

## The Six-Day War

Source: Israel Government Yearbook 5728 (1967-68), Central Office of information, Prime Minister's Office, March 1968, pp. 17-25

On the morning of Monday, 5 June 1967, Arab aggression led to the outbreak of air and ground fighting between Israel and Egypt. Within a few hours, attacks by Jordan, Syria and Iraq turned the fighting into war between Israel and the Arab States, Algeria, Kuwait and Sudan included, for they, too, dispatched combat units which took part in it.

Instantly, Israel aircraft delivered a lightning assault upon the Egyptian air force and wiped it out in three short hours, and, on that same first day, the other enemy air forces were either wiped out, too, or badly mauled. Our armor, parachutists and infantry broke through in Sinai and the Gaza Strip overran the heavily-fortified lines of Egypt after bitter engagements and, thrusting hard and swiftly westward and southward, smashed seven Egyptian divisions and their nearly a thousand tanks. All Sinai was in our hands, the sea-lane to Eilat was open once more, and our troops stood on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. On the Jordanian front, our forces drove into Judaea and Samaria in a multi-axial attack, worsted the Arab Legion, and in less than three days had taken the entire area. Jerusalem, one and undivided, was freed. On the Syrian front, we stormed the Golan Heights for all its powerful defenses, its difficult terrain and an enemy that offered stout resistance until, at length, it was broken.

Egypt lost all its aircraft and most of its army, and its navy was not unscathed. The air and land forces of Jordan and Syria were overwhelmed. Iraq's contingent, except for air squadrons on air-field No. 3, never fought; its communications unit, posted in Jordan, was punished in a raid by Israel planes.

So the war ended, with our aircraft in unchallenged superiority throughout, our soldiers established along advantageous lines at the Suez Canal, on the River Jordan and the Golan Heights. It had been a war fought to shatter the Arab aggression which had permanently plagued our lives, amounting latterly to boundless ferocity. It was the last, stern and fateful campaign in the war of nineteen years of belligerency waged by the Arab States against Israel from the first day of its establishment.

The political and military preludes to the Six-Day War in the Arab camp are described elsewhere in this Year Book. By the morning of 5 June, then, Egypt had seven – including two armored – divisions in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Jordan had seven infantry and two armored brigades, the infantry deployed along our border, the armor in the Jordan Valley. Egypt sent Jordan two commando battalions; Iraq moved a squadron to air-field No. 3 near its frontier with Jordan and began to maneuver infantry units in the interior. Syria marshaled its strength along our border: four infantry brigades there and two others holding a rearward second line; a spearhead of two armored and two mechanized brigades took post on the Golan Heights, and part of it was moved forward to the very boundary.

In the air, according to published reports, the Arab States had between 600 and 700 aircraft, far more than Israel. Numerically, the Egyptian navy was many times

superior to ours. The 'defense' pacts meant operational coordination between the Arab forces on all three fronts. The balance of power between Israel and its neighbors was gravely upset, the danger immediate.

As the Egyptian forces moved northwards in Sinai, the Israel Defense Forces started to mobilize the Reserves, and the extent of call-up and readiness kept pace with every intensification of the Arab threat.

On 5 June, the great charge of cumulative tension exploded thunderously.

### **The Air Force**

From the first moment, the Air Force went into full action; its instantaneous and devastating strike on the enemy's airfields has been mentioned. It achieved air mastery and kept it. Our pilots attacked enemy columns and emplacements on all fronts, transported our troops, did patrolling and communication flights, rescued comrades who bailed out behind the enemy lines, evacuated our wounded from the firing-line, and flew in and parachuted supplies. The ground-crews, in ceaseless and strenuous servicing, made it possible for our aircraft to take off safely again and again on their many missions: it was an unremitting discipline that added vastly to the effectiveness of the Air Force.

