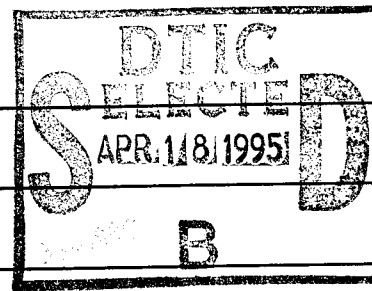


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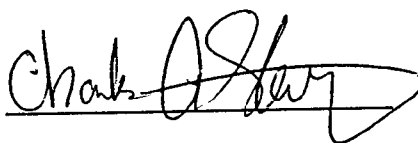
**The Arab-Israeli Six Day War of 1967:  
Essential Elements of Operational Art**

by

Charles A. Sternberg  
LCDR USN

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department.

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Signature: 

16 June 1995

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the Israeli experience during the Six Day War which illustrated the utility and indispensable nature of **clear vision, strong leadership, commitment to quality, flexibility and reliable intelligence** at the operational level of war. Israeli leadership was extremely talented, yet, Israeli operational success cannot be credited solely to exceptional genius at the operational level. Israeli success can be attributed more readily to the *operational environment* they had created for their "artists" and the "tools" that they provided to their artists. They had created an environment where their operational commanders thrived; an environment based on clear vision, strong leadership, commitment to quality, flexibility and reliable intelligence.

These elements transcend political, cultural and historical boundaries and should be recognized as an essential part of successful modern day operational art.

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### The Gamble.

On the morning of June 5, 1967, as Israeli jets streaked undetected toward Egyptian targets, Israel was gambling with her national survival. The war the Israelis were starting would either ensure their survival or mark their destruction--there was no middle ground. As Field Marshall Erwin Rommel said "A gamble is a chance taken; if it fails, recovery is impossible."<sup>1</sup> If the Israelis failed recovery would indeed be impossible.

### The Victory.

The victory the Israelis achieved over the numerically superior, Egyptian led coalition of the United Arab Republic (UAR) was inarguably stunning. The tactical accomplishments during those six days in June--the armored offensive in the Sinai, the surprise attack by the Israeli Air Force (IAF), or the assault on the Golan Heights, were indeed fantastic. But it was not tactical brilliance alone that won the war in 1967, it went deeper than that.

The Six day War of 1967 was a testimony to the Israeli understanding of Operational Art. This paper will address the Israeli experience during the Six Day War which illustrated the utility and indispensable nature of **clear vision, strong leadership, commitment to quality, flexibility and reliable intelligence** at the operational level of war.

### The Environment.

An operational level analysis reveals with textbook clarity the essential elements of Israeli operational art and provides practical insight for today's operational commanders.

Israeli leadership was extremely talented, yet, Israeli operational success cannot be credited solely to exceptional genius at the operational level. Israeli success can be attributed more readily to the *operational environment* they had created for their "artists" and the "tools" that they provided to their artists. The current U.S. Army Field Manual, FM 100-5 states:

"Operational art requires broad vision, the ability to anticipate, a careful understanding of the relationship of means to ends, an understanding of the inherent risks that are under them and effective joint and combined cooperation."<sup>2</sup>

The Israelis had created an environment that supports the above mentioned "requirements" for successful operational art. They had created an environment where their operational commanders thrived; an environment based on clear vision, strong leadership, commitment to quality, flexibility and reliable intelligence. The Israelis possessed "freedom from obsolete tradition . . . [and] had successfully molded unconventional doctrine and fluid organization to exploit enemy weaknesses."<sup>3</sup>

### The Problem.

Crucial to an appreciation for Israeli Operational artistry is a brief overview of the military situation that

confronted them in June of 1967. By June 1, 1967, the members of the United Arab Republic (UAR)--Syria, Jordan and Iraq, led by its self appointed President, President Nasser of Egypt, were becoming increasingly more vocal concerning their "permanent state of war" with Israel. Violence against Israel was on the rise. As Nasser said of war with Israel on May 26: "It will be total and the objective will be to destroy Israel."<sup>4</sup>

Syria had stepped up the daily shelling of Israeli villages from artillery emplacements in the Golan Heights. There were increasingly violent terrorist acts occurring in Israel, sponsored by Syria and accessing Israel through Jordan. Egypt had blockaded the Israeli port of Eilat by occupying Sharm el-Sheik. The occupation of Sharm el-Sheik provided direct control of the Straits of Tiran, which join the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aqaba. Eilat, located at the extreme north of the Gulf of Aqaba, was Israel's only access in the East to imported oil.<sup>5</sup> King Hussein of Jordan had signed a defense pact with Nasser on May 30 and was now allowing Iraqi tanks to enter Jordan.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Emergency Forces (UNEF), the peacekeeping force which had policed the Egyptian-Israeli border since the Suez crisis in 1956, had been abruptly removed following President Nasser's request.

