

Reading 3: Six-Day War

THE BATTLES BEGIN

Because Israel feared fighting on three fronts (Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian), and because it preferred that fighting take place in Arab rather than Israeli territory, Israel decided to strike first. On the morning of June 5 the Israeli air force attacked Egypt, the largest force in the region. The timing of the attack, 8:45 AM, was designed to catch the maximum number of Egyptian aircraft on the ground and to come when the Egyptian high command was stuck in traffic between homes and military bases. The Israeli aircraft took evasive measures to elude Egyptian radar and approached from directions that were not anticipated. The surprise was complete. Within hours of the strike, the Israelis, who focused their attacks on military and air bases, had destroyed 309 of the 340 total combat aircraft belonging to the Egyptians. Israeli ground forces then moved into the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip, where they fought Egyptian units. Egyptian casualties were heavy, but Israel suffered only minimal casualties.

War was not far behind on Israel's eastern front. Israel had conveyed a message to King Hussein of Jordan asking him to stay out of the conflict, but on the first morning of the war Nasser called Hussein and encouraged him to fight. Nasser reportedly told Hussein that Egypt had been victorious in the morning's fighting—an illusion the Egyptian public believed for several days. At 11:00 AM Jordanian troops attacked the Israeli half of Jerusalem with mortars and gunfire and shelled targets in the Israeli interior. Israel's air force, having immobilized the Egyptian air force, turned its attention to Jordan. By evening, the Jordanian air force had been largely destroyed, again with minimal Israeli casualties. At midnight Israeli ground forces attacked Jordanian troops in Jerusalem, and by the morning of June 6, Israeli troops had nearly encircled the city.

On the second day of the war the Israeli air force continued its operations against Arab air bases, raising the total number of destroyed Arab planes to 416, which included more than two-thirds of the Syrian air force. With nearly total control of the skies, Israeli fighter planes and bombers were free to support the tank and infantry forces on the ground. Thus Jordanian reinforcements were prevented from reaching Jerusalem, and by 10:00 AM on June 6 the Israelis had taken the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, in the Old City, the holiest site in Judaism. It was the first time in nearly 2000 years that Jews had controlled the wall. Ground battles continued in the Sinai, where Egypt's armies fell back in the face of Israeli advances. On the third day of the

war, June 7, Jordanian forces were pushed from the West Bank across the Jordan River. The UN arranged a cease-fire between Israel and Jordan that went into effect that evening.

The following day, June 8, Israeli forces reached the Suez Canal. As artillery battles continued along the front, the Israeli air force decimated retreating Egyptians, who were backed up on the few roads through desert mountain passes. As the Sinai shifted to Israeli control, Israel turned its forces toward the Golan Heights. There, on June 9, Israel began a difficult assault up steep terrain against entrenched Syrian forces. Israel sent an armored corps into the front of Syrian lines while infantry forces surrounded the Syrian positions. The balance of power soon shifted to Israel's favor, and at 6:30 PM on June 10, Israel and Syria made a cease-fire agreement. Israel controlled all of the Golan Heights, including parts of Mount Hermon. Fighting between Israel and Egypt did not formally end for many years, although Israel controlled the Sinai Peninsula. Not until the 1979 Camp David Accords did the two countries finally reach peace.

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