

# The Six-Day War: Israel's Strategy and the Role of Air Power



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# Outline:

- **Israel's Traditional Security Concept**  
**1948 – 1967 – 1973**
- **The Origins of the Conflict & Path to War**  
**International – Regional – Domestic Context**
- **The War:**  
**June 5-10, 1967**
- **Conclusion:**  
**Strategic Implications and Enduring Legacy**



# Israel's Traditional Security Concept 1948 – 1967 – 1973

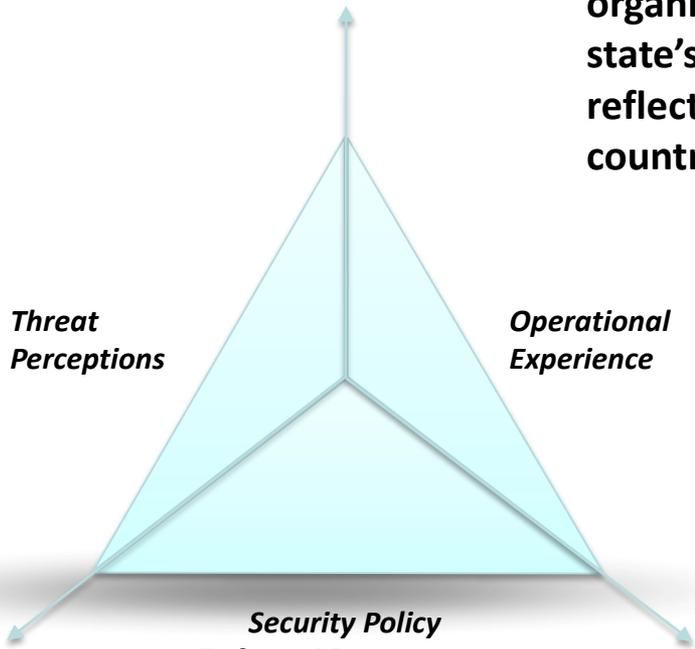
תפישת הביטחון של ישראל



# Baseline Assumptions:

## Security Conceptions

Distinct set of generally shared organizing ideas concerning a given state's national security problems, reflected in the thinking of the country's political and military elite;



*Threat Perceptions*

*Operational Experience*

*Security Policy*  
*Defense Management*  
*Strategies & Tactics*  
*Force Structure*  
*Force Deployment*

## Defense Strategy

Political and military-oriented collection of means and ends through which a state defines and attempts to achieve its national security;

## Military Doctrine

Operational concepts and fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of objectives;



# Baseline Assumptions:



“Over the years it has become clear that Israel’s military thought, to this day, is little more than a series of footnotes to the doctrine which crystallized in the fifties.

Although in the course of time changes and refinements were made, not always for the better, these foundations were preserved.”  
Israel Tal

