

PolicyWatch #1243 : Special Forum Report

When Diplomacy Failed: Lessons Learned from June 1967

Featuring Samuel Lewis, Wendy Chamberlin, and Dennis Ross

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On June 4, 2007, Ambassadors Samuel Lewis, Wendy Chamberlin, and Dennis Ross addressed a special Washington Institute symposium on the anniversary of the Six Day War. Mr. Lewis served as U.S. ambassador to Israel under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Ms. Chamberlin, president of the Middle East Institute, previously served as U.S. ambassador to Laos and Pakistan, and as deputy high commissioner in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Dr. Ross, The Washington Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of [Statecraft, And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#) (2007). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SAMUEL LEWIS

The historical record has made it increasingly clear that in the May-June 1967 Middle East conflict, public assurances from world powers -- or the lack thereof -- greatly influenced the decisionmaking of regional leaders. Specifically, Soviet encouragement of Egypt -- both public and private -- played a large role in influencing Egyptian chief of staff and military commander Abdul Hakim Amer as he brought President Gamal Abdul Nasser to the brink of war with Israel. At the same time, however, the U.S. government under President Lyndon Johnson extended no parallel public assurances to Israel. This absence of commitment from a major foreign power or the UN in a moment of crisis affected the mindset of Israel's policymakers whenever they faced national security dilemmas thereafter, leading them to take many unilateral actions in subsequent years.

In fact, the uncertainty behind U.S.-Israeli military relations dated back to the Tripartite Declaration of 1950, in which the United States -- together with Britain and France -- pledged to limit the supply of arms to the Arab states and Israel. That seminal event affected the thinking of Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who decided that war should not be declared without the firm backing of one of the "great powers." In 1967, this philosophy was at odds with Israeli chief of staff Yitzhak Rabin and defense minister Moshe Dayan's proposals for going to war without obtaining clear American assurances beforehand.

Israel pursued a unilateral strategy again in 1981 with the bombing of Iraq's Osiraq nuclear site, intended to prevent Baghdad from acquiring the ability to produce nuclear weapons. That incident was, in some respects, the result of a long effort by the Menachem Begin government to win U.S. assurances about forestalling Iraq's nuclear ambitions. The United States tried to stem those ambitions diplomatically, but failed. That failure reinforced the Israeli perception that foreign assurances, while useful, cannot be relied on as the sole means of countering a potentially threatening situation. Accordingly, the prospect of neutralizing the threat of a nuclear Iraq -- much like the Israeli perspective on the Iranian nuclear program today -- was to be assessed without any explicit defense commitments from the United States.

Despite being unable to offer any public military pledge in lead-up to the Six Day War, Johnson's White House was arguably the most cordial Israel had ever dealt with. American advisors such as Abe Fortas, Eugene Rostow, and Arthur Goldberg -- as much as the president himself -- conveyed positive feelings toward

the government of Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol. When the chips were down, however, Washington would not provide written commitments to the Israelis as it had in 1956 via President Dwight Eisenhower. State Department and CIA analysts warned of devastating consequences for America's relationship with its Arab allies, and Congress would not vote in support of aiding Israel or ordering an end to Nasser's blockade in the Strait of Tiran. Johnson's hands were tied -- "You'll only be alone if you go alone" was the message that Israel ultimately received from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the White House in the days before the war.

The inability to earn a U.S. commitment left Israel's defense and intelligence establishments no choice but to recommend independent military engagement with its neighbors. Only when it was clear that all efforts at diplomacy had failed was the Eshkol cabinet prepared to order the Israel Defense Forces General Staff to launch its campaign. Fear among Israeli leaders that an Egyptian first strike would eliminate the Dimona reactor project made them very eager to carry out the first wave of attacks across the Sinai.

In retrospect, Eshkol's tactics of delaying military action and working on diplomacy abroad turned out to be right. He succeeded in greatly increasing the worldwide support Israel received during and after the war, despite the lack of any public declarations beforehand. Even when Israel did decide to opt for preemption, Eshkol demonstrated that his country had tried very hard not to go to war.

If President Johnson had not been bogged down with Vietnam, he may have been able to produce a stronger message to President Nasser in spring 1967. Nasser, then, would have thought twice about running the risk of provocative deployments in the Sinai or a blockade in the Strait of Tiran. These valuable lessons of history should be borne in mind today as the United States engages in diplomacy with the government of Iran.

WENDY CHAMBERLIN

Most analysis of the Six Day War describes it as a "watershed event" that changed the power equation in the region tremendously. It is not difficult to identify the war's positive consequences. It definitely resolved the question of Israel's durability as a state in the international community. It also strengthened the long-term U.S.-Israeli relationship on multiple levels and brought enormous confidence to the Israeli public regarding the ability of its armed forces to credibly oppose adversaries. Indeed, people's attitudes after the war serve as one of the conflict's most compelling lessons.

