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## The Notion of a “Pre-emptive War:” the Six Day War Revisited

Ersun N. Kurtulus

*The article presents a critical assessment of the widespread conceptualization of the June 1967 War between Israel and its neighboring Arab states as a pre-emptive war both in academic and non-academic writing. Tracing the origins of the notion of pre-emptive war to international law, the article identifies three necessary conditions for such a war to be classified as pre-emptive: acute crisis combined with high alert levels; vulnerable offensive weapons; and strategic parity as regards to offensive capabilities. On the basis of a re-interpretation of the evidence produced by previous research, this article argues that the circumstances surrounding the Six Day War did not fulfill some of these necessary conditions. This conclusion also is supported by evidence related to the Israeli decision to launch a first strike.*

**T**he June 1967 War<sup>1</sup> is not only a turning point in the contemporary history of the Middle East, but also a milestone in a conceptual development: namely, the gradual broadening of the concept of “pre-emptive war” that culminated in the use of this term to depict the war conducted by the United States and its allies in Iraq, and later to refer to a possible attack, at the time of writing, on the nuclear facilities of Iran.

On June 5, 1967, after three weeks of tension, the Israeli Air Force attacked air bases in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, and destroyed approximately 80% of the warplanes of these states on the ground. During the military operations that followed the initial strike, Israeli troops swiftly occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank of Jordan, and the Golan Heights. In what was probably one of the first employments of this concept to describe a conventional war, the Israeli attack was regarded as a pre-emptive strike, first in the minutes of the Israeli government,<sup>2</sup> and later by the

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Ersun N. Kurtulus is a Lecturer in Middle Eastern Politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent. He is currently conducting research on collapsed states with a special focus on the impact of state collapse on various institutions of society, including the actors of the civil society. His research interests include state sovereignty, collapsed states, Lebanese politics, counter-terrorism, and the international relations of the Middle East. His publications include: *State Sovereignty: The Concept, the Phenomenon and the Ramifications* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005); “Theories of Sovereignty: an Interdisciplinary Approach,” *Global Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (October 2004); and “Sovereign Rights in International Relations: a futile search for regulated or regular state behaviour,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (October 2002). The author would like to thank A J R Groom, Thomas Saalfeld, and Carl-Einar Stålvant for their comments on previous drafts of this article.

1. While Israeli and most of the Western sources refer to this war as “the Six Day War,” Arab sources prefer to use the expression “the June 1967 War” (Cf. Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. xiii). In an attempt to avoid bias introduced by word choice, I will alternate between these expressions in this article.

2. The official Israeli government decision concerning the strike was drafted by Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and gave the outlines of pre-emption: “After hearing reports on the military and diplomatic situation from the prime minister, the defense minister, the chief of staff and the head of IDF

[Continued on next page]

general public. This view is now rather well established<sup>3</sup> and, as a general conceptualization of this war, it has been presented in various contexts: books on weapon systems;<sup>4</sup> textbooks on international law;<sup>5</sup> scholarly study of surprise attacks;<sup>6</sup> monographs of political philosophers;<sup>7</sup> quantitative research on war;<sup>8</sup> reference books;<sup>9</sup> and even travel guides.<sup>10</sup> Leaving aside issues emanating from the normative justification and the defensive connotations embedded in the notion of a pre-emptive war, such a conceptualization of the Six Day War raises two important questions:

- What is a pre-emptive war and on what basis or criteria can it be differentiated from other types of first strikes, such as surprise attack, preventive strike, or unintentional war?
- To the extent that it is possible to identify a set of criteria that would enable identification of pre-emptive strikes, to what extent do the circumstances surrounding

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intelligence, the Government has determined that the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan are deployed for a multi-front attack that threatens Israel's existence. It is therefore decided to launch a military strike aimed at liberating Israel from encirclement and preventing assault by the United Arab Command.” (quoted in Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 158).

3. Another version of this argument is the view put forward by Roland Popp in a recent article that the conceptualization of the 1967 War as an “inadvertent war” (i.e. an unwanted war which is the outcome of miscalculations, misperceptions, and misunderstandings) is adopted by many scholars writing on the June 1967 War and that this is a “recurring theme in both revisionist and traditionalist accounts of Six Day War.” (Roland Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 282-3.) As shall be seen in due course, the differences here are to a large extent terminological. Scholars writing on the nuclear strategic thinking of the Cold War era tend to regard pre-emptive war either as a sub-species of inadvertent war or they treat both terms as synonyms.

4. See for instance, Anthony M. Thornborough, *Iron Hand: Smashing the Enemy's Air Defences* (Sparkford: Haynes Publications, 2002), p. 31; Stewart Wilson, *Phantom* (Australia: Sovereign Series, Motorbooks International, 2002), p. 76 and Stewart Wilson, *Combat Aircraft Since 1945* (Fyshwick: Aerospace Publications Pty Ltd, 2000), p. 11.

5. See for instance Yoram Dinstein, *War, Aggression and Self-Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.172-3. Dinstein makes a distinction between “interceptive” and “anticipatory self defence” which roughly corresponds to that between pre-emptive and preventive attack.

6. See for instance Michael Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” in Klaus Knorr and Patrick Morgan, eds., *Strategic Military Surprise: Incentives and Opportunities* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1983), pp. 111 and 131. Handel more often uses the term “unanticipated wars” to refer to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. See also Klaus Knorr, “Strategic Surprise: The Incentive Structure,” in Knorr and Morgan, eds., *Strategic Military Surprise: Incentives and Opportunities*, p. 187.

7. For a detailed account see Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 80-85. Treating the Six Day War under the heading “Pre-emptive Strikes,” Walzer uses the term “anticipation” to refer to the Israeli first strike.

8. See for instance, Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 150, see also pp. 87 and 239 n30.

9. See for instance *The New Encyclopædia Britannica, Macropædia – Knowledge in Depth*, 15<sup>th</sup> edition (1992), p. 144.

10. *Berlitz Israel Pocket Guide* (Princeton and London: Berlitz Publishing Co., Inc., 1988), p. 63; *Footprint Jordan Handbook: The Travel Guide*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Bath: Footprint Handbooks Ltd., 2000), p. 350.

the Six Day War fulfill these criteria?