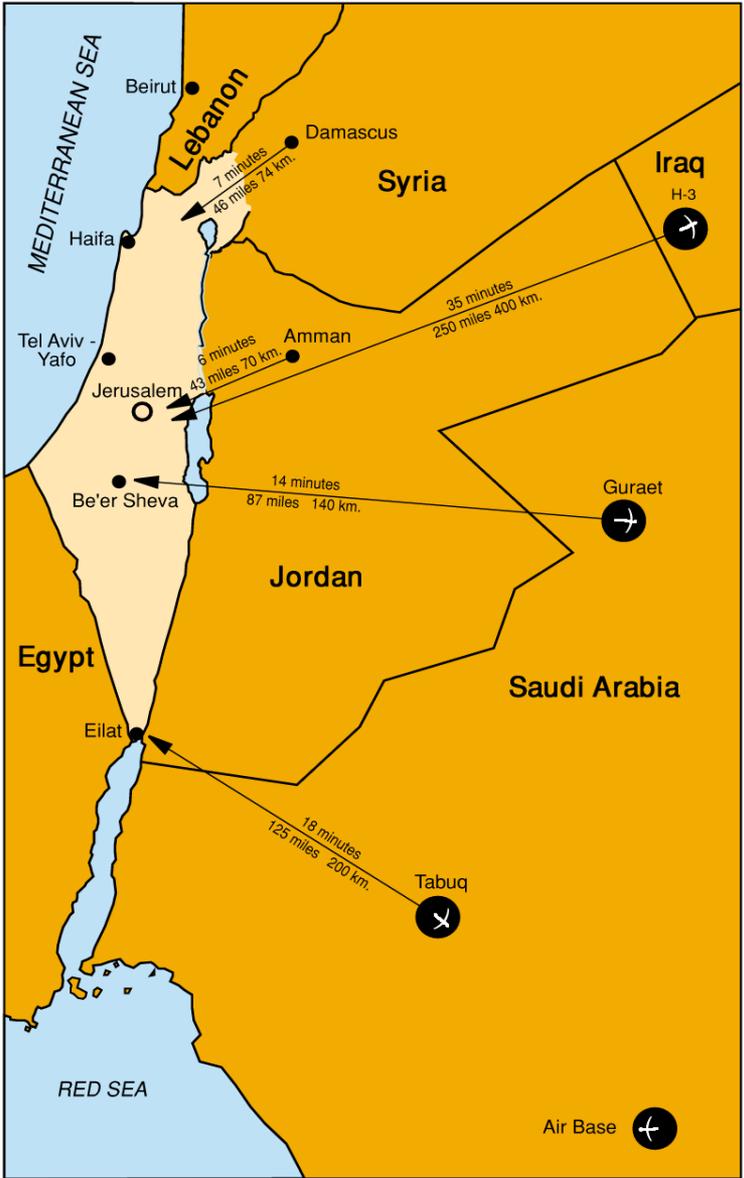
**Israel is engaged in a struggle for its very survival - Israel is in a perpetual state of “dormant war” even when no active hostilities exist;**

**Given conditions of geostrategic inferiority, Israel cannot achieve complete strategic victory neither by unilaterally imposing peace or by military means alone;**

**Israel is confronted with wars of no choice (*ein brera*);**

**Israel is standing alone; it must retain qualitative military-technological edge;**

# Baseline Assumptions:



The Aerial Distances and Flight Times to Israel

## Conditions of Geostrategic Inferiority:

Basic, permanent strategic factors that characterized Israel's circumstances, defined threats and constraints, and determined the goals and aims that could be adopted within the limits of its power.

Michael Handel (1977)

## Lack of Strategic Depth

- Short early warning time;
- Israel cannot trade space for time;
- Israel cannot afford to lose a single war;

**All Israeli airfields are within three to five minutes flying time of Syria and Jordan, as well as in range of surface-to-surface missiles capable of hitting any target in Israel.**

# Baseline Assumptions:

## Population Inferiority

“The Few Against the Many”

Israel vs. direct neighbors:	1/15
Israel vs. Arab world:	1/40
Israel vs. Muslim world:	1/200

- Limitations on the size of armed forces;
- Vulnerability to attrition strategies;
- Limitations on the duration of wars;
- Defense burden on economy and society;
- Sensitivity to casualties;

## Lack of Natural Resources

- Nearly complete external dependence on critical energy sources;
- Shortage of water supplies;

- Israel cannot afford to sustain lengthy wars of attrition;
- Concentration of effort on one front;

## Superpower Involvement

- Direct or Indirect Involvement
- Preventing strategic decision on the battlefield;

- Israel must reach battlefield decision quickly prior to superpower involvement;
- The more extensive gains, the greater the chances for involvement;

