Mideast Upheaval
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Mideast Upheaval

Israel's Forces Change the Whole Power Balance

With a swift, furious shake, Israel upset the Middle East kaleidoscope last week, convulsing the power patterns of a decade, perhaps forever.

In just a few days, her planes and troops turned a tough-sounding Arab challenge into a humiliating rout. They broke Egypt's blockade of their southern outlet to the sea. They raced to the edge of the Suez Canal, from which Israeli ships had been barred for 20 years. They seized the Jordanian half of Jerusalem and climbed the Jordanian hills that command Israel's pinched, strategic middle. They humbled their bitterest foe, Syria, as the United Nations struggled to enforce a cease-fire that finally went into effect yesterday.

Plainly they planned to hold their gains until the world could secure a better peace than the frail one offered for their retreat after the war of 1956. Ideally, they hoped for a lasting settlement that would include Arab acceptance of the state of Israel and a final, militarily advantageous delineation of her frontiers.

But having overturned all the tables, the Israelis could look only to the big powers and their smarting Arab neighbors for the final gift of stability and peace. And that will depend upon months of agonizing reappraisal and reconstruction.

Wrecked in the Sinai Desert last week was much more than the Egyptian Army with its Soviet armor.

The Wreckage

Wrecked were the contradictory faces of Egypt's charismatic leader, President Gamal Abdel Nasser—the fiery missionary who would rally the Arab nations for the final eradication of Israel, and the cool and cunning statesman who repeatedly sought profit in crisis while averting a crash. The adroitness of a master politician was still his, as he diverted the lightning accumulating about his head by offering to resign, then bowing to popular appeals that he stay on. But the magic was gone, and his future was uncertain.

Wrecked once again, barely after it was proclaimed, was the project of Arab unity. The Israelis swarmed over their neighbors, almost in turn, encouraging the victors to hope that the Arab states could also be taken diplomatically, one by one.

Wrecked were the costly Soviet investments of money, arms and prestige in the Arab cause. And wrecked, too, were the consciously contradictory efforts of the United States to retain influence with all the feuding Arab nations while sustaining Israel against them.

And not entirely wrecked, but badly maimed was the United Nations, whose peace-keeping forces in Sinai were hastily withdrawn by Secretary General Thant just as the crisis flared—collapsed like an umbrella as the rain began to fall, as an Israeli official put it. The Security Council was left with no means of arranging the many cease-fires it demanded through the week and became merely a repository for the Arab surrender notices as they arrived.

Building a peace upon this foundation promised to rival the building of pyramids on sand. But the Israelis yearned for a real peace and President Johnson vowed to try.

Debating Peace Terms

Surrounded and overwhelmingly outnumbered, Israel, nonetheless, stood unchallenged this weekend, debating but not yet asserting her terms for withdrawal and peace. As they prayed at old Jerusalem's Wailing Wall her leaders vowed never again to surrender the city. And as they walked the strategic heights of the Jordan River and the flat beaches of the Gaza Strip, her young warriors no doubt vowed never to yield these vantage points to hostile armies again.

But the special committee formed by President Johnson to find a path toward reconciliation had no sense yet of what would be asked and offered by whom and when. The committee could only begin to list the hundreds of suggestions, mild and wild, that were being offered around the world for the reopening of the Suez Canal and free passage through the Gulf of Aqaba, for a limitation of arms sales to the Middle East, for international patrols and armies, big-power restraints and guarantees, for creation of truce lines and demilitarized zones and autonomous regions and independent international territories, for final resettlement of the hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees from Israel and the care of the new Arab wards of the Israeli conquerors.

For the moment, there was not even the prospect of direct Arab-Israeli talks, nor was there any clear consensus at the United Nations that the construction of a peace would gain priority over the rival big-power interests in the region.

The Soviet Union called her allies together in Moscow at the weekend to frame a message of condolence and support to the beaten Arabs—and to break diplomatic relations with Israel. But this was clearly a cover-up for their unwillingness to risk a clash with the United States by intervening in the conflict.

Only after the embarrassments of this week have faded and only after the political conflicts inside the Arab nations are resolved will Moscow be able to reassess its interests in the Middle East. It plainly wishes still to exploit Western difficulties by currying favor with the numerous and strategically placed Arab states. But it must also wish to avoid yet another decade of expensive aid to clients who would again gravitate toward war.

How the Soviet leaders will resolve this dilemma is a major riddle in the new situation. It proved relatively easy during the fighting last week for President Johnson and Soviet Premier Kosygin to agree in their hot-line teletype exchanges to stay out of the conflict, but their commitments to rival Middle East societies will prove a major obstacle to genuine collaboration in building a new peace.

The Russians appear to have encouraged Egypt up to the point of its mobilization against Israel three weeks ago, but they never endorsed the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba, probably because they knew that it would touch a raw Israeli nerve. When their worst fears were realized and the Israeli Army poured across Sinai they deserted the Arabs altogether by endorsing a United Nations call for a cease-fire that did not demand an Israeli retreat to its frontiers.

