

Six-Day War, 50-Year Occupation — What Really Happened in June 1967?

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In the first of an extended three-part interview on the 50th anniversary of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, author and scholar Norman Finkelstein debunks the enduring myths surrounding that historic confrontation — myths that have sustained the ensuing Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.

TRNN transcript:

Aaron Mate: It's the [Real News](#), I'm Aaron Mate. June 5th marks the 50th anniversary of the 1967 war between Israel and neighboring Arab States. In six days of conflict, Israel captured the Egyptian Sinai, the Syria Golan Heights, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Except for the Sinai, Israel still controls all of those territories. In fact, the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is the longest in modern times. In this segment, we're going to explore what happened in 1967. But this isn't just a history lesson. The dominant narrative of 1967 is that Israel faced an existential threat, that it fought a defensive war, and didn't want to occupy Arab lands. That narrative has been repeatedly used to justify Israel's violence and repression in the occupied territories, so it's important we get the history right and correct those who misuse it. My guest is someone who's been doing that task for decades. Norman Finkelstein is a scholar, an author of many books on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and I'm very pleased he's here with us. Welcome, Norman.

N Finkelstein: Well thank you for having me, Aaron.

Aaron Mate: Thanks for being here. We're going to hear a lot of commemorations of the '67 war, and the narrative we're going to get is much like this one. This is from the New York Times. The Times writes:

"This year marks half a century since the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 in which Israel defied annihilation by its Arab neighbors and also came to rule over Palestinian Arabs in captured areas, including in the old city."

Norman, that's The Times saying that Israel "defied Annihilation" in '67. What's wrong with that picture?

N Finkelstein: Well, what's wrong with it is it never happened, and that's usually a big problem. It's called "falsifying history." The record's very clear on 1967, at least on the point that we're now going to address. The United States had multiple intelligence agencies

monitoring the situation between Israel and its Arab neighbors, probably close to a half dozen intelligence agencies and the US administration under Lyndon Johnson was being kept abreast of everything that was happening there.

Now the big question for Israel in 1967 was not whether they were going to prevail over the Arabs. They knew that was a done deal because they already had the dress rehearsal in 1956 when they conquered the Sinai in about 100 hours, and this is just a decade later and they know they are going to easily prevail. Their big concern was, how would the US react? In 1957, that decade before, the US acted rather harshly. Dwight D. Eisenhower gave Israel an ultimatum: Get out or else. Meaning, get out of the Sinai or you're going to face a strong reaction from the US Government. The Israelis were afraid there was going to be a repeat of '57 in '67.

So, the Israelis are sending over lots of people to feel out the US Administration, asking questions from people who had insight and who were connected to Johnson. Among the people they sent over was Major General Meir Amit, who was the head of the Israeli Mossad, the intelligence agency. Now the US had reached two firm conclusions about 1967. Conclusion number one, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, he was not going to attack. There was no evidence he was going to attack. Conclusion number two, if, against all odds, he did attack, as Johnson said at the time, "You will whip hell out of them if he attacks. That's what all our intelligence agencies say."

Now you might ask the question, well that's what US intelligence says, what did Israeli intelligence say? Well we know, because on June 1, Major General Meir Amit, he came to Washington and he spoke to senior American officials. He said, and now I'm quoting him, there were "no differences in the assessment of the intelligence situation now unfolding in the Middle East. No differences." Which means the Israelis also knew Nasser wasn't going to attack and they also knew if he did attack, it was going to be, as Johnson said, "You'll whip hell out of them." In fact, that's what happened-

Aaron Mate: Okay, wait a second-

N Finkelstein: The Secretary of Defense at the time was Robert McNamara and in the internal discussion, he predicted the war would last between seven to ten days. Later on, he would boast how close his estimate was. In fact, the war was over not in six days, the war was over, really literally, it was over in about six minutes. The moment Israel launched its Blitzkrieg strike and flattened the Egyptian Air Force, which was still on the ground, then the ground troops had no air support. It was over. The only reason it lasted six days is because they wanted to grab territory. It was a land grab.

Aaron Mate: Okay, but the narrative that we've heard over 50 years, I learned this in Hebrew School, in Sunday School, and at my Jewish summer camp, was that Israel faced an existential threat and it fought a defensive war. So let's go through some of the key points that are used to advance that argument. Since you mentioned Nasser, let's start with him. He did order the withdrawal of UN troops that were stationed on his side of the Egyptian-Israeli border. That's often cited as evidence that he was preparing to attack Israel.

N Finkelstein: Right, well what happened was, in April 1967, there was a dog fight between the Syrian Air Force and the Israeli Air Force. In the course of the dog fight, Israel downed six Syrian planes, including one over Damascus. You might ask, why did that happen? Well, the evidence is perfectly clear why it happened and we got it from an unimpeachable

source, namely Moshe Dayan, and Moshe Dayan, in 19-

Aaron Mate: Who was an Israeli General.



