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War Initiation: The Case of Israel

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Israel has been one of the most conflict-prone states in the world during the post-World War II period. It has been involved in countless skirmishes with its Arab neighbours and even a few skirmishes with non-Arab states.[1] It has also been involved in six Arab–Israeli wars: the 1948–49 War of Independence, the 1956 Suez War, the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1969–70 War of Attrition, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the 1982 Lebanon War.[2] In the 1948–49 war, Israel did not have an opportunity to initiate hostilities. Indeed, it was literally born during this war. On the day that it proclaimed its independence, seven Arab armies invaded its territory, seeking to end its existence. In the other five wars, by contrast, Israel had opportunities to start hostilities. In three of these wars – those fought in 1956, 1967, and 1982 – it chose to initiate hostilities. In two of these wars – those fought in 1969–70 and 1973 – it chose not to do so.

This historical record raises an interesting question: Why did Israel choose to start hostilities on certain occasions, but not on others? Much has been written about Israeli decision making in specific wars, particularly the 1967, 1969–70, and 1973 wars. Much has also been written about the state's 'security dilemma' and general political-military strategy.[3] No single study, though, examines Israeli decision making across all of the Arab–Israeli wars with the express purpose of searching for a pattern of behaviour that might help to explain why Israel started hostilities on certain occasions, but not on others.

Perhaps the main reason why no comprehensive, comparative study exists is that Israel's wars have not been alike in at least three readily observable respects. First, and most obviously, the Jewish state initiated three wars, while it was attacked in three others. Moreover, two of the three wars that it began – the Suez and Lebanon wars – have traditionally been classifed as preventive wars, while the third war that it began – the Six-Day War – has traditionally been classified as a a pre-emptive war. Second, Israel's wars have differed in duration and intensity. The Suez, Six-Day, and Yom Kippur wars lasted from a few days to a few weeks; but each involved intensive fighting on a daily basis, causing heavy casualties to the warring sides. The War of Attrition and Lebanon War, by contrast, lasted considerably longer. The Lebanon War spanned several months, while the

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War of Attrition dragged on for more than a year. Although both of these latter featured many days of intensive fighting, in which heavy casualties were inflicted on the warring parties, there were also many days in which relative quiet prevailed between them. Third, in 1956, 1967, 1969–70, and 1973, Israel fought primarily against Arab states; in 1982, it fought primarily against a non-state entity. In 1969–70, it fought a static, 'trench' war that did not involve territorial conquest; whilst in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, it fought 'manouevre' wars that involved territorial conquest.

Still, despite these significant differences, similarities can be identified across those wars that Israel started. All three wars display similarities as to whether Israeli decision makers perceived their state to be faced by a clear threat; as to whether Israel's patron was supportive of or opposed to war initiation; as to the military options available; and as to Israel's foreign policy orientation. Furthermore, similarities can be identified across the two wars that Israel did not start, which differentiate both of these wars from the ones that Israel initiated.

This article does not attempt to develop a precise model that can offer a definitive explanation of Israel's decisions to initiate war. Nor does it draw any hard-and-fast conclusions about which variables are necessary or sufficient to explain Israel's decisions to initiate war.[4] Its purpose and scope are more modest: to illustrate a *pattern* of Israeli behaviour that should help to make more sense of the state's past. To this end, the first part of the article briefly sketches the concepts behind the dependent and four independent variables. The second part of the article then provides an assessment of Israeli decision making leading up to the 1956, 1967, 1969–70, 1973, and 1982 wars, using the method of 'structured, focused comparison' of cases.[5]

Defining the Variables

War Initiation

War initiation is used here as a purely descriptive term that means 'firing the first shot'. It is not intended to be a normative term indicating historical, legal, or moral responsibility for the outbreak of war. But this definition begs a serious question. Are the 1956, 1967, 1969–70, 1973, and 1982 wars qualitatively different from other kinds of Arab–Israeli violence, including border clashes, inter-communal unrest, and terrorist attacks? The answer is 'yes' for two reasons. First, international relations theorists and Middle East specialists are in general agreement that these episodes of Arab–Israeli violence (along with the 1948–49 war) differ fundamentally from other kinds of Arab–Israeli violence. Second, these episodes also differ from other kinds of Arab–Israeli violence based on objective criteria, such as the

number of battle deaths suffered in them by the organized military forces engaged in combat and the amount of force employed by the antagonists.[6] The point here is that the 1956, 1967, 1969–70, 1973, and 1982 wars constitute the sum of relevant cases.

Perceived Threat

How decision makers perceive whether their state is threatened by other actors – states or non-state entities – in the international system is currently not well understood. International relations theorists have thus far been unable to develop a parsimonious model of threat perception.[7] A reasonable assumption, however, is that decision makers base their judgments on the intentions and capabilities of a potential adversary. Broadly speaking, decision makers perceive their state to be threatened if a potential adversary is judged to have both hostile intent and the capability to act. Conversely, decision makers perceive their state to be secure if a potential adversary is judged to lack either hostile intent or the capability to act. Decision makers who believe that their state is threatened, it is reasonable to conclude, are more likely to initiate war than decision makers who think otherwise.

