Pre-Emption and Israeli Decision-Making in 1967 and 1973

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Why did Israel decide in favour of a pre-emptive strike in June 1967 and against one in October 1973?

The Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 were crucial in shaping the political and social climate of the modern Middle East. They forged the physical borders between Israel and her neighbours and radically transformed the fragile balance of power and shifting political alliances between major Middle Eastern countries. The 1967 war in particular was not only a watershed in the history of the Middle East, it was also one of the rare occurrences in modern times of a pre-emptive war, a type of war which "breaks out primarily if the attacker feels that it will itself be the target of a military attack in the short term".[1] Given the scale of its impact, it is crucial to analyse the Israeli decision to strike pre-emptively in June 1967. Although regional factors, as well as the international political climate, did play a considerable role in both decisions, this essay will argue that two domestic factors made it necessary for Israel to favour a pre-emptive strike in June 1967. A climate of fear for the survival of the Israeli state was amplified by the economic crisis and social divisions of the 1960s, which led to an over-estimation of Israeli vulnerability and a

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widespread anticipation of Arab aggression. Additionally, Israel's lack of strategic depth, combined with the structure of its military, made it very difficult for Israel to absorb a first strike. Ultimately, Israeli decision-makers felt that they had no choice but to pre-empt in June 1967. By October 1973, the situation was radically transformed. Israeli leaders decided against pre-emption because they felt that the survival of the Israeli state was not at stake, due to their overwhelming military self-confidence and new-found strategic depth. With the post-Six Day War borders and political climate, pre-emption could not be justified as essential for the survival of the Israeli state. Prime Minister Golda Meir thus rejected the pre-emptive option, deciding to protect Israel's reputation and political alliances at the expense of a short-term military advantage.

A state of neither war nor peace

In order to understand the Israeli decision-making process in 1967 and 1973, we must strive to understand its prevalent concept of national security: Israel had to accept the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict as a behavioural norm. The 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and its neighbours were interim documents which neither forged clear boundaries nor constituted a permanent peace treaty. Thus, a state of war still effectively existed between Israel and the Arab nations, albeit dormant. This state of "neither war nor peace" was characterised by a feeling of constant insecurity, as well as a tit-for-tat stream of border incursions and low-level fighting.[2] Dan Horowitz emphasises that this greatly impacted the Israeli leadership: "the dichotomic perception of war and peace was thus alien to the Israeli decision makers".[3] Israeli policy makers were habituated to favourably and flexibly making use of force. Moshe Dayan considered that "military operations in peacetime [were] a legitimate instrument of Israeli policy making in the particular conditions of the Arab-Israeli conflict determined by the Arab 'belligerency short of war' approach".[4] Ahron Bregman emphasises that the dichotomy between war and peace was so absent in the 1950s that the Israeli public perceived the Sinai War as a mere military campaign, "not much different from the major large-scale retaliatory actions which had taken place against Egypt and Jordan in the period leading up to it".[5] This situation essentially made both the Israeli public and the Israeli leadership much more open, on the whole, to the idea of pre-emptive action, since there was a fundamental belief that Israel was vulnerable, and constantly at the brink of war.

In this climate of perceived instability, two factors were key in determining whether Israel opted in favour or against a pre-emptive strike. The first, which we will proceed to analyse, is the public perception of Israeli capabilities and Arab intentions, which resulted in two greatly differing political climates in 1967 and 1973.

