Combatants in Mideast
By HANSON W. BALDWIN
New York Times (1857-Current file); Jun 6, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2002)
pg. 19

Combatants in Mideast

Arabs Have Greater Numbers and Area; Israelis Superior in Spirit and Tactics

By HANSON W. BALDWIN

The fighting in the Middle East in effect pits mass against momentum.

The Arabs enjoy the advantage of greatly superior numbers and of a much larger geographical area, the Israelis the advantage of a superior offensive spirit and greater tactical effectiveness. The current confrontation, however, is far different from that of 1948 or of the Suez crisis in 1956.

News Analysis

In 1948, Israel was weak. Today she is strong.

In 1956, Egypt was the only Arab combatant, and the British-French attack on Suez forced President Gamal Abdel Nasser to thin out his Sinai defenses. Today Israel faces an Egyptian Army two to three times stronger in the Sinai Peninsula than the forces defeated there in 1956, and she must divide her own troops to face threats from Syria and Jordan.

And today both sides have modern jet aircraft and some airborne, seaborne and land-based missiles, and the effects of their use against cities and civilian populations are unpredictable.

In numbers of men in uniform, Israel is outnumbered more than 2 to 1 if the United Arab Republic, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon fully mobilize their reserves.

275,000 Israelis in Uniform

Israel probably has in some sort of uniform 275,000 to 300,000 men and women, with most of the rest of the nation enrolled in some sort of auxiliary military service. Some of these are armed, chiefly with infantry weapons, but there are ample numbers of rifles, machine guns, submachine guns and small arms.

The Israeli Army is organized in four regular brigades of about 4,000 men each—one of them a paratroop infantry brigade—and a separate armored unit of divisional size. There are about 24 reserve brigadse, many of which use requisitioned commercial vehicles for transport.

Israel has more than 650 tanks and 200 to 300 self-propelled guns. The tanks include old United States model Shermans, French AMX-13 light tanks, the newer United States M-48 tank with a 90-mm. gun, and the British Centurion.

Antitank guns include 106-mm. recoilless rifles, mounted on jeeps, and French antitank missiles.

Israel's air strength numbers about 450 planes—French Mirage, Mystère, Vautour and Ouragon fighters and fighter-bombers, armed with missiles as well as guns and bombs.

Her airfields and principal cities are defended by two battalions—about 32 missile launchers—of United States type Hawk surface-to-air missiles. If properly used and maintained, these are deadly against aircraft from low to medium altitudes.

The small Israeli Navy includes three destroyer types, a couple of submarines and motor torpedo boats and small craft.

The six principal Arab states involved—the United Arab Republic, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon—have armed forces that total, at full mobilization, about 650,000.

Kuwait, the Sudan and Libya add 10,000 to 20,000 more, and Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco 100,000 to 150,000. These figures, however, have little reality as applied to the scene of fighting.

The principal Arab fighting forces are being furnished by the United Arab Republic, Syria and Jordan, with some additional units from Iraq and token forces from some of the smaller nations. It is, indeed, doubtful that the Arabs have any great numerical advantage along Israel's frontiers except, perhaps, in Sinai.

The United Arab Republic has six to seven divisions, separate brigades and parachute units — a total of almost 300,000 men in its armed forces. About 40,000 of these are tied down in Yemen, and there are reported to be 60,000 to 80,000 in the Sinai peninsula.

The Egyptians also have about 1,200 tanks and self-propelled guns and about 500 aircraft, including 50 MIG-21's.

Soviet SAM-2 missiles, of the type used by the North Vietnamese, and radar-controlled 85-mm. antiaircraft guns defend Egyptian fields.

The navy has nine former Soviet submarines and Komar and Osa-class torpedo boats, equipped with winged guided missiles of about a 20-mile range. The navy also has six destroyer types and many smaller vessels.

Syria has 60,000 to 100,000 men at full strength, about 400 tanks and self-propelled guns and about 150 aircraft.

Jordan, with one of the best of the Arab armies, could muster 70,000 to 80,000 men, including some half-trained Palestinians and the so-called National Guard. She has several hundred combat vehicles and about 50 planes.

Iraq has six divisions, 400 tanks and 200 planes—a total mobilized force of about 100,000. But only a fraction of this number could be supported in Syria, Jordan or the United Arab Republic.

Arab Long-Term Asset

The Arab advantage in mass is more of a long-term than an immediate asset and would probably become of maximum importance only if all of the Arab League members participated fully in the war and if the drain of continuing casualties and losses were to slowly weaken Israel.

It is an advantage that was offset at the start of fighting—as yesterday's combat reports tended to show—by superior Israeli cohesiveness, a greater technological mastery of weapons and superiority in air warfare and mobile land warfare.

Israel's armed forces, moreover, are keyed to a high national spirit, and Maj. Gen. Moshe Dayan, the one-eyed hero of the Sinai campaign in 1956 and now Minister of Defense, is a firm believer in the utmost use of force in war and of the offensive spirit.

As chief of staff in 1956, General Dayan recognized the importance of time, and today he is likely to try to win key objectives quickly before possible great-power intervention can take place or attrition set in.

The Sharm el Sheik and Strait of Tiran area is one of these probable objectives.

The key to northern Sinai and the Gaza strip, which is difficult to defend, is the triangle formed by Rafah, El Arish and Abu Agelia. This area commands the prinicpal roads, the railroad and the desert tracks leading across Sinai to Suez and into Israel.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.