Patron Attitude

A state's security rests principally on its military capabilities. It can acquire these capabilities in two distinct ways: *internally* and *externally*.[8] A state acquires military capabilities *internally* by building an army and an arms industry, *externally* by finding an ally or a patron, which then transfers some of its own military capabilities to the state. While all states rely on a mix of military capabilities, the precise mix is very different for patron and client states. A patron state, which is among the larger and more self-sufficient actors in the international system, is less dependent on foreign assistance than a client state. A client state is especially dependent on military assistance from its patron when it faces the prospect of war, because its internal capabilities will not be adequate to meet its war or post-war requirements. War, no matter how short and decisive, is always an expensive undertaking; and a client state cannot rapidly build up its own army or arsenal. To meet war or post-war requirements, it must get additional military capabilities from its patron, in return for which the patron acquires considerable leverage over its client's war policies. The client, after all, has to pay a political price for this help. A client state's decision makers, then, are less likely to initiate hostilities when their state's patron is opposed to such an act than at other times.

Military Options

Hypothetically speaking, a state with a modern army that is thinking about

starting a war has several military options.[9] It can adopt a 'limited aims' strategy, which seeks to capture a portion of a potential adversary's territory, usually for use as a political bargaining chip, through a surprise assault. A state that embraces this strategy prefers to avoid heavy fighting if possible. Alternatively, a state may try to defeat decisively its adversary to achieve its goals. It can try to do so either through a blitzkrieg strategy, bringing about the speedy collapse of the enemy's military forces by swift armoured penetration of their defences, or by an attrition strategy, which engages them in a series of slower-moving battles of annihilation. A state that is able to choose any of these options would prefer to pursue a decisive campaign employing a blitzkrieg strategy, because it results in a quick victory. In other words, blitzkrieg is most likely to be the least costly of the three options. Both a limited aims strategy, which could easily turn into a war of attrition should the adversary decide to fight, and an attrition strategy, which involves engaging in a war of attrition from the outset, are more likely to result in higher human and material costs to the attacker. A state's decision makers, therefore, are more likely to initiate war if their state possesses a blitzkrieg option.

Foreign Policy Orientation

A state constantly reviews its position *vis-à-vis* other states to determine whether the *status quo*, which has been defined as the current resolution of international issues (e.g., territorial, security, and trade) of concern to the state, is acceptable.[10] A state that is content with the current resolution of all international issues of interest to it has no reason to change the *status quo*. Whilst one that is not content will to seek a change in the *status quo* in order to create a new, more favourable *status quo*. If a state decides to act on its desire to alter the *status quo*, it may attempt to do so through non-violent and/or violent means. In the late 1930s, for example, Great Britain and France remained satisfied with the European *status quo* that had emerged out of Germany's defeat in World War I. Germany, on the other hand, was dissatisfied, and its leaders decided that violent means offered the best prospect of achieving a more favourable *status quo*. Hence Germay, not Great Britain or France, initiated World War II.[11] In short, while a state with an anti-*status quo* foreign policy could opt to do nothing or to attempt to change the *status quo* through non-violent means, it could also opt to initiate war to try to change that *status quo*.

Wars Initiated by Israel

The 1956 Suez War

Although the Suez War was fought in late 1956, its origins can be traced

back to the Czech-Egyptian arms deal of autumn 1955.[12] From Jerusalem's perspective, this arms deal, under whose terms Cairo was to receive large quantities of sophisticated Soviet weapons, would greatly increase Egypt's military capabilities relative to those of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Decision makers in Jerusalem assumed that Egypt would act on its frequently stated intention to destroy Israel once it had the military capabilities to attempt to do so. Egypt, they knew, was already sponsoring a vicious campaign of terrorist attacks from the Gaza Strip against southern towns and agricultural settlements. It was also blockading the southern port of Eilat by prohibiting ships bound for there from passing through the Straits of Tiran. By late 1955, then, Egypt was already infringing upon Israel's right to a secure and prosperous existence.[13] Soon after the Czech-Egyptian arms deal became public knowledge, Israeli decision makers began to explore seriously the possibility of initiating a preventive war, in part to stop Egypt from absorbing the new weapons into its arsenal.[14]

Israeli decision makers realized that they would need foreign support, especially the cooperation of France, which was Israel's patron at the time, if the state was to initiate war against Egypt. To launch a war without this support would be to court international condemnation and isolation, an unthinkable proposition for a small state like Israel. Fortunately for Jerusalem, France had reasons of its own to contemplate military action against Egypt. The French were extremely angry with Egypt for supplying military assistance to Algerian rebels, who were trying to drive France out of Algeria. Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal in the summer of 1956 further enflamed French opinion. By early autumn 1956, France and Israel had begun to discuss a possible joint assault against Egypt. Simultaneously, France had begun to talk about a joint military operation with Great Britain, which had reasons to attack Egypt as well. Like the French, the British greatly resented Cairo's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal at their expense. Furthermore, they were incensed by Egypt's unceasing efforts to overthrow the pro-British regimes in Jordan and Iraq. At the Sèvres Conference of October 1956, France brokered a tripartite agreement between itself, Israel, and Great Britain to attack Egypt. Jerusalem now had the foreign support it needed to go to war against Egypt.

