

Book Reviews

D73. "An Old-Fashioned War: Michael Oren's Authoritative Account of the Six Day War - and its Legacy." The Weekly Standard June 10, 2002 p 34-36.

Six Days of War
June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East
by Michael B. Oren
Oxford University Press, 446 pp., \$ 30

In *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Michael B. Oren gives a meticulous, blow-by-blow history of what is, unfortunately, an old-fashioned kind of war.

Just before the short but decisive conflict, Egypt had closed the Straits of Tiran and demanded the removal of the United Nations forces that were serving as buffers in Sinai and the Gaza Strip. As the Egyptian army marshaled on the southern border of Israel, an Israeli morning raid eliminated the Egyptian air force, catching most planes on the ground, concentrated in small areas. Egypt proceeded to attack, but its forces -- without air cover -- were quickly defeated, retreating in disarray. Further fighting with Syria led to the Israelis' capture of the Golan Heights. Jordan entered the battle late (and reluctantly) and was quickly defeated, which resulted in the capture of the West Bank by Israel and the integration of the eastern parts of Jerusalem into the Israeli capital.

Michael Oren has impressive credentials to tell this story. A military historian trained at Princeton University, he has written the well-received *Origins of the Second Arab-Israeli War* and served in the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In *Six Days of War* he lines up facts, more facts, and still more facts, with little editorializing. He has dug up carloads of documents, many previously secret or inaccessible, in Russian and Arabic, to advance his fine-grained documentation. Oren's writing is clear and unadorned, allowing the swift development of events to provide the drama, and he closes *Six Days of War* with seventy-three pages of endnotes and an extensive bibliography. It is altogether a serious and important work.

In a very useful opening chapter, Oren provides the historical context for the Six Day War -- the conflict that, in turn, established the framework for many of the geopolitical issues with which the Middle East is still contending. It is a familiar story of the Jews of the Diaspora settling in what they believed to be a land with few people. In 1947 the United Nations "General Assembly Resolution 181" created two states, Arab and Jewish, with Jerusalem under an international regime. But both the local Palestinians and the neighboring Arab states refused to accept the arrangement, choosing instead to fight Israel from the day it was born. (I served as an Israeli commando in the Palmach at the time and can testify to Oren's accuracy.)

Six Days of War also shows how the Israeli-Arab conflict was quickly caught up in the Cold War, with the Soviet Union actively supporting certain states (especially Syria and, more indirectly, the Palestinians) and the United States supporting others (Israel and Iran). This discussion is particularly useful, for it highlights how much the world has changed since 1990. Soviet-style socialism never really had much force in the Arab world. Nationalism did

provide some motivation, but not enough to fill the rank and file of the Arab armies with a strong desire to fight. Instead, the kind of ideological fervor that leads to suicide bombers and people willing to spend years preparing terrorist attacks on civilians has come, since the collapse of Soviet communism and the fading of the Cold War, from a new force: Islamic fundamentalism.

Recently there was a fight among the hundreds of volunteers for a suicide bombing mission in Gaza -- because one of the candidates jumped the queue, taking the place another considered his. And many millions of Muslims across numerous countries, egged on by Arabic TV, have made eliminating Israel (the little Satan) and the United States (the big Satan) a tenet of their faith.

And the problem we face, the problem that Michael Oren points us to in *Six Days of War*, is that simple, decisive, six-day wars are no longer possible. The campaign against terrorism by Israel and the United States will be a prolonged struggle. Its proper metaphor is not -- sadly -- the Six Day War, but the Cold War. We are engaged in a long, tedious, and brutal war with virulent forms of Islam, during which will have to be a fight over the hearts and minds of those we face. We shall have to help them to see the virtue of free governments and open societies over the dogmatic life under theocratic regimes that now not only terrorize, but also ideologically mobilize them by playing on religious symbols.

When liberal democracies fight terrorism, they face a moral dilemma. The individual terrorists hide within the civilian population and do not fight by traditional rules of war. And the countries that support them place their missiles, topped with chemical and biological agents, next to schools, hospitals, and mosques. So, when we fight terrorists in Afghanistan (or when Israel fights them in Jenin), there are inevitably civilian casualties.

Part of this is hardly a new issue. We faced it during World War II when we fire-bombed Dresden. And, of course, we faced such moral challenges in Hiroshima and in Vietnam. But we must now face this issue on a wholly new level. Nearly all of World War II was conducted in the old-fashioned way. Even in Vietnam we faced an army of North Vietnamese, although they were extensively supported by what today would be called South Vietnamese terrorists, mixed in with the civilian population.

