



PERSPECTIVES

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Rewriting the Six-Day War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When Israeli officials seemingly questioned their country's narrative of the Six-Day War, politicized historians and commentators seized on their words as vindication of their claim that Israel had been the aggressor. But what these officials had actually said was abridged, misrepresented, and taken out of context. This distortion provided fodder for a tendentious rewriting of history.

In 1972, retired Israeli general Matityahu Peled sparked a public debate when he claimed that in the run-up to the June 1967 war, the Israeli government "never heard from the General Staff that the Egyptian military threat was dangerous for Israel." British journalist John Cooley described it as "newer evidence" that Israel was culpable for the war, while another prominent British journalist, David Hirst, observed that "Peled ... committed what ... seemed nothing less than blasphemy."

What made Peled's "revelations" particularly odd is that at the time of the prewar crisis, he was one of the generals who argued most forcefully for a preemptive strike to stave off the Arab threat. According to one account, Peled used "aggressive, highly pejorative language" to entice the Israeli government into a decisive blow against the Arab armies massing on Israel's doorstep. To delay, he argued at the time, was to cast doubt on the abilities of Israel's armed forces, and Peled was particularly concerned with protecting the military's reputation as a deterrent against future Arab aggression. "We deserve to know why we have to suffer this shame!" he demanded of Israel's civilian leadership.

In his post-army incarnation, Peled became a well-known leftist activist and politician. This swerve could, of course, neither change his actual behavior in the run-up to the war nor give him carte blanche to rewrite history to accord

with his later political agenda. Nevertheless, the Peled thesis continued to be promoted as vindication of Israel's supposed culpability for the 1967 war.

In 1982, the argument was amplified by another statement, this time coming from then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who had been a member of the national unity government formed by Levi Eshkol shortly after the mobilization of the Arab armies in May 1967. In a speech at Israel's National Defense College, Begin made a passing reference to the 1967 War in order to justify his own controversial decision to wage war against the PLO in Lebanon. Some Western observers, however, saw it as another confessional moment. According to one account: "In Israel itself ... a little of the truth about the June war has seeped out over the years."

To be sure, Begin seemed to contradict Israel's moral justification for 1967 when he said, "The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him." However, while most historians stop there when quoting Begin, his reference to the Six-Day War went on. The crux of the speech was that there are two types of war: "[W]ar without choice, or a war of one's choosing." Begin classified the Six-Day War as the latter, because Israel decided to preempt rather than absorb the Arab attack (as happened in October 1973).

Yet he viewed the war as a fight for survival – i.e., there was, in fact, no choice involved, because Israel faced the threat of annihilation at the hands of multiple Arab armies. Thus, he went on to say: "This was a war of self-defense in the noblest [sense]. The Government of National Unity ... decided unanimously: we will take the initiative and attack the enemy, drive him back and thus assure the security of Israel and the future of the nation."

Indeed, it was common knowledge in 1967 that the Arab wartime strategy was predicated on Israel's taking the first shot. Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser was confident that his forces could take on and outperform the IDF, and his mouthpiece at the Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*, Muhammad Heikal, openly taunted Israel in widely publicized editorials.

In short, Begin's comments were abridged and taken out of context by historians and commentators seeking to score political points.

The false narrative of Israeli "confessions" gained further traction on the 30th anniversary of the war, this time involving a posthumously published interview with wartime minister of defense (not to mention one of the most universally recognized heroes of the war) Moshe Dayan. However, the authenticity of the interview is unclear, since it was allegedly adapted from a

series of private conversations with Dayan in 1976 of which there is no original record. Nonetheless, this has not stopped Israel's critics from quoting its most striking portion and hailing it as another key admission.

The excerpt refers to skirmishes between Israel and Syria over contested land. Over the years, Israeli kibbutzim had been subjected to harassment from Syrian artillery that was stationed on top of the Golan Heights overlooking the Israeli valley. Some historians have looked to Israel's suffering in those years as a validation of its moral position in 1967. But if a prominent Israeli official (supposedly) claimed that it was Israel's modus operandi to pretend to be a victim in order to provoke conflict for territorial gain, and that official was responsible for Israeli military operations during the Six-Day War, then surely Israel must have feigned victimhood in 1967.

Here is what Dayan supposedly said:

I know how at least 80% of the clashes there started. In my opinion, more than 80%, but let's talk about 80%. It went this way: We would send a tractor to plow some area where it wasn't possible to do anything, in the demilitarized area, and knew in advance that the Syrians would start to shoot. If they didn't shoot, we would tell the tractor to advance farther, until in the end the Syrians would get annoyed and shoot. And then we would use artillery and later the air force also, and that's how it was.

The story typically ends there. But what most accounts fail to mention is that Dayan was only the minister of agriculture during the period he was allegedly describing. He was also a member of David Ben-Gurion's small opposition party, Rafi, which aggressively sought to undermine the premiership of Eshkol – a leader who was seen as indecisive and a stubborn proponent of ineffective bids for peace.

Whatever Dayan said (or did not say), this does not change the clear historical record. Apart from its own regular harassment of Israeli villages, Damascus sponsored attacks by the nascent Fatah on Israeli villages along the border with Lebanon and Jordan, which were the main irritant between Israel and Syria in the year leading up to the 1967 war. Most anti-Israel historians do not even mention either Fatah's terrorist attacks or Syria's "popular liberation war" doctrine, which called for utilizing these attacks as a way to instigate a pan-Arab war against Israel.

In the words of Syria's prime minister: "We say popular liberation war is the only way to crush Zionism and imperialism ... This slogan will not remain only a mere slogan ... Popular liberation war means sacrifice and expense ... All the

progressive and toiling forces will be in the vanguard to lead the people to victory.” When Israel asked Damascus in October 1966 to put a stop to Fatah’s attacks, Syria’s prime minister proudly admitted his regime’s partnership with Fatah in a broadcast interview: “We are not guards for Israel’s safety. Also we are not resigned to holding back the revolution of the expelled and oppressed Palestinian people. Under no circumstances shall we do so ... We shall set the entire region afire.”

In the process of sifting through the historiography of the 1967 War, it becomes abundantly clear that carelessly worded statements have provided fodder for the writing of polemical history. Former and current officials beware: words are everlasting, and have the power to irrevocably alter the meaning of the historical events they describe.

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