

# Great Powers in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of Arab-Israeli Conflicts in 1967 and 2021

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## ABSTRACT

This article conducts a comparative study of Arab-Israeli conflicts: the Six Day War of 1967 and the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis of 2021. The outbreak of armed conflict between Israeli and Palestinian forces in 2021 has constituted a resurgence of internecine violence. The role of great powers in such conflicts features the alleged influence of the United States in bringing about a ceasefire between Israeli and Palestinian forces on the 21st of May 2021. It situates accounts of the role of the United States as a great power as part of a longstanding explanatory mechanism for Arab-Israeli conflict and resolution that dates back into the Cold War. Identifying such explanatory accounts as rooted in neorealist theory, this article argues that such assessments of the role of great powers overlook the roles of internal factors motivating war and peace, such as ideological factors. From a realistic neoclassical perspective, it also argues that although the support or opposition of external states – particularly great powers – has some influence over Arab-Israeli conflicts, neorealist theory elevates the role of great external powers to the almost total exclusion of contributory internal factors.

**Keywords:** Security dilemma, the Six-day war, Great powers.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay compares contemporary developments in Arab-Israeli conflict to historical instances of conflict in terms of the role of great power influence upon Arab-Israeli relations. This comparison takes place in light of the greatest upsurge in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the 2014 war in Gaza. Following a spate of evictions and Israeli police officers entering the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem [1], escalating tensions led to significant violence between Israeli and Palestinian forces, with the crisis narrowly averting full-scale war. What might have otherwise spiralled into a longer and bloodier conflict appeared to be calmed somewhat following the interventions of the United States' president Joe Biden on the 19th of May. By stating that he 'expected a significant de-escalation today on the path of a ceasefire', which was followed the day after by an agreement to cease hostilities [2].

This apparent intervention may suggest that great powers continue to exert a significant role in Arab-Israeli conflicts, reflecting a history of great power influence extending from the Cold War up until the present day. However, this paper argues that this is not the case. While analysis of conflicts from some perspectives suggests

that great powers, by virtue of their influence, will always exert a significant amount of influence on the bilateral relations of lesser or middling powers, their actual impact needs deliberation. An analysis of the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian crisis – and indeed that of previous conflicts – demonstrates that this influence has often been overestimated to the detriment of ideological and domestic influences on war and peace between Arab and Israeli states.

This essay compares two conflicts to this end: the 2021 Israeli-Palestinian Crisis and the Six Day War of 1967. It is argued that neorealist accounts of such conflicts overestimate the influence of great powers in Arab-Israeli conflicts and, in both cases, have tended towards overlooking the significance of domestic factors in the development of these conflicts. While the Six Day War was indeed an international event driven to a substantial degree by the influence of external powers, the 2021 conflict as a primarily domestic conflict demonstrates a limitation by which the roots of the conflict have been amenable to great power influence. This is not to say that great power influence does not remain a relevant factor but that the neorealist account typically overemphasizes the influence of external

security threats at the expense of analysing internal factors driving Arab-Israeli conflicts.

## 2. THE SIX DAY WAR

The Six Day War of 1967 has something fundamental in common with the most recent Arab-Israeli conflict insofar as it was a relatively short conflict resulting from longstanding heightened tensions between Arab and Israeli protagonists. The closing of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships prompted Israel to launch what it termed pre-emptive strikes against the Egyptian Air Force, who brought in Jordan and Syria as allies [3]. Palestinian territory likewise played a role in the conflict, with several hundred thousand Palestinians being displaced from the West Bank as a consequence [4]. There are distinctions between these two conflicts insofar as the former is an international conflict. In contrast, the latter's status resembles more closely a civil conflict given the ambiguous nature of the relations between the Palestinian and Israeli states.

The earlier conflict must likewise be understood in light of the international environmental backdrop against which it occurred in relation to the latter. In the post-independence era, a number of states across the Middle East introduced socialist forms of government, such as Egypt (1952), Syria (1963), and Iraq (1963) [5]. For great powers, this may be understood as occurring against a backdrop of states sorting into capitalist and communist blocs as part of the bilateral relations of the Cold War era. Led by the US and the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), respectively, these hegemonic rivals not only exerted a significant amount of potential influence across and through these blocs but likewise attempted to prise states away from one bloc and towards their own through regime change. The creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1962 raised the prospect of the Arab world passing under the influence of the Soviet bloc. This development arguably had significant effects on US foreign policy towards the Middle East [6].