Arab and Israeli capabilities: shifting perceptions and realities

A feeling of Israeli vulnerability and a dominant 'Ben-Gurionist' view of the Arabs created a climate of suspicion and, crucially, of fear in Israel in 1967. Dan Reiter puts forward that this climate of fear was a key element in Israel's decision to launch a pre-emptive strike: "the essence of preemption […] is that is motivated by fear, not by greed".[6] Yet, given the overwhelmingly rapid and decisive Israeli victory, certain historians have doubted whether the Israeli decision to initiate a pre-emptive strike in 1967 was truly motivated by fear, putting forward opportunism and greed at the centre of their historical narrative of the Six Day War. Roland Popp vehemently argues that Israeli leaders saw in Nasser's blockade of the Straits of Tiran an opportunity to change the status quo on the ground by harnessing their military superiority to strike their Arab neighbours whilst maintaining a veil of legitimacy. In retrospect, it might indeed seem ridiculous that there was a prevalent fear of annihilation permeating Israeli society given her astounding military victory in the Six Day War. This narrative, however, fails to consider the difference between perception and reality in considering not only the motives of the Israeli leadership, but also public opinion in Israel. Rafael Frankel highlights that "in the political-security realm, the Israeli psyche is governed by one overriding emotion: fear", due to the fact that Israeli society is "in a perpetual state of post-traumatic stress".[7] He emphasises that fear of attack, and fear of annihilation remains a "constant for Israeli political leaders".[8] This base fear was brought to the forefront of policy in the 1960s, due to the economic and social crisis in Israel at the time.

Indeed, the 1960s were a difficult decade for Israel. Tom Segev emphasises that this was a period of social crisis, which sparked a nation-wide debate about Israeli identity, a widespread feeling of malaise within Israeli society and a feeling of doubt in the plausibility of a unified Israel. Segev stresses that in the 1960s, "Israel witnessed its most

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dramatic revolution since the state's inception: the Askenazis stopped being the majority",[9] which prompted "unease over the destruction of Israeli culture [that] had been with the Ashkenazi establishment since the first days of the state".[10] When an economic crisis hit Israel, social tensions were amplified: growing inequalities resulted in destructive riots in a number of Israeli towns. With unemployment rising from 40,000 to 100,000 in a matter of months, the Israeli public began to doubt the Israeli leadership, generating severe public pressure. Abraham Wagner emphasises how the social and economic crisis greatly impacted on the political climate: "the lack of governmental decisiveness in the economic sphere prompted people to see the government as indecisive in the security field, as well as in other areas, with scant evidence to the contrary".[11] The dominant view of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was one of incompetence: "the 'tax collector' was thinking in terms of fiscal years, not imminent invasions".[12] In the 1960s, Israeli public opinion was increasingly characterised by disunity and pessimism, which led to an over-estimation of Israel's vulnerability faced with Arab escalatory actions. The pessimistic interpretation of the behaviour of other actors in the region became the norm: there was a widespread "consensus among Israeli policy makers about the consequences of the warlike characteristics of the Arab-Israeli conflict even in periods of apparent tranquillity", reflecting the dominant, Ben-Gurionist image of the Arabs at the time, which perceives Arab action through an inherently 'bad faith' lens.[13]

Thus, when President Nasser heightened the existing tensions between Israel and its neighbours by mobilising and deploying troops in the Sinai, evicting the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) and ultimately closing the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, the perception in Israel was not one of a return to the status quo before 1956, but rather of an overtly aggressive, revisionist Egypt. Israel felt threatened on two counts. Firstly, the Straits of Tiran directly impacted on the prosperity of the Port of Eilat, which was key to developing the Negev, an area seen as necessary to Israeli survival because of its natural resources and strategic position – a bridge between the Mashreq and the Maghreb. Secondly, by closing the Straits of Tiran, an act that Israel had publicly defined as a *casus belli*, Israel felt that Nasser directly and explicitly challenged their deterrence power in the Middle East. Given the Israeli *mal-être* during the 1960s and their intense suspicion of Arab actions, it is easy to understand how fear could have gripped Israeli society and Israeli decision-makers in the lead-up to the Six Day War. On the whole, Israel felt that its territorial integrity, role in the region, and ultimately its very existence was greatly threatened. This factor, combined with the lack of strategic depth, resulted in the Israeli decision to pre-empt in 1967.