Moshe Dayan (Source: Wikipedia)

N Finkelstein: He was the leading figure in '67, and then he became under Begin the Foreign Minister, when Begin came to power in 1977. But in 1976, Moshe Dayan, he gave an interview and he said, "I'll tell you why we had all of these conflicts with Syria. There was a demilitarized zone formed after the 1948 war, between Syria and Israel. So what happens in this demilitarized zone?" Dayan said, "At least 80 percent of the time, probably more, let's just limit ourselves to 80 percent of the time, we would send bulldozers into this demilitarized zone, because Israel was engaged in a land grab." It was trying to get land inside the demilitarized zone. It would send in bulldozers, the Syrians would react, and then it would escalate. In April '67, it escalated into a dog fight between the Syrians and the Israelis.

After that, Israel start to threaten, verbally, that it was going to launch an attack on Syria. Many Israeli officials, the most famous statement came from at that point Yitzhak Rabin, but many Israeli officials were threatening Syria. It happened that the Soviet Union got wind of the Cabinet meetings going on in Israel. In mid-May, the Cabinet made a decision. We're going to attack Syria. The Soviet Union communicated that knowledge to the neighboring Arab States. In the official history, it's called the false alarm, that the Soviet Union invented this imminent Israel attack.

Aaron Mate: When you say, "the official history," the history that we're often taught and hear about in the media, yeah.

N Finkelstein: It's a history that literally apart from a handful of scholars, including Israeli scholars-

Aaron Mate: Well let me quote one, actually.

N Finkelstein: Yeah.

Aaron Mate: Israeli Historian Ami Gluska, and the Israeli military on the origins of the 1967 war, he writes, "The Soviet assessment from mid-May 1967 that Israel was about to strike at Syria was correct and well-founded."

N Finkelstein: You know, I often use that quote because it was the first time I ever saw in

print. There were rumors that Israel was going to attack, and there were occasional hints of a Cabinet meeting where they reached that decision, but it had never actually appeared in print until I read Gluska's book. He says yes, the Israelis had made the decision to attack. So Egypt has a defense pact with Syria. Knowing that an Israeli attack is imminent, he has an obligation to rise to Syria's defense. So he moves Egyptian troops in the Sinai. Separating Egypt from Israel was a peace-keeping force called the United Nations Emergency Force, UNEF. He asked U Thant to remove-

Aaron Mate: The Secretary General.



U Thant (Source: Wikipedia)

N Finkelstein: Excuse me, yes. The UN Secretary General. He asked UN Secretary General U Thant to remove the UNEF, the United Nations Emergency Force. Under the law, U Thant had an obligation to remove those forces. Now, U Thant was very viscously attacked for that decision. In fact, it wrecked his term of office in the United Nations, because everyone blamed him for the '67 war. It's all forgotten now, but that's what happened. But there was a simple answer. There was a simple response.

Aaron Mate: Put them on the Israeli side.

N Finkelstein: Yeah, because in 1957, when the UNEF was installed, the agreement was it was supposed to be on both the Egyptian side of the border and the Israeli side of the border. So in '67, once Nasser says, "Remove UNEF from our side," all Israel had to say was, "Fine, we will reposition it on our side of the border," meaning the Israeli side. They didn't do that. If the UNEF really could have averted an Egyptian attack, which is what Israel suggests when it said U Thant committed this monumental blunder by removing it, why don't you just put it on the other side of the border?

Aaron Mate: Let me go on then to the other reasons that are cited for Israel launching the war. You had guerrilla attacks coming onto the Israeli side from both Jordan and Syria.

N Finkelstein: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron Mate: Those are described in the official history as a major threat to Israel's security.

N Finkelstein: Well, first of all we have to understand what was behind those attacks. These were Palestinian commando raids, mostly supported by the Syrian regime. But the Israeli senior officers acknowledged, the reason Syria was sponsoring those commando raids was because of the Israeli land grab in the demilitarized zones. Secondly, with all due respect, I'm not out to ridicule the Palestinians or the PLO, I recognize these were acts of courage by people who had been dispossessed of their homeland-

Aaron Mate: In '48.

N Finkelstein: In '48. These were refugees. Remember, it's a short time between '48 and '67. It's within a generation. But the record is these commando raids were extremely ineffective. One of the heads of the Israeli intelligence, Yehoshafat Harkabi, he described him after '67 as by any standard very unimpressive.

Aaron Mate: Okay, the other main historical incident that is cited is Nasser closing the Straits of Tiran.