The Israeli decision to initiate war in late 1956 was also based on the assessment that the IDF would be able to achieve a rapid and low-cost victory over Egyptian forces in the Sinai. After some hesitation in the years immediately following the War of Independence, Israeli military planners concluded that the IDF should be built primarily for offensive, mobile warfare.[15] This decision was based not only on the IDF's successful campaign against Egypt in the final stages of the War of Independence, but also on the state's attributes. Its long and vulnerable borders, lack of

strategic depth, extreme sensitivity to casualties, limited economic resources, and lack of alliance partners all worked to convince Israeli military planners that short and decisive wars were absolutely vital if Israel had to fight.[16] By the mid-1950s, the IDF had adopted a blitzkrieg strategy, albeit crude by later Israeli standards, and had trained its personnel to implement this strategy. Although the IDF's strategy at this time was based on the primacy of mechanized infantry rather than tanks, the emphasis on speed, mobility, and casualty avoidance clearly indicated a blitzkrieg strategy. Nevertheless, the IDF still did not possess sufficient quantities of up-to-date armoured vehicles and jet aircraft necessary to launch a blitzkrieg. Until the French began to supply modern arms from the summer of 1956, Israel did not have a viable blitzkrieg option. By late 1956, this situation had changed.

Prior to the Suez War, Israeli leaders were not content with the regional *status quo*. Israel was being subjected to a destructive terrorist campaign and economic blockade by Egypt, and was at odds with the West over acceptable terms for settling the Arab–Israeli conflict. While France had displayed signs of warming to Israel as its anger with Egypt and the Algerian rebels grew, Great Britain remained openly hostile and the United States aloof. British leaders in the 1950s had repeatedly tried to interest both the United States and the Arab world (with some success) in plans to strip Israel of large parts of the Negev. From the perspective of Israeli leaders, joining with France and Great Britain in an attack on Egypt would alter the regional *status quo* in Israel's favour. It would end Egypt's terrorist campaign and economic blockade, and might even convince Egypt to make peace with Israel on Israeli terms. It would also solidify Israel's burgeoning relationship with France, as well as convince Great Britain and the United States that it was in their interests to cultivate Israel rather than the surrounding Arab states.[17] Moreover, as demonstrated by the IDF's numerous forays into Arab territory, especially the early 1955 raid against Egyptian military headquarters in the Gaza Strip, Israeli leaders were willing to employ the IDF to challenge the regional *status quo*. With a perceived threat to the state now looming on the horizon, with the firm support of the state's patron, with a blitzkrieg option now available to the state, and with an anti-*status quo* foreign policy, Israeli decision makers opted to attack Egypt in late 1956.

The 1967 Six-Day War

The Six-Day War was the end result of Israeli-Syrian border clashes in the spring of 1967.[18] Pressured by the Arab world to avenge Damascus's defeats and by the Soviet Union to deter a full-scale attack on Syria, Cairo mobilized its army and deployed it in the Sinai.[19] Jerusalem mobilized the

IDF to counter Egypt's move. Overnight, a minor crisis had been transformed into a major one. Egypt escalated the crisis further by ousting Sinai-based United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, who had separated the two states since the Suez War, and by renewing its blockade of the Straits of Tiran. Egypt and the rest of the Arab world once again made noises about seeking Israel's destruction. Israeli decision makers feared the worst as a consequence of these belligerent actions and declarations. The consummation of an Egyptian-Syrian-Jordanian war pact reinforced Israel's belief that the state was in imminent danger, as the pact provided the Arabs, who possessed a considerable numerical advantage in soldiers and fighting machines, with the capability to confront Israel on three fronts. Years later, Abba Eban, Israel's foreign minister during the war, captured the mood of Israelis, including government decision makers, in the days before the outbreak of fighting.

> As Israelis counted up the huge accumulations of tanks, planes, guns and troops arrayed against them on three fronts, they felt the icy wind of vulnerability. Their tragic history warned them against any temptation of complacency. They noted that the outside world took the prospect of their extinction very seriously. They could not fail to observe how foreign governments and international agencies were fleeing from the scene, abandoning Israel to a lonely fate.[20]

From the moment the crisis began, the United States sought to resolve it peacefully. American decision makers concluded (correctly as it turned out) that an Arab–Israeli war would damage Washington's relationship with the Arab world and increase Soviet influence throughout the Middle East. Thus, they wanted to avoid war if at all possible. For the first week of the crisis, Israel, which had entered into a patron-client relationship with the United States in the early 1960s, approved of American peace efforts without reservation, in large measure because the IDF required time to prepare for battle.[21] For the last two weeks of the crisis, however, Israeli decision makers (as a group) showed markedly less enthusiasm for American peace efforts. Many of them had concluded that war was now inevitable. The longer Israel delayed going to war, they argued, the more destructive the war would be. Nevertheless, Jerusalem did not attack during these two weeks, principally out of concern for American sensitivities. As Israeli decision makers realized that their state would need American diplomatic support during a war, as well as military, economic, and diplomatic support in the wake of a war, they decided that Israel could not initiate war without Washington's approval. Only after the United States had reluctantly conceded that its peace efforts were not going to bear fruit, and only after it had quietly signalled that it would not object to war, did Israeli decision makers give the IDF the order to attack.

