**War Stories: Making Tough Choices**

**War of Independence (1947-1949)**

**Summary:**

On May 14, 1948, Israel declared its independence and immediately Israel's neighboring countries – Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt – invaded the new state. The war had an enormous human cost: 6,000 Israelis were killed, representing 1% of the state's Jewish population, including Holocaust survivors and other new immigrants, as well as Jews from around the world who had come to help. The war, which ended in an armistice agreement in 1949, resulted in Israel expanding its borders beyond the land that the UN Partition Plan had provided.  However, Jerusalem was divided; the Old City was controlled by Jordan, meaning that Jews could not visit the Western Wall.

**The Details:**

* Israel declared independence on May 14, 1948.
* Great Britain had been in charge, but in 1947 told the United Nations it was relinquishing control on May 15, 1948.
* On November 29, 1947, the UN had voted to partition the territory into two countries – one for Jews, one for Arabs.
* The Jews accepted the plan, but the Arabs rejected it. The war began, between Jews and Arabs living in the territory (called Palestine at the time), immediately after the UN vote.
* Six months later, on the eve of the British withdrawal, David Ben-Gurion, who had led the Jewish community in Palestine and was to become the first prime minister of Israel, declared independence at a ceremony late Friday afternoon in Tel Aviv.
* Immediately after the declaration and the British exit, the local fight between Arabs and Jews in Palestine turned into an all-out war between the new state of Israel and its Arab neighbors.
* All four of Israel's neighbors – Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – sent their armies to attack the new state. They were joined by troops from Iraq and Saudi Arabia.
* More than 6,000 Israelis died in the War of Independence, out of a total Jewish population (in May 1948) of 650,000. That's the equivalent of 3 million Americans, on a proportional basis, and was the highest loss as a percentage of the population in any of Israel's wars.
* The new state of Israel lacked equipment and what it did have was old and in bad condition. Diaspora Jews helped purchase weapons, including old fighter planes from World War Two, and delivered them to the new state.
* The Arab armies had better equipment and were much larger. The Egyptian Air Force bombed Tel Aviv, and ground forces attacked from every direction.
* During the War of Independence, some 700,000 Arabs fled their homes in the new state of Israel. Nearly all of these people left because the Arab leaders told them to do so. They were not allowed to return after the war, and Arab countries did little to resettle them, so they (and their descendants) remain refugees today.
* Some call it a miracle, while others attribute it to great determination, but by the summer of 1949, when the fighting stopped, Israel had survived, and expanded its borders beyond what the UN plan had allocated. None of its neighbors recognized the state for nearly 30 years. (Egypt would be the first to accept Israel, when it signed a peace treaty in 1979.)
* Former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon used to say that Israel is still fighting its War of Independence, and that it will go on until the country is fully accepted by all of its neighbors.
* The Arab world termed the events of the war the "Nakba" – Arabic for "Catastrophe."
* See attached maps for more details of key battles, and to see the shifting borders. Maps can also be viewed at Israel's Story in Maps or in Martin Gilbert's Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict (provided in the Goodman Initiative Supplies)

**The Six-Day War (1967)**

**Summary:**

The Six-Day War took place in June 1967 between Israel and three of its neighbors: Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Earlier in 1967, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, blocking access to the port of Eilat. Egypt also forced the UN to remove its troops from the Sinai Peninsula, where they had been stationed to maintain a ceasefire between Egypt and Israel. Fearing that its neighbors would destroy it, Israel pre-emptively attacked Egypt's air bases on June 5.

After six days of fighting, Israel won the war and tripled in size, gaining the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and the Golan Heights. Jerusalem was reunified and Jews were able to visit the Western Wall for the first time since the establishment of the modern state.