Egypt, Syria and Jordan, with the two Iraqi squadrons, had 600 aircraft, 450 bombers and jet-fighters, the remainder transport planes and helicopters. On the first day, about 350 were destroyed on the ground and – a minority – in air fights. Egyptian airfields came under attack in Sinai and the Suez Canal zone, in the Delta and in the neighborhood of Cairo, right through to the Nile Valley, the shores of the Red Sea and up to the Sudan frontier; in Beni Suweif and Luxor long-range Topolev-16 bombers were the targets. It took a hundred and seventy minutes to write 'finis' to Egypt's air power, infinitely less than our wildest optimism had envisaged; the destruction of 300 Egyptian aircraft grimly underlines what might have happened if these planes had been operable against our forces and our civilians. Among them 2343 30 Topolev-16 heavy bombers, 27 medium Llyushin-28, 12 Sohoj-7 fighter-bombes, only just delivered, 90 Mig19 and 75 Mig17 fighters, and 32 transport planes and helicopters, including the large Mi-6 type.

Jordan, Syria and Iraq had bombed Israel territory from the air on the first day. With Egypt now out of it, we turned to the airfields of Amman and Mafrak, of Damascus, Dameir, Seikal and Marj-Rail, and No. 3 in Iraq. Within an hour, all of Jordan's 20 Hunter fighters, and its seven transport planes and helicopters had been dealt with; in Iraq, six Mig-21s and three Hunters; in Syria, 30 Mig-21s, 20 Mig-17s and two Llyushin-28s, meaning two-thirds of its air force and the rest of it took off for airfields at a safe distance from our operational radius. The skies over the Golan Heights were in our undisputed control.

After that, and even before it, two-thirds of the jet sorties were to aid our ground forces, in an ever-widening and more powerful cooperation of crucial importance on all fronts.

It was not all attack. There was also transport, perhaps a prosaic way of describing the daring extrication of 'downed' pilots many kilometers behind the enemy lines rushing wounded from forward positions or parachuting men down into the heart of enemy emplacements in the midst of battle. All this by helicopter; transport planes carried reinforcements and supplies into battle areas.

The strength of an air force is usually measured by the number of its planes. A better criterion is how many sorties it can carry out in a given time, which depends not only on the number of planes but also on the capability of ground crews. Our mechanics, armorers and fuelers worked round the clock, so that the planes could fly at top capacity, strike continuously at the enemy and sustain the sweep and élan of combat to the end. There never was a moment when our aircraft did not enjoy total serviceability.

The citizens of Israel suffered almost no hurt from enemy air bombing; practically every enemy plane that entered our air space was shot down.

### **The Navy**

The massive naval forces of the enemy never once took action, to disturb our sea-lanes, shell our coastal conurbations, or molest our forces from the rear. No commandos or saboteurs were landed behind our lines. Not one vessel of ours was hit. In the light of Egypt's colossal buildup of naval strength with Soviet help, and of Israel's geography, this was astounding.

Israel's little flotilla was not slow to attack, entering the enemy's waters, beleaguering his ports and bases, penetrating his anchorages, inflicting damage on his ships. On the first night, in the harbor of Alexandria, several Egyptian vessels were hit; after midnight, an Israel destroyer and two torpedo-boats in the approaches of Port Said opened fire at a range of a thousand yards on two missile-carriers of Soviet make, scoring direct hits and forcing them to turn tail without even firing back.

The navy, out of Eilat, took due part in the action that led to the capture of Sharm el-Sheikh.

### **Land Battles The Southern Front**

The piercing of the forward defense positions in Sinai was carried through in a tri-axial offensive by task-force under Brigadiers Israel Tal, Erik Sharon and Abraham Yaffe, each made up of brigades of armor, infantry, parachutists, artillery, engineers and communications and medical units, plus a maintenance ancillary for fuel, ammunition, repairs and supply, which permitted independent combat and movement over several successive days and nights.

The break-through on the northern axis was by the Tal task-force, attacking in the Khan Yunis-Rafiah area, a two-brigaded position twelve kilometers deep with a strong protection of mines, tanks and anti-tank guns. The attack was mounted with great vigor by parachutists and armor, frontally and in a long flanking movement against the enemy's southern element, and especially its artillery. Hard fighting went on for hours, but, even before the day was won, we had exploited the first gap to pass through a tank formation which burst out westward, overcame enemy positions at Sheikh Zueid and el-Jiradi and by nightfall had reached el-Arish.

