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THE 1967 ARAB-ISREALI SIX-DAY WAR
AN ANALYSIS USING THE PRINCIPLES OF WAR

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War provides the operational commander with an excellent opportunity to examine the importance of the application, or misapplication, of the principles of war in a conflict. The usefulness of the principles of war has always been a subject of debate.¹ Some find them valuable as "...guides for the effective conduct of war;...[or] to facilitate the study of military history".² Others believe their utility has past.³ This paper does not address that debate and does not assert the principles of war as absolute truths that must be obeyed. It is intended to reinforce the validity of the principles as operational planning tools and that adherence to them will not necessarily guarantee success or that the misapplication of one or two will lead to an irrecoverable situation; but that the complete disregard for their concepts will almost certainly spell disaster.

This paper will review the Middle East's prewar strategic setting, then briefly describe the air operation, the battles for the Sinai, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. Next, using the principles of war as a guide, the war will be analyzed from both the Israeli and Arab perspectives. The

¹ Russell Glenn, "No More Principles of War", Parameters, Spring 1998, p. 64.

² John Alger, The Quest for Victory, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. xviii.

³ Col Herbert Tiede, "Principles of War", Marine Corps Gazette, April 1995, p. 54.

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STRATEGIC SETTING

Arab-Israeli relations have always been tense, however, in the summer of 1967 dealings between the middle-eastern neighbors were especially stressed. By early June, Israel found itself on the brink of war with every neighbor with which it shared a border and (at least verbally) with the remainder of the Arab world. Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen were all very outspoken about their desire and determination to crush Israel. Their participation in the war, however, amounted to little more than rhetoric and will not be address here.

In the weeks leading up to June 1967, the primary belligerent Arab states, Egypt, Syria and Jordan, had put themselves on a war footing by mobilizing their countries and increasing the number of troops deployed along their respective borders with Israel.

In early June 1967, Israel had announced that it would go to war under any of the following circumstances: the blockading of the Strait of Tiran (effectively closing the Israeli port of Elait on the Gulf of Aqaba); deployment of Iraqi troops to Jordan; the signing of an Egyptian-Jordanian defense agreement; or the withdrawal of United Nations

Emergency Forces from their positions along the 1948-56 cease-fire line.⁴ By 5 June 1967 the Arab nations had managed to achieve each of the Israeli requirements.

Surrounded and outnumbered, Israel saw no chance of survival except by striking the first blow and winning quick decisive victories on each front, one at a time. "There could be no question of a prolonged war...Israel could mobilize...but only at a cost of...the countries normal industrial and commercial life...".⁵

AIR OPERATIONS

The numbers vary from source to source but in 1967 the Israeli Air Force (IAF) consisted of about 260 combat aircraft and was opposed by approximately 341 Egyptian, 90 Syrian and 18 Jordanian combat aircraft.⁶ Although, facing the possibility of a three front war Israel considered the Egyptian long range bombers and their forces in the Sinai to be the greatest threats and placed their focus of effort there.

The heart of the plan called for the IAF to use the majority of its aircraft to destroy Egyptian aircraft and airfields before the Syrians and Jordanians could intervene.

⁴ Ernest and Trevor Dupuy, The Encyclopedia of Military History, From 3500 B.C. to the Present, (New York: Harpers & Row, 1977), p. 1230.

⁵ Richard Humble, Famous Land Battles, From Agicourt to the Six Day War, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 167.

⁶ Dupuy, p. 1231.

In order to deliver a powerful enough blow to the Arab Air Forces the IAF had to mass almost all its combat aircraft for the attack; leaving only twelve in Israel to guard their bases.⁷ The IAF's plan called for simultaneous strikes on ten Egyptian airfields in the first phase and nine more on the second phase of a preemptive strike. These attacks were designed to destroy the Egyptian Air Force while it was on the ground. The time of the strike, 0745, was extremely important for four reasons. First, at that hour the Egyptians had already flown their first morning combat air patrols and the majority of aircraft were back on the deck. Second, most of the Egyptian high-ranking officers were still enroute to work. This eliminated Egyptian senior leadership during the crucial first minutes of the attack. Third, it allowed the IAF's pilots to get one last full night of sleep before starting an operation that was sure to test their endurance. Finally, the normally heavy morning mist would be gone by 0730, which would enable better target acquisition by 0745.