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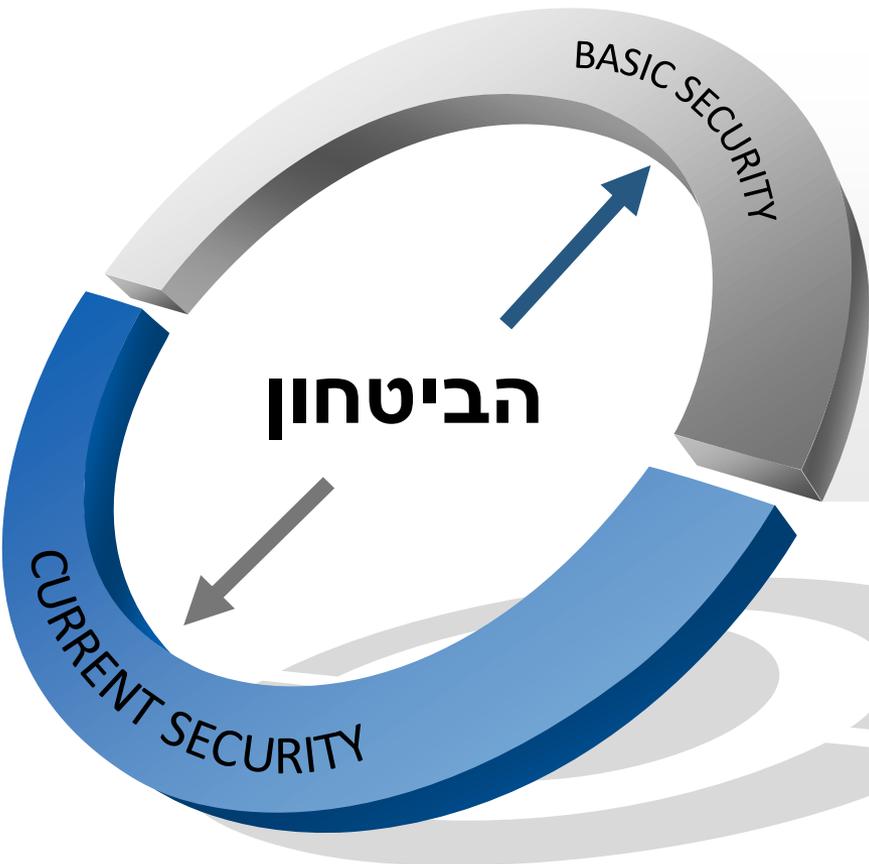
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# “Basic” vs. “Current” Security:

“BITACHON SHOTEF”  
(BATASH)

Daily Operational  
Security

Low-Intensity Conflicts,  
Enemy intrusion,  
Response to terrorist  
attacks, border skirmishes,  
etc.



“BITACHON YISODI”

Existential  
(Fundamental)  
Security

Major conventional wars  
(real or potential)

Transcends all  
differences in ideology  
and politics.



# “Circles of Defense”:

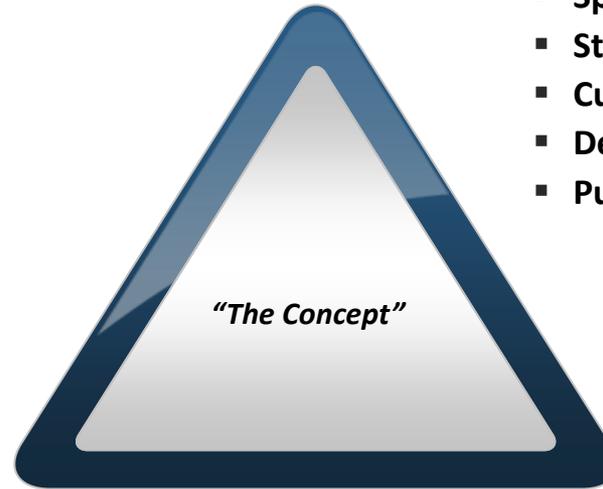
- Perimeter** (Egypt/Syria/Jordan)
- Intra-Frontier** (Israel/West Bank/Gaza)
- Remote Commitments** (Iraq/Iran)



# “The Concept”:

## Deterrence

- Current Deterrence
- Specific Deterrence
- Strategic Deterrence
- Cumulative Deterrence
- Denial
- Punishment



*“The Concept”*

## Early Warning

- Strategic/Tactical Intelligence;
- First Line of Defense;
- Not a “warning of intentions” but formation of a threat as an objective reality;