The task of the Sharon task-force was to penetrate and shatter the enemy defenses at Umm Khataf and Abu Ageila, which had been reinforced by an infantry brigade, about 90 tanks and six units of artillery. The attack was delivered from the Nitzana area and lasted all night: our parachutists overran the artillery from the rear, the infantry assaulted the forward lines and the armor made frontal and flank inroads, one after the other, from the north and the rear. The enemy's guns were strong, but by dawn his central line was abandoned and the task-force could advance through Abu Ageila to Jebel Livni.

So it moved into Sinai on a zigzag axis through almost impassable sand-dunes from the Rafiah-el-Arish line in the north to the Nitzana-Abu Ageila line in the south, and eventually came up behind the enemy's southerly position at Bir Lahfan and denied his armor beyond that any chance of reinforcing the defenses under our attack.

A detachment of our armor faced an Egyptian armored force of division strength which was extended in the Wadi Kureiya, apparently with the idea of cutting off Eilat and the southern Negev. The detachment made contact with the enemy and, on the first day, stormed part of the Kuntilla defenses.

At the northern end of the southern theatre of operations, Israel infantry fought from top to bottom of the Gaza Strip, clearing Khan Yunis, seizing Deir Balah, and, after a stern engagement at the approaches to Gaza, taking the Ali Muntar emplacement.

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The tanks of the Tal task-force reached el-Arish on the first day. But the enemy reorganized in his fortified el-Jirada line to the south, and armored infantry attacked it at night to clear the way to el-Arish for the rest of the task-force. At el-Arish, the task-force split and went on bi-axially: one formation westward towards the Suez Canal, meeting with only light resistance for the first half of its progress; the other southward, fighting a tank battle on the el-Arish airfield. Still moving southward, the Tal task-force took the Bir Lahfan defenses and the Yaffe task-force fought a tank battle with the enemy behind them.

From that point, the two task-forces proceeded to Jebel Livni, where the Yaffe task-force was joined by a detachment which had been waiting in Israel until the road to Abu Ageila was open. In the Jebel Livni area, the Yaffe task-force fought a second battle,

and then the two task-forces linked up in a concerted assault westward and southward. The Sharon task-force, meanwhile, advanced the whole day, fighting from the Umm Khatab-Abu Ageila area southward and westward towards Kuseime, and clashing with an enemy armored division that had assembled in the south, at the Kureiya Pass.

Simultaneously, an infantry unit, with a complement of parachutists and tanks, captured Gaza in severe fighting, and commanded the entire Strip.

At this stage, all three task-forces advanced westward and southward to envelop the main Egyptian armor, sever its line of retreat to the Canal Zone and compel it to give battle. The Tal task-force, less a contingent operating on the coastal axis, made its way through delaying forces of the enemy's tanks to the Bir Gafgafa area. There it occupied the terrain negotiable by tanks, thus straddling the only possible exit for the Egyptian armor towards the Canal, and was at once attacked by an Egyptian formation coming from the south-east in an attempt, with air support, to undo the block. It was driven off and the Tal task-force delivered a counter-attack on both flanks, decimating an Egyptian mechanized brigade. During the night, a group of 60 T-55 tanks, from the Canal direction, made a second challenge and, for two hours of critical and costly fighting, our light tanks held them off until reinforcements arrived and the enemy tanks were routed.

Now, the task-force moved slowly towards the Canal, exchanging fire along with Egyptian tanks engaged in rearguard actions.

Things were much the same on the northern axis, where the formation that had split off at el-Arish was advancing. Besides their delaying tank tactics, the Egyptians brought into play what was left of their air force against our forward units, and a tough set-to between those units and the enemy planes was eventually settled by the intervention of our own aircraft, where-after the advance went on through the night and, towards dawn, we were at Kantara.