The initial attack lasted eighty minutes and consisted of eight waves. Each wave had four aircraft that spent about ten minutes over the target. Each wave was followed, usually less than three minutes later by the next. After the initial eight waves the Egyptians were allowed to catch their breath for ten

⁷ Randolph and Winston Churchill, The Six Day War, (Boston: Houghton, 1967), p. 82.

minutes then the next eighty-minute attack commenced. By noon on the first morning there were a total of nineteen airfields attacked in the Sinai, the Suez Canal Zone, the Cairo Area, the Nile valley and the western bank of the Red Sea. In the first three hours of the war, the Egyptian Air Force lost 300 of its 340 including all of its TU-16 long-range bombers combat aircraft.⁸

Although not taken by surprise the Jordanian and Syrian Air Forces did not fair any better. Unknowingly, they cooperated fully with the Israeli plan. Neither initiated offensive action until the Egyptian Air Force was no longer an effective fighting unit allowing the IAF to turn its full attention on them. On the afternoon of June 5th, the IAF effectively eliminated both the Jordanian and Syrian Air Forces from the war. In a few hours Syria had lost 60 combat aircraft and Jordan had lost all of theirs.⁹ The vast majority of both countries losses were while their aircraft were still on the ground.

By mid-afternoon on the first day Israel had achieved complete air supremacy on all three fronts. This gave the Israeli ground commanders complete freedom of movement and

⁸ Maj Charles Long, Analysis of the Six-Day War, June 1967, (U.S. Air University: Air Command and Staff College, 1984), p. 6.

⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

allowed the IAF to concentrate on close air support missions for the remainder of the war.

THE SINAI

By the eve of the war the Egyptians had deployed five infantry divisions and two armored divisions into the Sinai. The force consisted of approximately 100,000 soldiers, 1000 tanks and hundreds of artillery pieces.¹⁰ The infantry was placed forward, along assumed avenues of approach, with the armor deployed in strategic depth. In fact, the entire Sinai was a model of defense in depth; one historian of the battle described the Egyptian positions as "Giant strong points...all combining to form one solid fortified framework, stretching back from the border with Israel deep into the heart of the central Sinai."¹¹

Against this force the Israelis placed three divisions, each with about 15,000 men, 300 tanks and a number of artillery pieces.¹² The Israeli plan called for a three-phased attack, with the first phase being a three-pronged break through (see map-1¹³ p. 18). One division on the northern avenue in the Khan Yunis-Raafah-El Arish area, one division on the southern avenue of approach in the Abu Ageila-Kussiema area and one division going, through the supposedly impassable

¹⁰ Chaim Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars, (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 154.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 154.

¹² Nadav Safran, Israel-The Embattled Ally, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 243.

sea of sand dunes, between the other two avenues of approach. In the next phase the Israeli forces were to penetrate deep into the Sinai to sever the Egyptian lines of communication. The final phase was to capture the mountain passes, Mitla and Jidi, leading to the Suez Canal in order to stop the retreat of and to destroy the Egyptian army in the field.¹⁴

The Israelis started their ground offensive at 0815 on June 5th; the United Nations cease-fire in the Sinai took effect at 0435 on June 9th. In that time Israel extended its southern border across the entire Sinai to the east bank of the Suez Canal. The Egyptians lost 12,000 men and 700 tanks; the Israelis, on the other hand, lost 275 men and 61 tanks.¹⁵

THE WEST BANK

The Jordanian forces consisted of eight infantry brigades and two armored brigades, a total of approximately 56,000 men and 287 tanks.¹⁶ These units were deployed along the Judean hills from Jenin, in the north, through Jerusalem to Hebron, in the south. The Israeli forces were made up of elements from the North and Central Commands, totaling six infantry Brigades and two armored brigades, numerically a fairly even match.¹⁷

¹³ Herzog, p. 156.

