use of the limited supply of

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, and Herbert F. Ziegler. *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005, 872. <sup>2</sup> Bentley, 872.

water.<sup>2</sup> Growing populations led to growing demands for water, and thus strained the relations between Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> In 1955, the United States, while under the Eisenhower Administration, interposed to resolve this issue by arranging an accord that would allocate the resources of the Jordan and Yarmouk rivers.

This accord was called the Johnston Plan, named after the chief American negotiator at the time.<sup>4</sup> Although Israel immediately agreed to the terms and began constructing their own water diversion system, known as the National Water Carrier (NWC), the Arab states refused to sign the agreement because it would solidify Israel's legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> In the years following 1955, the NWC was the target of numerous assaults by its neighbors. For example, Seliktar references an Israeli report of 98 Syrian violations to the Johnston Plan between December 1962 and August 1963.<sup>6</sup> These included kidnappings and murders of Israeli farmers living along the Syrian border.

Along with the pressure to bring home water to their citizens, the Arabs' other explicit purpose in challenging the Israeli water system was the eventual destruction of Israel. Seliktar explains that the Arabs "claimed that utilizing the Jordan River... would increase its ability to absorb more immigrants, further ensuring that state's survival."<sup>7</sup>

Leading the charge against Israel was the Egyptian president, Abdul Gamal Nasser, who sought to create a pan-Arab unified resistance

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<sup>2</sup> Seliktar, Ofria. "Turning Water into Fire: the Jordan River as the Hidden Factor in the Six Day War." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* Vol. 9 No. 2 (June 2005), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Seliktar, "Turning Water into Fire," 58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Seliktar, "Turning Water into Fire," 58.

to Israel's existence. By 1963, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq announced plans to form a United Arab Republic for the purpose of liberating Palestine.<sup>8</sup> This was exacerbated by the involvement of the USSR, who sought to increase its influence in Southwest Asia as well as promulgate Socialist ideals. During these years, the Soviets supplied arms and funds to Syria and Egypt. Meanwhile, the United States were currently occupied with the war in Vietnam, so it was limited in the amount of support it could lend to Israel.<sup>9</sup> These patterns of hostility toward Israel continued to escalate rapidly until 1967, when Nasser began the final steps to initiate the war.

On May 14, 1967, Nasser moved Egypt's forces into the Sinai Peninsula toward Israel's western border. Within four days he requested that the United Nations remove its emergency forces in the peninsula.<sup>10</sup> He continued his advance on Israel by blocking the Gulf of Aqaba from Israeli shipping on May 22. This was a significant blow to Israel's economy and supply lines, as the Gulf of Aqaba provided its sole sea-trade route to the Red Sea and the East. Then, on May 30, the leader of Jordan, King Hussein, signed a defensive pact with Egypt and thereby relinquished control of Jordanian troops to the Egyptian military. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia also joined this pact, although they kept control of their forces.<sup>11</sup> Over the next few days, Arab forces continued to encroach on the Israeli border from all sides with the Lebanese and Syrians moving in from the North and Northeast; the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.. 60.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. "Six-Day War." Encyclopædia Britannica. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Six-Day-War>.

<sup>11</sup> "Six-Day War." Encyclopaedia Britannica.

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Iraqis, Jordanians, and Saudis in the East; and the Egyptians in the West.<sup>12</sup>

The outlook was bleak for Israel until they launched a surprise airstrike on the Egyptian airbase early in the morning of June 5. This nearly wiped out the entire Egyptian air force.<sup>13</sup> A similar assault dealt a devastating blow to Syria's air force that afternoon.<sup>14</sup> These attacks were so well executed that the defenders did not even have a chance to get their aircraft off the ground. Now without air support, the Arab forces were vulnerable to attack. Israel took advantage of this opportunity and attacked its opponents on three fronts: Egypt's forces in the Sinai Peninsula, Syrian forces in the Golan Heights, and Jordan's troops in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Due to their air superiority and clever maneuvering, the Israeli forces were able to defeat the Egyptians and conquer the entire Sinai Peninsula up to the Suez Canal in only three days.<sup>15</sup> They then turned their attention to the Golan Heights and West Bank. Despite heavy enemy fortifications at both fronts, Israel succeeded in taking the West Bank on June 7 and the Golan Heights on June 10.

The war that foretold nearly certain destruction for Israel proved to only strengthen the young state by doubling its size and providing it with several important locations. This massive and quick victory was obtained with only the loss of only 700 troops. Egypt lost more than 11,000 men; Syria 6,000; and Jordan 1,000.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Six-Day War Maps: Events Leading to the Six Day War." Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/map-of-the-events-leading-to-the-six-daywar-1967>.

<sup>13</sup> "Six-Day War," Encyclopaedia Britannica.

<sup>14</sup> "Syrian Front," The Six-Day War, accessed October 24, 2017, <http://www.sixdaywar.org/content/northernfront.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> "Six-Day War," Encyclopaedia Britannica.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

While there are numerous reasons for conflicts and wars, territory is by far the most prominent.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Gallagher posits that it is the most common cause of war.<sup>18</sup> Gallagher's claim is corroborated by other researchers, such as John A. Vasquez and Miles Kahler. In his book, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, Vasquez claims that because the majority of interstate wars occur between neighbors, it can be inferred that territoriality, the human predisposition to occupy and defend territory, is the key to understanding war.<sup>19</sup> Further along in his discussion of neighboring states, Vasquez points to statistics that highlight the significance of contiguous boundaries in the likeliness of a military conflict: "The probability of war breaking out between contiguous states is thirty-five times more likely than it is for non-contiguous states."<sup>20</sup>

Why are states with contiguous borders more likely to go to war than those without contiguous borders? The explanation can be found in the frequency of interactions between neighbors as compared to those between states without contiguous borders. Just like individuals, states deal with those immediately around them more frequently than those far away, and they are therefore more likely to come into conflict with them. In addition to an increased frequency in interactions, the most logical location for expansion is almost always the territory immediately next to a state's own holdings. One would not typically sail across the world to

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<sup>17</sup> "Territory." Home: Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed October 25, 2017. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/199601?rskey=7AExr6&result=1#eid>.