Still, Jerusalem might not have initiated war in 1967 had it lacked a blitzkrieg option. The IDF's decisive victory in the Suez War had convinced Israeli military planners to commit themselves even more firmly to a blitzkrieg.[22] They assigned the air force a much more prominent role in IDF operations because it had successfully carried out its duties in the Suez War. The Israel Air Force (IAF) was given the important task of destroying an adversary on the ground at the start of the next war, in order to ensure total mastery of the air. Once the IAF had eliminated its opponent's air power, it would conduct close air support and interdiction strikes on behalf of the IDF's advancing ground forces. To these ends, the IAF steadily acquired more and better aircraft between 1956 and 1967. Like the air force, the IDF's armoured units, which had also performed well in the Suez War, acquired more and better equipment. Their personnel received better training than previously. During 1956–67, the IDF adopted a classic blitzkrieg doctrine, similar to that employed by the *Wehrmacht* against France and the Soviet Union. By the time the Six-Day War broke out, Israeli military planners believed that the IDF, spearheaded by its air and armoured forces, with artillery and infantry forces lending a hand, could execute a more devastating blitzkrieg against Egypt than the one unleashed in 1956, despite the knowledge that Egypt's army had grown larger and stronger in the same period.[23] A blitzkrieg strategy offered a far superior chance of victory at tolerable cost than the alternative: absorbing an Egyptian attack and using an attrition strategy to counter-attack.

Before the mid-May 1967 crisis erupted, Israeli leaders had been satisfied with the regional *status quo*. For the most part, Israel's frontiers had been quiet since the Suez War. The state's economy had prospered, due in part to the steadily expanding trade conducted through the port at Eilat. Moreover, Israel was no longer being strongly pressured by the West to settle the Arab–Israeli conflict on Arab terms. Its relationship with the United States had warmed to the point where America had begun to supply it with arms. But developments from mid-May onwards – the Arab world's mobilization for war, Egypt's termination of the UN peacekeeping force in the Sinai, Egypt's renewed blockade of Eilat, the Egyptian-Syrian-Jordanian war pact, and the international community's apparent lack of concern for Israel's survival – all quickly undermined this *status quo*. As a result, Israeli leaders concluded that they had to take action to recreate a favourable *status quo*. They gave diplomacy a chance to achieve this objective. Once they realized that diplomacy would fail, they fell back on the use of force. Thus, perceiving a threat to the state's security, having received the tacit approval of its patron, and possessing both a blitzkrieg option and an anti-*status quo* foreign policy, Jerusalem initiated war against Egypt in early June 1967.

The 1982 Lebanon War

The Lebanon War has often been referred to as the first war of choice in Israel's history. According to this argument, Israel fought the war not in response to a perceived threat to its security, but rather solely to achieve long-term political goals.[24] This perspective notwithstanding Israeli decision makers perceived the PLO and Syrian presence in Lebanon to be a threat to the state.[25] They had reason to be concerned about PLO and Syrian intentions and capabilities. For 12 years prior to the IDF's invasion, the PLO had used Lebanon as a base of operations from which to mount terrorist attacks against Jewish targets both inside and outside Israel. During those years, it had also constructed a military infrastructure in Lebanon, including an artillery arm that had bombarded towns and agricultural settlements in northern Israel. Israeli decision makers feared that life in the north might eventually become problematic for its residents, if the PLO was permitted to continue its military build-up. Also, they feared that Syria could possibly unleash its Lebanon-based military forces to attack Israel in a future war. While Israel's leaders felt their borders with Egypt, Jordan, and even Syria were defensible and offered strategic depth, the same was not true of the border with Lebanon.

They voiced these concerns when they sought American consent for a war in Lebanon. America indicated that it could accept an Israeli incursion to destroy the PLO's military infrastructure in southern Lebanon.[26] Such a limited war, it thought, would alter the Middle Eastern *status quo* in America's favour by causing the defeat of the Soviet Union's regional clients. The United States later turned against the Lebanon War, under pressure from the Arab world, which became enraged by Israel's siege of Beirut.[27] But Washington's about-face came only after Jerusalem's incursion had exceeded the limits agreed to earlier by America. Since the United States had consented to permit Israel to deal forcefully with a perceived threat, Jerusalem simply required an acceptable military option to make war a palatable proposition.

In Lebanon, as in Sinai in 1956 and 1967, the IDF had a blitzkrieg option. True, Israeli military planners certainly recognized that the IDF could not mount a classic blitzkrieg in Lebanon, as the mountainous terrain would not allow fast-moving armoured columns to manoeuvre deep behind enemy lines. This inability to manoeuvre was not thought to be crucial, however, because the well-trained and well-equipped IDF greatly outnumbered the PLO's poorly-trained and poorly-equipped forces. The IDF had thousands of sophisticated armoured vehicles and hundreds of state-of-the art jet aircraft and helicopters at its disposal, while the PLO had only a relative handful of older armoured vehicles and highly inefficient anti-aircraft defences. Even if

the invasion sparked an Israeli-Syrian conflagration, Israeli military planners felt confident that the IDF could quickly accomplish its goals in southern Lebanon, with only minimal losses.[28]

Although Israeli leaders endorsed and observed an American-brokered ceasefire agreement in the summer of 1981, putting an end to fighting between Israel and the PLO in southern Lebanon, they were deeply dissatisfied with the regional *status quo* prior to the Lebanon War. Specifically, they objected to the PLO's influence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; therefore, they intended to smash the PLO as a political-military entity. With the PLO out of the way, Israel could control the local Palestinian population more easily, which would help to strengthen its hold over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moreover, the demise of the PLO as a political-military entity would weaken the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East, which would be to the advantage of both Israel and America. Israeli leaders also wanted to reconstitute Lebanon as a Christian-dominated state, believing that such a state would naturally align itself with Israel in a Muslim-dominated Middle East, and an invasion of Lebanon would facilitate this goal.[29] Considering this political agenda, all that Israeli leaders needed was a PLO violation of the ceasefire agreement to justify an invasion: the early June 1982 attempt on the life of Israel's ambassador to Great Britain by a PLO faction served the purpose. Soon after, Jerusalem embarked on war in Lebanon.