¹⁴ Herzog, p. 154.

¹⁵ Safran, p. 246.

¹⁶ Dupuy, p. 1231.

¹⁷ Safran, p. 248.

The Israeli ground offensive, on this front, started at about 1300 on June 5th with the Israelis trying to occupy Jerusalem (see map-2¹⁸ p. 19). After delaying a few hours, waiting for a Jordanian counter-attack that never materialized, the Israelis attacked Jenin. This was followed by operations to secure the Judean hills and push into the Jordan Valley in order to secure the bridges across the Jordan River. By 2000 on June 7th, the conquest of the West bank was complete and a United Nations cease-fire was put in effect. In some of the most brutal and bitterly contested actions of the war, the Jordanians suffered over 6,000 men killed or missing and had lost 125 tanks; the Israelis had lost 550 men.¹⁹

THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

The Syrians had constructed a strong fortified defensive perimeter along the western edge of the Golan Heights. These defenses were up to ten miles in depth and were manned by approximately 40,000 men and 260 tanks as well as a number of artillery pieces.²⁰

Unfortunately for the Syrians, with the result of the other two fronts assured, the Israelis were able to turn their full attention towards them and concentrate their forces on

¹⁸ Herzog, p. 168.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 183.

²⁰ Edgar O'Ballance, The Third Arab-Israeli War, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1972), p. 233.

the Golan Heights. On this front, Israel would start with 20,000 troops and would have 30,000 troops and 250 tanks by the time the cease-fire took effect.²¹

The Israelis planned to break through the Syrian line in as many places as possible (see map-3²² p. 20). To improve their chances of success, the Israelis chose to attack in the areas that offered the most difficult terrain to cross but had the weakest Syrian defenses. Once the break through occurred Israel would seize the Heights, occupy Kuneitra and press south and east, as far as possible, into Syria.

During the initial days of the war, action on this front consisted almost exclusively of artillery exchanges. At 1130 on June 9th Israel started their offensive with an attack on Dan-Banyas in the north, at 1830 on June 10th the final United Nations cease-fire came into effect. In that short time, Israel occupied the southwest portion of Syria from the Golan Heights to within forty miles of Damascus. The Syrians lost 2500 men and 120 tanks; the Israelis lost 115 men and 100 tanks.²³

PRINCIPLES OF WAR

Sometimes complementary (security and surprise) and sometimes contradictory (mass and economy of force) the

²¹ O'Ballance, p. 236.

²² Herzog, p. 184.

²³ Safran, p. 256.

principles of war provide a useful template in analyzing a conflict. The definitions and descriptions of the individual principles can be found in Joint Pub 3-0 and will not be repeated here. Based on the overwhelmingly one-sided outcome of the war this analysis will have a distinct Israeli slant. However, when more than "was not applied" can be written the Arab perspective will be included.

SURPRISE

Surprise attack is not a new concept in warfare however, the Israelis raised the bar on the gains that can be achieved by surprise. There were several keys to the Israeli's success, the first of which was the use of deception. In the time leading up to the war the Israelis sent out several large air patrols near the Gulf of Aqaba. This led the Egyptians to think the Israelis would attack in the southern vice northern Sinai and compelled them to move some of their front line fighters to the southern part of the Sinai.²⁴ The actual attacks on the airfields were from an unexpected direction as well, "...The Israeli planes...attacked from the west, instead of from the north or east".²⁵ This caused an immense amount of confusion on the part of the Egyptians and even brought about speculation that British or American carrier aircraft had

²⁴ O'Ballance, p. 66.

²⁵ Kessing, The Arab-Israeli Conflict, the 1967 Campaign, (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 25.

taken part in the raids. By using these deceptive techniques Israel was able to achieve surprise on both the operational and tactical levels of war. Israel achieved strategic surprise, not by any action of their own but, by the failure of the Arab nations to recognize that war with Israel was eminent and to anticipate that Israel might initiate the hostilities with a preemptive strike. Even though the possibility of an Israeli surprise attack was so high the Egyptians took virtually no measures to protect itself or lessen the damage from such an attack.²⁶ For example, the majority of Egyptian combat aircraft were clustered at a handful of airfields, all within reach of the Israel aircraft.