By June 4, Egypt had massed over 100,000 soldiers and 1,400 tanks in the Sinai desert.<sup>7</sup> The combined forces

surrounding Israel were an estimated 328,000 Arab soldiers, 2,300 Arab tanks and nearly 700 Arab combat aircraft.<sup>8</sup> Mobilized Israeli forces totalled 250,000 troops, 191 aircraft and 1,000 tanks.<sup>9</sup>

The Egyptians had backed the Israelis into a corner and had unknowingly sealed their own fate. As Sun Tzu once advised in 500 BC:

"To a surrounded enemy you must leave a way to escape. Do not press an enemy at bay. Wild beasts, when at bay, fight desperately. How much more is this true of men."<sup>10</sup>

### Clear Vision.

Clear vision is an essential part of the operational environment. Clear vision enables the operational commander to clearly define operational objectives, provide clear direction and produce unambiguous mission statements. Israel's clear vision started with her national leadership. It was a product of many factors, tangible and intangible, but one of the most significant factors affecting this vision was her history.

Since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, Israel had never known peace. "[Israel] . . . has known only armistice, demarcation, and ceasefire lines . . . ." <sup>11</sup> By 1967, Israel had fought (and won) two wars against the Arabs (1949 and 1956), had been embroiled in continuous border clashes with Egypt, Syria and Jordan and been subjected continuously to artillery bombardment, guerilla raids and terrorist attacks. "It is safe to say every terrorist

incident had a *direct* impact on the majority of Israelis . . . all Israelis felt as if they were on the front line. Over time, Israelis [sic] had ceased to feel safe and secure within the boundaries of their hard-won little state."<sup>12</sup>

This "National solidarity"<sup>13</sup> was a boon to military leadership as illustrated by Israeli Lieutenant General Elazar: "The leader's role is to motivate men to achieve a common goal: here, 50% of the leader's job is already done. Our arguments and doubts are not about the goal, which is survival. Arguments are about policies--how to achieve it [sic]."<sup>14</sup> **For Israel, their National Objective was crystal clear--it was survival!**

From this clear National Objective, Israeli operational commanders defined two theater-strategic objectives: Border security and freedom of passage through the Straits of Tiran. Border security was defined as freedom from artillery bombardment, crossborder terrorist raids, and threat of invasion. Freedom of passage meant access to and from the Israeli port of Eilat, through the Straits of Tiran.

The clarity of these objectives simplified the next question for Israeli operational commanders as to what military conditions were required to achieve the strategic objectives. The threats to Israeli security were Egyptian forces in the desert and Arab forces in Syria and Jordan. Five reinforced Egyptian armored divisions had been mobilized along the southern border and at key crossroads in the Sinai.



The forces in the Sinai also controlled the Straits of Tiran. *Egypt's army in the Sinai must be destroyed.* Without his army, Nasser would no longer be able to threaten Israel and dominate the region; Syria and Jordan would no longer be able to rely on Egyptian muscle for legitimacy. "Without its Air Force and Army, Egypt was nothing to Israel."<sup>15</sup> To the Israelis, the reality was clear--*The Center of Gravity (COG) of the Arab coalition was Egypt, and the COG of Egypt was her army.*

Another product of Israeli clear vision and a tool that was used to guide Israeli operational artists, were five operational imperatives or precepts.

After the War of Independence in 1949, Colonel Chaim Laskov headed a committee charged with defining the future role of the IDF. His committee proposed a list of precepts that were to provide a blueprint for the IDF and a guideline for operational planning.<sup>16</sup>

"These five precepts were an amalgam of factors from Israel's own history and geography, and the qualities peculiar to the Arab armed forces [the IDF] was most likely to fight."<sup>17</sup>

Laskov's five precepts:<sup>18</sup>

- 1. Few against many.** Israel would always be fighting from a numerical disadvantage.
- 2. A War of survival.** Israel would always be fighting against an enemy with unlimited objectives. As one Israeli soldier stated: "You either win the war or you will be driven into the Mediterranean."<sup>19</sup>
- 3. A Strategy of attrition.** Israel would always be fighting a "limited" war. The key to destroying the strength of Arab armies lay not in killing the maximum

number of soldiers, but in destroying the maximum amount of equipment--tanks, artillery and aircraft. Theirs must be a strategy of mass destruction, an "offensive strategy of attrition" directed at equipment, not necessarily men.

**4. Geographic pressures.** Israel could not allow a war to be fought on her soil. Israel had no strategic depth, no space to trade for time, no room to maneuver and no natural strategic barriers. Israeli doctrine was to always fight on enemy territory, if possible.

