

The Myth of Annihilation and the Six-Day War

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One of the convictions shared by the Israelis on the eve of the Six-Day War has just been seriously shaken. The certainty that the Jewish state was threatened with extermination in May-June, 1967, has attained a status of dogma, which no one could question without the likelihood of being accused of treason or mental instability."

Thus begins a review of the "annihilation controversy" in Israel, or the "Generals' polemic," as it has been called by an Israeli Jewish journalist, Amnon Kapeliuk, writing in *Le Monde*.¹ (I am heavily indebted to this important review in early sections of this article.) On June 12, 1967, immediately after the war was over, Levi Eshkol, the Israeli prime minister, stated to the Knesset: "The existence of the Israeli state hung on a thread, but the hopes of the Arab leaders to exterminate Israel were brought to nought." Not only was this assertion unchallenged at the time, Kapeliuk points out, but it was repeated and elaborated on in thousands of speeches, interviews and articles by prominent Israelis. And not only in Israel. A prominent American Jew described the common view in the United States in 1967:

In the eyes of millions, a much-admired underdog withstood heroically, even miraculously in June of 1967, the threat of annihilation from the giant military menace of the combined Arab armies.²

The challenge to this myth began with a speech by Reserve General Matitahu Peled. A lecturer in Middle Eastern history at the University of Tel Aviv and a researcher at the Shiloan Institute, General Peled had previously been chief of the logistical command during the June war and was one of the twelve members of the Army General Staff. The occasion of his revelation was a symposium at the political-literary Zavta Club in Tel Aviv on March

11, 1972, in a discussion on the controversial book *The Israelis, Founders and Sons* by Israeli writer Amos Elon. Peled accused Elon of accepting as axiomatic statements that were not actually true. To his stunned audience Peled flatly stated: "The thesis, according to which the danger of genocide hung over us in June, 1967, and according to which Israel was fighting for her very physical survival, was nothing but a bluff which was born and bred after the war."³ Furthermore, he said, in May, 1967, the Israelis were not under threat of destruction either as individuals or as a nation. While Egyptians had eighty thousand soldiers in the Sinai, Peled explained, Israel had hundreds of thousands of men poised against them.

The fact that there was no real danger of destruction, Peled said, caused more difficulty for the government, which had adopted the "diaspora approach," according to which war can be justified only when there is a threat of extermination and not merely for political reasons. Actually the war was caused, he stated, by the Soviet Union's attempt to change the status quo in the area and to supplant the American settlement, which had prevailed since 1957, with a Soviet one. He pointed out that the Arabs had only a secondary role in 1967. Posing the question, When was the last time that Israel was exposed to Arab attack? he answered: According to my reading of history, that was in 1948.

Kapeliuk reports that the General's candid assertions provoked in the press an uproar of rejections and denials, and that, as a result, Peled took up the question again on March 24 in a long article in *Maariv*, the largest Israeli newspaper. He wrote: "There is no reason to hide the fact that since 1949 no one dared to, or in more exact terms, no one was in any position to, threaten the very existence of Israel. Despite this, we continue to nurture the feeling of inferiority as though we were a weak and insignificant people living in dire straits and strug-

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gling to preserve our own existence in the face of impending extermination."

General Peled made clear that he was aware of the threats of Arab leaders which had an influence on the opinions of prominent Israelis. But, he pointed out, "it is well known that the Arab leaders themselves were aware of their impotence and did not believe in their own threats." And further:

I am convinced that our General Staff never told the government [of Levi Eshkol] that there was any substance to the Egyptian military threat to Israel, or that we were not capable of crushing Nasser's army which had exposed itself, with unprecedented foolishness, to the devastating strikes of our forces. All those stories about the huge danger we were facing because of our small territorial size, an argument expounded once the war was over, had never been considered in our calculations prior to the unleashing of hostilities. While we proceeded towards the full mobilization of our forces, no person in his right mind could believe that all this force was necessary for our "defence" against the Egyptian threat. This force was necessary to crush once and for all the Egyptians, at the military level, and the Soviet masters, at the political level. To pretend that the Egyptian forces concentrated on our borders were capable of threatening Israel's existence not only insults the intelligence of any person capable of analyzing this kind of situation, but is primarily an insult to Zahal [the Israeli Army].⁴

A few days after Peled opened the controversy, the Army Chief of Staff, General David Eleazar, in an interview in the daily *Yediot Aharonot*, took issue with General Peled's claim and stated: "The previous frontiers were not secure. It was, therefore, difficult to engage in defending the country with such a handicap. If we had allowed the Arab armed forces to get organized and to attack first, we would have jeopardized the existence of the State of Israel."

