The Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars in Historical Context

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The confrontation between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbours is one of the most enduring and iconic conflicts that still persist today. Many scholars have argued that 'for the best part of a century the Arab-Israeli conflict has been a complex problem with important ramifications for the international community'[1] – and this is in many ways the truth. Created out of the ashes of the Second World War under the awful spectre of the Nazi Holocaust, Israel as a nation has survived and prospered both politically and economically, in no small part due to Western – primarily French and American – assistance. The Arab states have correspondingly been opposed to America and the West based on this implied support for Israel and has therefore turned to different stratagems in an attempt to combat this alliance – such as balancing with the USSR during the Cold War and increasingly using its market power (derived from the various oil reserves in the region) to further its political aims in the two decades since the Iron Curtain fell. Into this context there were two major (albeit rather short) wars – the Six Day War of 5-10 June 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of October 1973. Decisive, cataclysmic and dramatic, these two conflagrations have in many ways defined the conflict as it is today. But what were the main strategic and political consequences of these two wars? This essay will attempt to answer that question by examining relevant source material and analysing what conclusions can be drawn. The answers will fall into three broad areas – strategic, psychological and international – and will finish by assessing the importance of the 1967 and 1973 wars in relation to one another, as well as any collective inferences that can be made from that period as a whole.

It is easiest to begin with an examination of the pure strategic consequences of the two wars. This area can be further divided into two sub-categories – strategic depth and broader geo-politics, beginning with the former factor. A primarily military concept, strategic depth can be considered to be the literal and material barrier between the front line and the 'vitals' of the unit in question – which in this case is the nation of Israel. Prior to 1967 Israel appeared an embattled nation, sharing territory and borders with countries that were fundamentally hostile to it – with Egypt to the south, Jordan to the east and Syria and Lebanon to the north, Israel was hamstrung by the idea that a successful first strike could effectively cripple it as a nation. The events of early June 1967 changed the map completely. Writing in 1972, Edgar O'Ballance commented that 'in six days of fighting the Israelis had occupied about 26,000 square miles of Arab territory'[2]. Whilst his validity is slightly compromised by his inevitable ignorance of the events of the following year, the statement is still largely sound. The territorial spoils of war – including the Sinai, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and much of the West Bank – 'increased Israel's size by six times'[3] and created a 'vastly improved strategic situation'[4] for the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). These borders, as opposed to those created following the 1948 conflict were 'more defensible and afforded the military greater strategic depth'[5]. This security was integral to the military and political thinking of Tel-Aviv meaning it is therefore fair to consider that the Six Day War has 'defined the parameters of negotiations to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict ever since'[6]. Even the 1973 war, despite being a more sustained confrontation, only 'slightly modified the territorial framework'[7] established in 1967. Neither side being willing to relinquish their various claims means that, when this stalemate is combined with the internationally sensitive Israeli occupation and settlement programmes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it can be justifiably considered that the strategic depth gained by Israel counts as the most clear-cut and tangible change wrought by the two wars as, simply put, the map of the Middle East in use today was in many ways drawn on the battlefields of 1967.

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Despite all this however, it would be wrong to consider that the strategic consequences of the two wars were purely cartographic. The geo-political consequences were as far-reaching as they were varied and should be examined to give us a greater picture of the effect that 1967 and 1973 had. Whilst all the changes cannot be properly covered in this essay, the three main ones – Israeli relative strength, the issue of the Palestinians and the Lebanese Civil War – can be discussed in relation to the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars and the effect they may have had. Looking at Israeli relative strength, it is understandable that the strategic depth gained by Israel in the 1967 war had a massive effect on Israel's regional power. However, territory does not automatically equal power and similarly Israel's post 1967 dominance in the Middle East was resultant of more than its geographical expansion. The comprehensive beating meted out by the IDF upon its three Arab counterparts (Syria, Jordan and Egypt) put Israel 'in a stronger position than ever'[8]. This, linked in with ever increasing US support and the physical security of strategic depth made Israel 'the decisive military power in the Middle East' which, despite some set-backs (for example in 1973) has never really been changed, and Israel both can and does act unilaterally to protect its interests.

This brings us neatly towards the next geo-political issue to discuss – the Palestinian question. The occupation of such a vast area meant that Israelis were 'now faced with the problem or administering a large Arab population'[9]. The conquest of the territories can therefore be considered to be a 'poisoned chalice', as through the creation of its 'mini-empire' Israel had won more territory –but now had to keep it[10]. This has required Israel's 'sword' (i.e. its military machine) to become 'ever heavier, ever blunter'[11] to retain control of the regions it had taken and to pre-empt any external threats the may foment unrest in those regions.