In contrast, today we fight a worldwide war against terrorists who hide only among civilians. Moreover, if caught, they claim all the rights we bestow on civilians, supported by civil-libertarian lawyers, and backed up all too often by judges who think that they are dealing with garden-variety criminals. And, in terrorist nations such as Iraq, not only are there more than a few instances of major military assets being hidden among and under civilian quarters, but such positioning is systematically pursued. In short, we are unable to overcome terrorism without causing "collateral damage" on an entirely new order of magnitude.

The Six Day War belongs squarely in the camp of old-fashioned conflicts: The regular military forces of Israel and its Arab neighbors fought with "remarkably few civilian casualties," as Oren puts it. Of course, that's not to say the Six Day War, like every war, was without moral ambiguities. It was, on the face of it, a war in which Israel launched the first attacks -- which has allowed it to be used by such revisionist Israeli historians as Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim as a prime example of wickedness in their spate of recent books blaming Israel for everything from the very existence of armed conflicts in the Middle East to Arab intransigence to the rejection of Ehud Barak's extreme peace offer.

But -- as demonstrated in the recent "Letter From America" statement signed by sixty American intellectuals, which applies just-war theory to our fight against terrorism -- a preventive war is not necessarily wrong. A just war is a war in which we aim to defend

innocents from harm, to oppose a clear and present danger, and to address a situation that cannot be plausibly mitigated through negotiations. Although Oren does not delve into this issue, he clearly views the Six Day War as a just war, because Israel -- given its small territory -- could not wait until it was attacked by the forces that were amassing on its border. (When it did, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, it was nearly overrun and destroyed.)

Oren thus provides a healthy counter to the Israeli revisionists. Above all, he reminds us how the world has changed when it comes to civilian involvement in wars. The people who were supposed to be kept out of the range of combat are now the main targets. Suicide bombers in Israel much prefer to attack Passover dinners, open-air markets, and discotheques over military targets. The Pentagon was the only military target among the four at which terrorists took aim on September 11. We have seen Iraqi chemical weapons unleashed on villages full of Kurds -- and we know such weapons are aimed at Tel Aviv and Riyadh.

Moreover, as we are learning in Afghanistan (on a small scale), we cannot avoid civilian casualties in fighting such terrorism. Most likely there would be many more in a war with Iraq. We should not, therefore, shy away from facing the moral dilemmas of fighting terrorism, suggesting that they are raised mainly by left-wing eggheads or a few misguided Europeans who hate America. This is a key point. Those we must convince include opinion-makers in nations from which we need help -- because terrorists can hide in their free societies (as in Germany), or use their all-too-easy protocols to obtain passports (as in Belgium), or pass through their airports known for weak security (as in Greece). We must never hit civilians sheerly out of revenge and we must continue seeking technological and other measures to reduce civilian casualties. Perhaps most important, we must be extremely cautious about intelligence. Mistakes are unavoidable, but they threaten our credibility and moral fortitude.

Still, when all is said and done, we must come to terms with the fact that if we are to prevent a Saddam from doing to our troops and to our allies what he has done to his own citizens, we may have to cause quite a few more civilian casualties than we have so far. The deciding factor may be that such an attack may ultimately lead to a smaller number of casualties on both sides -- a consideration that tipped the moral scale for the bombing of Hiroshima.

We may find solace in what ought to be called "collateral gains." We have learned in Afghanistan that the overwhelming majority of its people wanted to be released from the yolk of the tyrannical government that had terrorized them for decades. Far from being fanatical (as many of us, only two years ago, supposed most Afghans were), they were dancing in the streets when freed from the Taliban. A visit to Iran this May left me without the slightest doubt that about 80 percent of the population of that country (as indicated by election polls and their behavior) do not favor the fanatical regime imposed on them by the mullahs. And although Iraq is governed by a secular and not a theocratic tyranny, the fact that it has to rely on terror to keep its own people in check is a sign that American troops may soon be welcomed as liberators in Al Basrah and in Baghdad, as they have been in Kabul.

As we prepare for all of this, Michael Oren's *Six Days of War* is a key volume -- both to remind us how the modern Middle East came into existence and to teach us what kind of war we are no longer able to fight.