According to Kapeliuk, this statement found no supporters among the military men who took part in the controversy, each of whom in different ways confirmed Peled's claims. General Ezer Weizman, who as chief of operations played a leading role in the 1967 victory and who later became Minister of Transportation and president of the Herut (Nationalist-right) Party, spoke out several times. This supporter of the Greater Israel Movement, a man generally considered a "superhawk," flatly stated: "There never was a danger of extermination." He added that this hypothesis "had never been considered in any serious meeting."

On April 19, 1972, in an interview with *Maariv*, General Haim Bar-Lev, who in 1967 was deputy to Chief of Staff General Rabin and who is presently

Minister of Commerce and Industry, stated: "We were not threatened with genocide on the eve of the Six-Day War and we had never thought of such a possibility. It is true that such a possibility had been envisaged during the 1948 war of independence, but this possibility revealed itself even then as unworthy of serious consideration."

On July 2 Bar-Lev explained his views to the Cabinet. He repeated that the situation in 1967, although "extremely grave," did not forebode "the destruction of Israel—if those words meant the physical annihilation of a million Jews and/or the effective conquest of the territory of the State of Israel." Bar-Lev stated flatly: "Such a danger did not exist." He added, however, that had Israel acted *differently*, its victory would have involved heavier sacrifices. He was clarifying his position to the Cabinet, he said, "since my name has been mentioned in connection with utterances making light of the gravity of the danger that confronted Israel The Arab states intended to destroy . . . Israel and believed in their power to do so. The closure of the Tiran Straits and the troop concentrations along the border created an intolerable situation."⁵

Kapeliuk concluded his review with the observation that "no argument of any considerable weight has been advanced to refute the thesis of these three generals. Nevertheless, certain Israeli journalists thought of the idea of appealing to the Generals' 'civic sense of duty' by urging them not to exercise their inalienable right of free speech, lest they prejudice world opinion and the Jewish diaspora against Israel."

Two interesting civilian witnesses joined in the public discussion. Mr. Mordecai Bentov, a former member of the Mapam (leftist socialist) Party, who was a member of the ruling coalition during the June war, spoke out. He had not voted in favor of launching the war in 1967 because he was convinced that all the political and diplomatic means had not been employed to remove the Egyptian forces from the Israeli borders and to obtain the reopening of the Gulf of Akaba. In connection with the annihilation controversy he made a statement which appeared in *al-Hamishmar* on April 14 and which provoked bitter press attacks against him: "This whole story about the threat of extermination was totally contrived, and then elaborated upon, *a posteriori*, to justify the annexation of new Arab territories."

Mr. Menahim Begin, leader of the Herut Party, who also joined the ruling coalition on the eve of the June war, speaking to the students of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on June 7, 1972, agreed that while there were dangers, there was no threat of annihilation.

Thus the controversy sparked by General Peled spread. The discussion raises the question: If, as

he claims, there was no danger of Israel's being destroyed, why did he agree with the Israeli decision to launch the attack in June, 1967?

General Peled, who has a reputation for being pro-American and anti-Soviet, favored war against Egypt in 1967, not in order to defend Israel's existence, but to give credibility to Israel's power of dissuasion. Israel had insisted from 1957 that a blockade of the Straits of Tiran would be considered a *casus belli*. So, General Peled felt, Israel had to act militarily in 1967, when the Straits were closed, to prevent Nasser and the Russians from changing the status quo in the region.