## Military Decision

### Decisive Operational Victory (*hachra'a*)

- Negating the enemy’s combat capability (“**Reverse Asymmetry**”)
- Restoring the credibility of deterrence;
- The concept of “military rounds”;

# Operational Conduct:

## Offense

- Transfer war into enemy territory;
- Seize operational control and initiative;
- Disrupt or deny enemy's plans;
- Concentrate forces at chosen points;
- Shorten the duration of conflict; minimize casualties; reduce war costs;

## Preemption\*

- Striking first in the face of a major imminent threat;
- Improve the probability of decisive operational victory;
- Achieve strategic surprise;
- Deny the enemy's plans;
- Mitigate the risk of superpower intervention;
- Reinforce the credibility of Israel's deterrence;

## Rapid Maneuver

- Combination of force movement and fires to gain advantage over the enemy;
- Speed , Mobility, Maneuverability;
- Surprise – Indirect Approach
- Flexibility – command, plans, and operations;

**“An offensive ethos of a pre-emptive attack executed by a combination of armor-heavy and air striking forces deep into enemy territory, that would bring the destruction of its military force and thus remove the immediate strategic threat to Israel.” Naveh [1996]**

# The Origins of the Conflict & Path to War

International – Regional – Domestic Context

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# Conditioning Factors:

## International Level

- **Escalating Cold War tensions between the U.S. and USSR:**
  - Vietnam War – U.S. Air Strikes
  - Brezhnev anxious to relieve the pressure on North Vietnam by fomenting minor crises elsewhere;
  - U.S. preoccupied with Vietnam, had fewer resources to handle upheavals in the Middle East;

## Regional Level

- **Fragmentation of the Arab world:**
  - Conservative monarchies of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco vs. sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf vs. radical regimes of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq;
  - Common factor: opposition to Israel → integral to Arab identity;

## Domestic Level

- **Political and Social instability in all Arab countries;**
  - Weak political institutions, Arab rulers forced to prove their legitimacy vis-à-vis rivals both in the region and at home;
  - Opposition to Israel amplifies their legitimacy;

→ **All these factors converged, creating the “Context of Conflict” – highly unpredictable, unstable, and potentially explosive security environment;**

# The Path to War:

No single event can be said to have sparked the Six-Day War;

Confluence of factors;

**Nov. 1966: Tensions between Israel and Syria escalate;**

***Syria launches a series of aggressive actions against Israel:***

- attempts to divert the Jordan River;
- efforts to support Palestinian guerrillas of the al-Fatah;
- armed clashes along Israel-Syria border;

***Israel's response:***

- IDF CoS Yizhak Rabin proposes a major retaliation raid against Syria;
- Levi Eshkol, Israel's PM and DM opposes – fearing that such attack would provoke Soviet intervention against Israel;

→ **Decision to strike back at a Palestinian stronghold in the West Bank village of Samu'a;**

→ **Nov. 13. IDF carries out the op - unexpected bloodshed with Jordanian soldiers KIAs;**

# The Path to War:

## *Arab Reactions:*

**King Hussein of Jordan embarrassed; blames Egyptian President Nasser**

for failing to defend the West Bank and for hiding behind UNEF;

**Nasser insulted; searching for a means to evict the UNEF;**

**May 12, 1967:**

**Soviet Union, still interested in igniting low-level crises in the Middle East, informs Egypt that it had uncovered a secret Israeli plan to invade Syria;**

**Nasser knows the Soviet intel is wrong, sees it as opportunity to evict the UNEF;**

- Issues orders for mobilization and concentrate the force in Gaza and at Sharm al Sheikh;
- Aims to win a bloodless political victory over Israel – no war;

**Field Marshal Abd Hakim Amr revises Nasser's orders:**

- instructing the UNEF to exit the region entirely within 48hrs;
- sends paratroopers and occupy Sharm al Sheikh;
- close the Straits of Tiran – May 22;

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# The Path to War:



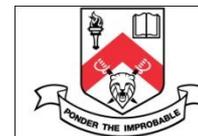
## Egypt-Jordanian Defense Treaty:

As public opinion in the Arab World rages against Israel, and support for Nasser sours, King Hussein can no longer stay out of the conflict;

Nasser could defeat Israel and then turn his forces against Hussein, or Nasser could lose and blame Hussein for his failure – either way the King would die;

**May 31, 1967: Hussein signs a defense pact with Egypt, placing his army under direct Egyptian command;**

**Arab leaders proclaim to “meet in Tel-Aviv” and to “drive the Jews into the sea.”**



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# The Path to War:

## Israel's Dilemmas:

**Egyptian forces in the south – 100,000 men, 1,000 tanks, 400 warplanes:**

- requires prolonged mobilization of IDF reserves;
- IDF commanders also fear potential Egyptian surprise attack on Dimona;

## **Closing of the Strait of Tiran:**

- danger of blockade; oil supplies;
- weakening Israel's deterrence;

## **Egypt-Jordanian Treaty + Egypt-Syrian Treaty + Egypt-Iraqi Pact:**

- Israel is effectively surrounded on all sides by massing, hostile armies;

**UN or U.S. unwilling to act; France leaning to Arabs;**

**Potential Soviet intervention? Internal debates within Israel;**

**→ June 4, 1967: Decision to go to WAR;**

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# The War

June 5-10, 1967

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# June 5, 1967

## Operation "MoKehd" (Focus)

**8:45 am First Wave:**

**206 IAF fighters attack 11 Eg. airbases**

- superior intelligence
- timing and preparation
- strategic and operational surprise

**09:35 am Second Wave of attacks (16 airbases)**

- sortie turnaround time: 8 minutes
- 500 sorties

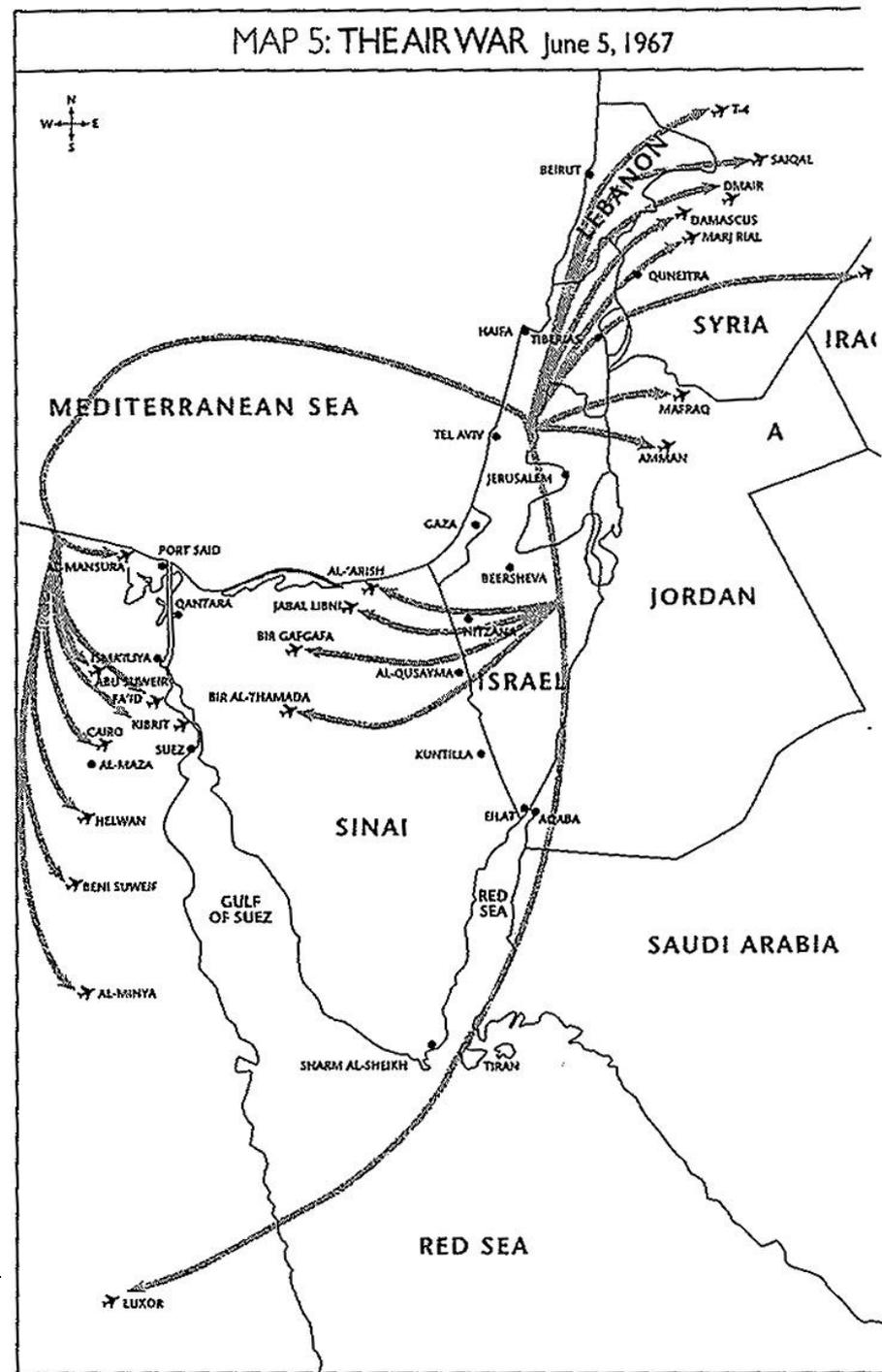
**11:35 am Moti Hod:** *"The Egyptian Air Force has ceased to exist."*