Wars Not Initiated by Israel

The 1969–70 War of Attrition

Israel won a spectacular victory in the Six-Day War. Not only did it utterly defeat the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, but it also acquired a substantial amount of territory. At war's end, Israel held the Sinai, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. For the first time in its history, the state had both strategic depth and defensible borders in the face of potential attack from Egypt, Syria, or Jordan. Most of its population centers and industrial assets were no longer within easy reach of Arab military forces. The new territorial *status quo*, along with the defeat of Arab armies, gave Israelis a strong sense that their state was secure. Even though Arab intentions, as reflected in the late summer 1967 Khartoum Conference, remained openly hostile, they believed that the Arab world lacked the military capabilities to pose a major challenge to Israel.[30] Thus, when Egypt began to harass the IDF in the Sinai with special forces raids and artillery barrages soon after the end of the Six-Day War, Jerusalem was content to adopt a defensively-oriented tit-for-tat strategy. The IDF did nothing more

than respond with special forces raids and artillery barrages of its own. Israel, in short, just did not view Egyptian harassment, painful as it could be at times, as a real threat to the state.

Quite apart from the feeling that Israel was secure, Jerusalem also knew that the United States would not endorse an Israeli-initiated war against Egypt. American decision makers accepted (albeit sometimes grudgingly) the notion that Jerusalem had a right to respond to Egyptian provocations with proportional force; starting a war, however, was an *entirely* different matter. Washington had important interests in the Arab world, particularly ensuring an unimpeded supply of oil, that it wished to protect. An Israeli-initiated war would threaten these interests, as well as advance those of the Soviet Union, thus jeopardizing the budding American-Israeli patron-client relationship, a relationship that Jerusalem believed had become fundamental to Israel's welfare. Put simply, Israel could not risk the possibility of being seen by the United States as an aggressor because it had become heavily dependent on American arms after the Six-Day War.[31]

Furthermore, Israel did not have a blitzkrieg option against Egypt after the Six-Day War. The same border that provided strategic depth and defensibility also inhibited a rapid strike by fast-moving armoured columns. The Suez Canal, after all, stood between the IDF and the Egyptian Army. As both the Egyptians and Israelis demonstrated during the Yom Kippur War, the canal was by no means an impenetrable barrier for armoured forces; but Israeli military planners in the late 1960s did not think that the IDF could cross the canal swiftly and with tolerable losses in the face of a mobilized and entrenched Egyptian army. If Israel was to initiate war, the IDF would have to employ an attrition strategy, which was as anathema to them as it had been to their predecessors.

Additionally, Israeli leaders were content with the regional *status quo* that developed in the wake of the Six-Day War. They could live with the prevailing 'no war, no peace' state of affairs. Indeed, they were satisfied enough with the new *status quo* to reject all attempts, including American efforts, to negotiate a comprehensive solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, feeling that such a solution would lead to a deterioration in their geo-strategic position.[32] Not perceiving a threat to its security, not wanting to imperil its relationship with its patron, not having a blitzkrieg option, and not expressing discomfort with the *status quo*, Israel was not about to start a war against Egypt. Rather, it proved to be the Egyptians who initiated the War of Attrition in early 1969.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War

As Egypt had failed to accomplish its goal of inflicting enough casualties to compel an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, many Israeli decision makers

concluded that Israel had won the War of Attrition.[33] Not only had Egypt been defeated, they reasoned, but its army had also taken a frightful beating in the war. This optimistic interpretation of the War of Attrition's outcome, combined with the assumption that Egypt and Syria would not attack Israel before they had the air power to hit rear areas and contest the IAF's mastery of the skies, convinced Israeli decision makers up until the day hostilities broke out that they were *not* facing an imminent threat of war in the autumn of 1973.[34] Egyptian leaders had spoken about going to war 'to restore Arab rights' on occasions in the early 1970s, but had not acted on their words, which further reinforced the belief that the Arabs posed no threat to Israel. Blinded by the mistaken belief that Egypt and Syria had neither the intent nor capability to engage in a war, Jerusalem systematically misinterpreted an immense quantity of information that pointed to the opposite conclusion.[35] When Egypt and Syria mobilized and deployed their armies opposite IDF positions along the Suez Canal and on the Golan, Jerusalem was convinced that these forces were merely engaged in routine exercises or sabre rattling (in response to the destruction of 13 Syrian aircraft in a dogfight that had taken place a short time before). When Soviet citizens left Egypt in considerable numbers in the days prior to the war, it ascribed this to a feud between Moscow and Cairo. Only at the last moment (just hours before the Arab assault began), when irrefutable evidence that Egypt and Syria would attack had been received, did Israel recognize its grievous error and entertain the idea of a pre-emptive strike.[36]

The United States, however, did not want Israel to launch a pre-emptive strike.[37] As in the past, American decision makers believed that their state's interests in the Arab world would be damaged, and the Soviet Union's interests promoted, if Israel opened hostilities. Jerusalem, fully cognizant of Washington's attitude, felt that to defy the United States by shooting first would be to jeopardize American assistance during the war. Faced by a solid Arab war coalition that had the firm support of the Soviet Union, Jerusalem decided that it simply could not risk the loss of this assistance. Against the advice of the IDF high command, therefore, the state's political leadership chose to absorb the Egyptian-Syrian attack.