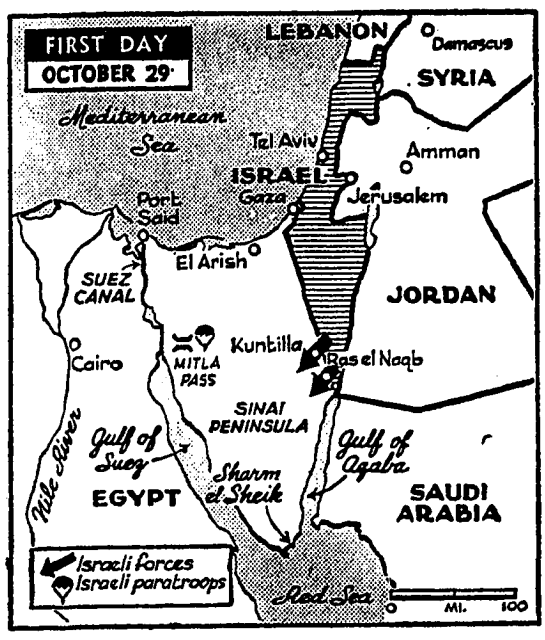
Their growing disenchantment with President Nasser, combined with their traditional uneasiness about non-Communist strongmen in weak countries, may persuade them to try a new course of limiting arms shipments if the West applies similar limits to Israel.

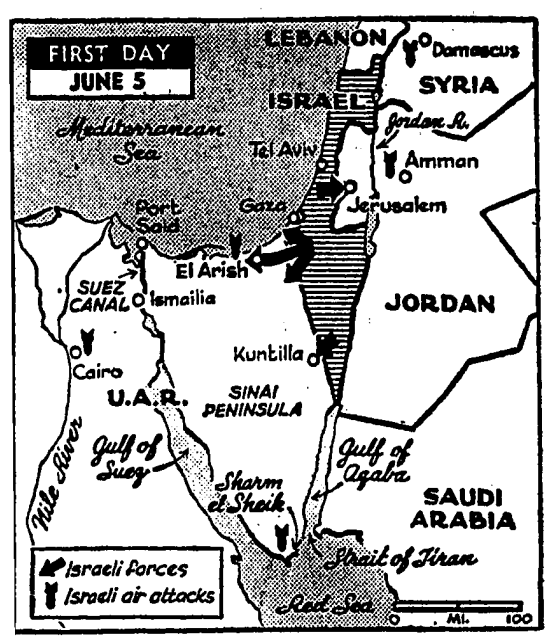
The United States, translating its long-range hope for a lasting settlement into proposals for the moment, tried to move from cease-fire to the revival of some United Nations machinery that could supervise the truce, and toward a situation in which some Arabs and Israelis could be persuaded to begin face-to-face discussions of how to deal with the hundreds of issues now before them.

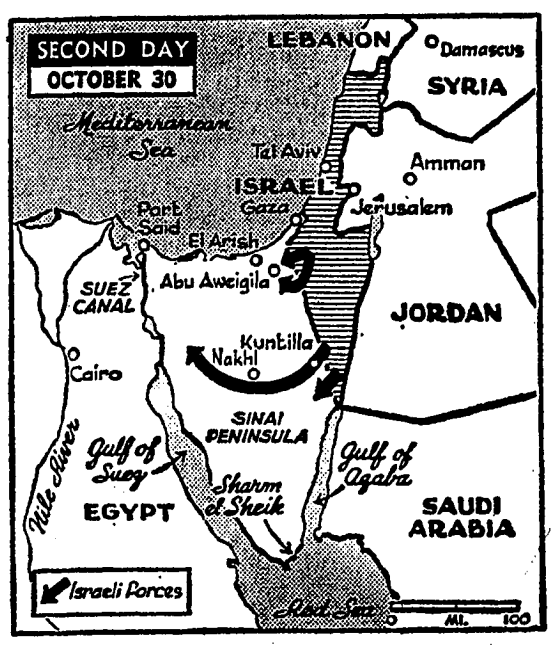
The Israelis can bargain with their proven military supremacy, their physical position far beyond their frontiers, and the threat finally to proceed with the production of nuclear weapons. But they will soon be confronted by demands that Suez be reopened, by European and Asian requirements for Arab oil, by the American and Soviet desire, in different degree, to help restore the self-respect and minimal viability of the Arab nations, and by the inevitable fading of the euphoria of victory.