On the face of it, certain factors could be pointed out to support the view that the June 1967 War was a pre-emptive war. Deployment of some 80,000 Egyptian troops on the Sinai peninsula,<sup>11</sup> agitation of the Arab opinion with calls for the destruction of Israel, the ensuing fear and alarm among the Israeli public,<sup>12</sup> and perhaps most importantly, conclusion of a defense treaty that comprised all of Israel's neighbors with the exception of Lebanon just before the war, easily could give the impression of an imminent attack by the Arab states and thus open up the way for the interpretation of the Israeli first strike as a pre-emption of *that* attack. However, in-depth analysis of the circumstances surrounding the Israeli strike produces a different and more complicated picture. In what follows I shall first map out the difficulties involved in the concept of pre-emptive war and, by means of logical deduction, develop a set of criteria on the basis of the use of this concept in the nuclear strategic thinking of the Cold War period. This will be followed by an evaluation with reference to these criteria of the evidence produced by previous research about the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the Six Day War. This evaluation will be complemented with a brief review of additional evidence that may be raised against the notion of the June 1967 War as a pre-emptive war. The article will be concluded with general observations about the broadening of the concept of "pre-emptive war."

### *DEFINITIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF "PRE-EMPTIVE WAR"*

The origins of the concept of "pre-emptive war" may be traced back to the so-called *Caroline* case, a border incident between the USA and Canada in 1837 and the ensuing developments. In a note to the British government, whose troops had infringed upon the territory of the United States, US Secretary of State Daniel Webster formulated what is now accepted as the "*locus classicus* of the right of self-defense" and required Britain to show a "necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation."<sup>13</sup> There is a clear connection here between the right of self-defense and pre-emption and, according to Walzer, this view — "the legalist paradigm" in his words — "would permit us to do little more than respond to an attack once we had seen it coming but before we had felt its impact." In this view, pre-emption "is like a reflex action, a throwing up of one's arms to the very

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11. According to recently declassified CIA documents this figure was 50,000 Egyptian troops together with 71 aircraft and 500 tanks near the Israeli border (see Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War," p. 300).

12. In the words of Maxime Rodinson, "[t]he propaganda war seemed to show that war was inevitable." Maxime Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 182; see also pp. 175-184. See also Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 410-412; Nadav Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1978), p. 397. Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 97, 135-136, 147-148. It has to be noted that there is no evidence to suggest that the state of public opinion had any effect on the Israeli or the Arab decision-making about starting armed operations.

13. Webster quoted in D.W. Bowett, *Self-Defense in International Law* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), p. 59.

last minute."<sup>14</sup>

This narrow and strictly defensive conceptualization of a pre-emptive strike is reflected in those definitions given to the concept in the nuclear strategic thinking of the Cold War era, where avoidance of a pre-emptive strike by one of the superpowers was one of the highest priorities. For instance, Williams and Williams describe "pre-emptive attack" as "an attack provoked by an imminent and certain attack."<sup>15</sup> Betts maintains that there are three types of first strike: "preemptive;" "aggressive;" and "pre-ventive;" and "[a] preemptive attack is one made in immediate anticipation of enemy attack."<sup>16</sup> Schelling and Halperin define pre-emptive war as a "[w]ar initiated in the expectation that attack is imminent."<sup>17</sup> According to Freedman, to give a last example, a pre-emptive war was "tied to a specific situation ... when there were strong grounds for believing that a Soviet strike was imminent."<sup>18</sup>

Three observations may be made about these and similar descriptions of pre-emptive war. First, regarded as definitions of the concept they are rather imprecise, always non-operationalized and sometimes confusing. As has been pointed out by Frei, terms such as "accidental war," "inadvertent war," "unintentional war," "war by miscalculation or misunderstanding," "unpremeditated war," and "pre-emptive war" seem to be "somehow interrelated, partly identical (synonymous), partly overlapping."<sup>19</sup> This is probably the consequence of the fact that these concepts are not operationalized, in a manner that would enable us to differentiate a pre-emptive strike from other types of first strikes. Sometimes, this imprecision leads to a terminological confusion reflected in expressions such as "pre-emptive surprise attack"<sup>20</sup> or "attacking pre-emptively and doing so by surprise"<sup>21</sup> which raises the question how a pre-emptive attack, which per definition emanates from a mutually expected attack — an expectation that is often caused by and reflected in alert, warning, or outright crisis — can take the prospective attacker by surprise at a strategic level.

Second, the definitions are the product of nuclear strategic thinking and the fact that we — fortunately — did not experience a nuclear war during the Cold War rivalry puts a limit to their empirical utility. This is because the definitions reflect the relative simplicity of the nuclear context, which was characterized by overkill capabilities, clearly perceived weapon-vulnerabilities, and an approximate parity in the strategic balance. As shall be seen in due course, once we shift the focus of attention from nuclear strategic thinking to conventional warfare, such factors become much more complicated and show the limits of the utility of these definitions.

Third, the definitions are based on decision-making and this causes a range of

14. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, pp. 74-75.

15. Geoffrey Lee Williams and Alan Lee Williams, *Crisis in European Defence: The Next Ten Years* (London: Charles Knight & Co Ltd, 1974), p. 139.

16. Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1987), p. 161.

17. Schelling and Halperin quoted in Daniel Frei, *Risks of Unintentional Nuclear War* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 3.

18. Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1989), p. 126.

19. Frei, *Risks of Unintentional Nuclear War*, pp. 3-4.

20. Handel, "Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars," p. 132.

21. Knorr, "Strategic Surprise: The Incentive Structure," p. 187.

methodological difficulties. Some of the elements involved in decision-making are either non-verifiable or immeasurable: We can neither corroborate that a war is “imminent and certain” nor measure the desperation caused among the decision-makers by this situation. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to presume that any decision to launch a first strike (regardless of whether it is pre-emptive or not) will be taken by an inner circle of decision-makers, who deal with issues related to high politics and who are placed far up in the political hierarchy. Such circles are not only notoriously inaccessible for researchers who would like to study the decision about a first strike, but also immune to infiltration by the intelligence services of the adversary whose task would be to report about the decision and, hence the “imminent attack.” To complicate the matter further, there is also an incentive on the part of the decision-makers to resort to deception and exploit the defensive connotations of pre-emptive strike in order to legitimize what may after all be an aggressive surprise attack. These factors restrict the possibility of conducting empirical research on pre-emptive strikes on the basis of the decision-making process.

