

BOOK REVIEWS

SORBY, Karol R. *Jún 1967. Šesť dní, ktoré zmenili Blízky východ*. [June 1967. Six Days that Changed the Middle East]. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2010. 519 p. ISBN 978-80-8095-065-1. In Slovak.

The war in June 1967 burst upon an unsuspecting world as suddenly as a summer storm, but in retrospect it should not have been all that surprising. Indeed, none of the Arab states was yet ready to openly acknowledge the partition of Palestine and the existence of a Jewish state on Arab land with the help and blessing of the great powers. Although afterwards there existed Arab-Israeli contacts, they had to be secret because the touchstone of Arab ideological purity remained support for the Palestinian cause and a refusal to accept the “Zionist entity”. Nor had Israeli actions contributed to an atmosphere of accommodation. Quite the contrary, the Israeli policy of retaliation by force against Arab infiltration across the border coupled with a tough and often provocative posture in various negotiations in the Mixed Armistice Commission set up in 1949 to deal with border problems, hardly induced Arab governments or Arab public opinion to consider moving toward settlement.

The book under review is interesting both because of its theme and the way of treatment. The author himself in the preface (p. 9) states that the aim of his work is not the description of the details of the military operations of the June war, because on that theme hundreds of books have been published in the last 40 years, but to present a vivid picture of the political development in the Middle East, both internal and international, in the period from the end of the Suez War in November 1957 until the formal closing of the June War in the UN Security Council in November 1967. In this way, the author extends his former monograph treating the Suez Crisis of 1956 and smoothly passes in his narrative into another complex era in the regional development in the Middle East culminating in the May 1967 crisis. The internationalised crisis ended in a pre-emptive Israeli attack on the Arabs and the subsequent short war. The crushing defeat of the Arabs led to feverish political and diplomatic activity that was formally closed by the passing of the UN Security Council Resolution 242. The issues that led to the crises continue to remain unresolved.

The book is divided into six comprehensive chapters. The content of each chapter elucidates in detail the different aspects of the Middle Eastern political development after the closing of the “Tripartite Aggression” of 1956, to another round of armed confrontation between Arabs and Israelis. Taking into consideration that the author is a renowned expert in Arabic studies who spent many years in Arab countries not only as a research fellow but also as the Slovak ambassador to Iraq, his work can be valued for the diverse perspective it brings on the escalation of conflict, particularly from the Arabs’ point of view.

In the first chapter entitled “The Middle East as an Object of Power Politics after the Suez War” the author gives an analysis of complex international relations in the region.

He shows that Jamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir helped to define what counted as an Arab state in good standing, the types of norms to which it should adhere, and how those norms might relate to the desired regional order. As the leader of a new generation of Arab politicians, he possessed the rare ability to shape the political agenda and challenge the rules of the game. Having successfully challenged the legitimacy of strategic alliances with the West, he would soon associate himself with Arabism’s ultimate goal of unification. The author points to the gradual “meddling” of the USSR in the Middle East which was made easier due to unconditional support of the USA and Western powers for Israel. However, he also admits that to the Egyptian president’s great disappointment the Soviets often supported such Arab “revolutionary” regimes that were in open discord with Egypt (p. 41).

In the second chapter called “Inter-Arab Relations after the Suez War” Dr. Sorby concentrates on relations between the Arab countries within the League of Arab States which could not come closer or unite because of deep ideological and social contradictions between their “revolutionary” and “reactionary” regimes. On the other hand, the collapse of the United Arab Republic led to political changes and opened an era which Malcolm Kerr called “The Arab Cold War”. The author rightly argues that after the Syrian secession Jamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, who once spoke of “unity of ranks” and implied that regimes of divergent orientation could cooperate to confront common external threats, now began to champion a “unity of purpose” to best further the goal of true unity and revolution (p. 102). In the fall of 1962, after overthrowing the ruling family, the revolting soldiers under ʿAbdallāh as-Sallāl established the Yemen Arab Republic and Saudi Arabia and Egypt soon became embroiled in the Yemen conflict (p. 137).