The decision to forgo a pre-emptive strike was probably eased somewhat by the fact that the IDF occupied formidable defensive positions in the Sinai and on the Golan as well as by the conviction that the IAF had air superiority. Indeed, the IDF high command itself, though favouring a pre-emptive air strike, assured the political leadership that Israel would not lose the war if the Arabs struck first.[38] A defensively-oriented mindset, which challenged but did not displace the blitzkrieg-oriented approach of the pre-1967 era, probably contributed to the decision to refrain from initiating hostilities. In any case, with the bulk of the IDF's armoured units

unready for battle, Israel had no blitzkrieg option.

Finally, with the end of the War of Attrition, the Middle East reverted to the earlier 'no war, no peace' *status quo*. As they had after the Six-Day War, Israeli leaders expressed satisfaction with this state of affairs. Likewise, they once more rebuffed attempts to negotiate a comprehenisve solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, again believing that such a solution would harm their state's geo-strategic position. With the Arab threat recognized only at the last minute, with its patron against a pre-emptive strike of any sort, with the IDF unable to launch a blitzkrieg, and with no reason to alter the regional *status quo*, Israel allowed Egypt and Syria to land the first blow in October 1973.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF ISRAEL'S DECISIONS TO INITIATE/NOT TO INITIATE WAR

War	Perceived Threat	Patron Approval	Blitzkrieg Option	Anti-Status Quo Foreign Policy	War Initiation
1956 Suez War	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1967 Six-Day War	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1969–70 War of Attrition	No	No	No	No	No
1973 Yom Kippur War	No/Yes	No	No	No	No
1982 Lebanon War	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Conclusion

Jerusalem's decisions to initiate war in 1956, 1967, and 1982 share several traits. In each case, Israeli decision makers believed that their state faced a clear threat. In each case, they sought and received patron approval, either open or tacit, to initiate war. In each case, they knew that the IDF could launch a blitzkrieg. And, in each case, their foreign policy orientation was anti-*status quo*. Likewise, Jerusalem's decisions to refrain from starting wars in 1969–70 and 1973 share several traits. Before the War of Attrition, Israeli decision makers did not believe that their state faced a real threat. In the autumn of 1973, Jerusalem dismissed the idea that the state was about to be attacked, at least until the final hours before the assault actually began. In both cases, Israeli decision makers knew that their patron would not approve of war initiation. In both cases, they realized that the IDF could not launch a blitzkrieg. In both cases, they were content with the regional *status quo*.

An analysis of the cases also suggests that Israeli decision makers did not always give equal weight to all of these variables when making decisions. In the Six-Day and Yom Kippur wars, for instance, patron attitude appears to be somewhat more important than the other variables in accounting for Israeli behaviour. In the Six-Day War, Israeli decision-makers refrained from initiating war until the United States had given its tacit consent to an Israeli assault. They acted so even though they had recognized a threat to the state weeks before, even though IDF could have launched a blitzkrieg earlier than it did, and despite an earlier convinction that the dangerous regional *status quo* had to be altered. In the Yom Kippur War, Jerusalem decided against a pre-emptive air strike largely out of concern that the United States would refuse to support Israel if the IDF opened hostilites. In the Lebanon War, to the contrary, the most important variable influencing the thinking of Israeli decision makers appears to have been their desire to redraw the Middle East map to Israel's advantage.

This is not to suggest that Jerusalem's decisions either to initiate or not to initiate war have no other traits in common. Nor is it meant to suggest that unique aspects of each of Israel's wars are unimportant to understanding why Jerusalem chose to initiate hostilities on certain occasions, but not on others. Nevertheless highlighting a *pattern* of decision making that holds across Israel's wars, however incomplete the pattern, is a useful first step in deciphering the state's war-ridden past.

NOTES

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1. In the War of Independence, to cite one example, the IAF (Israel Air Force) shot down a total of five RAF aircraft in a pair of dogfights on 7 Jan. 1949. For an in-depth treatment of this episode see Zeev Tzahor, 'The 1949 Air Clash Between the Israeli Air Force and the RAF', *Jnl of Contemporary History* 28/1 (Jan. 1993) pp.75–101. In the War of Attrition, to cite another example, the IAF shot down five SAF (Soviet Air Force) aircraft in a dogfight on 30 July 1970. For a brief account of this battle see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Moscow's Lessons from the 1982 Lebanon Air War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp. 1984) p.28.
2. Israel was also a participant in the 1991 Gulf War. This conflict, however, falls outside the boundaries of this article for three reasons. First, the Gulf War was not an Arab–Israeli war. It pitted a Western-Arab coalition against Iraq. Second, Israel was not the target of a war *per se*. Rather, Iraq bombarded it with a few dozen ballistic missiles in an ultimately futile attempt to goad it into a massive response that Baghdad hoped would transform the conflict into an Arab–Israeli war. Third, the IDF did not participate in the fighting.
3. On Israeli decision making in the 1967, 1969–70, and 1973 wars see Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *The Israeli-Egyptian War of Attrition, 1969–1970: A Case Study of Limited Local War* (NY: Columbia UP 1980); Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Crisis: Israel, 1967 and 1973* (Berkeley: U. of California Press 1980); Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1988) pp.132–211; Janice Gross