Consequently, it will be argued here that there are compelling reasons to shift the focus of attention from decision-making as such (the *sufficient condition* for a pre-emptive strike under certain circumstances, such as correct assessment of the military situation) to material factors that lie outside of the sphere of decision-making (the *necessary conditions*). It is possible to clarify the logic behind this approach in two ways. First, *pre-emption of an imminent attack* is a reaction to *material circumstances*. Just like any other foreign policy or defense decision, a decision to launch a pre-emptive strike may be regarded as a reaction to those factors that constitute the environment of the decision-makers. In other words, certain conditions that emanate from what Brecher calls “the external operative environment” function as “inputs” for decision-making.<sup>22</sup> It is possible to presume that in the case of a decision to strike pre-emptively, these conditions should give rationality to, or constitute the basis for, such a decision. If not, then the strike in question is, in the least aggressive case, an erroneous decision that starts “an unintentional war.” In such a situation, the inputs of the decision may be traced back to the “internal operative environment” or the “psychological environment.”<sup>23</sup> Second, and more importantly, *pre-emption of an imminent attack* is the outcome of a conjunction between *decision-making* and *material circumstances*. It is not possible to identify a pre-emptive strike only on the basis of decision-making, because this would blur the crucial distinction between a pre-emptive war, which is launched in order to neutralize a forthcoming attack, and an unintentional war, which is caused by an incorrect perception on the part of decision-makers that there is such an imminent attack. The difference between these two types of wars is by no means purely terminological: For instance, good quality intelligence may precipitate a pre-emptive war while being a decisive factor in avoiding an unintentional war. Furthermore, concentration on decision-making is also problematic due to the methodological difficulties mentioned above and because of the incentive on the part of decision-makers to resort to deception by exploiting the defensive connotations of the word “pre-emptive war.” Seen in this vein, an exclusive focus on decision-making also risks blurring the crucial difference

22. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, pp. 6-7.

23. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, pp. 6-7.

between a pre-emptive strike and a classical surprise attack of the Pearl Harbor type.

*THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR A PRE-EMPTIVE WAR:  
A CONCEPTUAL EXPLICATION*

At the most basic level, a pre-emptive war logically presupposes the mutual capacity to launch an attack, and a kind of parity with respect to offensive capabilities, where the impending attack of one side is neutralized by the actual attack of the other. Such mutual capacity requires, in turn, possession of offensive weapons by both sides that would enable them to carry out an attack — imminent or pre-emptive — rapidly and effectively. Furthermore, it is not possible to speak about imminence of an attack if no preparations are undertaken to launch such an attack. The most important indicator of such preparations is high alert or mobilization levels among the armed forces of the state that is about to attack. Such preparations will seldom go undetected and, by providing advance notice of the impending attack, they will cause increased levels of tension and crisis between the states involved in the conflict. Finally, the pre-emptive nature of the strike requires that it be directed towards eliminating the capacity of the adversary to launch an attack. This capacity can only be eliminated by the destruction of the offensive weapons of that adversary, which, in turn, requires that these weapons be vulnerable to such destruction.

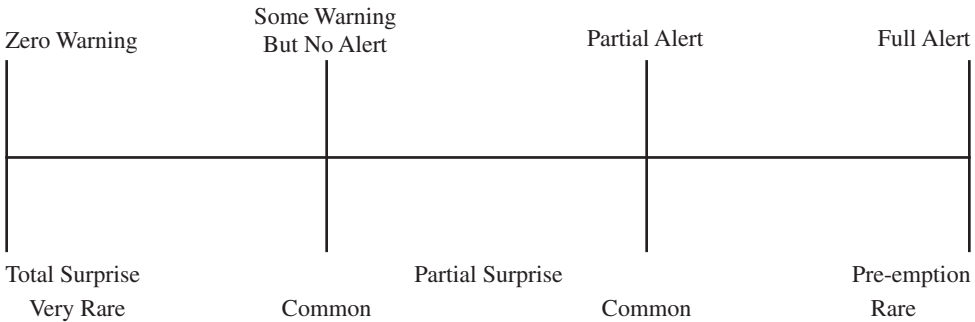
Thus, when a state, A, attacks another state, B, three conditions have to materialize before we can regard the attack as pre-emptive:

- (a) that there is *an acute crisis* between A and B, and the armed forces of both states should be put on *high alert*.
- (b) that A and B possess *offensive weapons*, which are *vulnerable*.
- (c) and that there is at least a rough *strategic parity* between them as regards to offensive capabilities.

Naturally, these factors are not isolated from each other. For instance, offensive weapons would be devoid of any immediate impact if they were not put on high alert and positioned for possible use. Similarly, as the case of the Cuban missile crisis shows, the mere presence of offensive weapons or their whereabouts may cause a crisis between two states. Thus, the distinction between these three factors is made only for analytical purposes.

To start with the first criterion, we can reasonably presume that there is a direct connection between acute crisis and high alert: A crisis between two states may prompt them to raise the alert levels of their armed forces. In a similar vein, if a state raises the alert levels of its forces, this may lead to a crisis between the state in question and its adversary. Moreover, if the emergence of an acute crisis and high alert levels coincide with other factors mentioned above (strategic parity and possession of offensive weapons that are vulnerable), then this may raise the question as to who will strike first and cause desperation among decision-makers of both states. This relationship has been pointed out in previous studies on pre-emptive strikes. For instance, Frei considers “a catalytic cause such as an acute international crisis confrontation” together with “pre-disposition of the strategic system of deterrence system” as the necessary conditions of

an “unintentional nuclear war.”<sup>24</sup> During the Cold War, a group of researchers from Harvard University maintained that “in a deep and apparently irresolvable crisis” one of the superpowers may launch its nuclear weapons. One of the reasons that may increase the probability of such a pre-emptive strike is the perception of the decision-makers that the other superpower is planing to strike “first, and soon.” This, in turn, requires “the adversary’s forces be at or moving toward (or perceived to be at) a high state of alert.”<sup>25</sup> The relationship between high levels of alert and pre-emptive war is even clearer in a diagram used by Handel in his case studies of the three Arab-Israeli wars.



Source: Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” p. 145.

As may be deduced from the diagram, the surprise effect is always relative. For instance, according to Handel, the Israelis were somewhere in the middle of the spectrum (partial surprise) in 1973 while the attacks on Pearl Harbor and Operation Barbarossa found the United States and Soviet Union respectively in a condition of total surprise. The most important element for the purposes of the argument here is the connection that he makes between “full alert” and “pre-emption.”<sup>26</sup>

To shift to the second criterion, the relationship between the vulnerability of weapons and a pre-emptive first strike is a well researched topic in the literature on nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy. According to Frei, “the urgency with which the decision must be made” is dependent on “the *vulnerability* of both the strategic weapons and the communication and command channels.”<sup>27</sup> This relationship is also reflected in the logic of “use them or lose them,” which informed one of the nuclear strategic goals of the United States during the Cold War, the goal of “crisis stability.” The aim here was to reduce the probability of a pre-emptive war by diminishing the vulnerability of the nuclear weapon systems. On the other hand, however, the connection between offensive weapons and pre-emptive war is not sufficiently emphasized in this body of literature. The reason for this may well be the fact that all nuclear weapon systems, with the exception of Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) systems, were offensive weapons during

24. Frei, *Risks of Unintentional Nuclear War*, p. 5. The difference between “unintentional war” and “pre-emptive war” is only terminological.

25. Albert Carnesale, et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons: The Harvard Nuclear Study Group* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 55.

26. Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” p. 145.