**5. A short War.** Israel's culminating point was extremely sensitive to time. Israel could not afford to fight a protracted war--politically, economically or militarily. A short war, four days maximum, was required due to the fragile economy, force sustainability and the probability of a quickly imposed United Nations cease fire. In 1967, 2/3 of her army was in the reserves, the economy could not be sustained when the army was mobilized.<sup>20</sup> A long war meant high casualties.\* The spirit of the people nor the economy could sustain significant losses.

These five precepts pervaded Israeli decision making for the next 18 years. They helped to define the roles and missions of the IDF, directed training and influenced procurement of arms and equipment. They provided all members of the military, and all political leaders, a clear vision for the future of the IDF. More importantly, they provided Israeli operational commanders with non-negotiable, unquestionably clear "dictates" which were to be followed and incorporated into any operational plan. There was absolutely no question in anyone's mind, up or down the chain of command as to what type of war they would be fighting.

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\*During the 1948-1949 War of Independence, Israel's casualty rate, in proportion to the population was four times greater than American losses . . . in the Civil War; during the Six Day War, [IDF losses were] 450 times the rate of American Losses in Vietnam.

## Leadership and Quality

To avoid the destruction of Israel, IDF commanders had to build, train, and equip a military force that would be able to inflict maximum destruction upon several numerically superior Arab armies simultaneously, in Arab territory and in the shortest possible time.<sup>21</sup>

The only way to achieve this was through a *massive qualitative advantage*. They had committed themselves to quality--quality of leadership, quality of personnel, quality of training and quality of equipment. This "quality" was instrumental in shaping the Israeli operational plan.

"Leadership from the front" was a tenet of the IDF. "The Israeli concept of leadership--leaders lead from the front--resulted in abnormally high casualties among leaders. To ensure the advance did not bog down because everyone who knew the plan had been killed or incapacitated, everyone knew the plan. The loss of a tactical or even operational leader was no excuse to stop the advance."<sup>22</sup>

This forceful leadership was integrated with quality personnel and increased the options available to the operational commander. Essential to this leadership style was the Israeli concept of "Adherence to Mission"<sup>23</sup>. "Adherence to Mission" was the bedrock of the IDF. "Adherence to Mission", sometimes referred to as "Maintenance of Aim" was somewhat similar to a modern day mission statement, but in the IDF it was an ethos rather than an object.

"Adherence to Mission" permeated the entire structure of the IDF. It was based on trust, talent, quality, faith in superiors and confidence in subordinates. "Adherence to Mission" meant that higher headquarters gave broad direction and the individual unit or soldier was to "use any means necessary to carry out the task." Tremendous responsibility and corresponding authority was delegated down the chain of command, along with strict accountability. Initiative and original thinking was paramount. Aggressiveness was encouraged, and mistakes were tolerated if reported rapidly and honestly.<sup>24</sup> The IDF "consciously sought to identify and nurture leaders who could think on the run without recourse to central authority."<sup>25</sup> The Israelis operated from a highly decentralized command and control structure. Effectiveness was ensured by relying on their commanders' initiative and "Adherence to Mission". Micromanagement and bureaucracy was an anathema to the IDF.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, Israeli commanders were not continually looking over their shoulders, waiting to be second guessed. This attitude was a boon for the operational commander. It empowered him, it freed his hands and increased his operational flexibility. He could operate more aggressively, take more risks, exploit his original thoughts. A student once said about the Israeli command and staff college: "In Israel, you flunk out if you can't come up with an original plan."<sup>27</sup>

These concepts may seem more relevant at the tactical level of war than at the operational level, but in fact it was critical at the operational level as well. It was the quality of leadership, quality of personnel, quality of training and quality of equipment and that gave the Israeli operational artists the latitude and flexibility to plan with confidence.

They knew that their forces were as well trained and capable as they *reportedly* were. They had absolute confidence that the Israeli pilots would be able to destroy the Egyptian Air Force on the ground on their first try. They had confidence that the "armored blitzkrieg" in the Sinai would overwhelm the Egyptians. These operations could not have been envisioned without extraordinary confidence in the quality, training and readiness of the IDF. It was unbelievable to many, especially the Egyptians, that the Israelis could have considered attacking the UAR, much less win. Israeli confidence was clearly evident in a statement made by Brigadier General Ezer Weizmann, Director-of-Operations of the IDF General Staff in March of 1967: **"The Arabs have surrounded us again--poor bastards."**<sup>28</sup>

#### Intelligence.

Key to any operational level planning is accurate knowledge of the situation--a good net assessment. This includes an accurate analysis of enemy and own force critical factors--critical strengths and weaknesses. From this analysis, the center of gravity can be determined and critical

vulnerabilities and strengths can be identified and exploited. It was in the net assessment arena, where the Israelis excelled and the Egyptians fell short.

