

Interview With Dr. Dan Schueftan  
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*Dr. Dan Schueftan served in Israel's air force intelligence during the 1967 Six-Day War and subsequently analyzed the conflict as an historian in several books and articles. In a recent interview, he described the prelude to the war and analyzed its consequences.*

**What was the prevailing mood among Israelis following the military buildup and threats from Egypt on the eve of the Six-Day War?**

During the 1960s, Israelis were aware that whereas [Egyptian President Gamal Abdul] Nasser wanted to destroy Israel, his behavior indicated that he understood it was not a realistic goal for the near future. He was constantly telling the Arab world, "Yes, we should liberate Palestine [i.e., destroy Israel], but at the moment we are not strong enough to go to war." Israel's then-intelligence chief Aharon Yariv said at the time, "The only country that can lead a war against Israel is Egypt. Egypt doesn't want war now. Therefore, for now, there will be no war."

Because of such seemingly logical assumptions, we were conceptually unprepared for war. So when Egypt remilitarized the Sinai Peninsula and millions of Arabs poured into the streets and shouted "Death to Israel," Israelis were frightened. When Israelis realized during the three weeks preceding the war that nobody was going to help Israel defend itself, and that even France – Israel's closest ally and arms provider at the time – was taking an anti-Israel stance, the anxiety deepened. The notion that something terrible could happen here was so deeply felt that Israelis again started talking about the Holocaust.

Remember that this was only six years after the Eichmann trial; Israelis were reminded of the fact that the Jews were left alone then, and now nobody really cared. Israel was even told not to defend itself – particularly by the French but also by others. Add to this the prevailing sense that the government was hesitant and not willing to take the necessary action, and you get a very depressed mood on the eve of the war.

The preparation of thousands of graves in the Tel Aviv area for the expected massive civilian losses in the looming war further heightened the alarm. There was also grave fear at the time – unjustified as it turned out later – that the Egyptians were going to use poison gas in the coming war as they had done shortly before during the war in Yemen. The IDF, on the other hand, was confident and used the waiting period very well to prepare for war.

**What was the main strategic significance of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War?**

By far the most important result of the war was the defeat of Nasser's radicalism. Nasser was a threat not only to Israel but also to the most vital global interests of the United States because of his liaison with the Soviet Union and his very significant role in bringing about massive Soviet influence in the Middle East. Nasser's 1967 defeat provided President Johnson with leverage to break this radicalism.

The U.S. message to Egypt was that if it wanted to retrieve the Sinai or other Arab territorial losses of the war, it would need not only to accommodate Israel but primarily to abandon its radical policies and its subservience to the Soviet Union. While Nasser rejected this message and tried to wear out Israel and the United States in the War of Attrition, his successor – Anwar Sadat – understood that he did not have a choice. He kicked out the Soviets, turned Egypt into a U.S. ally, went to Jerusalem in 1977, and signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979.

And so the Six-Day War gave the United States an instrument that finally demonstrated to the Arabs and to the Third World that if you want something done, you have to accommodate the United States

because the Americans have real leverage. The period between 1967 and 1977 was a learning process for the Egyptians: They found out that to get what they needed, they had to go primarily through Washington, and to a lesser but significant extent, through Jerusalem.

**How has this development affected the U.S.-Israel relationship?**

Israel's victory – and even more so the U.S. determination not to change the consequences of that victory without an Egyptian quid-pro-quo – proved the effectiveness of the American-Israeli alliance. The reason for the deep strategic cooperation between the two countries is not only shared values but also shared vital interests in the region. There may be disagreements between them here and there, but what is vitally important for both countries is best achieved when they work together as they have done in the last four decades.

Now, were there a lot of tensions between Israel and the United States in the postwar period? Yes. Were the relations between them in the late 1960s half as good as they are today? No. But even during that period, the deep U.S. understanding that you can use Israeli achievements to further vital American interests was demonstrated in the way the United States handled the consequences of the Six-Day War.