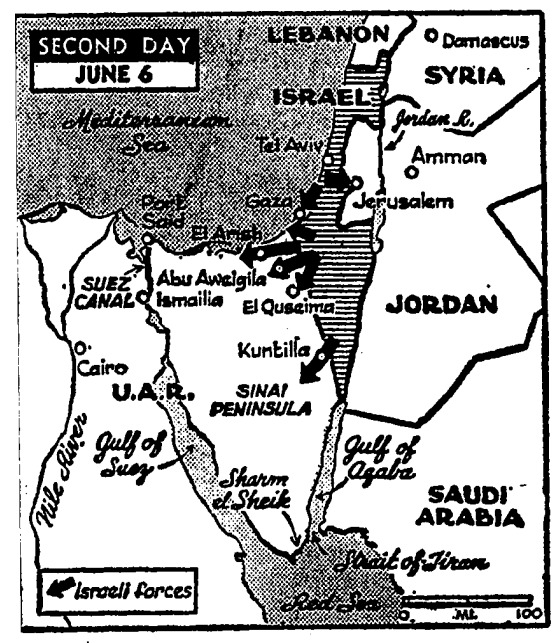
The Israelis have demonstrated again that force and determination can eliminate the unbearable but these qualities cannot evoke the wisdom and charity now needed to produce the desirable.

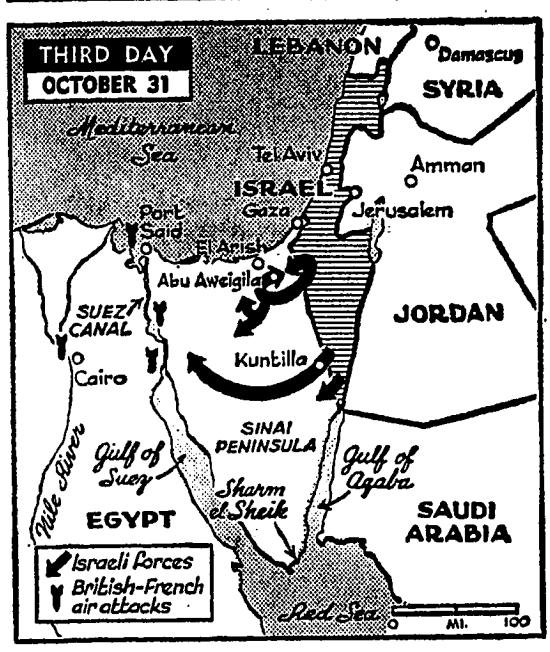
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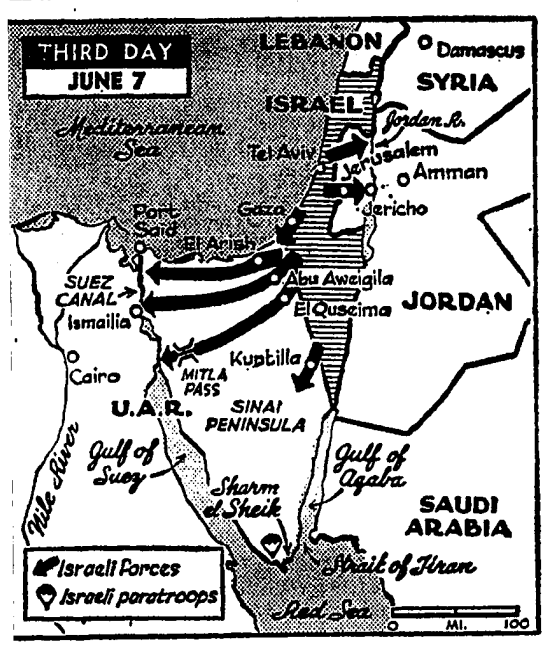


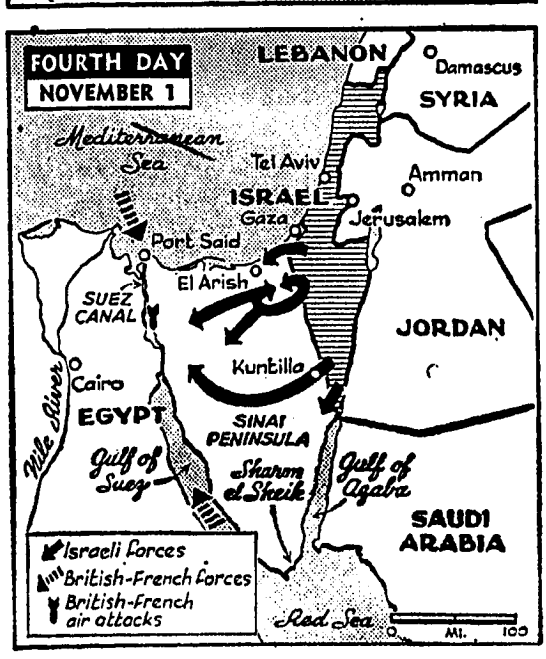












TWO CAMPAIGNS COMPARED

In 1956, the Israelis, with the aid of the British and French, swept across most of the Sinai and broke the back of Egyptian resistance in five days. Last week the Israelis, acting alone, overwhelmed the Egyptians and Jordanians in three days. These maps show the day-by-day progress of the crucial period of each campaign. Yesterday, on the sixth day of the present campaign, fighting was still going on as the Israelis invaded Syria to secure the border before a cease-fire was accepted.

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