N Finkelstein: Yeah, so in the middle of May, I think it was May 17th or 18th, Nasser closes ... There were also UNEF forces stationed by the Straits of Tiran, and they were removed when Nasser asked U Thant to remove the UNEF. U Thant, again he was very heavily criticized. There was a claim he could have just removed the UNEF from the Egyptian-Israeli border and not from the Straits of Tiran, but he removed all of them. I've read his defense. I found his defense very credible. He was an extremely honorable man, U Thant. Probably the most honorable Secretary General of the UN in its history. In any case, the UNEF was removed from around the Straits of Tiran, and Nasser declared the Straits of Tiran closed. Now, the Straits of Tiran-

Aaron Mate: So UNEF was removed from Sharm El Sheik.

N Finkelstein: Yes. It's basically the same area.

Aaron Mate: Oh, okay.

N Finkelstein: That was the waterway to Eilat, the Israeli port city of Eilat. Well what do you make of that decision?

Aaron Mate: Yeah.

N Finkelstein: Number one, Abba Eban, who was always given to drama-

Aaron Mate: A famous Israeli diplomat.

N Finkelstein: He was at that time the UN representative. Later, he became foreign minister. He said, very dramatically, "Israel is now breathing with only one lung."

Aaron Mate: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

N Finkelstein: That was his famous line. In any event, Eilat was barely used. The only significant commodity that came through Eilat was oil, but Israel had several months' supply of oil accumulated, so the oil supply wasn't, at least for several months, it wasn't endangered. But the biggest point is there was no blockade. It happened that Nasser's a blowhard, he announces a blockade, enforces it it's usually estimated about two to three

days, and then he start to let ships go through quietly. There was no blockade. The issue was not a physical blockade, the issue was political. Namely, Nasser had defied Israel in public. It had sealed a quote unquote “international waterway,” Israel claimed. Whether it was an international waterway, or whether it belonged to Egypt, is also a complex legal question. Nasser said, at the end of May he repeatedly said, “Israel claims it has the right of passage in the Straits of Tiran. We say they don’t. Let’s go to the International Court of Justice to adjudicate it.”

Aaron Mate: That just days before the war breaks out.

N Finkelstein: A few days, yeah. About a week before. Israel says, “No, we’re not going to the International Court, because Israel wants the right to do as it pleases, when it pleases. You don’t go on an equal footing with an Arab to the International Court of Justice. That’s just not the way things work here. We’re in charge.” So it wasn’t a significant waterway. The only significant commodity entering was oil. They had significant supplies of oil. The waterway wasn’t closed. Nasser offered to take it to the International Court of Justice to adjudicate. This is not the technical language, this is not a *casus belli*, a justification for war.

Then there’s a separate legal questions, which is, under Article 51 of the UN Charter, you’re only allowed to launch a preemptive attack if there is an armed attack against you. Closing a waterway is not an armed attack. That should have gone to the Security Council. So there are 1,000 reasons, you know, it’s a layered question, but in every count, Israel had no case. On every count, it had no case.

Aaron Mate: You touched on this a little bit, but maybe if you can go into more detail: Why did Israel go to such extraordinary lengths to launch this war and take over so much territory? What was their motivation?

N Finkelstein: Well, it is several motivations that converge. The overall picture is, Israel, from its founding in 1948, in particular its Prime Minister and dominant figure, David Ben-Gurion, he always worried about what he called an “Arab Ataturk” rising to power in the Arab World. Namely, somebody like the Turkish figure Kemal Ataturk who modernized Turkey, brought Turkey into the modern world, and there was always the fear by Ben-Gurion that a figure like Ataturk might emerge in the Arab World, and the Arab World would then remove itself from the state of backwardness and dependence on the West, and become a power to contend with in the world and in the region. In 1952, when there was the Egyptian revolution, and eventually Nasser emerges as the dominant figure, and Nasser was a kind of an emblematic figure of that era. It’s obviously been completely forgotten by everybody except historians, but it was a very heady era, it was the post-war era of non-alignment, Third-World-ism-

Aaron Mate: Third World solidarity, yeah.

N Finkelstein: ... anti-imperialism, decolonization, and the emblematic figures were Nehru in India, Tito in Yugoslavia, and Nasser. The three of them were not officially the Soviet Bloc. They were a third force.

Aaron Mate: Non-aligned.

N Finkelstein: Non-aligned, exactly. The non-aligned tend to lean toward the Soviet Bloc because the Soviet Bloc was officially anti-imperialist, but it was non-aligned. Nasser was

one of the dominant figures in that period, so he was anti-imperialist, he was a modernizer. Israel was seen, not wrongly, as a Western implant in the Arab World, and it was also seen as trying to hold back the Arab World.