Deception also played a major part in the land battles. In the Sinai, by giving the impression of building up forces near Kuntilla the Israelis managed to convince the Egyptians that they were planning an attack towards Sharm El-Sheikh (in the southern Sinai) as they had in 1956. The Egyptians were not expecting a direct frontal assault through the center of the Sinai.²⁷ This deception plan dovetailed with the air operation's deception plan, making both even more credible to the Egyptians. On the West Bank, deception was employed throughout the battle, as each major thrust was accompanied by

²⁶ O'Ballance, p. 83.

²⁷ Herzog, p. 157.

a diversionary attack on another sector of the front. On the Golan Heights by choosing to attack over the most difficult terrain the Israelis were able to catch the Syrians off guard.

Intelligence was the next most important contributor to Israeli's achievement of surprise. Obviously, it would be difficult to achieve such a stunning triumph without knowing exactly where, when and how to attack. The Israelis certainly had all that information. Enroute to the targets Egyptians radars were avoided, either by flying under their coverage or flying out over the Mediterranean Sea to avoid them. Out of all the Egyptian airfields within their reach, the Israelis knew which ones were a threat and needed to be destroyed and which could be ignored. Once over their targets, the Israeli pilots knew where the Egyptian aircraft were located as very few real aircraft were left intact while almost no decoys were hit. Possessing the knowledge of when your opponent will be most vulnerable (most of the aircraft on the ground and majority of senior leadership still on their way to work) gave the Israelis a definite advantage.

SECURITY

Hand in hand with surprise is security. Although the air strike that started the war was planned years in advance and

rehearsed frequently before June 5th,²⁸ the Israelis were able to maintain operational security prior to the outbreak of hostilities. It's doubtful that the Egyptians had any idea what was about to hit them; if they did they failed to take any measures to prevent the attack or limit the damage.

On the other hand the Arabs kept little of their prewar habits hidden, allowing Israel to gain all the intelligence needed for a successful preemptive air strike. During the war, Israel was also able to monitor and exploit the information gained from Egyptian communications.

OBJECTIVE

Israel was successful in articulating an objective and then developing and executing a plan that would achieve that objective. Their strategic object was to survive. From this came the operational objectives of protecting its people and maintaining territorial integrity. In order to achieve these objectives they needed air supremacy for two reasons. First, to eliminate the threat of the Egyptian long-range bombers to their cities. Second, to allow their ground forces freedom of movement. Air supremacy could only come from a preemptive strike that would destroy the Egyptian Air Force when it was least ready.

²⁸ Long, p. 5.

The Arabs had an objective, the destruction of the state of Israel²⁹. However, they never transformed that objective into a plan that would achieve it.

OFFENSIVE

Surprise attacks lend themselves to taking the offensive and gaining the initiative. It is obvious that the Israelis gained and maintained the offensive in the air, but the Israelis took the offensive on the ground as well. In the Sinai, the Egyptians had a full thirty minutes between first bombs on target and when the Israeli ground offensive started but chose to surrender the initiative to the Israelis. The Jordanians were not much better, delaying the start of their ground offensive until 1100 on June 5th. Worst of all were the Syrians, who waited patiently in their trenches for four days before the Israelis would initiate their ground attack.

UNITY OF COMMAND

The Israeli ground forces were divided into three commands, Southern (the Sinai), Central (the West Bank) and Northern (the Golan Heights). All of Israeli's air forces were under a single command. Ultimately, both the ground and air forces were controlled by the Minister of Defense, General Moshe Dayan; who could and did move forces from front to front when needed.

²⁹ Long, p. 29.