Ultimately, Israel became an occupying power. Some would say that the country's leaders were not careful to weigh the consequences for all parties involved in the 1967 struggle. Understandably, Israel's exuberance and territorial gains from the war made it very willing to make "land for peace" offers a short time later. It was not until after Egyptian pride had been restored in 1973, however, that Cairo could make the push for reconciliation with the Israelis.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has changed a great deal since 1967. No longer is there a unified Arab front as in decades past. The Six Day War served to expose the weaknesses of Arab national armies, and Palestinian nationalist movements were the first to take over the mantle of resistance beginning in the 1970s. More recently, religious politics have taken on a larger role, as Palestinians came to believe that the UN and world powers were unable to deliver on their enduring aspirations for autonomy.

The success of future U.S.-led diplomacy between the Palestinians and Israelis will depend on whether basic human needs and aspirations are met. This is a prerequisite, to be treated not as a reward for compliance at the end of a process, but as a starting point for all parties with regard to negotiations. Accordingly, any effective peacemaking strategy must involve improving the socioeconomic conditions for all players in the conflict. People turn to extremism out of despair, but they begin to reject violence when they enjoy the tangible benefits of peaceful coexistence. The United States and the international community must be prepared to address the need for investments (which may run into billions of dollars) in order to bring an end to the conflict.

The challenge of the next U.S. president will be to engage in the peace process early and with intense personal commitment. At the same time, he or she must promote the development of a genuine Palestinian democracy that mandates accountability for elected leaders and individual citizens alike. There is no room in this process for allegiance to nonstate actors that practice violence. Leaders who are trustful of their counterparts in the negotiating process are best suited to deliver the promises of peace.

DENNIS ROSS

In 1960, the Soviets offered false intelligence encouraging Egypt to move two divisions into the Sinai. This enabled the Soviets to take credit when Israel chose not to engage. From this event, the Soviets learned the important lesson that by offering false intelligence to their ally, Egypt, they could claim a victory of sorts over a regional adversary, Israel. An echo of that past situation may be audible today: the Russians are furnishing Syria with what could amount to false information, suggesting that the United States might attack Iran and that Israel would in turn attack Syria. As a result, Syria has made an effort to acquire new armaments and reposition its forces along Israel's border, much like the measures taken by Nasser in the 1960s. By encouraging such behavior, Russia is trying to reestablish itself as a major player in world politics.

Another interesting echo from the past comes from Israel's aforementioned efforts to win public assurances from the United States before the Six Day War. Just as the U.S. government was more concerned with Vietnam then, Washington today finds itself unable to make certain pledges to Israel regarding Iran, given the situation in Iraq. Some say that the ability to focus on Israeli-Palestinian matters is greatly undermined by the U.S. determination to maintain a regional coalition to confront Iran. The uncertainty of achieving commitments from the United States has been deeply ingrained in Israeli approaches to national defense.

In matters of statecraft, it is vital to appreciate the importance of timing when conducting diplomacy. When there is an opening, it should be seized; when that opening is missed, the result leaves one worse off. Perhaps the American preoccupation with Vietnam in 1967 reduced its ability to avert war or even engage more intimately in Arab-Israeli disputes in subsequent years.

Leverage is equally necessary in statecraft. Instead of conveying episodic messages to Nasser about actions against Israel, a less ambiguous declaration of U.S. willingness to support the Israelis might have made Egypt's leader rethink his behavior. The U.S. government had this leverage but did not apply it due to its preoccupation with events elsewhere.

A final point is the need to marry objectives and means. This is clearly lacking at the moment in addressing Iran's nuclear agenda. The Bush administration has proposed international sanctions, which are of course important. But relying on the International Atomic Energy Agency in this process has forced the United States to resort to slow-motion diplomacy. In dealing with a swiftly advancing nuclear program, slow motion is a highly troubling approach. By relying on it, Washington ensures that its objectives and means are out of sync. It would be better to use the UN Security Council while simultaneously going outside the organization by working with allies that have leverage -- such as the Europeans, the Saudis, and the Japanese. All of these parties fear the prospect of Iranian nuclear armament, so a coordinated strategy is essential to bring about a mutually preferred outcome on the matter.

The Iranian nuclear problem is reaching such a stage that the Israelis are putting the United States on notice regarding the usefulness of the diplomatic path. Israel is beginning to arrive at the conclusion that Western diplomacy is not going to produce a desired outcome. If the United States does not want the Israeli military to provide its own answer, it is time to rethink American diplomatic strategy and hasten to make it work.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Ira Hubert.

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