27. *Italics are in the original.* Frei, *Risks of Unintentional Nuclear War*, p. 5. See also Carnesale et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons*, pp. 142-143.



the Cold War, and this may have pushed to the background the study of the impact that offensive weapons may have on the probability of a pre-emptive war. Nevertheless, some preliminary answer to this question may be deduced from Quester's study of the impact of offensive and defensive technology on peace and stability. Posing the question as to whether the technology gives incentives for caution or pre-emption, Quester argues that

with a basically defensive technology, perhaps a three to one, or five to one, superiority will be required to break through; with a more offensive technology, far less a superiority may suffice, or no numerical superiority at all may be required, as either side can win if it only beats the other to the offensive. The last situation is the most horrendous for peace, because it creates the kinds of mutually reinforcing fears that leave little stability for the prevention of war.<sup>28</sup>

To this it may be added that in the conventional context the offensive weapons may take various forms: ballistic missiles with conventional warheads, attack and fighter planes, suicide bombers about to leave their base camps, or any other functionally equivalent delivery systems. Equally importantly in the conventional context is the vulnerability of counter-value targets, such as population centers and civilians, especially if non-state actors are involved in the conflict.

With regard to the third criterion, it is possible to claim that the connection between strategic parity and pre-emptive strike is a trivial one: At a minimum level of rationality, mutual fears of a first strike require a mutual capacity to launch such a first strike. It is more or less self-evident that, everything being equal, we could not speak of a pre-emptive war between, for example, the USA and the island of Grenada or Russia and the Baltic states.<sup>29</sup> However, in many cases the balance of power is far from being as asymmetric as it is between these states and, as it is indicated by the long and often fruitless disarmament negotiations conducted within the framework of Mutual Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR), and then, Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) during the Cold War, it is much more difficult to speak about the existence or lack thereof of strategic parity in the context of conventional weapon systems.

There are two complications involved here. First, conventional weapons lack the enormous destructive power of the nuclear weapons. In those cases where it has been possible to speak about a general strategic parity, such as the balance between the USA and the Soviet Union, this has been due to the possession by these states of nuclear weapons with "over-kill" capacities. In such a context, possession of a hundred more or a hundred less nuclear warheads or delivery systems would not have a significant impact on the nuclear power balance. In contrast, in a conventional strategic context, possession of a hundred more fighter jets or a hundred less tanks may shift the military

28. G. H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), p. 212.

29. Even in the current case of the war between the United States and Iraq, the former repeatedly made claims — yet to be validated at the time of writing — to the effect that the latter possessed weapons of mass destruction and that this justified launching a pre-emptive war. To the extent that it implies the possibility of launching an attack (pre-emptive or not) on the part of Iraq, these claims are tantamount to a proposition — alleged, perceived, or real — that there is a strategic parity between the parts to the conflict, despite the apparent asymmetry in their power.

balance in either direction, and hence become a crucial factor determining the emergence or disappearance of strategic parity. Secondly, the geopolitical circumstances may have an important influence on the military balance. For instance, the question may be raised — as it has been done in the context of Israeli-Arab military balance prior to 1967 — as to how many surplus conventional weapons a state may need in order to compensate for a disadvantageous military-geographical position.

In conclusion, a pre-emptive strike may be defined as a strike launched in the anticipation of an imminent attack, but under the necessary conditions that:

- (a) there is a deep international crisis which puts the military apparatus of both parts to the conflict on high alert;
- (b) there is at least a rough strategic parity between them and;
- (c) both parts possess offensive weapons which are vulnerable.

This criteria differentiates a pre-emptive strike from other types of similar strikes, among them, accidental war, unintentional war, surprise attack, and preventive war. However, it is necessary to make two observations about this definition before moving on to the empirical study of the June 1967 War. First, since these criteria are *necessary* conditions for a pre-emptive strike, what we have here is a *negative* definition of the concept: If such conditions are absent, then, it is *not* possible to regard the strike under consideration as a pre-emptive first strike. In other words, the criteria clarify in which cases we *cannot* speak about the existence of a pre-emptive war. Secondly, the search for empirical material related to the *sufficient* condition, the *decision* to launch a pre-emptive attack, continues to constitute an important research agenda. This is due to the fact that where the necessary conditions of a pre-emptive first strike are existent this does not lead automatically to the conclusion that the strike in question is a pre-emptive strike. The decision-makers may mistakenly or deliberately exaggerate — or even invent — the possibility of an imminent attack. In the latter case, we would speak of a classical case of a surprise attack, while in the former we would be witnessing a tragic instance of an unintentional war.

### *THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR A PRE-EMPTIVE WAR AND THE JUNE 1967 WAR*

An evaluation of the circumstances preceding the Six Day War on the basis of the criteria for a pre-emptive strike formulated in the previous section reveals that the Israeli first strike on June 5, 1967 did not fulfill completely these criteria. In a nutshell the argument is as follows: It is true that there was a rough strategic parity between Israel and the Arab states since the mid-1960s, where the qualitative superiority of the former compensated for the quantitative superiority of the latter and that both parties to the conflict possessed offensive weapons, in the form of fighter and attack planes, which were on high alert before the war. However, the three week-long crisis that preceded the war was not acute towards its later phases and the Israeli offensive weapons (fighters and ground attack aircraft) were not vulnerable to an eventual attack that could have been launched by the neighboring Arab states. These factors may now be studied in some detail.

*ACUTE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS AND HIGH ALERT*

The chain of events that led to the June 1967 War is well documented in the available literature and the chronological details of the crisis do not need to concern us here. What is of paramount importance, however, is the possibility of dividing this period of three weeks into two phases with the Israeli cabinet decision on May 23 to postpone military action and to send Foreign Minister Abba Eban to the United States, United Kingdom, and France on a diplomatic mission as the turning point. The first phase was characterized by acute international crisis, instability, and high alert, while during the second phase the crisis was not pressing anymore and, due to circumstances which will be addressed in a moment, the military and political instability was contained to a considerable degree.

