1967: Changing Policies

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The creation of Israel in 1948 has led to a prolonged period of turbulence in the Middle East that is still festering to this day. The area became home to a very important struggle for dominance within the scope of the bullet-less Cold War, with Western interests being hinged almost entirely with the survival of an Israeli free state and the ability to access oil from the surrounding areas. As such, peace needed to be kept in order to find a permanent solution to the deeply rooted issues that have come to define the region. However, as history has shown that desire was not to be met in the first twenty years of the Israeli state. The Six Day War of 1967 was a watershed moment in the historic battle between the Arab and Israeli world; it was also a pivotal moment in Britain’s foreign policy concerning the Middle East. By 1967, Britain, once a great super power, had been relegated to the position of a second-tier power, trying desperately to maintain their interests in the Middle East. The road leading up to the conflict on June 5th was one of changing ideals in the relationship between Britain and Israel and the post conflict period was host to almost complete entrenchment of opposing philosophies. This essay intends to bring to light the importance of the conflict and subsequent months in changing the perceptions of what needed to be done in the region from both Israel`s side and their end goal of gaining security and recognition from the Arab nations, as well as Britain`s struggle to regain and maintain a working relationship with the Arab nations that were so closely tied to their economic viability on the international stage. In order to understand the change in relationship between the two nations, one must be informed of the previous elements that formed the foundation of the rapport, starting in 1948.

The creation of Israel in 1948 was the result of the Second World War and coinciding Holocaust that resulted in the demand for an independent home for Jews following the attempted eradication of European Jewry. Britain played a major role in the process of forming Israel and took the initial lead in protecting the sovereignty of the new nation-state. Throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s Britain supplied Israel with vast amounts of weapons, justifying it as their part in maintaining peace in the Middle East by securing and building Israel’s position of military strength so as to discourage an Arab attack against an obviously superior Israeli military.[[1]](#footnote-1) The supplying of those weapons acted as foreshadowing for future disagreements between the two nations, an issue that will be discussed further in the following pages. By the mid 1950’s “Britain began to see Arab nationalism as a threat to British interests in the regions-particularly, access to oil, regional stability, and commercial investments.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The recognition of this threat caused the idea of strengthening Israel in order to stem the tide of pan-Arab nationalism which was becoming more entrenched with the Soviets. At the time, Britain felt that it was the proper move to make, but was reticent to proclaim unwavering support for Israel as a nation, with a prominent British Statesman being quoted after a large transfer of arms to Tel Aviv in 1960 as saying,

“We do not give the Israelis arms because they are pro-Western or because we admire their achievement. We give them arms because out interests in the Middle East are the keep peace and quiet, and to prevent war. Anything which makes war more likely is against the interests of the Western Powers.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This quote was one of many attempts by the British to down-play their role in aiding Israel by shifting their perceived intentions from supporting the Israelis because they were a Western ally, to merely attempting to keep peace in the region and hopefully one day reaching a concord and resolving the overwhelming land dispute and refugee issues. However, by the mid 1960’s, keeping a lower profile in regards to Israeli support was a difficult process; the British had been relegated to a lower class of power and as such could ill afford to risk its access to the oil rich Arab countries that formed the majority of OPEC; nations that refused to even recognize Israel, let alone reach a peace agreement with them. As such, the Arab nations demanded more than simply perceived impartiality; they called for absolute support of the Arab policy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course Britain could not possibly do that. Add the Suez Canal debacle that remained fresh in the minds of the Arab leaders and they felt secure in believing Israel held the full support of the British. This would lead to many difficulties for Britain.

When Egypt, particularly its President and self-proclaimed ‘leader of the Arab people’, Gamal Abdel Nasser, closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping on May 21st 1967, Britain was forced to act or risk the weakening of transnational standards concerning free-trade.[[5]](#footnote-5) The closure of the Straits of Tiran, Israel`s only trade route to the Eastern world, meant that war was all but certain, and as such Britain had to cease its low profile and speak out in defense of Israel. On May 24th 1967, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson declared that,

“It is the view of Her Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom, that the Straits of Tiran must be regarded as an international waterway through which the vessels of all nations have a right of passage. Her Majesty’s Government will assert this right on behalf of all British shipping and is prepared to join with others to secure general recognition of this right.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Britain then went about forming an international naval task force in order to force the re-opening of the Straits; however it was met with limited interests from other nations, including two of Israel’s closest allies in the United States and France hesitating at the last moment.[[7]](#footnote-7)