Both the United States and the USSR attempted to influence the foreign policies of the participants of the Six Day War in ways that influenced its occurrence. For one, the USSR conducted arms deals with Egypt in 1963, which significantly enhanced the material capabilities of Nasser's military [7]. As well as arming Egypt, the USSR in May of 1967 had passed to Egypt false information about an Israeli military build-up along the Syrian border. It heightened tensions and may have influenced either Egypt or Israel to engage in a pre-emptive strike ahead of what appeared to be an increasingly inevitable conflict [8]. Meanwhile, Israel was firmly aligned with the United States, owing to its establishment and, to no small extent, the funding of its military to Western capitalist powers. This is reflected in Israel's longstanding role as an ally – often the sole ally – of the United States and the West generally in the Middle East. In this light, the Six Day

War might be viewed as something of a proxy war, partially instigated by great powers' interference and likewise facilitated by the great power support on either side [9].

To some extent, this explanation fits the neorealist paradigm of international relations and its theories regarding how foreign policy is formed. Neorealist theory – although owing to its roots in the classical realist theory of Hans Morgenthau (1960) – is a firm structuralism approach that emphasises the importance of defensive concerns as well as the significance of the relative power structures of states in determining state actions in the international arena [10, 11]. That Israel would set exclusion from the Straits of Tiran as a condition for war reflects the security threat posed by losing access to the straits. Likewise, the belief on either side that their prospective proponent was building up forces placed both Egypt and Israel into a security dilemma, eventually resulting in pre-emptive strikes. The role of the USSR and US in this conflict is clearly implied insofar as rival hegemonic powers effectively backed both states. According to neorealist theorist Kenneth Waltz, states will join blocs of allies primarily to balance the power of potential rivals [12], thus making war serve both the needs of Israel and Egypt regionally as revisionist and status quo powers, respectively.

However, these explanations do not necessarily fully account for the nature of the Six Day War in terms of the influence of great powers on its outbreak. For one, they overlook the role those specific national leaders had to play during the war and their motives. For example, Nasser had long held ambitions to attack Israel on account of its serving as an emblem of Western colonialism [13]. Likewise, Nasser had a long personal history with the Israelis insofar as he had served as a general in the Arab Army defeated by the Israelis in the 1948 War. Furthermore, these decisions were motivated in part by a broader Nasserite ideology, such as his pan-Arabism [14]. These factors are not isolated entirely from the influence of great powers. Still, neither are they equivocal with the external threat or support from great powers – they must be considered contributory factors. However, as a fundamentally positivist and structuralist theory, neorealists cannot admit such qualitative and individual-level factors under consideration. In contrast, other more epistemologically flexible iterations of realist theory – such as neoclassical realism – permit consideration of such personal and ideological factors on the decisions undertaken by state leadership [15].

It is also worth considering the role of the United States in the conflict and the USSR. Between 1963 and 1967, the United States had attempted to influence Nasser through a combination of diplomacy and economic support designed to exert influence over their foreign policy [7]. While this does not place Egypt automatically under the influence of the United States, neither does the

same behaviour on behalf of Russia render Egyptian foreign policy a mere extension of Soviet foreign policy. As Osman has observed, Nasser was not merely a client of the USSR and was highly effective in playing the two great powers off against one another to suit the Egyptian state's own instrumental needs and goals [16]. This serves as a reminder of the limitations that external states have in exerting control over an ally's foreign policy and suggesting how Egypt's foreign policy reflected offensive and defensive goals, a theory of state behaviour associated with offensive realism than neorealism [17]. The decision to go to war with Israel and vice versa may be understood both in terms of offensive and defensive goals and an alternative non-structuralism and non-intentionalism account by which the war was simply inadvertent on behalf of Egypt [9].

In this light, it is worth considering the Israeli response to the initial AUR strikes. Rather than seeking a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, Israel launched a massive offensive despite its overwhelming superiority to the Arab forces [18]. This cannot be understood merely in terms of defensive concerns, either on behalf of Israel with respect to the threat posed by Egypt or with respect to the balancing behaviour of the capitalist bloc in response to the communist threat in the region. Here, Israeli aggression can only be understood in light of offensive national goals, as was reflected in its successful annexation of territory from Egypt and Syria. Therefore, after its apparent inadvertent beginnings, the Six Day War's conduct and conclusion were shaped by years of Egyptian and Israeli ideological nationalism and offensive ethno-territorial claims to sovereignty over contested land, including Palestine [19]. These aims and motives exist independently of great power influence. They are at best facilitated by their support rather than reflecting the interests of the United States or the Soviet Union, specifically in the onset, objectives, and outcome of the Six Day War.