Why did General Peled make his declarations in March, 1972? Kapeliuk has no doubt that Peled had a political objective in mind, that in his opposition to Israeli annexation of the territories occupied in 1967 he wanted to show that the government was exploiting the feelings of fear in the population to further its expansionist aims. General Peled maintained that the Israeli leaders had deliberately distorted the objectives of the June war in order to raise the spurious issue of the security of the state. The only conclusion one can draw, Peled wrote, is that "by falsifying the causes of the war and confusing its true motivations, the Israeli government was seeking to render acceptable to the people the principle of partial or total annexation." He accused the government of stirring up in the people an irrational fear for their existence.

General Peled further argued against establishing new settlements on the borders. Such a policy, he said, would lead to a situation in which the new security frontiers (demanded by General Dayan and others) would, in turn, become insecure, as the old ones were in 1967. Thus, further wars would be required to reach wider "secure" frontiers.

While Generals Peled and Weizman are in complete agreement that in 1967 Israel was in no danger whatever of destruction, on the question of whether Israel should withdraw from the territories occupied during that war Peled is in favor while Weizman is opposed. For this reason Weizman's long analysis of the events surrounding the June war, set out in *Haaretz*, is worthy of careful attention.⁹

Was there a danger of annihilation of Israel in 1967? Weizman answers: If there were, would we have waited two weeks after the closing of the Straits of Tiran before going to war? The heart of the issue, he says, is: Did the Arabs have the power to destroy us? Not the Egyptians—even if they had attacked first, Weizman says, we would have completely defeated them, not in three hours, but in thirteen. Not the Jordanians—as the Israeli conquest of the West Bank shows. Not the Syrians. If they were a real threat to us, Weizman asks, why did we wait three days before attacking them?

General Weizman then takes up the assumption behind all this questioning. The assumption is false. We are assuming that we should wage war only to prevent extermination. This is the diaspora approach, he says; it is based on a false assumption. Rather, he states categorically, a state does not go to war only when the immediate threat of destruction is hanging over it. At issue, he notes, is not our physical security but the realization of our historical and national interests, our Zionist principles. The western regions of "Eretz Israel," that is, the West Bank, belong to the essence of Zionism, and without them the Jewish state does not constitute an historical wholeness.

Why, then, General Weizman asks, were people afraid in 1967? He answers that the fear was due to the "loss of cool" on the part of the Israeli leadership, its lack of self-confidence of an historical consciousness, of its Zionist mission. The leadership was thinking, instead, that it might fight solely to be secure against extermination.

The people regained their morale and self-confidence, General Weizman explained, with the formation of the united national government and the joining of it of Messrs. Begin and Dayan. For the future, Weizman states, we shall have no "wayward policy" that answers problems concerning only the body of our nation and not the things of the soul. Rather, if we are obliged to go to war again, he says, we will know that we are not fighting to survive but to be able to continue living here as we wish.

The annihilation controversy was renewed on the fifth anniversary of the June war, as a review of articles in one of the Hebrew newspapers, *Yediot Aharonot*, will suggest. On May 31, 1972, *Yediot Aharonot* presented the testimony of four generals, who agreed that in 1967 there had been no threat of extinction: General Yeshiyahu Gavich, formerly commander of the southern front and now retired; General Herzog, formerly official military commentator and chief of the Bureau of Military Information; and Peled and Weizman. (The views of these same four generals are given in a much longer article in the June 1 issue of *Ot*, the Labor Party weekly magazine.) In later articles, the argument continues, Colonel Menahim Aviram, one of the commanders in the southern district, expressed his agreement with Peled and the others. General Arik Sharon, presently commander for the Sinai region, affirmed that there was a danger of annihilation ("the aim of the 1967 war was to prevent destruction of the people"), while Menahim Begin denies such a danger. On June 11 the newspaper presented a discussion of the issue by a group of teachers; now that we have discovered that there really was no threat of destruction, they say, we want to know why the government lied to us.

On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the war

the Israeli radio presented Generals Peled and Herzog. General Peled not only repeated his statement that there had been no danger of destruction, but further stated that there was no proof that the Egyptians actually planned to attack Israel at that time. Both Peled and Herzog agreed that there had been among the Israelis a fear for their safety, but that those who understood the situation knew differently. Herzog also stated that neither the Israeli General Staff nor the Pentagon, as the memoirs of President Johnson prove, believed there was a danger to Israel itself. On June 7 Herzog suggested publicly on the radio that "an end be put to this discussion, since we should not raise doubts about this story we have created."