Command and control for the air operation was superb. The synchronization of the first wave so that each attack started at the same time at ten different airfields certainly resulted in fewer casualties for the Israelis and greater losses for the Egyptians. On the other hand, the lack of coordination between Egypt, Jordan and Syria at the outbreak of the war added significantly to the Israeli victory. If the Air Forces of all three countries could have been coordinated and employed on the morning of the 5th, the Israelis would have been unable to concentrate decisive force against any individual country and would not have been able to eliminate their Air Forces one at a time. This would have denied or, at the very least, delayed the air supremacy the Israelis operated under. As a result, the Israeli ground forces would not have enjoyed the freedom of movement that they had and perhaps the ability to go on the offensive would not have been available to them. All of this may have only delayed the inevitable, however, the question is how long could the Israelis have fought a three front war?

On the ground, Israeli commanders were given room for initiative and flexibility in the execution and accomplishment of their missions.

Although there was an Egyptian General in command of Jordanian forces, the Arabs never achieved effective unity of

command and their operational command and control was poor. The Arabs were never able to coordinate enough to present Israel with a serious, multiple-front war problem. Also, battlefield communications broke down early, leaving units to fend for themselves; thus, no coordinated offense or defense could be established.

MANEUVER

The Israelis emphasized maneuver in the Sinai by moving forces through what was thought to be impassable desert areas in order to take advantage the fixed Egyptian positions. On the Golan Heights the Israelis did the same thing by choosing to start their offensive up the most difficult terrain.

The Egyptians had no concept of mobile desert warfare, building fixed defensive positions that had their flanks and rear exposed.³⁰

ECONOMY OF FORCE

Recognizing that it could not employ decisive force on every front at the same the time, Israel would not allow itself to get drawn into major operations in the West Bank or the Golan Heights until the outcome in the Sinai was guaranteed. Ultimately, Israel was able to delay offensive action until the outcomes of the other fronts were secured and the forces could be concentrated on a single front. As an

example of using only the forces needed, a Paratroop Brigade originally planned to be dropped at El Arish was diverted from the Sinai, where they were no longer needed, to the West Bank where Israel needed them the most.³¹

MASS

Unquestionably, Israel massed its air forces during the preemptive strike. Israel also massed its ground forces into an armored fist at two points of attack to break through the Egyptian defense. On the other fronts, coordination between ground and air forces allowed the massing of combined arms against fortified positions just prior and during the ground attacks.

Closely linked to their failure to take the offensive, the Arabs did not mass their forces and bring a three front war to bear on Israel. The war started at 0745 but it wasn't until 1200 that Syria or Jordan took any offensive air action³². Also, by 0900 the Egyptian commander of the Jordanian forces was ordered to open a second front but nothing more than sporadic ground fire and some artillery exchanges took place until Israel initiated a ground assault.³³

At the tactical level, once the fight for the Golan

³⁰ O'Ballance, p. 166.

³¹ O'Ballance, p. 184.

³² Col Israel Krieger and LtCol Raanan Falk, Do We Debrief Successful Wars The Same Way We Debrief Failures?, (U.S. Air University: Air War College, 1989), p. 13.

³³ Long, p.13.

Heights started the Syrians failed to mass their artillery fire against the Israeli assault, allowing the Israelis to maintain the offensive momentum.

SIMPLICITY

Demonstrating both a good and a bad example of this principle, Israel did a fair job at keeping the simplicity level relatively low. They did so by managing to fight on one front at a time. However, the preemptive air strike was extremely complex and some of the attacks by Israeli ground forces involved as many as five phases.³⁴

LESSONS LEARNED

The sound application of the principles of war cannot be given sole credit for the overwhelming Israeli victory. Leadership, training, morale and other intangibles also played a part. However, the misapplication or in some cases the total disregard of those principles can certainly be credited as a major contributor to the Arab defeat.