The Yaffe task-force, too, began the third day of the War in the Jebel Livni area, moving southward to take Bir Hasna and then purposefully onward to the Mitla Pass, traversed by a main highway. A brigade shut off the Pass and for twenty-four hours and more mopped up any enemy armor or other troops that tried to get through, while a second formation blocked the Wadi Jiddi egress, parallel to the Mitla Pass and about twenty kilometers to the north of it.

The Sharon task-force, after battering the Egyptian line-up in Abu Ageila and taking Kuseima, went on to Kalaat el-Nahl, on the southern axis. In the process, in two parallel movements for part of the way, it fought tank battles with a trapped enemy. Now, based on Kalaat el-Nahl, it was joined there by a unit of the armored detachment that had taken Kuntilla and el-Thammad; another detachment occupied the frontier post of Ras el-Nakb.

In every part of the desert, all the length of every axis, this was the day of the fiercest battles of armor, in which about a thousand tanks were engaged; every one of them ended with Israel's armor victorious.

On the night of Wednesday, and on the morrow, the three task-forces advanced severally towards the Canal, and, when fighting ended, the forward troops, on all lines, halted in the evening on the highway parallel to the Canal, making contact with each other.

The southern arm of the Tal task-force – the northern had entered Kantara the day before – arrived at the Canal opposite Ismailia. The Yaffe task-force arrived in two sections – one approximately opposite Suez and the other slightly further north, opposite the Little Bitter Lake; one of its formations advanced from Foukar in a south-westerly direction and reached the Gulf of Suez at Ras el-Sudar, and a detachment proceeded along the coast to Abu Znima, where it met men from our Sharm el-Sheikh garrison who had gone northward after taking the township of al-Tur.

### **West Jordan**

The Jerusalem brigade was the first of our ground forces to retort to Jordanian aggression. At noon, it attacked the Arab Legion company which, a few hours earlier, had seized Government House, headquarters of the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization. By 4 p.m., after a hard battle, the place was in our hands. That task accomplished, the brigade went on to capture the 'salami position' which links Government House with Zur Bahr, and the 'bell position' in that village, east of Ramat Rahel. At about the same time, armor from the Jerusalem corridor came into action in a northerly, and from the Northern Command, in a southerly direction. Infantry of an armored brigade came from the direction of Maale haHamisha and Castel to engage the Legion outposts at the 'Radar' and Sheikh Abdul Aziz; our tanks silenced the bunkers and by nightfall both points were in our hands, allowing the armor to go forward. Meanwhile, another part of the armored brigade broke through from the east and advanced towards the hills along the difficult passage through Beit Iksa and Beit Hanina, and, towards morning, had reached the slopes opposite Tel el-Ful; the forces from the corridor kept going and, during the night, overran the enemy's defenses, turned eastward and mastered the light enemy opposition in Nebi Samwil.

The same night, our infantry captured Latrun village, the police post and the whole enclave, continuing eastward and upward by way of Beth Horon, and joining up finally with the armored brigade outside Ramallah.

At dusk on Monday, fighting began in the area of the Northern Command A brigade of armor, reinforced by infantry, smashed its way to Jenin on the Giv'at Oz-Jenin and the Ain el-Sahala-Yabid lines. In parallel, infantry made thrusts from the Beisan Valley, to mislead the enemy and prevent him concentrating against our main effort at Jenin. The attack upon the town was launched at 3 a.m.: the Arab Legion fought back fiercely, using anti-tank weapons with effect; it also had an advantage of topography on

the heights commanding Jenin, and of Patton tanks, most of our armor in that area being Shermans 50 and 51. Tank battles were violent around and inside Jenin. Our tanks reorganized and refueled, and were pushing through at last, when 60 enemy Pattons appeared from the direction of Toubas, only to be bombarded from the air and by our guns, so that the brigade could mount a new attack, capture Jenin and drive back any remnants of the Legion. This was in the morning of Tuesday.