The crisis started with a sudden escalation sparked by Soviet intelligence reports about an imminent Israeli attack on Syria. This information reached the Egyptian President Gamal 'Abdel Nasser [Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir] sometime between May 9 and 13. Egypt reacted to this by requesting the removal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip on May 16, deploying up to 50,000-80,000 troops in the Sinai within a week and finally closing the Strait of Tiran to both Israeli-flagged ships and the passage of all strategic material on May 22. The Israeli response took the form of a government decision on partial mobilization on May 16 and total mobilization on May 19. Less than a week after the start of the crisis the situation had become very explosive: According to one scholar, the Israeli decision-makers speculated about a possible Egyptian surprise attack on the Dimona nuclear reactor.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is possible to argue that four sets of factors had a mitigating impact on the crisis and a degree of stability was acquired during the last week of May, and that this situation continued until the start of military operations on June 5. First, after the above-mentioned decision of the Israeli government to postpone military action, which is interpreted in this article as the turning point of the crisis, the way was open to diplomatic initiatives. US President Lyndon Johnson put forward the Regatta Plan (Operation Red Sea Regatta), which "called for a declaration of maritime nations asserting the right of free passage through the Straits," which, if rejected by Egypt, would be followed by an attempt to break the blockade by "an international convoy of freighters" protected by American and British warships.<sup>31</sup> In turn, France suggested convening a four-power summit bringing together American, Soviet, British, and French leaders to solve the issue of the Strait. The UN Secretary General, U Thant, proposed a moratorium, freezing the situation for two or three weeks, whereby the Egyptians would not impose the blockade and the Israelis would not attempt to traverse the Strait. The last diplomatic initiative was a planned visit to Washington by Egyptian Vice President Zakkariya Muhieddin on June 7. This visit, coinciding as it did with the commencement of hostilities, never materialized. Although these proposals received limited support from the international community, and therefore may be regarded as unsuccessful, it is

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30. See Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 158 and 75-76. For a critical evaluation of this claim see Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War," pp. 295-8.

31. Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 105.

possible to presume that they nonetheless alleviated the immediate crisis.

Secondly, the military escalation lost its momentum and neither Israel nor Egypt took any further action that could restart the escalation. By the time of the outbreak of hostilities the number of Egyptian troops in Sinai was 80,000-90,000 according to some sources,<sup>32</sup> and 50,000 according to recently declassified American documents.<sup>33</sup> Which-ever figure is accepted, this indicates that the Egyptian troop movements had practically come to an end during the first phase of the crisis. Moreover, although “Egypt’s most effective striking force,”<sup>34</sup> the Fourth Armoured Division, was moved into the Sinai Peninsula, it was deployed in defensive positions west of the Mitla and Gidi passes.<sup>35</sup> It is true that both Jordan and Iraq joined the Joint Defense Treaty between Syria and Egypt just before the Israeli strike and Egyptian commandos were reported to have taken positions in Jordan. However, everything being equal — that is, speaking in objective terms in the sense of not taking into account how it may have been perceived by the Israeli decision-makers — this treaty should not have had any significant impact on the crisis for three reasons. In the first place, the Treaty was clearly a defense treaty: In its original form as the Joint Defense Treaty between Egypt and Syria from November 1966, it termed “an attack on either party an attack on the other.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it is possible to deduce from the Egyptian inaction when the Israeli Air Force shot down six Syrian airplanes on April 7, 1967, that border incidents and small scale battles would not activate the pact. In the second place, there was nothing novel about the Egyptian-Syrian-Jordanian pact because it was basically a re-activation of another defense treaty from 1950, the “Arab Collective Security Pact” or the “Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Treaty between the States of the Arab League.” This treaty referred to Article 51 of the UN Charter as its juridical basis and stipulated in Article 2 that “[t]he Contracting States consider any [act of] armed aggression made against any one or more of them or their armed forces, to be directed against them all.” According to point 5 of the Military Annex to the Treaty, “the supreme command of the joint forces shall be entrusted to the Contracting State possessing the largest military force taking actual part in field operations.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the provision of Article 7 of the May 1967 Pact that “in the event of military operations starting, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Republic shall assume command of operations in both states”<sup>38</sup> is in line with the stipulation of the 1950 Agreement.<sup>39</sup> In the third place, inter-Arab relations were far from manifesting any signs of cooperation and coordination, which was,

32. Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, p. 242.

33. Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War,” p. 300.

34. Abba Eban, *An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 325.

35. According to a CIA appraisal declassified recently, “UAR military dispositions in Sinai [were] defensive in character” (quoted in Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War,” p. 300, see also p. 302).

36. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, p. 435.

37. Robert W. Macdonald, *The League of Arab States: A Study in the Dynamics of Regional Organisation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 227 and 319-333.

38. Quoted in Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, p. 412.

39. It may be added here that an “increasing coordination of military planning and command between Egypt, Syria and Jordan” (Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” p. 115) also characterized the period immediately preceding the 1956 Suez War, without this having any impact on the development of the war once it started.

according to both Nasser and Israeli military leaders, a prerequisite for the Arab states launching an attack on Israel.<sup>40</sup> Conflict was the order of the day. Approximately four weeks before the signing of the Treaty, Nasser accused King Husayn of Jordan of being "a CIA agent." Moreover, Jordan broke off diplomatic relations with Syria on May 24, after a guerrilla attack inspired by the latter, and hastily re-established them on June 1. Syria was against the inclusion of Jordan into the pact,<sup>41</sup> tended to ignore its commitments under the Joint Defense Treaty, and refused to coordinate its policies with Egypt. In general terms, Egyptian-Syrian relations were far from being without substantial friction.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the Treaty was more or less a faint policy declaration rather than a robust framework for war preparations.<sup>43</sup>

Thirdly, *the super powers were able to intervene in order to restrain their allies*. On at least two occasions, first on May 23, and then, together with the Soviet Union on May 26, the United States intervened to stop Israel from launching a first strike.<sup>44</sup> After the war, the crucial role played by such interventions in postponing the Israeli action was confirmed by Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol:

Had we not received Johnson's letter and Rusk's message, I would have urged the Government to make the decision to fight; but their communications pointed out not only that unilateral Israeli action would be catastrophic but also that the United States was continuing with its preparations for multilateral action to open the Gulf to shipping of all nations.<sup>45</sup>

French President Charles de Gaulle also warned the Israelis against starting hostilities.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, according to Oren, who presents the only account in the literature which mentions an Egyptian decision to attack Israel,<sup>47</sup> the Soviet Union

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40. Brecher, "Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars," p. 126; Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, p. 397.

41. Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs*, pp. 180 and 178.

42. See Walter Laqueur, *The Road to War, 1967: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 62-63 and Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 162, 47, and 177.

43. However, it may be argued that the joining of Jordan and Iraq to the Treaty, together with the exaltation of the Arab public in the aftermath of the closure of the Strait with frequent calls for the destruction of Israel, may have aggravated the feeling of panic that was prevailing among the Israeli public. Although it may be seen as counter-intuitive, this factor does not have any immediate implications for the issue of whether the Israeli strike on June 5 was a pre-emptive one, simply because such decisions are taken not by the public but by the decision-maker at the top of the political hierarchy. However, as the Israeli government was divided over the issue of starting the war, these factors, operating together with the changing stance of the United States' position, may have had the effect of strengthening the case of those members of the top leadership who were proponents of an immediate strike, such as Defense Minister Moshe Dayan at the expense of "pacifists" such as Prime Minister Eshkol and Foreign Minister Eban (Cf. Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs*, pp. 179-180).

44. Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 334 and Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 102 and 123-124.