Has anyone challenged the claims of these leaders who have denied a danger of annihilation? Yes. To General Eleager, Chief of Staff, whose testimony has already been mentioned, should be added the names of Generals Igal Yadin and Arik Sharon. Further, on June 3, 1972, Israel Galili, Minister of State, declared that "the fact is that Israel was threatened with annihilation." Abba Eban, Foreign Minister, and General Itzhak Rabin, Israeli Ambassador in Washington, both maintained that the state was in danger. In response to the annihilation controversy, the Israeli embassy in Paris distributed a pamphlet prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and entitled *The Threat: Events which led to the Six-Day War*. The pamphlet illustrates the Arab threat to Israel with cartoons and statements drawn from the Arab press since 1948. The presentation argues that an atmosphere of hostility and hate, as well as the closeness of the two sides, led to what it termed Arab aggression.

On June 4, 1972, the Israeli government, in an unprecedented act, made public a 1967 resolution of the Council of Ministers regarding the day-to-day situation prior to the opening of hostilities in June of that year. The record stated:

... the government ascertained that the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan are deployed for immediate multifront aggression threatening the very existence of the state. The government resolves to take military action to liberate Israel from the stranglehold of aggression which is progressively being tightened around Israel.⁷

The resolution further provided that the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister be authorized "to confirm to the general staff the time for action," and that the Foreign Ministry be charged with the task "of exhausting all possibilities of political action in order to explain Israel's stand and to obtain support from the powers."

The publication of this decision of the 1967 Cabinet may well have been intended to put an end to the public debate on the question, according to the

Jerusalem Post, since its continuance would involve the "leaking" of security information, "as the debaters struggle to prove their case." The newspaper *Davar* expressed the hope that the publication of the 1967 Cabinet decision "will put an end to the barren argument."

Was there, then, a real threat of annihilation of Israel in 1967? The answer is clearly no. The number and stature of the Israeli generals who have spoken out, the clarity and explicitness of their statements, the glare of publicity surrounding the debate which would have brought out any weaknesses in these generals' arguments, the fact that a "dove" like General Peled and a "hawk" like General Weizman, who differ on the future of the occupied territories, concur on the central issue of the controversy—all these considerations make the answer emphatically clear.

There are, moreover, several elements which weaken the case of those who affirm that in 1967 a danger of annihilation did exist—the "establishment" connections of most of these persons, the dutifulness of their denials and the appeal to the generals who spoke out to refrain from further discussion lest Israel's image be adversely affected.

A second relevant question is: Was Egypt actually about to attack Israel in May and June, 1967? Peled, as we have seen, admitted that there was no proof that Egypt planned to attack. Herzog stated that the Israeli General Staff did not believe in this danger, nor did President Johnson. In his memoirs Lyndon Johnson tells of the meeting on May 26, 1967, with Abba Eban. Eban reported that, according to Israeli intelligence, Egypt was preparing an all-out attack. Johnson wrote:

I asked Secretary McNamara . . . to give Mr. Eban a summary of our findings. Three separate intelligence groups had looked carefully into the matter, McNamara said, and it was our best judgment that a UAR [Egyptian] attack was not imminent. "All of our intelligence people are unanimous," I added, "that if the UAR attacks, you will whip hell out of them."⁸

Commenting on the Israeli decision on the June 3 weekend to attack, Johnson said:

They [the Israelis] may have feared that the week ahead would bring about a significant relative weakening in their military situation Our military men did not share this fear, and their judgment of relative Israeli-Arab strength proved amazingly accurate as the battle turned out.⁹

Prior to this meeting with Johnson, Abba Eban had met with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was called into the meeting, gave the official evaluation:

He [General Wheeler] had no information of any Egyptian intention to attack, he declared; *if anything, it was the Israeli army that was pressing to begin hostilities*. And he repeated that in the Pentagon's view Israel had nothing to fear. Her army was, in his estimation, far superior to that of Egypt.¹⁰

In two dispatches from Cairo which appeared in the *New York Times* just before the war, James Reston reported conditions which indicated that Egypt was hardly about to attack. In his first article, entitled "Cairo: Quietly Flows the Nile," Reston stated: "The diplomats here seem less worried than their counterparts in Western Europe . . ." The Egyptians, he said, "deny any intention of trying to destroy the state of Israel (unless, of course, there is a war)."¹¹ Yet in his June 7 article, sent from Tel Aviv, Reston wrote that the Israelis "had to fight to save the existence of their country."