The latter part is best shown in the Lebanese Civil War. The peace accords signed between Israel and Egypt post 1973 largely fractured the ideal of Pan-Arabism and allowed Israel to pursue any 'police action' that it felt necessary (within reason)[12] to protect its national integrity. This integrity was under threat due to the instability in Lebanon – which again partly came about as a result of the wars of 1967 and 1973. Following the Yom Kippur War, due to agreement with Israel, Jordan moved to expel elements of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) that were attacking Israeli targets from camps within Jordan. This was achieved, albeit with substantial bloodshed, and PLO duly relocated to just outside Beirut, 'further destabilising the fragile Lebanese government'[13]. Therefore when the IDF intervened in 1982 it would be valid to suggest that they were limiting a war of their own making. These events combined with the previous two are good examples of the vast geo-political changes that were created by the two wars and the indirect effect they could have. Israel became more powerful but correspondingly more responsible. It can be said then that 1967 and 1973 made Israel the dominant single power in the Middle East, with all the prestige, responsibility and problems that came with it.

The next area of analysis to be considered is the psychological consequences of the wars – which were inevitably both political and strategic also when considered in sufficient depth. The analysis can be divided along broadly national lines in this context – i.e. the consequences for the Israelis first can be looked at first the Arabs' in subsequent comparison. The Israeli mindset post 1967 and 1973 could not have been more different. The Six Day War was a crushing Israeli victory, made more spectacular by the fact that a coalition of three Arab nations (whose manpower nominally overwhelmed the IDF) could not even challenge their Jewish foe. The country became 'overrun by euphoria and a sense of having broken the noose that encircled it'[14]; for many of the Jews of Israel it was thus seen as a vindication of their national rights, and nothing short of a miracle. As mentioned above, vast swathes of previously Arab territory were conquered – including most importantly for this point 'the whole Jerusalem area, including the Arab Old City'[15]. The capture of this most symbolic of cities (including one of the most sacred sites in Judaism, the Western Wall) was seen as a religious as well as national triumph – that Israel, in every sense of the word, was whole again.

However, this 'bright and glorious page in Israeli history[16] was short lived and in many ways culpable for its own downfall. The victory of 1967 was so overwhelming and conclusive that the offensive strategy that had served so well during the Six Days was dropped, and 'gave way to a defensive posture – and hubris'[17]. As P. R. Kumaraswamy argues 'the political military echelon of Israel was overconfident of its military prowess and intelligence capabilities'[18]. In the so-called War of Attrition between 1967 and 1973 the IDF became 'trapped by the concept that the Arabs were not ready for a war'[19]. Thus the 'disillusionment of 1973'[20] came to pass. Even though the war could be considered at worst a draw for the Jewish side, 'the coordinated Arab effort to breach the

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1967 ceasefire line still haunts many (Israelis)'[21].   It is perhaps just to consider that since the Six Day War was such a conclusive Israeli victory that anything less in 1973 could and was considered a defeat, at least in relative terms. What it meant in real terms however was that the country that emerged from the 1973 war 'was a different nation: sober, mellowed, scarred in many lasting ways'[22]. Despite the strategic depth won in 1967 not being severely threatened, the feelings of vulnerability and being surrounded were once again thrust to the forefront of the Israeli mindset, greatly amending their attitude towards their Arab counterparts in several lasting ways.

From this point the psychological consequences for the Arab participants of the two wars can be placed in contrast. This was predictably roughly opposite to the Israeli psyche in relation to the two wars – with a few crucial differences. The rout of 1967 was unarguably a humiliation for the Arab peoples. Inflammatory rhetoric on Arab national radio stations – such as Egypt's *Sawt al-'arab* (Voice of the Arabs) proclaimed easy Arab victories (even when the Arab armies were fleeing) and the shock of reality did not sit well with the Arab peoples and their leaders. However, this only 'increased their public defiance'[23] as, in Arab eyes, the problem was not resolved sufficiently – their means had simply been insufficient to achieve victory. They acted to rapidly improve their armed forces (extensively helped by the USSR) and, once the first policy started to take effect, tried to initiate a favourable war to put them back on level pegging with Israel. This duly happened in 1973 – and, from a Syrian-Egyptian perspective – could not have gone much better. The war 'redeemed Arab self-esteem'[24] and, in both Israeli and Arab eyes, once again radically altered the balance of power in the Middle East. The Arabs had matched the previously seemingly invincible IDF, and Israel could no longer afford to ignore their demands. This is best seen in the subsequent bilateral peace between Israel and Egypt – the so-called Camp David Accords – where Egyptian President Anwar Sadat successfully 'extricated his country, and by consequence much of the Arab world from its fateful encounter with the Jewish state'[25]. Thus it can be seen that the two wars of 1967 and 1973 as representing two extremes for the Arab nations, with the despair and defiance of the Six Days War giving way to the pride and feelings of reinstated equality given by the Yom Kippur conflict.