45. Eshkol quoted in Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, p. 401.

46. Eban, *An Autobiography*, pp. 341 and 344.

47. For a substantial and convincing criticism of Oren's argument see Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War," pp. 295-8. According to Popp "[t]aking the 'Arab threat' of May 25 seriously, is not only a departure from previous research but also from the accounts of some of the personal witnesses" (p. 297).

exerted similar pressure on Egypt.<sup>48</sup> Thus, during the last week of May, the war had been avoided, in the words of Oren, “[b]y the thinnest margins ... the crisis appeared to have crested. To varying degrees, both sides had committed themselves to explore nonviolent solutions.”<sup>49</sup>

Fourth, the *strategic deception* resorted to by Israel during the days immediately before the first strike may have further mitigated the crisis. During the last week of May, Israel demobilized 30,000 nonessential reservists. It is not unambiguously clear if this measure was just a stratagem or if it was taken for the purposes of reducing the economic costs of total mobilization. In any case, as it has been pointed out by an observer, “[t]his may have caused Soviet and Arab intelligence organizations to conclude that Israel was not planning on war.”<sup>50</sup> Another deceptive maneuver came just 48 hours before the Israeli strike. During a press conference on June 3, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan stated that “[i]t is too late for a spontaneous military reaction to Egypt’s blockade of the Tiran Straits ... and still too early to learn any conclusion of the possible outcome of diplomatic action. The Government ... embarked on diplomacy and we must give it a chance.”<sup>51</sup> In his autobiography, Dayan writes that “[a]t the press conference ... [w]ithout being explicit, I was hoping that ... the impression might be gained that we were not about to go to war but were intent on exhausting all the diplomatic possibilities.”<sup>52</sup> The last known Israeli deception took place just one day before the first strike. After the Israeli government meeting in which the decision to go to war was taken, the Israeli government decided to add to the communiqué that Ambassador Avraham Harman was going to return to Washington “to continue diplomatic efforts.”<sup>53</sup> In the words of Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, the government communiqué “which was literally true, though not comprehensively accurate, sent many unperceptive foreign correspondents back to their countries in despair of ever seeing a war.”<sup>54</sup>

In sum, these factors mitigated the crisis which erupted in mid-May. Seen from a certain perspective, the situation on the ground was a “return to a status quo ante 1956”<sup>55</sup> and Nasser did not seem to be in need of any further steps that would only aggravate the crisis and jeopardize his gains.

As regards to the second element of the necessary condition, high levels of alert, it is possible to note that the armed forces of both Israel and Egypt were in high alert just before the start of hostilities on June 5. The alert levels of the Egyptian forces were at the maximum at the beginning of the crisis,<sup>56</sup> but may have eased later as a result of the decrease in the intensity of the crisis. In the words of Oren, “[t]hough blackouts and air raid drills continued to be conducted, hospital beds reserved and military youth

48. Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 119-120.

49. Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 124.

50. Barton Whaley referred to in Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” pp. 131-132.

51. Dayan quoted in Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” p.132. See also pp. 135-136.

52. Moshe Dayan, *Story of My Life* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), p. 341.

53. Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 402.

54. Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 402.

55. Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 170. See also Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, p. 411.

56. Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, p. 381.

clubs formed, Egypt's mood was steadily returning to normal. Emergency regulations were eased along with restrictions on internal travel. Even tourism appeared to be up."<sup>57</sup> The Israeli forces, in turn, were ready for war after two tactical decisions of the Israeli government: a partial mobilization order on May 16 and a total mobilization order on May 19.<sup>58</sup> While Egypt deployed its fighter and attack planes to advanced positions on the Sinai Peninsula and the northern parts of the country, Israel did not take — and probably because of its limited territory did not need to take — similar measures.

### *STRATEGIC PARITY*

Two features of the military balance between Israel and neighboring Arab states render a comparison of their military capabilities a difficult task. Firstly, the war machines of both sides were equipped with conventional weapons. In contrast to a nuclear military balance, which is contingent on the enormous destructive power of nuclear weapons, a conventional military balance is dependent on a set of factors, such as the respective modernity of different weapon systems, the human element, mobility, and capacity to mobilize rapidly, which are often difficult to measure. In this context, the speculations about Israel's nuclear arsenal are irrelevant due to the fact that Israel never acknowledged its possession of nuclear weapons and, as a result of this, it never became a "nuclear power," capable of formulating explicit military doctrines and strategies that incorporate the use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, Israel probably decided to produce nuclear weapons after the Six Day War, although the country had such capacity long before.<sup>59</sup> Secondly, the Arab-Israeli balance of power was characterized by a lack of asymmetry. During the two decades of arms race that preceded the June 1967 War neither Israel nor its Arab neighbors were able to establish an unambiguous superiority.<sup>60</sup> Given the difficulties involved in analyzing a military balance that is both conventional and symmetric, it will be presumed here that such a balance is the outcome of an interaction between three factors: (i) the quantitative dimension that refers to numbers of troops, tanks, warplanes, etc.; (ii) the qualitative dimension that concerns the effectiveness and modernity of different weapon systems; and (iii) the human element which is related to features such as leadership, motivation, training, organization, etc.

As regards to the *quantitative* dimension, Arab states, which were parties to the Defense Treaty, had a clear superiority over Israel. At the time of the outbreak of hostilities, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq had 410,000 troops, 2,200 tanks, and 810 warplanes. Israel in turn had 264,000 soldiers (including the reserves), 800 tanks, and 350 warplanes.<sup>61</sup> According to another source, Israel was outnumbered 1.3 to 1 in overall manpower, 2.4 to 1 in aircraft, 2.3 to 1 in tanks, and 4.8 to 1 in artillery pieces.<sup>62</sup>

57. Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 159.

58. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, pp. 318-319.

59. Peter Pry, *Israel's Nuclear Arsenal* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), p. 19.

60. It has to be pointed out that this view about Arab-Israeli parity is put in a new light by a recently declassified CIA memo which claims that Israel had clear military superiority in numerical terms before the initiation of hostilities (see Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War," p. 299).