By October 1973, Israel's perception of itself and its neighbours was radically different. The rapid, decisive military victory of 1967 led to an overwhelming feeling of confidence in Israel's military capability. Micheal Brecher and Mordechai Raz stress the feeling of invulnerability in Israeli society at the time, the "unshakeable self confidence that, even if by some remote contingency, the Arabs attempted to attack, Israel's second strike capacity and its post-1967 hinterland would ensure a quick military victory".[14] This perception was further reinforced in May 1973, when the mobilisation of Israeli reserves seemed to deter Egypt from launching an imminent attack. Confidence in Israel's military capability was also strengthened by a feeling of heightened social cohesion and national unity, and a period of intense economic growth and prosperity in the inter-war period.

Due to its overwhelming victory, Israel felt its role in the Middle East was profoundly transformed "from a little country surrounded by hostile enemies on all sides […] into a middle regional power, able to change the status quo according to its national interests".[15] Although the predominant view of the Arabs following the Six Day War was still imbued by suspicion, this was coupled by a feeling that Arab actors could simply not be taken seriously. For example, Anwar Sadat's failure to put words into action by the end of 1971, the 'year of decision', led to a complete discrediting of Egyptian verbal threats in the eyes of the Israeli leadership from January 1972.[16] There was a profound conviction in Israeli leadership circles that the Arabs were relatively incapable of enhancing their military capability, either by acquiring advanced weaponry, or changing their strategy to induce a limited attack for limited political ends. Abba Eban's infamous statement, 'the Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity', adequately sums up the Israeli perception of Arabs at the eve of the Yom Kippur War. This perception led to an under-estimation of Arab intent and capabilities, which contributed to the Israeli 'conception' that led to their gross intelligence failure in 1973, as well as their decision to renounce to a pre-emptive strike.

Redrawing borders, redefining defense priorities

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The second vital factor that decisively impacted on both the Israeli decision to pre-empt in June 1967 was the question of the defensibility of Israeli borders. At the eve of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the distance between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was, alarmingly, a mere thirty miles. Except in the Negev, no Israeli settlement was further than 20 miles away from an Arab frontier before 1967.[17] Abraham Wagner insists that "one of the most important elements of the strategic and psychological environment of the 1967 crisis was Israel's unique geographic situation", which essentially left Israel with a narrow margin of security.[18] Considering the Israeli military structure of the 'nation in arms', characterised by a small standing army supplemented by a large citizen mass of reserves, this lack of strategic depth meant that there was only a very small margin of time for Israel to mobilise its reserves in the event of a surprise Arab attack. It is unsurprising that the widespread consensus amongst Israeli decision-makers was the relative indefensibility of Israeli borders in the event of an Arab attack. Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon affirmed that these borders were "without any topographical security value", emphasising that along the eastern border, "a single successful first strike by the Arab armies would be sufficient to dissect Israel at more than one point, to sever its essential living arteries, and to confront it with dangers that no other state would be prepared to face".[19] Moshe Dayan harboured an even more pessimistic view of Israel's defensive sustainability: "the entire community is a frontier, and the whole rhythm of national life is affected by any hostile activity from the territory of neighbouring states".[20] The foreign correspondent Winston Churchill accurately emphasised that "Israel could never afford to let her country become the battlefield – she had to move out to meet her enemy".[21]