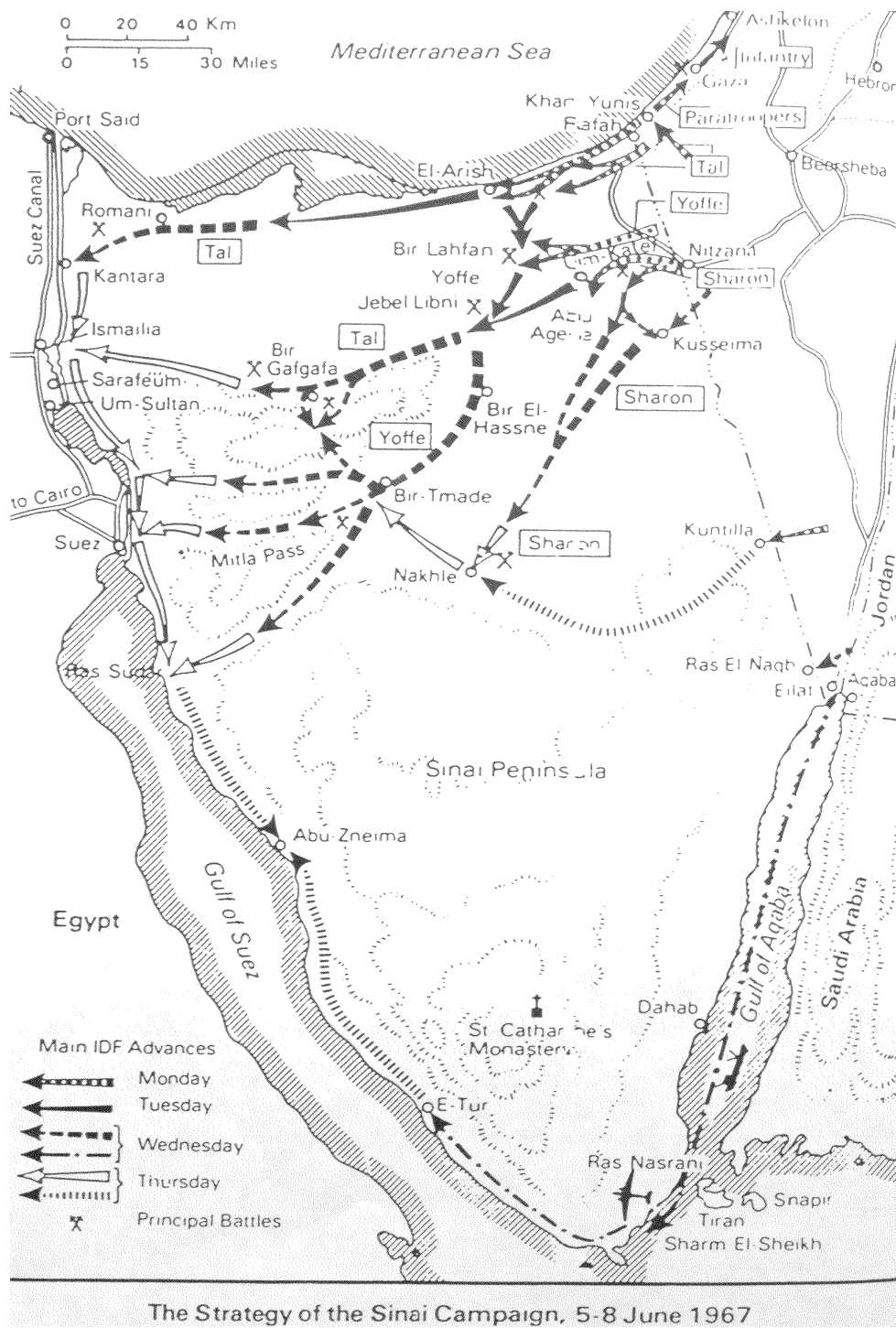
"To forsake the knowledge of past wars would be foolish: to try to fight the next war as the last war is also foolish."³⁵ There are two lessons to be learned from the study of the proper and improper application of the principles of war in this conflict. First, is the importance of adherence