61. Daniel Dishon, ed., *Middle East Record Volume Three* (Tel Aviv University, 1967), p. 205.

62. Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, p. 136. See also Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 164. The estimates of a recently declassified CIA memo contradict these figures. According to this document,

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As far as the *qualitative* dimension of the military balance is concerned the fighters and attack planes possessed by these states, which were regarded as modern by the mid-1960s, were as follows: the Soviet MiG-21 and Su-7, the French Mirage 3 C and Super-Mystère, and American A-4E Skyhawk. All these warplanes conducted their premier flights in the mid-50s<sup>63</sup> and, thus, may be regarded as equally modern. The Israeli Air Force possessed 48 A-4E Skyhawk, 65 Mirage 3 C, and 12 Super-Mystère. The equivalent numbers for the Egyptian Air Force were 100 MiG-21 and 90 Su-7, for the Syrian Air Force 55 MiG-21 and 20 Su-7, and for the Iraqi Air Force 60 MiG-21 and 20 Su-7.<sup>64</sup> Other types of planes that were at the disposal of these states (Tu-16, Il-28, MiG-15, MiG-17, MiG-19, Vautour, Hunter, Mystère 4 A, and Magister) were more or less outdated by the mid-60s. Consequently, Israel had 125 modern aircraft compared to 345 possessed by the neighboring Arab states (including Iraq). However, this comparison should be taken cautiously as it says nothing about the effectiveness of the air forces of the states involved in the conflict or their capacity to use sophisticated, modern technology. Nor is it the case that modern aircraft produced during the same time period were equally advanced. Such considerations may explain why the outcome of the dogfights on April 7, 1967, when Israeli fighters shot down six Syrian MiG planes without suffering a single casualty was interpreted in France as demonstrating the superiority of the French-built Israeli Mirage over the MiG.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the advanced technology was not necessarily an advantage for the Arab side. According to Laqueur, the Arab soldiers had difficulties in handling certain “prestige weapons” which often turned out to be unsuitable for desert conditions.<sup>66</sup>

With regard to the *human element* involved in the military balance, it is argued that there was “a qualitative gap in manpower” to Israel’s advantage<sup>67</sup> and that the Israeli army was much stronger than its adversaries in terms of training, skills, and motivation<sup>68</sup> in addition to morale and maintenance.<sup>69</sup> Both Israeli Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin and the experts from the Pentagon were convinced about the superiority of the Israeli Air Force over its Arab counterparts.<sup>70</sup> In light of the quantitative comparison conducted above, this may be explained with reference to the Israeli pilots who were “better trained than their Egyptian adversaries, had more flying time, and almost all

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the Israeli side had a slight superiority in terms of “operationally assigned fighter aircraft.” It had 256 planes while the Arab side had only 222. Furthermore, only 117,000 Arab soldiers were close to the Israeli borders while Israel had 280,000 soldiers after successfully completing its military mobilization (see Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War,” pp. 299 and 304).

63. Cf. Christopher Chant, *Encyclopedia of World Aircraft* (BDD Promotional Book Co., 1990), pp. 93, 115, 228, and 311.

64. *Jane’s Weapon Systems 1969-1970*. It is not clear how many Iraqi aircraft were involved in the hostilities but according to Brecher, 23 Iraqi planes were destroyed during the war (Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, p. 432).

65. Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 317.

66. Laqueur, *The Road to War, 1967*, p. 69.

67. Shiff quoted in Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, p. 324.

68. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, p. 324.

69. Robert J. Donovan, *Six Days in June: Israel’s Fight for Survival* (New York: Signet Books, 1967), p. 53.

70. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*, pp. 335-336 and 390.



of their ... planes ... were operational."<sup>71</sup> Moreover, during the period before the June 1967 War the Egyptian army was involved in an attrition war in Yemen and suffered from cutbacks in the defense budget, which was reflected in poor maintenance of its aircraft and a cessation of almost all training exercises. Furthermore, commanders in senior positions were appointed on the basis of familial ties and political loyalties rather than competence.<sup>72</sup> These factors may have had a negative impact on the morale of the Egyptian army personnel.

In sum, it is possible to claim that by the mid-1960s, there seemed to be an approximate military parity, based on a rather stable balance of military capabilities, between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Such a conclusion is deduced from the premise that qualitative and quantitative dimensions in a military balance, to a certain extent, can compensate for each other. In the Middle Eastern theater, the Arab supremacy in numbers was counterbalanced to a large extent by the superior training of the Israeli armed forces.<sup>73</sup>

#### *OFFENSIVE WEAPONS AND VULNERABILITY*

It is clear from the analysis conducted in the preceding section that both sides of the conflict possessed offensive weapons in the form of warplanes. However, as far as the vulnerability of these weapons is concerned, the picture was very different. The outcome of the Israeli first attack on June 5 proved unambiguously the vulnerability of the Arab aircraft deployed in advanced positions. During the three waves of attacks conducted by the Israeli Air Force, Egypt lost 304 of its 419 warplanes, the Jordanian Air Force all, and the Syrian Air Force half of its aircraft on the ground.<sup>74</sup> This was a repetition, on a larger scale, of what had happened during the Suez War in 1956, when the British and the French Air Forces destroyed the Egyptian warplanes on the ground. While Egypt apparently did not take any measures to reduce the vulnerability of its airplanes, which led to the 1967 debacle, Israel seemed to have drawn the correct lessons from the 1956 war, and began to build concrete underground shelters for all of its fighter aircraft.<sup>75</sup> It is possible to envisage that this building project was completed by the mid-1960s and that the Israeli warplanes were well-protected at the outset of the crisis that preceded the June 1967 War. Moreover, Israeli air space was also generally impenetrable for Arab aircraft. A couple of days before the start of hostilities, chief military spokesman Chaim Herzog, "having made a detailed estimate of the Arab forces in the region, discounted the possibilities of a successful blitz and strongly doubted that the Egyptians could penetrate Israel's air defenses at all."<sup>76</sup> The situation on the Arab

71. Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 171.

72. Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 37 and 55-56.

73. Cf. Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, p. 331.

74. Handel, "Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars," p. 134. For the vulnerability of the Egyptian aircraft see also Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 171.

75. Handel, *Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars*, p. 122. See also Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War," p. 299.

76. Herzog referred to in Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 393. However, this claim is weakened by the fact that Egyptian MiG planes were able to conduct a couple of successful reconnaissance flights over the Dimona nuclear reactor at the beginning of the crisis.

side was completely different. By December 1966, Israeli aircraft were penetrating Egyptian airspace up to the Suez Channel on a daily basis and had flown over Cairo on several occasions.<sup>77</sup>

It has to be noted in this context that despite these factors, Israel was militarily vulnerable to a certain extent because of its disadvantageous geographic situation. The northern and southern sections of the country were connected by a narrow strip which was only 12 kilometers in some sections. As a result of this, all of Israel's air bases, with one exception, were within the range of Arab artillery.<sup>78</sup> However, to judge from the military operations conducted by Israel during the Six Day War, this vulnerability does not seem to have played a significant role in Israeli war plans. On the Jordanian front the field operations were conducted in three sections: East Jerusalem, Latrun, and Jenin. It is clear from the description given by Safran<sup>79</sup> that only the operations in the Jenin section were aimed at reducing the impact of this geographic vulnerability by placing the Jazreel Valley with its settlements and the important Ramat David air base outside of the range of Arab artillery. In the Jordanian front, in the words of Defense Minister Dayan, "the focal point, geographic and political, was of course Jerusalem,"<sup>80</sup> which was actually nearly surrounded by Jordanian territory and whose western Israeli part was connected to the rest of Israel by a narrow corridor. The form and the target of the military operations indicate that the Israeli decision-makers did not regard the vulnerability of the air bases to Arab artillery as a serious threat or a grave danger which had to be eliminated at the outset of hostilities.