President Nasser had repeatedly stated (e.g., on May 26, 1972) that Egypt would not go to war unless Israel attacked first. General Rabin, who was Chief of Staff during the June war, expressed his own opinions on this issue en route to Washington to take up his position as Israeli Ambassador to the United States. Rabin stated clearly to Eric Rouleau of *Le Monde*: "I do not believe that Nasser wanted war. The two divisions he sent into Sinai on May 14 would not have been enough to unleash an offensive against Israel. He knew it and we knew it."¹²

In this interview Rabin gave no indication whatever of a fear of annihilation of Israelis; on the contrary, the whole tenor of his remarks goes against such a fear. When Eric Rouleau pressed the significant objection—since the partial blockade of Akaba did not constitute a question of life or death for Israel (which could get supplies through Haifa as it did before 1956) and Nasser was prepared to make concessions concerning the passage, especially for petrol, why, then, did you unleash hostilities only forty-eight hours before the arrival in Washington of Zakaria Muhidin, who went there precisely to negotiate a settlement?—General Rabin replied: "The closing of the Gulf of Akaba in itself, I repeat, was for us a *casus belli*. However, fundamentally the war was provoked by an ensemble of local and international factors. The pernicious role of the Soviet Union came to exacerbate the passions and the hate reigning in the region."

If the belief that Israeli Jews were threatened with destruction in 1967 has been exposed as false in Israel in 1972, it still commands much vigorous and unquestioning assent in the United States. On a speaking tour of U.S. campuses in the fall of 1972 I found that the conviction that Israel was imperiled in 1967 maintains a powerful

emotional hold on people, many of whom are psychologically not ready to be informed otherwise. Moreover, the lecture tour demonstrated that anyone daring to challenge the myth may, on occasion, run into a hornet's nest of objections—even vilifications.

That the myth still flourishes in America raises serious questions regarding the responsibility of the American news media, especially of the press. The coverage of the Israeli "Generals' polemic" in the U.S. press has hardly been adequate to the intrinsic newsworthiness of the personalities involved, to the seriousness of the issue and its ramifications for Middle East questions and to the number of Americans who are either intensely involved or are very much interested.

The continuance of the legend of an "Israel standing alone in 1967 with its back to the wall" constitutes a serious psychological obstacle to clear judgment on the part of many Americans on the problems of the Middle East. One thinks particularly of American Jews in their attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, or of those Americans involved in one way or another in American Jewish-Christian relations, inasmuch as these have, since 1967, been partly based on an understanding that in 1967 Jews faced for the second time in this century a threat of massive destruction.

Further, Americans—no matter what their religious backgrounds—like all other members of the world community of nations, must be aware of the reality of world conditions if they are to develop sound attitudes regarding world justice and peace. If this is so, then citizens of the United States have a particularly grave responsibility, since their government can play a decisive role toward peace in that area.

NOTES

1. (June 3, 1972.) The French original with an English translation is available in *The Facts About the Palestine Problem*, bulletin of the Arab Women's Information Committee, Beirut.

2. Balfour Brickner, "American Jews, Israel and Public Policy," *Worldview* (January, 1972).

3. Kapeliuk, *op. cit.* See also the *Christian Science Monitor* (July 17 and 18, 1972); *Time* (June 19, 1972); *Middle East News Review* (June 12 and July 3-10, 1972).

4. Kapeliuk.

5. *Jerusalem Post* (July 3, 1972).

6. See *Know* (June 15, 1972). Also *Middle East International* (August, 1972).

7. *Jerusalem Post* (June 5, 1972).

8. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York, 1971), p. 293.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

10. David Kimche and Dan Bawly, *The Six-Day War* (New York, 1968), p. 126.

11. *New York Times* (June 4 and 5, 1967).

12. *Le Monde* (February 29, 1968).