The Israelis had always demanded and practiced truthful reporting. As opposed to Egyptian intelligence, Israeli intelligence was abundant and more importantly it was "intellectually honest". Intellectual honesty used in this context refers to: "The adherence to facts and truthfulness with which those facts are interpreted and presented . . . intellectual honesty must extend to reporting even what you do not know, no matter how unpleasant that may be in the short term."<sup>29</sup> This intellectual honesty was a product of the Israeli style of leadership. Israeli "messengers" were not shot for reporting bad news, commanders were not chastised for being brutally honest or making mistakes. This honesty enabled Israeli operational commanders to obtain reliable intelligence and were subsequently able to evaluate critical factors realistically. The Israelis, were therefore able to make more informed operational decisions. The author's analysis of critical factors are provided in Figure 1 on p. 12.

The Egyptians, on the other hand, were not predisposed toward intellectual honesty and suffered accordingly. As one Israeli commander stated: "[The Arabs] had a tendency to believe their own propaganda".<sup>30</sup> Nasser's judgement was distorted by the enormous failure of a "sycophantic"

intelligence service.<sup>31</sup> Because of this environment, Nasser failed or refused to recognize several Israeli critical factors, as indicated by asterisks in Figure 1 below. As a result, Nasser overestimated Egyptian capabilities and underestimated the Israelis'. The value of "intellectually honest" intelligence cannot be overemphasized. Israeli success illustrated the value of reliable intelligence to the operational commander during the Six Day War.

Figure 1.  
Net Assessment

UAR/Egyptian

**Critical Strengths:**

Numerically superior Army  
 Numerically superior Air Force  
 Long range bombers  
 Vast quantities of Soviet equipment  
 Geographical advantage  
 (Forces surrounding Israel)

**Critical Weaknesses:**

Long LOCs  
 \*Poor training  
 \*Weak coalition  
 Exterior position  
 \*Weak national will  
 \*Weak Leadership  
 \*Lack of mobility  
 \*Unreliable intel  
 Night operations

Israeli

**Critical Strengths**

\*Well trained Army  
 \*Well trained Air Force  
 \*Highly mobile Army  
 \*Strong leadership  
 \*Strong National Will/Support  
 Central position, Short LOCs  
 Reliable Intelligence  
 Night operations  
 Aggressive tactics

**Critical Weaknesses:**

Small Army  
 Small Air Force  
 Limited sustainability  
 Geography/Surrounded  
 (3 front war)  
 Economy

\* Indicates factors that Nasser/UAR failed to recognize.

Flexibility.

The Israeli plan demanded flexibility--"This was no Schlieffen Plan."<sup>32</sup> It was built around a "lightning,

preemptive offensive" taking advantage of surprise, combined arms maneuver warfare, and the "Indirect Approach". The grand design was to: "Hold the line on Syrian and Jordanian fronts, [while] destroying the Egyptian Army in the Sinai."<sup>33</sup> As General Weizmann commented: "We have got a plan for everything - even capturing the North pole. The plans are like bricks. They can be used one by one to build up a structure as the situation develops. We don't go in for preconceived and, therefore, *inflexible* [my emphasis] master plans."<sup>34</sup>

Brigadier General Moti Hod, Commander-in-Chief of the IAF in 1967, referred to this flexibility as "operational control" in a statement outlining the reasons for Israeli success: "Sixteen years of planning, superb intelligence, operational control and superb execution."<sup>35</sup>

Flexibility was essential to operational sustainment and speed, which was critical when considering the short war imperative. Liddell Hart referred to the Israeli campaign as "Perfect Blitzkrieg"<sup>36</sup> and a member of the Israel general staff commented that the plan was based on an "incessant dashing forward".<sup>37</sup> This rapid operational tempo kept the Egyptians off balance and denied them sufficient opportunity to accurately evaluate the situation and regroup.

#### Summary.

Brigadier General Moti Hod, stressed the dedication and effort of Israeli planning and the justification for their



confidence in the following statement: "Sixteen years of planning had gone into those initial 80 minutes. 'We lived with the plan, we slept on the plan, we ate the plan. Constantly we perfected it.'<sup>38</sup>

Hard work and talent will always be essential to successful operational art, but it cannot in itself guarantee success. Genius cannot be relied upon. Instead, we must rely upon ourselves, our leaders, our peers and our subordinates to create an environment that is conducive to sound decision making. In such an environment, an operational artist is given the proper tools with which to work. The Israelis demonstrated that the creation of such an environment was possible. Granted, Israel's situation was unique, politically, geographically and culturally. Even so, the Israeli experience during the Six Day War illustrated the utility and indispensable nature of **clear vision, strong leadership, commitment to quality, flexibility and reliable intelligence** at the operational level of war. These elements transcend political, cultural and historical boundaries and should be recognized as an essential part of successful modern day operational art.

## Endnotes

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