



The Six-Day War Was a One-Time Event

by Gen. (res.) Gershon Hachohen

BESA Center Perspectives No. 487, June 5, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The events of the Six-Day War of 1967 are often used by proponents of withdrawal from the West Bank as proof that Israel can defend itself from behind the “green line.” Since Israel won the 1967 conflict from this starting point, they argue, it will readily be able to do so again if necessary. There is, therefore, no strategic impediment to relinquishing control over these territories. However, this argument ignores all the military-strategic changes that have washed over the region in the fifty years since that conflict. It fails to take into account that the Six-Day War was a one-time event with unique circumstances that will not be seen again.

In many ways, the 1967 war was a “secondary tremor” from the tectonic earthquake of WWII. It used many of the same doctrines, and the same, or similar, military platforms, with the main exception being fighter jets that replaced propeller air force planes. Many of the ground platforms were the same in both wars, including Sherman, British-made tanks used by Israel, and Soviet-made T-34 tanks used by Syria and Egypt. The artillery guns were quite similar in both wars, as were the fighting techniques.

Senior Israeli defense officials flew to Germany to learn about WWII doctrines and spoke to German and British former commanders. They took off-the-shelf doctrines, like Germany's WWII-era Blitzkrieg doctrine, and adapted them to the Israel Defense Force's (IDF) needs in the best possible manner.

In the 1960s, wars in the Middle East occurred mainly in open areas, with military machines moving across such battle zones. The IDF, borrowing from Blitzkrieg doctrine, utilized the dynamics of surprise attack and the move-and-fire tactic. The

Israel Air Force's (IAF) surprise attacks on the air forces of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and, later, Iraq, were developed from a Luftwaffe doctrine. The IAF made optimal use of this doctrine in the Six-Day War.

This feat was never repeated, because the neighboring states, in subsequent years, hid their jets in underground hangars.

On the Arab side, the Syrians, Egyptians, and Jordanians relied on Soviet defensive doctrines during the Six-Day War, following them very closely. In 1964, three years before the outbreak of hostilities, Soviet military systems were being imported into Egypt and Syria in vast quantities.

The successful Israeli air campaign set the scene for the land war. Consider, for example, the southern front with Egypt. The IDF entered Sinai on the second morning of the war, on June 6. Egypt quickly began withdrawing as it lacked air cover, which was the main defense for ground forces. The order from Cairo was to retreat as quickly as possible. From day two, the IDF went from attack mode to advance and pursuit operations.

On the northern front, Syria too lacked air power. It realized that it was alone, as Egypt and Jordan were losing their combat capabilities. Syria's defensive positions were deployed too far forward, and it had not placed sufficient backup armored units to realize the Soviet counterattack doctrine.

Had Syria placed more armored units on its front with Israel, the IDF would not have been able to seize the Golan Heights.

As the battles raged, airborne IDF units captured the southern Golan. They then progressed to Quneitra in the north, and the Syrian forces withdrew.

On the eastern front, the battle for Jerusalem lasted 27 hours. When it ended, IDF paratroopers and armored units were in control of the city.

The Jordanian defensive system was hastily created, relying on a territorial brigade that defended Jerusalem. These forces were shattered by IAF strikes in places like Ma'aleh Adumim, and had no chance in the war.

Jordan's King Hussein ordered his "crown jewel" unit, Brigade 40, to withdraw from the northern West Bank.

None of these events can be repeated. Warfare has shifted from open areas to urban settings. Even in Jerusalem, in 1967, Jordanian military positions were out in the open, on Ammunition Hill, separated from civilian zones.

In modern warfare, military units must conduct street-to-street fighting, often without knowing where the enemy is located.

This means the whole idea of encircling an area and besieging it while knocking out the enemy's centers of gravity, which was so successful in 1967, is no longer relevant.

In 2017, the enemy's systems are decentralized. One need look no further than Hezbollah in Lebanon to see this. The organization possesses a deep understanding of the IDF's advantages, and seeks to cancel them out. Hezbollah lacks F-35 jets, submarines, and tanks, and wishes to level the playing field.

It does this by stocking up on rockets with a variety of ranges. Quantity is what counts in this type of approach. Hezbollah has over 100,000 projectiles. Even if 80% miss their targets or are destroyed, 20,000 enemy rocket attacks is a substantial threat.

Hezbollah has also set up bases of operation in hilly Lebanese areas, dubbed "nature reserves." This tactic cancels out Israel's ability to conduct a rapid lightning assault. In war under these circumstances, a new battle develops every moment. Every village under enemy control is a new war.

The latest tactic being used by Hezbollah, and Hamas as well, is to set up elite forces designed to take the fight into Israeli territory. Hamas has the Nuhba force to this end, and Hezbollah's Redwan unit was set up for this objective.

These types of threats mean Israel has to allocate more resources to defense. Israel's aerial supremacy still goes a long way, but it cannot be described as decisive in modern warfare.

Twenty-first century enemies operate underground, in tunnels and bunkers. Their zones are interlinked with that of civilians, meaning that even if Israel gets excellent intelligence, it can't always act on it, for fear of creating enormous collateral damage. Killing thousands of civilians in a few strikes would immediately lead to Israel's delegitimization.

In 1967, Israel's enemies made all mistakes possible. Israel's modern-day enemies will not do that again.

War in the new era is based on local fighters, as the Syrian and Ukrainian battlegrounds have proven. Hamas has built up localized divisions and brigades, whose commanders live in the areas in which they operate.

In the Six-Day War, the Egyptian soldiers mobilized to Gaza and Sinai were expeditionary forces. When the battles ended, they went home, to Egyptian cities far

from the conflict zones. In Gaza, when battles end, commanders hide their weapons at home and act like local civilian residents. They live among the people.

When one fights locals, the dynamics of post-conflict situations change. Occupying territory and hoisting a flag mean very different things in 1967 and 2017.

In the Six-Day War, Israel had the ability to get to Nablus and stay there. Today, if Israel leaves the West Bank, and Palestinian terrorists begin firing rockets at Israel, the IDF would return – but it would take years to reestablish control of Palestinian urban centers in the West Bank, not six days.

These fundamental changes mean defending Israel from the pre-1967 borders is no longer possible.

Today, with much of the West Bank's territory under Israeli control, the IDF can send two Jeeps into a Palestinian village to conduct a pinpoint security operation. In Gaza, which Israel left in 2005, only major firepower and an entire operation would enable the IDF to reenter. If Israel leaves the West Bank, the area will turn into Gaza, and the possibility of nightly security raids – essential for Israel's security – will disappear.

In addition, the character of the enemy and its motivation have been transformed. Israel has placed its faith in technological advantages while the enemies have become religious.

All these changes mean that the lessons of the 1967 War are not applicable to 2017, and should not be seen as such.

Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family