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Netanyahu's False Narrative of Self-Defense

by MARJORIE COHN

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On March 3rd, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued an impassioned plea to Congress to protect Israel by opposing diplomacy with Iran. Referring to “the remarkable alliance between Israel and the United States” which includes “generous military assistance and missile defense,” Netanyahu failed to mention that Israel has an arsenal of 100 or 200 nuclear weapons.

The Six-Day War

The day before he delivered that controversial address, Netanyahu expressed similar sentiments to AIPAC, Israel's powerful U.S. lobby. He reiterated the claim that Israel acted in the 1967 Six-Day War “to defend itself.” The narrative that Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in self-defense, seizing the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, has remained largely unquestioned in the public discourse. Israel relies on that narrative to continue occupying those Palestinian lands. And the powerful film “Censored Voices,” which premiered at Sundance in February, does not challenge that narrative.

But declassified high-level documents from Britain, France, Russia and the United States reveal that Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were not going to attack Israel and Israel knew it. In fact, they did

not attack Israel. Instead, Israel mounted the first attack in order to decimate the Egyptian army and take the West Bank.

Censored voices uncensored

For two weeks following the Six Day War, Amos Oz and Avraham Shapira visited Israeli kibbutzim and recorded interviews with several Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers who had just returned from that war. Largely censored by the Israeli government for many years, those reels have finally been made public. “Censored Voices” features the taped voices of young IDF soldiers, as the aging, former soldiers sit silently beside the tape recorder, listening to their own voices.

The testimonies documented in the tapes reveal evidence of targeting civilians and summarily executing prisoners, which constitute war crimes. A soldier asks himself, “They’re civilians – should I kill them or not?” He replies, “I didn’t even think about it. Just kill! Kill everyone you see.” Likewise, one voice notes, “Several times we captured guys, positioned them and just killed them.” Another reveals, “In the war, we all became murderers.” Still another says, “Not only did this war not solve the state’s problems, but it complicated them in a way that’ll be very hard to solve.” One soldier likens evacuating Arab villages to what the Nazis did to Jews in Europe. As a soldier watched an Arab man being taken from his home, the soldier states, “I had an abysmal feeling that I was evil.”

In what proved to be a prescient question, one soldier asks, “Are we doomed to bomb villages every decade for defensive purposes?” Indeed, Israel justifies all of its assaults on Gaza as self-defense, even though Israel invariably attacks first, and kills overwhelming numbers of Palestinians – mostly civilians. Each time, many fewer Israelis are killed by Palestinian rockets.

Israel’s false self-defense claim

The film begins by showing a map of Israel surrounded by Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, with arrows from each country aimed at Israel. The IDF soldiers felt those Arab countries posed an existential threat to Israel. “There was a feeling it would be a Holocaust,” one soldier observed. The Israeli media claimed at the time that Egypt had attacked Israel by land and by air on June 5, 1967. According to British journalist Patrick Seale, “Israel’s preparation of opinion” was “brilliantly managed,” a “remarkable exercise in psychological warfare.”

In his book, “The Six-Day War and Israeli Self-Defense: Questioning the Legal Basis for Preventive War,” published by Cambridge University Press, Ohio State University law professor John Quigley documents conversations by high government officials in Israel, the United States, Egypt, the Soviet Union, France, and Britain leading up to the Six-Day War. He draws on minutes of British cabinet meetings, a French government publication, U.S. documents in “Foreign Relations of the United States,” and Russian national archives. Those conversations make clear that Israel knew Egypt, Syria and Jordan would not and did not attack Israel, and that Israel initiated the attacks.

Egypt was the only one of the three Arab countries that had a military of any consequence. Israeli General Yitzhak Rabin told the Israeli cabinet that the Egyptian forces maintained a defensive posture, and Israeli General Meir Amit, head of Mossad (Israeli's intelligence agency), informed U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that Egypt was not poised to attack Israel. Both the United States and the Soviet Union urged Israel not to attack. Nevertheless, Israel's cabinet voted on June 4 to authorize the IDF to invade Egypt.

"After the cabinet vote," Quigley writes, "informal discussion turned to ways to make it appear that Israel was not starting a war when in fact that was precisely what it was doing." Moshe Dayan, who would soon become Israel's Minister of Defense, ordered military censorship, saying, "For the first twenty-four hours, we have to be the victims." Dayan admitted in his memoirs, "We had taken the first step in the war with Egypt." Nevertheless, Israel's UN Ambassador Gideon Rafael reported to the Security Council that Israel had acted in self-defense.

"The hostilities were attacks by the Israeli air force on multiple Egyptian airfields, aimed at demolishing Egyptian aircraft on the ground," according to Quigley. On June 5, the CIA told President Lyndon B. Johnson, "Israel fired the first shots today."

Article 51 of the UN Charter authorizes states to act in collective self-defense after another member state suffers an armed attack. Although Jordan and Syria responded to the Israeli attacks on Egypt, they – and Egypt – inflicted little damage to Israel. By the afternoon of June 5, Israel "had virtually destroyed the air war capacity of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria," Quigley notes. "The IDF achieved the 'utter defeat' of the Egyptian army on June 7 and 8."

The United States empowers Israel

U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said that U.S. officials were "angry as hell, when the Israelis launched their surprise offensive." Yet, Quigley notes, "Israel's gamble paid off in that the United States would not challenge Israel's story about how the fighting started. Even though it quickly saw through the story, the White House kept its analysis to itself."

Although Security Council resolution 242, passed in 1967, refers to "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and calls for "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," Israel continues to occupy the Palestinian territories it acquired in the Six-Day War.

Israel has abandoned its claim that Egypt attacked first. Yet the international community considers that Israel acted in lawful anticipatory self-defense. Quigley explains how the UN Charter only permits the use of armed force after an armed attack on a UN member state; it does not authorize anticipatory, preventive, or preemptive self-defense.

"The UN did not condemn Israel in 1967 for its attack on Egypt," Antonio Cassese of the University of Florence explained. Quigley attributes this to Cold War politics, as the USSR supported Egypt. "For the United States in particular, Israel's success was a Cold War defeat for the USSR. The United States was hardly prepared to condemn Israel after it performed this service."

The United States continues to support Israel by sending it \$3 billion per year in military aid, even when Israel attacks Gaza with overwhelming firepower, as it did in the summer of 2014, killing 2,100 Palestinians (mostly civilians). Sixty-six Israeli soldiers and seven civilians were killed.

If Israel were to mount an attack on Iran, the United States would invariably support Israel against Iran and any Arab country that goes to Iran's defense. Indeed, Netanyahu intoned to Congress, "may Israel and America always stand together."