**Details:**

* In the Spring of 1967, Egypt -- Israel's largest and most powerful adversary -- took two steps that were essentially declarations of war:
* It ordered the United Nations to remove its forces from the Sinai Peninsula. The UN troops had been stationed there under an agreement designed to separate the two countries' armies and ensure no military confrontation between Israel and Egypt.
* It closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, essentially cutting off the southernmost port of Eilat from the world.
* Israelis feared the worst, and for three weeks in May and June, the country was paralyzed, expecting an all-out war to be launched at any time.
* Few Israelis could imagine that their country would survive another war. (This was 22 years after the Holocaust, and the notion of wiping out Jews was fresh in Israel's collective memory.)
* Israel's military had grown and obtained much better equipment than it had in 1948, but the public and the leaders all feared that the country's adversaries would overpower them. The big concern was air power, because modern wars are won or lost by air forces.
* On June 5, the Israel Air Force launched a preemptive attack on Egypt's air bases. The IAF sent nearly all its planes on the early-morning mission, flying low over the Mediterranean Sea to avoid radar detection. They destroyed the entire Egyptian Air Force fleet on the ground, and bombed the runways at all of Egypt's air bases.
* With the air force of the most powerful Arab country wiped out, Israel was able to overpower Egypt, Jordan and Syria in six short days of battle.
* Israel more than tripled its size, conquering the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria.
* Suddenly Israel went from underdog to regional power. The fears of a second Holocaust were replaced by a sense of invincibility.
* Before the war, Israel was 9 miles wide at its narrowest point (near Netanya, midway between Tel Aviv and Haifa.) Now it was relatively big and felt secure.
* Gaining control over the Old City of Jerusalem, including the Western Wall, was seen by many as a miracle.
* Israel gave the Wakf, or Muslim religious authorities, control over the Temple Mount, where the ancient Jewish Temples once stood, and where the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque stand today.
* Soon after the war, Israel made offers to return much of the conquered territory in return for peace treaties, but these offers were rebuffed by the Arabs.
* A September 1967 Arab League meeting in Khartoum issued a statement insisting that the Arab world would never recognize or negotiate with Israel.
* The Arab world termed the events of June 1967 the "nachsa" -- Arabic for "setback."
* See attached maps for more details of key battles, and to see the shifting borders. Maps can also be viewed at Israel's Story in Maps or in Martin Gilbert's Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict (provided in the Goodman Initiative Supplies)

**The Yom Kippur War (1973)**

**Summary:**

On Yom Kippur, October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel. Most soldiers had been given leave for the holiday, so the IDF was ill-prepared for the onslaught on its northern and southern borders.  During the time it took the IDF to mobilize its troops, the outlook was dire and some feared that Israel might be wiped out. A massive US military airlift, ordered by President Nixon, helped to turn the tide. While the war did not result in significant changes in Israel's borders, it had a sobering impact on the public and the country's leaders. Israeli losses were heavy: during the 20-day war, more than 2,500 soldiers were killed and many more were wounded. Prime Minister Golda Meir took responsibility for the lack of military preparedness, and resigned.

**Details:**

* In the six years between June 1967 and October 1973, Israel enjoyed rapid growth and consolidation of it stunning Six Day War victory.
* After its offers to return land to Arab neighbors in exchange for peace were rebuffed, Israel essentially stopped thinking about ceding territory.
* Israelis felt secure, even invincible
* On the eve of Yom Kippur (the holiest day of the year) in 1973, Israel's military intelligence said there was next to no chance of imminent war.
* Most soldiers were given home leave for the holiday, with very few remaining on the country's borders.
* On the morning of October 6, military intelligence discerned signs that had been missed: Syria and Egypt were about to launch a synchronized attack.
* Mobilizing reservists, and calling regular soldiers back to the front, takes time. Although Israel's leaders knew war was about to begin, they could do nothing to be prepared.
* In the south, along the Suez Canal, only a few Israeli tanks stood ready to defend the border. The same was true on the Golan Heights in the north.
* Not surprisingly Israeli losses were heavy, especially in the first hours and days of the war. Altogether, more than 2,500 Israeli soldiers died in the war (the highest losses since the War of Independence), and thousands more were wounded. The IDF lost hundreds of tanks and fighter jets. (Loss figures for Egypt and Syria are not available, because those countries did not release them, but estimates put the numbers at 8,000-18,000 dead.)
* In the early hours of the war, Syria and Egypt both advanced into Israeli territory. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan wanted to hold a press conference to warn of the "fall of the Third Temple" -- a reference to his fear that Israel would be defeated -- but Prime Minister Golda Meir forbade him from speaking publicly.
* The Soviet Union and the U.S. both backed their respective allies (the Arab countries and Israel), sending huge shipments of military equipment. The U.S. decision to send supplies to Israel was a key to the IDF's eventual turnaround, and enabled Israel to encircle the Egyptian Third Army in Sinai, forcing their surrender. It was the beginning of the close military ties that connect Israel and the U.S. to this day.
* The war officially ended on October 22, 1973, although some fighting continued.
* Four years later, in November 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat cited his country's "victory" in the 1973 war when he offered to negotiate a peace deal with Israel.
* See attached maps for more details of key battles, and to see the shifting borders. Maps can also be viewed at Israel's Story in Maps or in Martin Gilbert's Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict (provided in the Goodman Initiative Supplies)

**Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009)**

**Summary:**

Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, also known as the Gaza War, in response to Palestinian rocket attacks into the country's southern cities.  Most of the rockets landed in open fields and caused minimal damage, but thousands of children in Southern Israel slept in shelters and exhibited severe signs of stress. After Hamas broke a shaky truce, the IDF unleashed massive air attacks on rocket and missile launch sites, as well as terror headquarters in Gaza. US public opinion polls found most Americans held Hamas responsible for the violence. The operation ended with a ceasefire three weeks after it began, just hours before President Obama was sworn into office on January 20.

**The Details:**

* Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in August 2005, removing 8,000 Israeli residents and all military personnel. The territory was handed over to the Palestinian Authority.
* In June 2006, Hamas and Fatah, the two largest Palestinian factions, engaged in a prolonged battle in Gaza. Eventually, Hamas beat Fatah, and senior Fatah figures fled to the West Bank. Hamas, which is deemed a terror organization not only by Israel but also by the U.S. and the European Union, set up its own government in Gaza.
* Unlike Fatah, Hamas refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist. Since its takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2006, it oversaw the launch of thousands of rockets and missiles from Gaza into southern Israel. The IDF regularly staged retaliatory operations, but refrained from all-out operations.
* Through much of 2008, Hamas abided by a cease fire, and the number of rockets launched from Gaza dropped. However, when the cease fire expired, Hamas declined to extend it, and in December the rocket attacks increased again.
* While the rockets were mostly primitive projectiles that caused relatively minor damage and casualties were relatively low, the constant threat of attack made life in the region -- especially in the town of Sderot -- unbearable.
* On December 27, 2008, the Israeli government launched Operation Cast Lead, also called the Gaza War, designed to cripple Hamas and stop the barrage of rockets. It was a devastating and ongoing air attack on rocket-launch sites and Hamas infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip.
* Hamas responded by launching hundreds of rockets and missiles into Israel. Some were longer-range projectiles that reached Be'er Sheva and reached toward the heavily populated Tel Aviv metropolitan area.
* In early January, the IDF sent ground troops into Gaza to continue the effort. Palestinians claimed the Israelis were conducting massacres of Palestinian civilians, but the IDF and Israeli government insisted the military effort was being conducted in a way that sought to minimize civilian casualties.
* Israel said that Hamas had harbored many terror cells in the midst of civilian populations, making it hard to avoid "collateral damage." This was borne out by the disproportionate casualty figures: While precise numbers are not available, more than 1,100 Palestinians died in the fighting, including hundreds of non-combatants. Thirteen Israelis died.
* International outcry focused on the disproportionate death figures.  The United Nations appointed Judge Richard Goldstone to head a committee to investigate the events of Operation Cast Lead. The Goldstone Report spread blame on both sides and included serious charges of misconduct by Israel. In 2011, Judge Goldstone issued a public retraction of parts of the report, including the most severe charges against Israel.
* Since the end of the military operation, rocket fire from Gaza has been sharply reduced, but Israeli military intelligence believes that Hamas has used the period of quiet to bolster its stock of rockets and missiles