**IAF destroys over 300 of Egypt's 450 combat aircraft +runways, C2s, SAMs**

**pm: Third and Fourth Wave: IAF**

- strikes airbases in Syria; half the SAF gone;
- destroys Jordanian AF;
- attacks Iraq's H-3 Al-Walid airbase, destroying Iraqi planes;

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# June 5, 1967

## Operation "MoKehd" (Focus)

### Est. Aircraft Losses

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number</i>
Egypt	338
Syria	61
Jordan	29
Iraq	23
Lebanon	1
<b>Approx Total Arab</b>	<b>452</b>
Israel	46

### Fighter and interceptor No.

MiG-21 'Fishbed'	148
MiG-19 'Farmer'	29
MiG-17 'Fresco'	112
Su-7 'Fitter'	14
Hawker Hunter	27

### Bomber

Tu-16 'Badger '	31
Il-28 'Beagle'	31

### Transport

Il-14 'Crate'	32
An-12 'Cub'	8
Miscellaneous	4

### Transport helicopters

Mi-6 'Hook'	10
Mi-4 'Hound'	6

[video](#)

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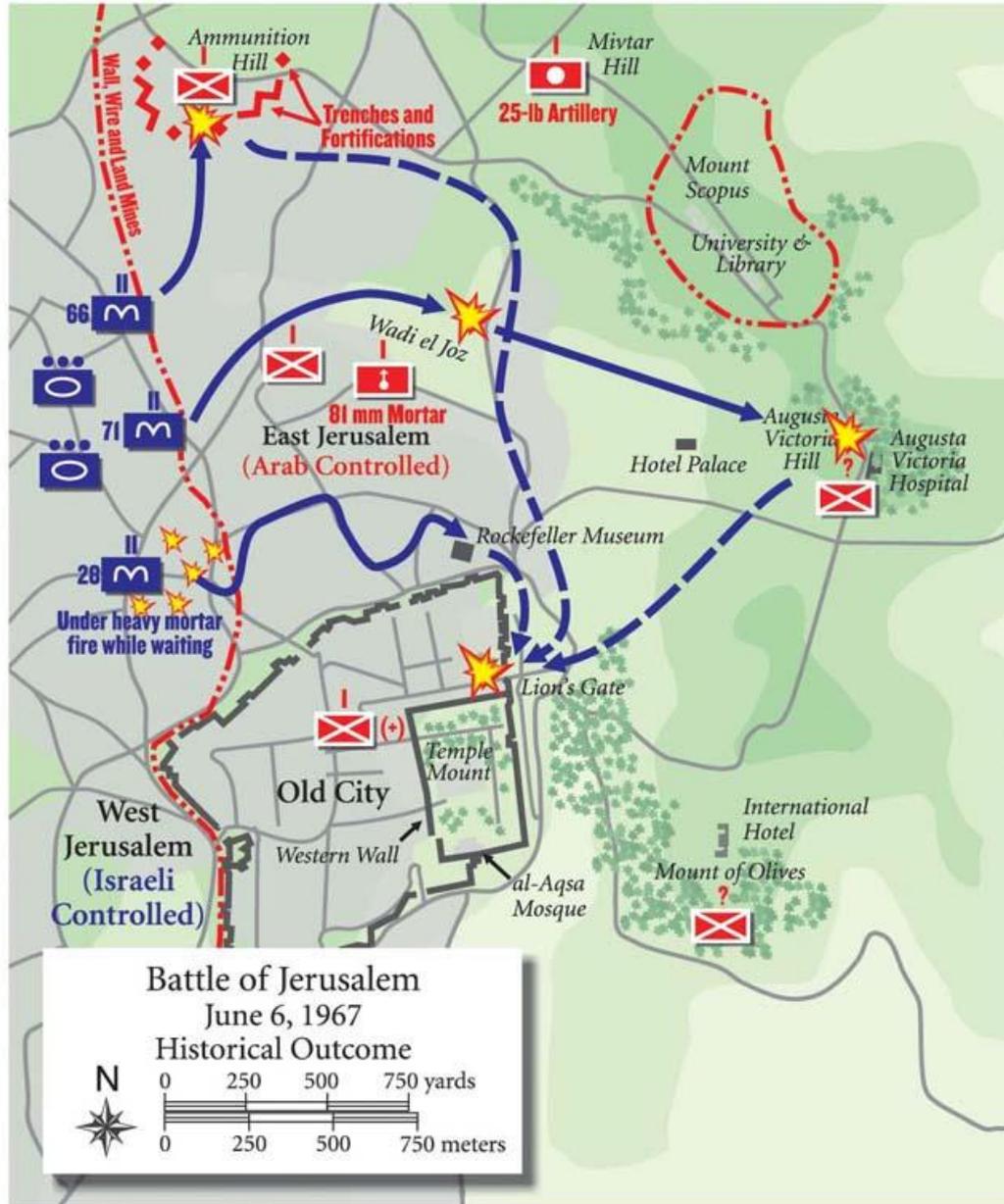
# The Sinai Campaign:

June 5-8

- Egyptian High Command in a state of shock;
- Eg. Army disorganized, confused: sporadic defense; unable to maneuver; lack of cohesion;
- After 36 hours, Nasser and Gen. Amr issue orders for a general retreat; no plan!
- Disorganized evacuation of thousands of soldiers results in chaos:
  - many are stranded / lost in the desert;
  - columns of massive traffic jams;
  - Israeli jets decimate the retreating Egyptian forces:  
15,000 casualties in four days; 20,000 POWs; 80% military hardware
  - IDF ground forces advance rapidly beyond their maximum objectives
- By the evening of June 8, Nasser accepts cease fire;  
IDF controls of all of Sinai;



# The War with Jordan:



## June 5:

- Radio Cairo announces that victory is imminent! Israel: radio silence – delay superpower intervention;
- Israel sends message to King Hussein, urging him to refrain from fighting;
- King Hussein hesitates; Nasser assures him that Egyptian forces are pushing across the Negev to join with the Jordanian forces in the Hebron Hills;