Accordingly the final segment of this essay's argument is reached, which concerns the international consequences of the two wars. Like the previous two areas, this strand is also divided into two areas – Cold War conflicts and continuing American interests. Initially by looking at the Cold War aspect of the argument then it is clear that the alliance system that supported Israel so crucially throughout the Cold War underwent substantial flux in response to the various 'strategic cross-currents that … beset the Middle East'[26]. Despite the seemingly ubiquitous support given to the Jewish state by Washington today, the Israel in 'its early years received only limited US support'[27]. The main ally during the early Cold War was instead France, which was 'relied upon heavily for diplomatic and military support'[28] in the pre-1967 era – as seen in the Franco-Israeli collaboration during the 1956 Suez Crisis. However, the seemingly unprovoked attack by the Israelis in the 1967 war (despite President de Gaulle's explicit warning not to act) led to a diplomatic schism between the two nations and a gap that America was willing to fill. This was not an immediate occurrence. Collaboration had been going on since the early 1960's, as Israel proved to be a 'significant source of foreign intelligence'[29] useful to the US, which duly reciprocated by providing arms of an 'entirely new level of in terms of quality and quantity' for the Jewish state. The bi-polar world of the Cold War was unlikely to allow US political investment in the region without eliciting a Soviet response, which duly occurred following the emergent hegemony of Israel post 1967. Soviet influence with the Arabs 'increased with defeat'[30] as they sought to resurrect their nominal proxies. This increased priority led in a short time to the point where 'Egypt and Syria were being supplied on a level far exceeding anything seen prior to 1967'[31]. Thus by 1973 and the period afterwards the Cold War was effectively imported into the Middle East – best shown by the fact that during the conflict itself 'the United States and the Soviet Union both actively resupplied their clients and rattled their sabres at each other'[32]. It could reasonably be argued therefore that these two wars firmly gave this aspect of Middle Eastern politics a 'Cold War character'[33] by bringing in superpower interests and therefore rivalry directly into the respective sides of the existing local conflict, thus exacerbating the importance of the narrative in subsequent diplomacy.

Finally the other aspect of this argument strand can be considered – American continuing interests. Whilst chronologically there is obviously some overlap with the previous section, there are two key issues that are distinctly American which can be assessed in this separate context. Firstly, the wars put Israel 'in a stronger position than ever, backed by Western states and much of Western public opinion'[34]; the heroic victory of an embattled under-

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dog resonated with the US people. Contemporary American identity as a 'New Jerusalem'[35] has firmly bonded these two nations together, and whilst 1967 and 1973 did not begin this inclination, they certainly more firmly tied the two nations together in a partly collective destiny. Linked in with this is a slightly more infamous issue – oil. It is convincingly argued that 'during the 1967 war the Gulf States started to use oil prices and boycott as major weapons against the West'[36]. The Suez Canal was closed and the flow of oil severely hampered, consequently showing America the 'significant leverage the Arab states held over their oil-dependent economy'[37] and it could thus be argued that increased American interest following 1967 was as much an effort to secure the oil stability as it was to pursue the political. This 'fundamental restructuring between the OPEC and the West'[38] can and has been extrapolated in the decades since the wars of 1967 and 1973, with many interpretations ranging from the Marxist to the cynic construing the US emphasis on the Middle East as centred purely on the security of the oil there. Regardless of viewpoint the importance of Middle Eastern oil to the American economy is undeniable and in relation to the question is a major strategic consequence, as American interests greater than the integrity of Israel have been another defining force in the Middle East peace process that cannot legitimately be ignored.

Consequentially, it is obvious that there are many varied issues to consider when identifying the primary strategic and political consequences of the 1967 and 1973 wars. This essay has tried to distil the major ones from a wide array of sources and analyse them to gain the best possible outlook of these two events. However, there is an interesting note to attach to the sources used concerning their provenance. A surprising amount of the relevant literature in circulation is by American, British or Israeli authors – or in the case of some (such as P. R. Kumaraswamy) those educated at Israeli institutions. Whilst it is not implied that this automatically devaluates the sources it is nevertheless an interesting point to consider that when analysing the Arab-Israeli conflict the Arab intellectual voice is much more underrepresented than its Israeli counterpart. Separate to that however the sources are generally sound and more than adequate for the task. It is difficult to look at the Six Days War and the Yom Kippur War as separate events due to the massive and inherent links between them, the final analysis should be done collectively. This 'fault-line' conflict, despite being one of many in the Middle-East and of course the world at large has become one of the most serious and lasting confrontations that exist today. The events of 1967 and 1973 by no means started this conflict or in any way moved them closer to ending. However, their importance should not be underestimated. The key issues – for example Israeli security, the Palestinian issue, American involvement etc. – were all created or brought to the forefront by one or both of these wars. These issues at the same time increased the importance of the conflict on the international agenda and made them ever more difficult to solve. In a sentence, the 1967 and 1973 wars made the Israeli-Arab conflict what it is today, and are therefore unavoidable when trying to understand this iconic, symbolic and consistently intractable subject.

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