So there was a sense of conflict and collision between Nasser and Israel. Beginning, again very scrupulously documented, not by Finkelstein, but by a very reputable mainstream historian, namely Benny Morris. If you look at his book, "Israel's Border Wars," it talks about the period from 1949 to 1956, and he shows that around 1952-53, Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan, they're now determined, and I'm describing it literally from him, to provoke Nasser. To keep hitting him and hitting him until they have a pretext to knock out Nasser. They want to get rid of him, and to keep provoking him, and to some extent, he couldn't help it after a point, he got caught in the trap essentially. Didn't work exactly as the Israelis hoped and so in 56, they plotted, colluded with the British and the French to overthrow Nasser. That worked, to a point. They invaded the Sinai, the British and the French played their parts in this collusion-

Aaron Mate: The Americans told them to knock it off, though.

N Finkelstein: For several reasons not worth going into right now, the Americans told Israel to get out.

Aaron Mate: They wanted it delayed, basically.

N Finkelstein: Yes. Dwight Eisenhower didn't think-

Aaron Mate: It was time.

N Finkelstein: ... the time was right.

Aaron Mate: Yeah, yeah.

N Finkelstein: But of course, they also wanted to get rid of Nasser. They all saw him as a pin prick at their side. So '67 is basically just a repeat performance of 56, with one critical change.

Aaron Mate: American support.

N Finkelstein: The US didn't oppose it. They were very cautious and careful about how they worded it. Some people call it an amber light, a yellow light, some people call it the green light, but they didn't openly support it, because it was illegal.

Aaron Mate: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

N Finkelstein: You know, what Israel did. At that point, the United States was fighting a war in Vietnam which was very unpopular, and they didn't want again to engage themselves supporting Israel, which would also seem like Western Colonialism trying to assert itself over the Third World, the non-aligned world, whatever you want to call it.

The first goal was to knock out Nasser. That was a long-term goal, to keep the Arab World backward. To keep it in a subordinate, primitive state. Secondly, was what happened with the closing of the Straits of Tiran. Namely, Nasser was acting very uppity. He was challenging the Israelis. To some extent, he was goading them, I think that's true. It was all

hot air, and the Israelis knew it was hot air, but they thought, a very revealing phrase from one of the Cabinet meetings came from, at that point he was a Commander, Ariel Sharon. There were some members of the Israeli Cabinet who were still reluctant to launch an attack. He said, "We have to attack now, because we're losing our deterrence capacity." That's a favorite phrase among the Israeli Military.

Aaron Mate: Continues today with Gaza-

N Finkelstein: Yes.

Aaron Mate: And Lebanon.



Nasser (center), King Hussein of Jordan (left) and Egyptian Army Chief of Staff Abdel Hakim Amer (right) at the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces headquarters in Cairo before signing a mutual defense pact, 30 May 1967. (Source: Wikipedia)

N Finkelstein: "Deterrence capacity" means the Arab World's fear of us, that Nasser was now whipping up the Arabs and they were no longer afraid. For the Israelis, the fear, the deterrence capacity, is a very strong card on their side, to keep the Arabs in their place. So the second reason was that they had to restore, as they call it, their deterrence capacity. The third, I would not quote the reason, all the generals had their own desires about wanting to get back some lands. Everyone was agreed they wanted to get Jerusalem, because they lost part of it in '48. Large numbers of them wanted the West Bank, others of them wanted the Golan Heights, others wanted the Sinai, so there was a land grab element to the war.

Aaron Mate: Okay, on that point, and a quick question as we wrap part one of this discussion.

N Finkelstein: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron Mate: In terms of the land grab in the West Bank, the presence today in the West Bank of hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers, many of them religious fanatics who believe that they're there because God promised them that land, was that kind of religious zealotry a strong component in the internal Israeli thinking at that time? Like wanting to-

N Finkelstein: It wasn't religious-

Aaron Mate: [crosstalk 00:28:05]

N Finkelstein: ... but you have to remember that the Zionist movement was overwhelmingly secular, overwhelmingly atheist. In fact, large numbers of them consider themselves socialists and communists and had no truck with a religion. But they still felt they had a legal title to the land, because in their thinking, the Bible was not just a religious document, the Bible was a historical document, and historically, the Jews had been in Palestine, and it was theirs. It was the same mentality in '67. It was secular, but it was also deep-seated and fanatical. The fact that they had a claim to the land didn't make it necessarily in their minds a religious claim. It was a secular claim, but still a fanatical claim, that it was their land, because it says so in the Bible, and the Bible is a historical document, you know, for them the Bible is a historical deed.

Aaron Mate: That's going to wrap this part of the discussion. In the next part, we're going to get into what changed for Israel after '67 in terms of American Jewish support and also American government support, and how those two intertwined. My guest is Norman Finkelstein. Join us in the next part of this discussion.

Norman G. Finkelstein received his doctorate in 1988 from the Department of Politics at Princeton University. He currently teaches at Sakarya University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Turkey. Finkelstein is the author of ten books that have been translated into 50 foreign editions.

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