On Monday night, a brigade of parachutists went into action in Jerusalem; their assignment was to seize a densely built-up area in darkness and, from the start, they came under deadly gunfire, which grew fiercer every moment. Yet they went dauntlessly on into scores of wired and fortified emplacements, and fought determined enemy marksmen in sewers, within buildings, on roofs, in cellars, for four solid hours, suffering many casualties. In the north-east of Jerusalem, the fighting ended with the Police Training School, Sheikh Jarrah, the American Colony and the Rockefeller Museum environs in our hands: the way to Mount Scopus was open.

From the north of Jerusalem, the armored brigade fought hard to gain control of the space between Jerusalem and Ramallah, key-area for command of the West Bank. Tel el-Ful was taken in a tank engagement, and from there a battalion of the brigade moved southward. Sha'afat fell easily to a force which went on towards the Hill of the Parts north of Sheikh Jarrah, and the French Hill; our men were pinned down, with serious losses, by hellish fire and had to withdraw; it took a second attack to break the Legion's resistance. The French Hill was quickly taken.

The two other battalions of the brigade moved north from Tel el-Ful towards Ramallah, and linked up with the infantry that had captured Latrun the previous night and ascended the Beth Horon Pass; on the way to Ramallah, they redeemed the former Jewish settlements of Neve Yaacov and Ataroth. At nightfall, the armor entered Ramallah, meeting with only token defense.

On the western flank, infantry advanced towards Qalkiliya and reached Azun.

The Northern Command pressed steadily southward. The brigade of armor that had taken Jenin engaged a Jordanian counterpart at the Kabatiya crossroads. *Pari passu*, the Command pushed in part of a second armored brigade, which got through by another track through Deir Abu Dai'f and Jelak-Mus to Thilfit, striking the Kabatiya-Toubas-Nablus highway at 10:15 a.m. Moving on, it came up against enemy armor at Kufeir, and the tank engagement lasted till dusk. After midnight, our men attacked again and in a series of tank encounters got as far as Aqaba; from there, they could go on to Toubas, which yielded without a fight. The next morning, they were at the crossroads of the highway from Jisr Damieh and could bar the approach of any enemy armored reinforcements from that direction.

At Jerusalem, everything was ready for the final phase. Jordanian shelling had not stopped for moment. In the early afternoon, the Jerusalem brigade attacked Abu Tor, east of the railway station; the Arab Legion defended it stubbornly and long, but gave

way eventually; and the brigade went on down to the Vale of Kidron. The parachutist brigade spent the day clearing the captured areas, reorganizing and moving troops to their points of departure for Wednesday's operations.

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Wednesday will be remembered forever as one of the great days in the millennial chronicles of Jewry. On that day, the fighters of the Israel Defense Forces restored its wholeness to Jerusalem, eternal Capital, and, with it, the Temple Mount and the Western Wall were brought back to the bosom of their People. The parachutist brigade had the honor and glory of freeing the Old City: it did its duty with superb courage and paid for victory with the lives of the finest of its men. At 8:30 a.m., after aerial bombardment and a heavy artillery barrage Augusta Viktoria Stiftung, the Mount of Olives and el-Azariya, east of the Old City, were stormed in frontal assault, and, after a brief interval orders were given to take the Old City. The Muslim quarter was silenced, and our forces charged through the Lions' Gate. By 10 a.m., they were at the Temple Mount and the Western Wall.

So ended the battle for Jerusalem. The Arab Legion withdrew, and armed resistance thereafter was negligible. The Jerusalem brigade, meanwhile, outside the Walls, attacked the enemy positions at Mount Zion and cleared the entire area up to the Pool of Silwan and the Dung Gate. In the early afternoon, operating out of Ramat Rahel, it swept over the battalion defenses of the Arab Legion at Mar Elias and rapidly southward, hardly resisted, to capture Bethlehem and redeem Gush Etzion. Towards evening, Hebron fell, and, the next morning, a small armored group moved toward Dahariya and joined up with the forces of the Southern Command.