With word of Egyptian mobilization and unable to have the Straits opened, Israel`s Foreign Minister, Abba Eban departed on a trip to the White House on May 25th 1967. The meeting with President Lyndon Johnson did very little in the way of easing Israeli tensions surrounding a potential three-sided attack from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Israel decided an offensive strike was necessary. The result was six days of utter dominance by the Israeli army. They gained territory in the Gaza strip and Sinai Peninsula as well as the Golan heights and the West Bank of the Jordan River; an area that included East Jerusalem. The occupation of East Jerusalem was clearly a volatile situation with both Muslims and Jews perceiving it as a God given Holy city. This outbreak of war was against the very foundation of British policy, they needed peace in order to secure their interests. In an effort to protect those interests, during the war, Britain maintained a position of neutrality, refusing to supply arms to either side and attempting to universalize this policy into an international arms embargo.[[8]](#footnote-8) This attempt displayed the increasingly changing policy concerning Israel and its Arab neighbours.

British economic relations with the Arab nations took a considerable hit when Nasser closed the Suez Canal during the war, and due to embarrassing nature of the defeat, claiming the U.S. and Britain made sure the Israelis won, kept the Canal closed after the conflict.[[9]](#footnote-9) To further the damage to Western interests, the Arab states imposed an oil embargo on the West and began withdrawing their vast amounts of money from British banks. These acts were devastating to Britain, devaluing the pound and forcing them to purchase oil from more expensive reserves such as Venezuela.[[10]](#footnote-10) Something needed to be done to protect and return to viability British interests; interests that were specified by the Foreign Office as: securing cheap and regular supply of oil; obtaining a large and profitable share of the Middle Eastern oil industry; encouraging ample Arab investment in Britain; and securing for British exports a bigger slice of the regional market.[[11]](#footnote-11) Along with the economic issues, Britain felt pressured to regain a relationship with the Arabs due to a fear of the Soviets influencing the Arab world into portraying the ‘evil Westerners’ as the sole reason for such an embarrassing and decisive defeat. This fear and subsequent blow to their economic stability acted as the propulsion needed to speak out against the actions of the Israelis.

In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly on July 21st 1967, British Foreign Secretary George Brown spoke out against the occupation of the territories gained during the conflict, especially East Jerusalem. The speech essentially gave an overview of Britain’s new ‘Arab friendly’ foreign policy. Brown dispelled the rumours of British involvement in securing an Israeli victory, demanded withdrawal from the occupied territories, especially the overly contentious East Jerusalem, and discussed the right for the return of Arab refugees to their homes. The speech’s intentions were clear, as the minutes of the British Cabinet meeting the following day stated, “To make it clear that we had not given, and were not giving, full support to either party in the recent conflict and to begin the process of improving our relations with the Arab states, which was essential if our oil supplies from them were to be resumed.[[12]](#footnote-12) Israel was rightfully upset with this blatant attempt to integrate with the Arab states at the expense of Israel, which they deemed shameful.[[13]](#footnote-13) While it may have appeared as a backstabbing move on Britain’s part, British officials were taken back by the overly exaggerated response of Israeli leadership, with Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol declaring Brown an enemy of the State and Britain as a whole as, at best, trying to strip Israel of its wartime triumph, at worst, to undermine its very existence.[[14]](#footnote-14) Former Israeli Foreign Minister, Golda Meir even went as far as calling Brown “Judas”.[[15]](#footnote-15) In the eyes of the British, they had stood by Israel since its inception, helped protect and boost its economy and military through times of perceived weakness but now Israel had proven they were more than capable of protecting itself, even from possible multi-sided attacks. And the Israelites were well aware of their military superiority, entering a slippery slope of using military strength as the only way to realise national objectives, a very hazardous moniker for any nation.[[16]](#footnote-16) The interpretation of Israel`s confidence was integral in Britain deciding to turn its back on its pro-Israeli policy in order to regain its shaky relationship with the Arabs and hopefully regain its economic stability in the region. Besides, in their minds, the United States had seemed to take Israel under its wing and had become the main supporter of the Zionists, a position that Britain could no longer afford to do.