<sup>18</sup> Melanie L. Gallagher, "Chapter 3: War" (Lecture, International Relations, Harding University, September 19, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart A. Bremer, "Dangerous Dyads: Conditions Affecting the Likelihood of Interstate War, 1816-1965," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36 (June):309–41, quoted in John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 2013.

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conquer a distant enemy while there is still land to be gained right next door.<sup>21</sup>

That being said, what makes territory significant in the first place? There are two intangible or symbolic reasons as well as two tangible or quantifiable factors that can make territory significant. This essay will begin with the intangible factors.

Gallagher points to the symbol of power humans tie to territory.<sup>22</sup> Rulers often have boasted about their military might, and one of the easiest illustrations of this power is territory. A popular phrase during the British Peace was, “The sun never sets on the British Empire.” Additionally, a state that owns a large tract of territory naturally has the power to hold it, so when one sees a massive empire, one tends to think of its ability to defend its territory with awe. For example, modern observers of history still marvel at the sheer size of the Roman Empire.

Another intangible reason to hold territory is the symbolic value certain locations can have. Territory has often been significant because it is home to someone. Most people have some type of pride in their homeland; Texans brag about their state, Russians beam about Mother Russia, and musicians often work their hometown or neighborhood into their lyrics. This pride in a homeland brings powerful emotions to people, especially when they have been displaced from it. In his study of diasporas and homeland conflict, Terrence Lyons claims that people groups who were displaced forcefully often “pass on the grievance” over generations and have an “aspiration of return to the homeland in the future.”<sup>23</sup> Locations of religious importance are often also the subject of interstate conflicts, especially if two different religions are contending for

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<sup>21</sup> Melanie L. Gallagher, “Territory,” (Lecture, Global Issues, Harding University, October 19, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Gallagher, “Territory,” 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Terrence Lawrence, “Diasporas and Homeland Conflict.” *Territoriality and Conflict in an Era of Globalization*. Ed. Miles Kahler and Barbara F. Walter. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

them. Such locations are often viewed as indivisible because allowing the other religion to hold it would decrease its value in some way.<sup>24</sup>

A more objective aspect of territory that makes it desirable is the strategic value certain locations can hold. For example, when Xerxes sought to conquer Greece, King Leonidas and his small force were able to slow his advance by taking up a position in the narrow pass of Thermopylae. The geography of region funneled the Persian forces directly into the business-end of the Spartan phalanx until a flanking route could be discovered.

The final tangible aspect of territory is the value of the resources it holds. A state needs certain resources such as fresh water and access to food just to keep their populations alive, and economic resources such as oil or minerals can be remunerative for the state's treasury.<sup>25</sup>

Each of these aspects of territory manifested itself in the Six-Day War in some way. The arrival of Israel in 1948 brought the homeland issue to Palestine, as numerous Palestinians were either displaced or subjected to Israeli rule. As stated earlier, the liberation of Palestine was a cause for many Arab people, and Nasser used it to solidify his position as leader of the Arab states.<sup>26</sup> Coinciding with the symbolic importance of the territory, Jerusalem's religious significance played a role as Israel and Jordan fought bitterly for control of the city in the final days of the war. The symbolic power perceived in territorial possession came into play when Israel doubled in size as a result of the war. Although the sources point to Israeli efforts to gain locations of strategic value, this essay posits that at least part of their motivation in conquering new ground was the message that would be sent to states contemplating another attack on the young state.

Additionally, the arid climate of Southwest Asia had always made water an especially sought-after resource, and so it became another

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<sup>24</sup> Gallagher, "War," 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Gallagher, "Territory," 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Seliktar, "Turning Water into Fire," 59.

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area of contention between Israel and its neighbors. The specific grievance lay in the fact that the principal source of fresh water for Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan was the Jordan and Yarmouk river system, which constitutes the borders between Israel and the Arab states. With more states vying for control of the resource, there was less of it to go around. Therefore, water played a role throughout the entire conflict: the Arab states initiated by targeting Israel's access to water, and, after fighting them off, Israel pushed to gain access to the Suez Canal and new parts of the Jordan River. These victories in securing access to water not only defended their original holdings but added new opportunities to utilize the resource for Israel's needs.

The final manifestation of territory in the war was the significance of strategically valuable locations. Israel's advance on the Golan Heights, a raised, mountainous area overlooking Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan, was an effort to gain the high ground over the Arab states. This position offered a tremendous advantage in that whoever held it was able to fire down upon his opponents.

While multiple factors can be identified as causes of the Six-Day War, few are as perceptible throughout the entire conflict as territory. The land's symbolic importance for both parties, the message of strength implied by territorial holdings, the necessity of secure water supplies, and the Golan Heights' strategic value all played roles in the undertaking of this war.

Just over fifty years after the fact, the effects of territory on the Six-Day War are still evident. While Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in 1982, it never gave up its other territorial gains,<sup>27</sup> thus continuing the territorial tension that can be observed in the Middle East today.

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<sup>27</sup> "Sinai Peninsula." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. April 03, 2014. Accessed October 26, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sinai-Peninsula>.