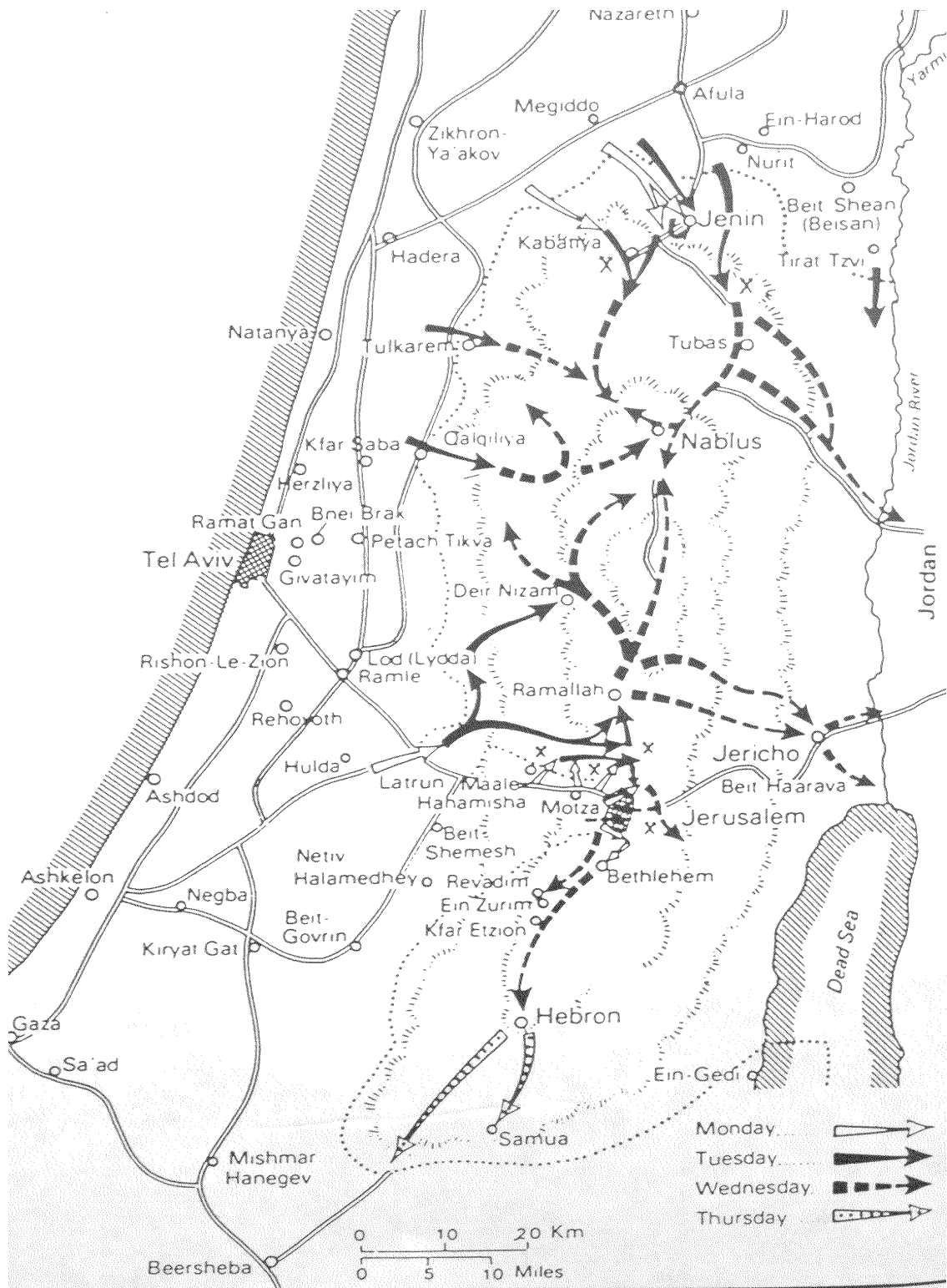
³⁴ Long, p. 42.

³⁵ Alger, p. 174.