The anxiety surrounding Israel's lack of strategic depth was made worse in the lead up to the Six Day War with the growing fear of Arab encirclement. The creation of the Arab-Summit Conference in 1964 significantly contributed to an Arab rapprochement against Israel. Anxiety about encirclement culminated in Israeli political circles when Jordan signed a military alliance between Egypt and Syria on May 30, 1967. With the unification of Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian forces, "Syria and Egypt were no longer separated by a reluctant Jordan; they had now become a unit for the purpose of the coming war".[22] The worst case military scenario would be one where the "Arab Legion could now be counted on to charge through the open door of the West Bank of the Jordan River straight to the centre of Israel".[23] The best case scenario would still be very difficult for Israel to sustain economically and politically: "this military ring would be able to squeeze concessions from it by threatening war and forcing it to mobilise and demobilise its reserves frequently".[24] With either scenario being devastating for Israel, policy makers argued that they had no choice but to attempt to militarily alter the situation on the ground. The survival of the state of Israel was their first priority. Bitter memories of the American and Soviet intervention during the Suez Canal Crisis, coupled with the anxiety that a pre-emptive strike would damage Israel's international standing led Israeli decision-makers to solicit American support. They contented themselves with an 'amber light' to launch a pre-emptive strike on Egypt. The prevalent domestic feeling – that Israel was fighting for the survival of its state, at the risk of damaging its international reputation – is perfectly summed up by Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon's statement on the eve of the Israeli attack: "They will condemn us… and we will survive".[25]

By 1973, Israel's borders were no longer perceived to be 'indefensible'. Micheal Brecher insists that Israel's "self-image of invulnerability was closely linked to the notion of 'secure borders' which most Israelis, including the attentive and mass publics, believed had been attained by the Six Day War".[26] Indeed, the post-1967 ceasefire lines greatly transformed the strategic situation of Israel. Israel effectively quadrupled in size, acquiring the Sinai peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and Gaza. This effectively removed centers of population from a direct line of fire, and provided a broad protective shield of defense in the south. This extra margin of security effectively erased the Israeli vulnerability that dictated the necessity of a pre-emptive attack in 1967, since "the postwar ceasefire line, unlike the former armistice line, provided Israel with the capacity to absorb an enemy's first strike even though her reserves were not mobilised and committed to defensive array".[27] If anything, there was a sense of role reversal – that Israel was now in a position in which it could easily threaten its neighbours. In 1973, Yitzhak Rabin emphasised that "the distance from the Egyptian border to Tel Aviv was once 130 kilometres and only 80 kilometres from the Gaza Strip. But the distance from our border on the Canal today to Cairo is only 130 kilometres".[28]

The fact that Israel no longer felt its survival threatened due to its vulnerable borders allowed Israeli policy makers to redefine defense priorities. Analysing Prime Minister Golda Meir's decision-making process on the eve of the Yom Kippur War allows us to understand this crucial shift. When deciding whether to accept General El-Azar's proposition to strike pre-emptively, she outlined her first priority – Israel's survival. It was quickly established that Israel could

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easily absorb a first blow without hampering its security in the long run. There was a predominant conception that any land lost to the Arabs would be quickly regained. Meir then turned to her second and third priorities – world public opinion, and the compelling need not to alienate the US – which ultimately led her to opt against a pre-emptive attack. Essentially, she chose to sacrifice a short-term, fleeting military advantage in favour of a long-term strategy aimed at protecting Israel's international reputation and alliances, since "the costs of an interceptive air strike were evaluated by her as greater than any short-term military benefits".[29] Ultimately, the re-definition of Israeli borders and prevailing sense of Israeli strength changed the strategic reality of Israel – with its survival no longer at stake, Israeli leaders considered the longer-term, political impacts of a pre-emptive strike. On the eve of the Yom Kippur War, Yigal Allon justified that "it will soon become clear to all that the political advantage Israel gains by not pre-empting outweighs any Arab military advantage from a surprise attack".[30]

Israel thus decided in favour of a pre-emptive strike in June 1967 because of its perceived economic, social and political vulnerabilities and its very real geographic vulnerabilities. In 1973, both of these factors had changed. Israel did not feel its survival was threatened because of its post-1967 'secure' and its military confidence. Ironically, these were both also key factors leading to the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. The fact that Israel still occupied Egyptian and Syrian territory made war seem necessary and inevitable to both Arab countries. Their surprise attack was ultimately so successful because Israeli confidence in its military supremacy and its dismissal of Arab threats led to Israel's dramatic intelligence failure in the lead-up to the Yom Kippur War.

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