Stein and Raymond Tanter, *Rational Decision-Making: Israel's Security Choices, 1967* (Columbus: Ohio State UP 1980); and Janice Gross Stein, 'Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence II: The View from Jerusalem' in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein (eds.) *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1985) pp.60–88. On Israel's security dilemma and general political-military strategy see Yoav Ben-Horin and Barry Posen, *Israel's Strategic Doctrine* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp. 1981); Michael Handel, 'The Evolution of Israeli Strategy: The Psychology of Insecurity and the Quest for Absolute Security' in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (eds.) *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (NY: CUP 1994) pp.534–78; Ariel Levite, *Offense and Defense in Israeli Military Strategy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1989); Bard E. O'Neill, 'Israel' in Douglas J. Murray and Paul R. Viotti (eds.) *The Defense Policies of Nations* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1994) pp.497–541; and Avner Yaniv, *Deterrence Without the Bomb: The Politics of Israeli Strategy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books 1987).

4. Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic and International Politics* (Columbia: U. of South Carolina Press 1989) contains very useful commentary on both model-building and the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions.
5. For a review of the method of structured, focused comparison see Alexander L. George, 'Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison' in Paul Gordon Lauren (ed.) *Diplomacy* (NY: Free Press 1979) pp.43–68. This method essentially boils down to examining several historical cases according to the same set of criteria in order to confirm existing generalizations or to derive new ones.
6. For one effort to distinguish war from other kinds of violence based on objective criteria see Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage 1982). A thorough overview of the phenomenon of war can be found in John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (NY: CUP 1993).
7. Robert Jervis, 'Perceiving and Coping With Threat' in Jervis, Lebow, and Stein (note 3) p.18. Jervis's essay presents a detailed treatment of the ways in which various psychological processes affect threat perception.
8. The following remarks on internal and external military capabilities draw on the work of James D. Morrow, 'Arms Versus Allies: Trade-offs in the Search for Security', *Int. Organization* 47/2 (Spring 1993) pp.207–33 and Gerald L. Sorokin, 'Arms, Alliances, and Security Tradeoffs in Enduring Rivalries', *Int. Studies Quarterly* 38/3 (Sept. 1994) pp.421–46.
9. The following remarks about military strategies are heavily indebted to the typology worked out by John Mearsheimer. See John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1983) pp.13–66.
10. The definition of the *status quo* used in this article is taken from James Morrow, 'Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances', *American Jnl of Political Science* 35/4 (Nov. 1991) pp.904–33.
11. A solid account of the origins of World War II can be found in Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War* (NY: Doubleday 1995).
12. For in-depth accounts of Israeli policy leading up to the Suez War see Mordechai Bar-On, *Israel's Road to Suez and Back, 1955–1957: The Gates of Gaza* (NY: St Martin's Press 1994); Michael Oren, *The Origins of the Second Arab–Israeli War: Egypt, Israel, and the Great Powers, 1952–1956* (London: Frank Cass 1992); and Selwyn Ilan Troen and Moshe Shemesh (eds.) *The Suez-Sinai Crisis 1956: Retrospective and Reappraisal* (NY: Columbia UP 1990).
13. A state's decision makers, not surprisingly, are likely to feel that their state is particularly threatened if its potential adversary has previously trampled on its rights. Jervis (note 7) p.15.
14. Before the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, Israeli decision makers occasionally broached the idea of a preventive war; but the idea was apparently not pursued with any vigour until after the deal had been completed. It also needs to be said that, while Jerusalem was aware that Egypt entered into the arms deal in part to beef up its defensive capabilities against Israel and in part to strengthen its position in the inter-Arab struggle for leadership in the Arab world, it genuinely feared that Egypt would eventually use these arms to attack Israel. For a contrary,

revisionist account of the arms deal's influence on Israeli decision making see Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (London: Clarendon Press 1993).

