



*The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East*, by Guy Laron. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017. 384 pages. \$28.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS EHRLICH REIFER

The Six-Day War, beginning on 5 June 1967 with Israel's attack on Egypt and its destruction of the combined Arab air forces of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, dramatically reshaped the Middle East and tripled Israel's territories to include the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem (p. 1). Into the mire of the war's murky history comes Guy Laron, a multilingual Israeli historian known for *Origins of the Suez Crisis*.<sup>\*</sup> Revealing the long-held Israeli plans for expanding its borders, Laron goes significantly beyond William Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim's important edited collection *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*, John Quigley's landmark *The Six-Day War and Israeli Self-Defense*, and Ilan Pappé's informative *Ten Myths about Israel*.<sup>†</sup> Laron's work contrasts with that of Michael Oren (an American-born Israeli who served as Israel's ambassador to the United States from 2009–13 and is now deputy prime minister), whose apologetic *Six Days of War*,<sup>‡</sup> powerfully critiqued by Norman Finkelstein, has an astonishing new introduction lauding the war.

Spanning the decades leading up to the war, the book shows that the war “was designed and even desired by prominent military figures in [a number of] the warring countries” (p. 2). Tense military-civilian relations in Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, recurrent economic crises in the former three states, and weakened or deposed civilian leaders in Israel and Syria paved the way for military pressure towards confrontation and war. Laron frames the conflict in light of the escalatory pressures, offensive military doctrines, regional instability, border disputes, and terrorism leading to World War I. An important focus of Laron's book is the significance of Syria in the escalation of confrontation, though while highlighting the military coup that overthrew Syria's parliamentary government in 1949, Laron omits the United States' role here.

The period leading up to the Six-Day War was characterized by recurrent war scares, military attacks (some by Palestinian guerrillas), brinkmanship, and provocative Israeli and Arab actions, including the amassing of military forces poised to strike, and military alliances among many

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<sup>\*</sup> John Hopkins University Press, 2013.

<sup>†</sup> *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); *The Six-Day War and Israeli Self-Defense: Questioning the Legal Basis for Preventive War* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); *Ten Myths About Israel* (Verso Books, 2017).

<sup>‡</sup> *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (first published by Presidio Press in 2002, and republished in 2017).

Arab states. The most revealing of Laron's findings are documented in his chapter, "Expanding Israel's Borders." In it, Laron shows the extent to which Israel's General Staff were "eager to use the next war to expand Israel's borders" and conquer new territories such as the West Bank and Gaza. Some even advocated for "preventive war," as Prime Minister Levi Eshkol learned during a series of discussions with the General Staff in 1963, with plans dating back to the 1950s, after what were seen as the missed opportunities of the 1948 war (pp. 106–7).

Ben-Gurion thought the post-1948 borders were "unbearable" and in response to his prodding, the Israel Defense Forces Planning Department drew up plans for territorial expansion and new borders in August 1950, envisioning "Israel's Strategic Living Space," echoing German notions of lebensraum. The contingency plans were updated and rewritten during the 1950s and early 1960s, when the so-called sabras, or Palestine-born generation of generals, came to power, and Israel's military began preparing and training soldiers for military occupation and rule. Yet while Eshkol thought that by providing weapons to the army he retained military control, the armed forces saw those weapons as allowing them "to build an offensive army that was capable of expanding Israel's borders. The military had been working on that plan for over a decade" (p. 267). While an aggressive offensive strategy was ascendant in the Israeli military, coming to the fore in what Israeli historian Tom Segev called the prewar "generals' revolt," Syria and Egypt were trained primarily in defense, despite their recklessly aggressive and provocative moves and statements before the war. Arab military forces were geared toward domestic repression and regime survival, versus Israel's focus on offensive war preparation, advanced intelligence, and air superiority that was critical to its lightning speed victory. Moreover, the Central Intelligence Agency and the White House gave a green light to Israeli plans, as did the Pentagon, the latter having "only one worry: Israel must find a convincing pretext before launching its offensive" (p. 211).

Military-civilian relations factored into the lack of a subsequent peace settlement, once the generals in Israel achieved the borders they had long envisioned. Those running Israel's policy toward the West Bank and Gaza, such as Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, were clear about their aspirations for the Palestinians. As Dayan outlined at a Mapai Party meeting in September after Israel's victory: "Let's tell [the Palestinians]: 'you will continue to live like dogs.' Those who want to leave—will leave . . . in five years, 200,000 [Palestinians] may leave and that would be a great thing" (p. 305). But it was not to be. While in 1966 military rule over its 400,000 Arab citizens in Israel was abolished, in 1967 Israel came to rule more than a million Palestinians. Among the results of Israel's aggressive expansionist war: fifty-plus years of brutal military occupation, wars, and regional and global insecurity, with incalculable costs and dangers. The recent revelation by Avner Cohen of Israel's secret doomsday option to detonate a nuclear weapon during the 1967 war only underscores Laron's important work.

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