Thus, with the exception of Israeli geographic vulnerability, which does not seem to have influenced the Israeli war plans on a tactical level, the vulnerability of the Arab airplanes (offensive weapons) may be contrasted with the absence of such vulnerability on the part of the Israeli aircraft.

### *THE SUFFICIENT CONDITION FOR A PRE-EMPTIVE WAR AND THE SIX DAY WAR*

As far as the Israeli *decision* to launch a first strike on June 5, 1967 is concerned, there is a substantial amount of evidence in the literature which suggests that other types of calculations than perceived levels of military threat or anticipation of a military attack by Arab states were pivotal in the Israeli decision-making process. This evidence, which is related to the sufficient conditions, may be summarized as follows.

First, during the period preceding the war, there was an ongoing power struggle within the Israeli decision-making apparatus between pacifists, such as Eshkol and Eban, and "activists," most pre-eminent among them Dayan, over the issue of launching an attack.<sup>81</sup> At a minimum this would imply the existence of a dispute among the Israeli decision-makers over whether or not an attack on the part of Arab states was im-

77. Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War," p. 308.

78. Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, p. 240.

79. Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, p. 248.

80. Dayan, *Story of My Life*, pp. 366-367.

81. See Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs*, pp. 179-180 and William B. Quandt, "Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color Was the Light?" *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 215-220.

minent. Such a dispute, in turn, would indicate the absence of unambiguous intelligence reports about such an imminent attack that would presumably put an end to the dispute. Second, at the height of the crisis, the Israeli government decided that preparations should be made to occupy the Gaza Strip as a bargaining chip for reopening the Strait of Tiran — the so-called Operation Atzmon.<sup>82</sup> The suggestion of such a limited military operation is not compatible with the perception of a large scale Arab military attack that is imminent and that would prompt a pre-emptive strike. Third, while the United States was intervening to restrain Israel, the latter was mounting sustained diplomatic efforts to acquire security commitments, or at least a green light to act alone, from the Johnson Administration.<sup>83</sup> During the first week of June, the stance of the United States changed, and, in Quandt's succinct formulation, "the red light turned yellow — but not quite green" and "[f]or the Israeli cabinet, that was enough."<sup>84</sup> This would place the main determinant of the first strike elsewhere than the degree of perceived military threat. Fourth, there is circumstantial evidence in the literature which indicates that the main concern of the Israeli decision-makers was the long-term collapse of the Israeli deterrence.<sup>85</sup> If true, this would support the view that the June 1967 War was a *preventive* war rather than a pre-emptive one. The differences here are by no means merely terminological. Not only is it the case that a preventive war is "based on a concern over an historical shift in the military balance"<sup>86</sup> which is fundamentally different from the emergency involved in an intense crisis situation characterized by high alert levels and mutual fears of imminent attack, but a preventive war is also illegal according to the mainstream opinion within international law.<sup>87</sup> In sum, more and more evidence is accumulating in the literature, giving effect to the view that the Six Day War was a "war of choice" for Israel rather than being a pre-emptive war imposed upon Israel.<sup>88</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

It is not possible to give a *definitive* answer to the question of whether the Six Day War was a pre-emptive war, as long as documents related to the *sufficient* condition — such as the protocols of the Israeli Cabinet meetings before the start of the hostilities — remain classified. It is true that an increasing amount of evidence indicates that the June 1967 War was anything but a military pre-emption, but the decisive piece of evidence is still missing. In the absence of this kind of primary data, the answer to the question can only be given tentatively and on the basis of an analysis of the existence or not of the *necessary* conditions for a pre-emptive first strike during the days preced-

82. Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 90.

83. Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 139, 146, 147, 152-153 and *passim*.

84. Quandt, "Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color Was the Light?" p. 228.

85. See Yariv, Eban, Dayan, and Sharon referred to in Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 87, 89, 149 and 134. This conclusion can be drawn especially from Rabin's memoirs (see the references to it in Handel, "Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars," pp. 127, 129-130 and 131); see also Eban, *An Autobiography*, p. 333.

86. Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p. 126.

87. Cf. Dinstein, *War, Aggression and Self-Defence*, p. 172 and Malcolm N. Shaw, *International Law*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 790.

88. This, for instance, is the main conclusion of a recent article by Popp (see Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six Day War.")

ing the Israeli first strike on June 5, 1967. As the preceding analysis indicates, several of these conditions — vulnerability of offensive weapons and the acute character of the crisis — were absent in the case of the June 1967 War, which raises strong doubts about the pre-emptive nature of this war.<sup>89</sup> As indicated in the preceding section, this tentative conclusion also is supported by circumstantial evidence related to the sufficient condition.

Seen in this vein, the Six Day War is probably the first important instance where the meaning of the concept of pre-emptive war has been widened, in such a way as to comprise much more than what Webster and the scholars of nuclear strategic thinking had in mind. In some cases, the broadening of the concept has been the outcome of deliberate theoretical attempts, such as when Walzer draws “[t]he line between legitimate and illegitimate first strikes” not “at the point of *imminent attack* but at the point of *sufficient threat*”<sup>90</sup> — a nightmare scenario for anyone concerned with the preservation of international stability. However, more often this usage is apparently unintentional as when the term “pre-emptive attack” is used in passing to refer to British and French military planning during the 1956 Suez War or Iraq’s first strike on Iran in 1980.<sup>91</sup> And in a few instances the broadening of the concept may be due to political expediency as seems to be the case at the time of writing, with the war launched on Iraq by the USA and its allies.

In sum, given the methodological difficulties involved in determining whether a first strike is launched in the anticipation of an attack, there are compelling reasons *not* to widen the scope of the concept of pre-emptive war. This entails refraining from using the concept to refer to the Six Day War, and for that matter, any other conventional war in the absence of hard evidence that indicates the existence of the sufficient condition, that is, a decision taken with the knowledge of an imminent attack. This is especially important when account is taken of the fact that the concept, with its defensive connotations, embraces a justification dimension — and actually refers to a legal action under international law — and that political convenience may dictate its use in circumstances that do not warrant such a use.

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89. Moreover, it was probably the non-pre-emptive nature of the June 1967 War which hindered Israel from launching a pre-emptive strike in October 1973 when an attack was *indeed* imminent. See Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” pp. 139-140.

90. *Italics are mine.* Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 81.

91. Cf. Handel, “Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars,” pp. 119 and 121; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Conflict* (London: Paladin, 1990), pp. 40 and 48; and Efrahim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), p. 27.