From the north of Jerusalem, two battalions of the brigade went forward on parallel lines to Jericho, and took it; the third went from Ramallah northward to join up with the Northern Command units that had entered Nablus. Coming from the coastal area, infantry seized Tulkarm and advanced on Ramah. One Northern Command armored brigade kept moving westward from Jenin to Nablus, taking Araba, Silat el-Zahr and Sabastia on the way. The second was at Nablus by the forenoon, coming from Toubas in the east. The townspeople apparently thought that it was an Iraqi reinforcement and joyously welcomed the entering tanks, but when they realized their mistake, sniping began. In the western approaches, Jordanian tanks had been assigned to defend the town, and the tussle with them was prolonged till nightfall.

## Golan Heights

The ridge along our north-eastern frontier was perhaps among the most strongly fortified positions in the world: it had been developed by the Syrian Army, with the help of foreign advisers, for many years. The reports of border incidents had taught us at least the names of the emplacements in the forward bastion, but behind that, going back in depth for several kilometers, were numerous entrenchments of second, third and other



defenses. The whole complex was pitted with bunkers of reinforced concrete and stonework of all kinds, particularly anti-tank guns and artillery. The approaches to the ridge from the Israel side, exceptionally difficult in any case, were nakedly open to the gaze and the guns of the enemy.

Yet this was where the first break-through had to be made if twenty years of Syrian aggression, based upon the bristling threat, were to be brought to an end. The Syrian positions were subjected to aerial bombardment and, beneath that barrage, one of our armored brigades struggled to the ridge at a point west of the village of Sulad, facing the Syrians at Naamush. Engineers and infantry patrols went ahead under enemy artillery and blazed a trail for the armor. Crossing the frontier at 11:30 a.m., the armor divided into two parts, one moving in the north towards Zeura and the other towards Zueib second, and by nightfall the operation was complete.

An infantry detachment from the Golan brigade, with tank reinforcement, clambered up and took Tel Azaziya, Tel Fakhr, Burj-Bawil and Bahriya and the village of Baniyas itself. It was at Tel Fakhr that the Golani fought their stiffest fight, in hand-to-hand combat that lasted three hours. Another Golani unit captured Urfiya, facing Nutra, and, through the gap, an armored brigade, having got as far as the village of Raviya on the same day, could make its way to the ridge. Infantry and parachutists drove further holes in the major Syrian defenses at Jelabina, Dargara, Tel Hillel and Darashiya. That finished the phase of penetration, and the night was spent on reorganization, refueling and bringing up supplies.

On the Sabbath morning, an armored force attacked Tel Hamra, helped to wind up the occupation of Baniyas and cleared out the Nuhelila positions and all the area up to the Lebanese frontier; from the mission, it returned eastward and took part in the attack on Mas'adeh.

Our troops, actually on the ridge, went over to the offensive again after our Air Force had pounded the Syrians once more, and, at approximately 10 a.m., signs were evident that the Syrian line was crumbling. An armored brigade advanced quickly along the Wast-Mansura-Kuneitra axis, and the enemy withdrew almost without making contact. Another armored brigade overcame anti-tank opposition on the road from Raviya to Wast, and went on then on the same axis to Kuneitra, which fell into our hands at 2:30 p.m. The Golani brigade soon arrived to clear the town. Other armor climbed to the ridge by way of Darbashiya, and set about cleaning up the length of the pipeline to the Butamiya junction.

In the southern segment of the Heights, southeast of Lake Kinneret towards Butamiya, operations were entrusted to a column under the command of Brigadier El' ad Peled. Parachutists, tanks and amphibious caterpillars went up from Tel Katzir, ascended the Tawafik crest, and advanced with speed along the axis to Butamiya. Some of the parachutists were dropped from helicopters at various points along the axis – Kfar Hareb, Fik, el Al and Butamiya – to cut the enemy's lines of retreat and prevent him from extricating his forces. As that was happening, infantry from Ein Gev and the Almagor

region moved along the eastern shore of Lake Kinneret to rendezvous, and met in the vicinity of Kfar Akab.

It was over.