15. On the IDF's offensive orientation by the mid-1950s see Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz, *The Israeli Army* (NY: Harper and Row 1975); S.L.A. Marshall, *Sinai Victory* (Nashville, TN: Battery Press 1985); and Mearsheimer (note 9) pp.136–40.
16. For discussions of how Israel's attributes have influenced its military doctrine see Ben-Horin and Posen (note 3); Handel (note 3); Levite (note 3); Mearsheimer (note 9) p.135; and O'Neill (note 3).
17. Israel achieved some of these goals in the war. The terrorist campaign and economic blockade against it were ended, and its relationship with France was strengthened (at least for a few years). The war also convinced Great Britain and the United States to moderate their policies toward Israel. On the other hand, the war brought a final peace with Egypt no closer.
18. For in-depth accounts of Israeli policy leading up to the Six-Day War see Brecher (note 3); Nadav Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1978); and Stein and Tanter (note 3).
19. Moscow fabricated the charge that Israel was preparing to initiate war against Syria. Israel had no intention of going to war with Syria, or any other Arab state, in the spring of 1967.
20. Abba Eban, *The New Diplomacy: International Affairs in the Modern Age* (NY: Random House 1983) pp.221–22.
21. The Franco-Israeli patron-client relationship began to fall apart with the end of the Algerian War in the early 1960s. Once it recognized Algerian independence, France's relationship with the Arab world improved, a development that France welcomed. At the same time, France sought to distance itself from Israel in order to strengthen further the Franco-Arab partnership. Jerusalem, therefore, sought a new patron. By the early 1960s, aware that Israel had become a formidable regional power, the United States began to express a willingness to fulfill that role. On the Franco-Israeli patron-client relationship see Sylvia K. Crosbie, *A Tacit Alliance: France and Israel from Suez to the Six-Day War* (Princeton UP 1974).
22. The following remarks on the IDF's structure and orientation between the Suez and Six-Day wars are indebted to the works of Luttwak and Horowitz (note 15); Mearsheimer (note 9) pp.143–53; and Gunther Rothenberg, *The Anatomy of the Israeli Army* (NY: Hippocrene Books 1979).
23. Israeli military planners, it is worth noting, wanted to avoid a ground war with Syria and Jordan in 1967, whatever might transpire on the Egyptian front. They did not relish the prospect of a three-front war. Moreover, the mountainous terrain in Syria and Jordan, combined with the extensive defenses of the Syrian and Jordanian armies, meant that the IDF would have to employ an attrition strategy against them. Israel, of course, did fight and defeat both of these states; but only after they initiated combat.
24. The logic behind this perspective is traced in Zeev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (NY: Simon & Schuster 1984), especially Ch.2, and Anver Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security: Politics, Strategy, and the Israeli Experience in Lebanon* (NY: OUP 1987), especially Ch.1. Both of these works also provide in-depth accounts of Israeli policy leading up to the Lebanon War.
25. On this point see Yaniv (note 24), especially Ch.1, and Avner Yaniv and Robert J. Lieber, 'Personal Whim or Strategic Imperative: The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon', *Int. Security* 8/2 (Fall 1983) pp.117–42.
26. On American consent for a limited Israeli operation see Schiff and Ya'ari (note 24) pp.71–77 and Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (U. of Chicago Press 1985) pp.413–14.
27. Washington decided that the war had to be brought to a speedy end in order to protect its cherished goal of creating an anti-Soviet 'strategic consensus' among friendly Middle Eastern states.
28. For a detailed discussion of the military aspects of the Lebanon War see Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War (Vol.I): The Arab-Israeli Conflicts, 1973–1989* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1990); Trevor N. Dupuy and Paul

Martell, *Flawed Victory: The Arab-Israeli Conflict and the 1982 War in Lebanon* (Fairfax, VA: Hero Books 1986); and Richard A. Gabriel, *Operation Peace for Galilee: The Israeli-PLO War in Lebanon* (NY: Hill & Wang 1984). During the war, the IDF handily defeated both PLO and Syrian forces in southern Lebanon; however, when it moved deeper into Lebanon, putting PLO forces under siege in Beirut and tangling with Syrian forces near the city, the IDF got mired in a more costly war of attrition, eroding many of its early achievements. Before the war, Israeli military planners apparently had not seriously prepared for the possibility that the IDF could find itself caught up in a draining war of attrition. On Israel's failure to prepare for the eventuality of a prolonged conflict in Lebanon see Amos Perlmutter, *Israel: The Partitioned State, a Political History Since 1900* (NY: Scribner's 1985) pp.313–30.

29. Despite its military triumph in Lebanon, Israel failed to achieve any of these political objectives. For Israel's political objectives and the failure to achieve them see Schiff and Ya'ari (note 24) and Yaniv (note 24).
30. At Khartoum, the Arab world set forth the famous 'three noes' formula: no negotiation with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no peace with Israel. On the Khartoum Conference, see Shimshoni (note 3) pp.127–9 and Spiegel (note 26) pp.155. Bar-Siman-Tov (note 3) and Shimshoni provide thorough accounts of Israeli policy leading up to the War of Attrition.
31. France had stopped furnishing arms to Israel prior to the outbreak of the Six-Day War. While Israeli industry could manufacture some weapons by the late 1960s, most of the IDF's arms requirements had to be fulfilled through imports.
32. See, for example, Bar-Siman-Tov (note 3) and Safran (note 18).
33. Stein (note 3) p.63. In addition to Stein's work, in-depth treatments of Israeli policy leading up to the Yom Kippur War can be found in Brecher (note 3) and Safran (note 18).
34. According to Israeli military intelligence, Egypt and Syria did not possess the necessary air power assets in 1973. On this point see Stein (note 3).
35. Mearsheimer aptly asserts that Jerusalem neglected to consider the possibility that Egypt and Syria might adopt a limited aims strategy. Jerusalem, in other words, failed to consider the possibility that Egypt and Syria would grab slices of Israeli-controlled territory in the Sinai and on the Golan, respectively, and would then be willing to lose on the battlefield in order to break the diplomatic stalemate that had emerged in the aftermath of the War of Attrition. See Mearsheimer (note 9).
36. Jerusalem contemplated a pre-emptive air strike to disrupt the Egyptian-Syrian offensive. An air strike, it thought, would put the unprepared IDF, which needed 24–48 hours to mobilize and deploy fully its armoured units, in a better position to withstand the Arab onslaught.
37. Brecher (note 3) pp.197–200 and Spiegel (note 26) pp.247–8.
38. Brecher (note 3) p.200.