### **3. THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CRISIS OF 2021**

An outline of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of May 2021 has been given to some extent above. Disturbances occurred before the conflict, originally centering around evictions and the occupation of a mosque by the Israeli police in Jerusalem but had escalated to the point where protests and riots had occurred. Soon, rocket attacks launched by Hamas from Palestinian territory were met with airstrikes from Israeli, resulting in a significant number of deaths. Particularly controversial was an airstrike upon the al-Shati refugee camp, medical facilities, and Associated Press and Al Jazeera offices in the al-Jalaa high-rise building [20]. The ceasefire following a conversation between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Biden led to media contextualisation of the following ceasefire resulting from US support or pressure on their Israeli ally [21].

This narrative may be understood against an international backdrop that has changed much since 1967, but that remains fundamentally similar in terms of the role of the United States. In the post-Cold War era, the United States has all but assumed a hegemonic position both globally and in the Middle East [22]. This has transformed the role of the United States as leader of a Western capitalist bloc to the leader of the global liberal order and a status quo power with no serious challenger to its hegemony. Israeli aggression may be interpreted as having risen in tandem with American unipolarity, such as may be evidenced by the militarisation of the Occupied Territories and its boldness in building new settlements on Palestinian lands in clear contravention of international law [23].

Israel's boldness is perhaps explicable again by the increased support given to Israel's foreign policy during the Trump administration. During that time, the US first recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. We attempted to arrive at a two-state solution that effectively revised the agreed previous boundaries that Palestinian authorities seek a return to [24]. In some respects, this serves as an important backdrop to the roots of this new conflict insofar as Palestinian violence was precipitated by increasing Israeli encroachment into East Jerusalem, reflecting perhaps an aggressive policy of further securing the new Israeli capital following US recognition. That Israeli foreign policy ultimately serves American interests may be understood from a neorealist perspective as evidenced by the strengthening of its sole ally in the region and its continued expansion at the expense of the strength of Islamist and anti-Western neighbours.

One might argue that the reason for the US supporting expansion into Palestine specifically – which does not by itself pose any credible threat to US security or regional interests – may be understood in light of the rise of China. Beijing has consistently support Palestine's interests in the UN. It does not define Hamas as a terrorist group [25], reflecting its promotion of Palestinian interests at the expense of Israel (and American) interests. By this logic, one might argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of 2021 has mirrored the 1967 war insofar as it has become shaped by the influence of great power politics. In this case, the Israelis are still backed by Washington, the Palestinians by Beijing.

However, several factors mitigate against the accuracy of this interpretation. For instance, unlike in the case of the Cold War, the United States is the only power with the capability of significantly influencing the trajectory of the 2021 conflict. Despite the attempts of Egypt and other states to bring about a ceasefire through the mechanisms of the UN, it was only the influence of the United States that ultimately brought this about [26]. China's comparative role is complex insofar as Israel is a critical site for the Belt and Road Initiative's connection of the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea and China's

relatively weak regional presence in the Middle East [27]. Beijing simply does not resemble the regional power that the Soviet Union held in the Middle East due to its lack of meaningful alliances in the region.

Likewise, there have been significant geopolitical changes in the Middle East since 1967. Although the United States may be a hegemon, middling powers now hold a significantly greater presence than they once did. Palestinian militants are, for instance, backed by Iran, with Hezbollah serving as an Iranian proxy [28]. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's power has now grown relatively, and they have recently undertaken an unprecedented rapprochement with Tel-Aviv, which has arguably emboldened the Israelis further [29]. Although the United States still wields considerable influence as a great power, there are likewise other regional conflicts to consider, such as between Iran and Israel and between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Compared to the Six Day War, the great power struggle is less regionally significant than these longstanding rivalries.

Finally, much like in the neorealist analysis of the Six Day War, the influence of ideology has been underemphasised in this assessment of the 2021 conflict. The influence of Israeli nationalism and neo-Zionism has motivated much of Israel's continued expansion [30]. This is not primarily motivated by defensive or security concerns, evidenced by Israel's relative power compared to Palestine and its neighbours. There is no security dilemma nor an external defensive threat to Israel in this instance – any threat is largely internal. Likewise, Israel's assumed motives might be interpreted as expansionist and therefore offensive given its recent history of continual expansion into Palestinian territory. In light of this, there is little influence that the United States is exerting on Israeli foreign policy with respect to Palestine. Its counsel towards a ceasefire suggests the contrary influence.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The above comparison of the Six Day War of 1967 and the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis of 2021 demonstrates a longstanding tendency to overestimate the influence that great powers have in causing and resolving Arab-Israeli conflicts. This is, to some extent, resultant from the assumptions of realism generally. However, a comparison of neorealist and neoclassical realist analyses demonstrates that it is a tendency encouraged specifically by the materialism of neorealism and its dominance as a theory across this time. The above analyses demonstrate that the exclusion of domestic and ideological factors removes much of the explanatory power behind understanding why specific conflicts have unfolded in the ways they have favored attributing all Arab-Israeli conflicts ultimately to external great power influences.

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