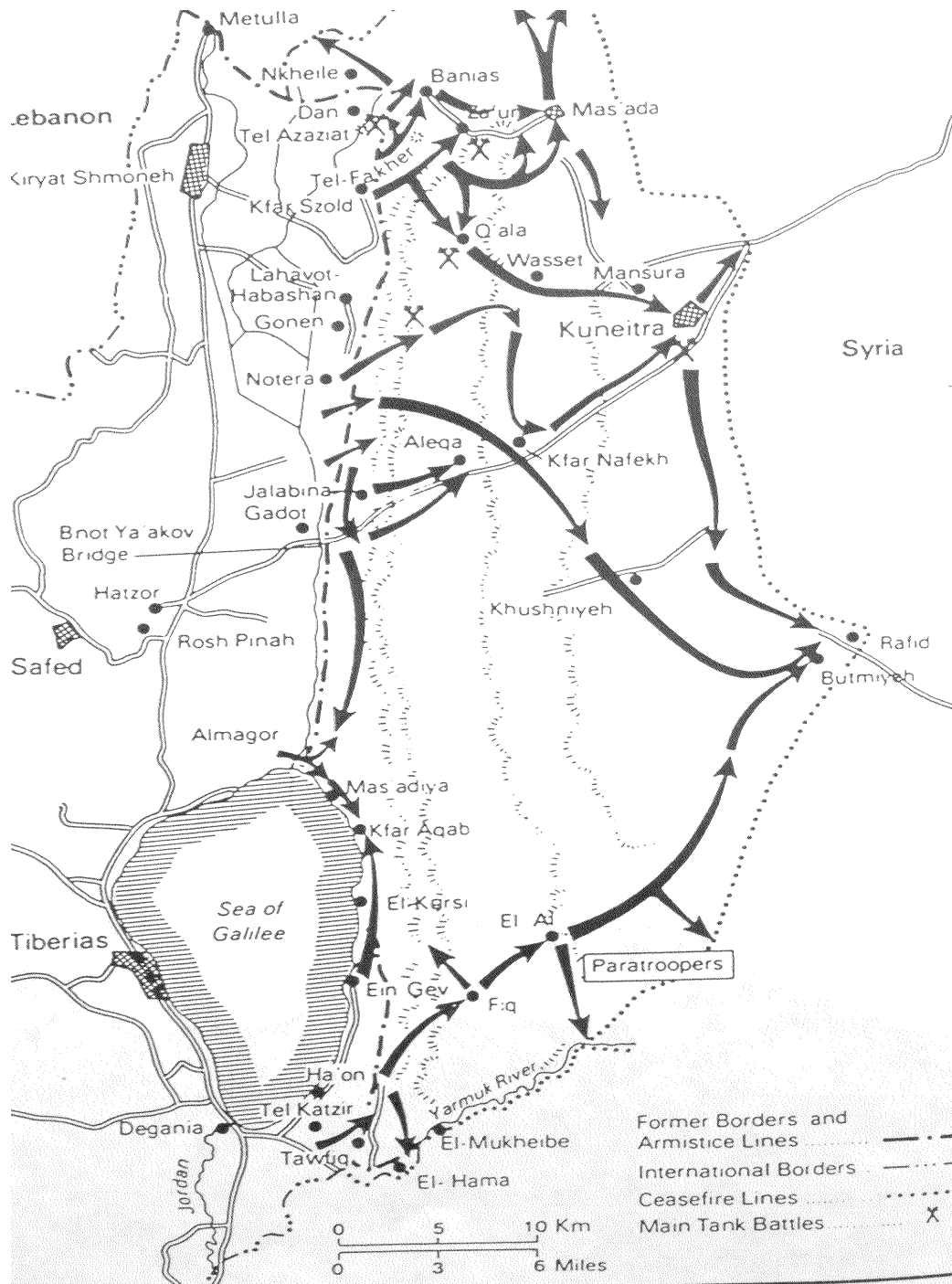
to the fundamentals conceptualized in the principles of war. The proper application of the principles will help future operational commanders achieve success no matter how hi-tech or Network Centric the services become.

Second, is for a nation not to plan for their next war by looking back at their last war. One reason the Egyptians were routed in the Sinai was that they expected Israel to attack in the south as had happened in 1956. The Israelis, resting on their easy victory in this war, will learn little from it and will have contempt for Arab soldiers. The Arabs on the other hand will learn many lessons, chief among them the necessity for surprise, security and the offensive. These lessons will have a very serious impact on how both sides prepare for and fight the first few days of their next war, the 1973 Yom Kippur War.





Main Battles in the West Bank and Jerusalem, 5-7 June 1967



Main Battles in the Golan Heights, 9-10 June 1967

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