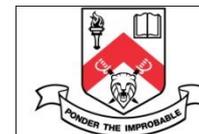
→ 10:00 am

Hussein orders his Arab Legion to attack Israeli targets (Tel-Aviv, Ramat David, Jewish Jerusalem)

45,000 troops, 270 tanks, 200 artillery

**June 5 -7:**

**Battle of Jerusalem**



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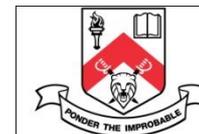
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# The War with Syria:



**June 9 - 10:**

- Syria - key Soviet ally in the region; impact on Israel's strategy;
- IAF flew about 300 sorties from June 6-8 against Syrian defenses in the Golan; but the IDF launched ground offensive only after defeating Egypt and Jordan;
- Difficult topographical conditions;
- Strong fortifications on the Golan Heights; 50,000 troops, 500 tanks, 500 APCs, 300 artl.
- IDF attacked with 20,000 troops, 250 tanks;
- attacked the northern flank of Syrian lines;
- rolled down the Syrian lines from north to south
- June 10, IDF takes key town of al-Qunaytarah;
- Syrian army in disarray;



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# Was Israeli Air Power Decisive?

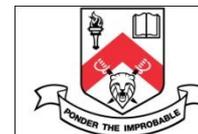
## IAF Air-to-Ground Sorties

Front	5 June	6 June	7 June	8 June	9 June	10 June	Totals
Egypt	170	286	321	160	20	8	965
Jordan	95	221	233	0	0	0	549
Syria	3	107	98	225	299	345	1,077
Totals	268	614	652	385	319	353	2,591

Source: History Branch, Israeli Air Force, correspondence with the author, 10 September 1997.

- The impact of the Israeli air power on the outcome of the Six Day War has been exaggerated;
- IAF important in the course of the War, but NOT the decisive element in ground battles;
- The IDF broke through the entrenched infantry lines of the Arab armies on all three fronts essentially without air support;
- Greatest strength of the IDF – flexible maneuver warfare;
- The IAF's main impact on the decisive ground campaigns was psychological, not physical → sowing confusion and panic in the Arab armies, causing paralysis, demoralization, and near-breakdown in unit cohesion;

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## Conclusion

### Strategic Implications and Enduring Legacy

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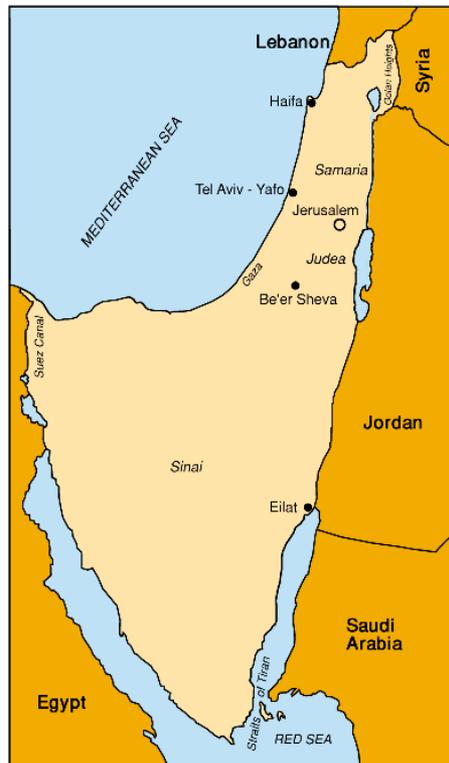
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# Strategic Implications:

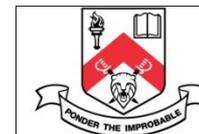
- **Strategic situation of Israel changed radically –**

In six days, the IDF overran the Sinai peninsula; took the entire West Bank of the River Jordan; and captured a great part of the Golan Heights. The culminating event was the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem.

→ **For the first time in its history, Israel gained defense in depth;**



- **Long-term regional and global ramifications;**
- **Changed Israel culturally & demographically;**
- **The Arab world radically altered by the war;**
- **Laid foundations for future hostilities, beginning with the Yom Kippur War in 1973;**



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# Questions?



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