

MEMMO

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The Six-Day War: Israel Overcomes Existential Threat

When the Six-Day War broke out forty years ago in June 1967, the Jewish state faced an existential threat unlike any it had experienced since its founding. In the weeks before the war, neighboring Arab countries amassed thousands of troops and Arab leaders repeatedly threatened Israel with annihilation. Israel, forced to defend itself against this growing threat, was able to triumph over the Arab states' massive arms build up and their overwhelming desire to see the young Jewish state destroyed.

In the weeks before June 1967, Arab countries conducted a series of aggressive military maneuvers in preparation for war.

- On May 15, 1967, Egyptian troops began moving into the Sinai Desert just south of the Israeli border to prepare to strike the Jewish state.
- On May 16, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser directed the U.N. Emergency Force (UNEF) – which served as a buffer in the Sinai Desert between Israel and Egypt – to leave in order to facilitate the attack.
- On May 22, 1967, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to all Israeli shipping and all ships bound for Eilat, cutting off Israel's only supply route with Asia. "If a single act of folly was more responsible for this explosion than any other," President Lyndon Johnson said after the war, "it was the arbitrary and dangerous announced decision that the Strait of Tiran would be closed."
- To facilitate greater cooperation and present a more united front against Israel, Jordan placed its troops under Egyptian command. Jordan, Egypt and Syria also signed a military pact pledging cooperation in their war against Israel.
- In the weeks before June 1967, the armies of Syria, Jordan and Egypt – with additional military backing from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Kuwait – amassed some 465,000 troops, 2,800 tanks, and 800 aircraft in preparation for war.

In the run-up to the war, Arab leaders repeatedly threatened the Jewish state with annihilation.

- On May 27, 1967, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser—the most powerful leader in the Arab world—asserted, "Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel. The Arab people want to fight."
- Nasser's belligerent statement followed a similar threat on May 20 by Syrian President Hafez Assad: "I, as a military man, believe that the time has come to enter into a battle of annihilation."

- On June 1, 1967—four days before the start of the war—Ahmed Shukairy, leader of the terrorist Palestinian Liberation Authority (PLO), said, “Those [Jews] who survive [the war] will remain in Palestine. I estimate that none of them will survive.”
- On May 31, 1967, Iraqi President Abdur Rahman Aref declared, “The existence of Israel is an error which must be rectified. This is our opportunity to wipe out the ignominy which has been with us since 1948. Our goal is clear—to wipe Israel off the map.”

Arab terrorism and other acts of war significantly increased in the three years before 1967, generating mounting tensions with Israel.

- Northern Israeli cities experienced hundreds of shelling attacks and land mines planted by Syrian forces in the years before the war, including attacks on Israeli water facilities.
- In 1964 the Arab League formed the PLO, which adopted a charter calling for Israel’s destruction. The PLO immediately began preparing for attacks against the Jewish state.
- The PLO launched 35 terrorist attacks against Israel in 1965, 41 attacks in 1966 and 37 attacks in the first half of 1967. .
- In the first months of 1967, Israel experienced some 270 attacks along its border with Jordan.
- On March 12, 1967, an Israeli train between Kiryat Gat and Kibbutz Lahav was forced to stop when a bomb exploded along the tracks. Passengers found leaflets nearby that proclaimed, “Death to the Zionist invaders – Victory to the heroic Palestinians.”

Basic Facts Summary

- In the weeks before June 1967, Arab countries conducted a series of aggressive military maneuvers in preparation for war.
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