The third chapter – “The Israeli Factor in Arab Politics” – deals with a problem which began in 1948 by the creation of Israel, an unwanted militant neighbour. The Arab leaders who wanted to maintain their regional and domestic standing found Arabism and a strong stand on Palestine a useful way to do so. Since the Suez War, the Arab-Israeli conflict had taken a backseat to the debate among Arab states about their organizing principles. However, in the fall of 1963 Israel’s plans to pump water from the Jordan River for its irrigation projects in Negev became evident. The author contends that the Egyptian president had no intention of being manipulated into a war that was not of his choosing. He responded to that challenge to his prestige by inviting his fellow Arab leaders to Cairo to discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict. By reaching out to all Arab states, both radical and conservative, he accomplished a number of important goals (pp. 223 – 224).

The fourth chapter “Escalation of the Crisis in May 1967” is dedicated to the growing tension between Israel and Egypt, and unsuccessful diplomatic efforts to settle the conflict peacefully. After reports were circulated about Israeli troops’ concentrations near Syrian borders, Egypt found itself increasingly pressured to take dramatic action to support its alliance partner. Jamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir was caught between the symbolic and the strategic, and he sacrificed the latter. By sending his troops into the Sinai and by closing the Strait of Tiran he accepted great risks. That he took this risk can be attributed to his beliefs that Israel would ultimately not launch a pre-emptive strike and that the combined Arab forces represented a sufficient retaliatory force, but that was a

miscalculation. On the basis of available documents and other sources, the author assumes that the high command of the Israeli army had been prepared for military action to solve the conflict with Arabs since the end of 1966 and was only waiting for a suitable opportunity (p. 247). The author argues that Israel had an excellently trained and well-equipped army together with outstanding intelligence services. Hence the legend of a “poor victim” struggling for its dire existence against his enemy’s overwhelming superiority is pure propaganda.

In the fifth chapter “Israel’s Assault on Egypt without Declaration of War,” Dr. Sorby states that symbolic competition propelled Arab leaders to commit to policies that they thought were unwise strategically but politically necessary. He underlines the excellently prepared, initially surprising pre-emptive air attack which destroyed the Arab air force in less than three hours and also the subsequent well-planned and organised Sinai campaign. With complete command of the air, Israeli forces won an easy victory in Sinai and reached the Suez Canal. The Egyptian president seemed to be confident in the abilities of the armed forces to stand the initial Israeli attack. He was obviously wrong because the causes of the disastrous Arab defeat lay in huge miscalculations and blunders of the Egyptian high command. This was a war that few Arab military officials prepared for or Arab leaders wanted, but it was a war that they stumbled into and got.

The last chapter “The Arab Struggle for the Removal of the Consequences of the Aggression” explains that apart from the general increase in anti-Western feeling, the shattering defeat of the Six Day War had many immediate and long-term effects on the Arab world. It also shows how Egypt, after the humiliating defeat of its army, had to begin from zero and rebuild its armed forces. The 1967 War was an extreme example of the ills that defined Arab politics. Arab officials and intellectuals could look back to the events since the Suez War and recall a period that began with promise and assuredness and ended with a string of failures and disappointments. The Arabs’ crucial aim was to regain the territories lost in the war. The ambiguous UN Security Council’s resolution 242 of November 1967 formally closed the conflict, but it did not solve the problem. It only put the issues off, which resulted in a new round of Arab-Israeli armed conflict in six-years’ time. It is a sad fact that a just and lasting peace in the Middle East has not been achieved until these days.

The very deep and close knowledge of the subject is a result of many years of study, research and personal experience of the author during his long periods in the Middle East through research programmes and in the highest diplomatic position. As well as being a master of detail, the author is also able to change the focus on key periods and key events. It is important to appreciate the precise and very reliable scientific transcription of Arab proper names. In his work the author uses a wide heuristic base: the list of used sources and literature points to an extraordinary understanding of all issues related to the subject and both for scholars and students would be a reliable guide for further study.

Dr. Sorby’s monograph under review is an excellent historical work surpassing the standard level of works treating the same subject. It will undoubtedly find its place in the wider scientific research of the Near Eastern history in the 20th century.

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