Despite these new uncertain times in the Israeli-British relationship, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson met with Israel’s Foreign Minister, Abba Eban and asked for assistance in having the Suez Canal reopened, reminding the Minister that they were blocked from the Canal due to their speaking out against the closure of the Straits of Tiran earlier that year; a decision that also led to the oil embargo. Eban was quick to remind Wilson that an Egyptian victory would have surely resulted in the disintegration of Western influenced leaders, such as Jordanian, King Hussein, and potentially all Western influence in the region.[[17]](#footnote-17) As such, the request was denied. Israel would not withdraw unilaterally from the occupied territories; even with Nasser promising to open the Canal if the territory to the East of it was returned to the Egyptians. Israel demanded direct negotiations with the Arab States, which would act as recognition of Israel as a nation, something that had not occurred with any Arab nation since Israel’s inception in 1948. [[18]](#footnote-18) Such an accomplishment was even more unlikely after the embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Israelis and Britain recognized that. They pushed hard an independent U.N. envoy to be stationed in the Middle East to help broker a deal for peace.[[19]](#footnote-19) This was not acceptable for an Israeli government that felt they held all the cards. The feeling was that over time the Arab nations would realize that war with Israel would get them nowhere and they would eventually be forced into acknowledging Israel in peace talks and thus as a nation. To further their show of strength, and against the appeals by Britain, the United States and the Red Cross, Israel granted Palestinian refugees until August 31st 1967 to return to their homes within the occupied regions; a time span that was far too close for any realistic return of refugees.[[20]](#footnote-20) With pleads to Israel obviously not working the next step was to become even more vocal in their opposition of Israeli policy.

As with most issues in the Middle East, Britain`s involvement in the 1967 conflict was complicated. They needed to appease the Arabs by getting them what they wanted, and the Arabs wanted their land back. However in order to get it back, Britain needed to plead to Israel, while Israel demanded the Arab nations themselves begin peace talks and thus recognize Israel as a nation, something the Arab leaders refused to do. Israel exasperated the problem when their Defense Minister, Moshe Dayan proclaimed the Gaza Strip as an integral part of the State of Israel and that they would not be returning to the borders that defined them in 1948.[[21]](#footnote-21) Furthermore, Israel re-united the Old City of East Jerusalem, formerly home to Jordan, citing that on June 7th 1967, Levi Eshkol sent a letter through the British Embassy to King Hussein stating, “If you, your Majesty, expel the Egyptian commanders of your army, if you regain control of your armed forces, if you accept a cease fire unconditionally, if you begin a process of peace talks with us, we will not take the Old City of Jerusalem.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

In September of 1967, the Arab nations hosted an Arab Summit called the Khartoum Conference, where talk of renewing Western oil supplies and the return of Israeli occupied lands dominated the discussions. Though the conference brought about many issues what it became known for was the slogan of, “No recognition, no negotiations and no peace”[[23]](#footnote-23) That statement solidified what many predicted, a response by the Arab nation that virtually, as Eban put it, “slammed the door on peace.” [[24]](#footnote-24) Prime Minister Eshkol was rightfully upset by the outcome of this summit, as well as Britain`s political seduction of Egypt in order to protect their interests and re-open the canal. Eshkol did not hesitate to condemn Brown as the main contributor to the new British foreign policy that stood on the opposite spectrum of Israel`s on virtually all major issues. Eshkol even went as far as deeming Brown one of Israel`s worst enemies, and stating, `From Bevin to Brown’, thus suggesting that there was no difference between Bevin, long viewed as one of the pre-Jewish state’s worst opponents, and his successor, George Brown.[[25]](#footnote-25) Accusations such as these, which by all intents and purposes were extreme reactions to very clearly motivated actions, did serious damage to the already faltering relationship. Britain desperately needed the Canal opened and could ill-afford to continue importing the over-priced oil from South America, and Israel desperately needed the recognition of the Arab nations and security going forward, sadly both parties were insensitive the needs of the other.

The successful passing of UN resolution 242 on November 22nd 1967, strongly pushed by Britain, was a bi-product of the new British policy, and called for both the removal of Israeli troops from occupied territories as well as guaranteeing access to international waterways. Specifically stating:

(i) Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;

(ii) Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force[[26]](#footnote-26)

While Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and eventually, Syria, all agreed to be a part of discussions based on the Resolution, “Israel interpreted the second part of the Resolution as recognition of its right to exist within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force, and saw this as a pre-condition to any withdrawal of troops.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Confined to the restrictions of the Khartoum Conference and the “three no’s” the Arab nations could not agree to directly negotiate with Israel, while Israel refused to speak with a UN representative, and thus the stalemate continued.

The year of 1967 was a tumultuous one for not only the political actors of the Six Day War, as well as for the innocent civilians, many of whom lost their homes and all their belongings, but also for the long standing relationship between Britain and Israel. Starting with the British downplaying the support in which it delved out to Israel; followed by the very public speech by George Brown to the UN General Assembly displaying for all the world to see Britain`s new stance with regards to the Middle East and desire to form relationships with the Arab nations; and finally the Khartoum Conference and the UN Resolution 242. Britain had been forced to change its policies in the region to protect its foreign interests and access to oil, this much was clear for all to see, however Israel still felt betrayed by the actions of a once close ally. The damage had been done, and within the duration of a year, the success in which Israel and Britain had together obtained from 1948-1966 had come to an end.

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