Bernie Taft

ONE YEAR AFTER

The author, who was a member of the delegation of the Communist Party of Australia to the International Consultative meeting of Communist Parties held in Budapest in February, visited Israel on his way home. Here he discusses the situation in that country and in the Middle East a year after the June war.

THE JUNE WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST has not solved Israel's problems, it has made them more serious. Israel's security is not greater than before June 5th. Peace is not nearer. The border incidents continue, with heavier clashes and loss of life. In Israel right-wing forces are more firmly entrenched. The atmosphere in the country is one of reliance on force, of "teaching the Arabs a lesson". The appetite for foreign conquest is growing. There is something of a cult of Dayan. The whole country is moving to the right. Voices are heard, and increasingly listened to, which talk of the "right to hold the land which we conquered by our arms".

The Israeli government acts in defiance of world opinion—the military parade through the occupied areas of Jerusalem in May was an example. Israel is losing some of the support and good will that it had earlier. Some sections of the left in the West which had tended to sympathise with Israel when Arab voices were heard calling for Israel's destruction, are revising their attitude, repelled by the intransigent attitude of the Israeli government. For despite all the talk about its desire for a peace settlement, the government is putting forward demands which it knows to be unrealistic and which no Arab leader could possibly accept. It deliberately refuses to clearly state its territorial settlement terms. At the same time responsible government leaders, such as the Minister of Defence (Ha'aretz, January 19, 1968) talk of "the Jordan river as a border of security of Israel".

The thinking behind this was revealed by the Prime Minister Levy Ashkol when he said on the eve of his visit to Washington (28th December 1967)—"Who knows if we will not have to remain another 20 years, maybe more, inside the border of the cease-fire lines, which are much more natural, stronger and more bold and
give us much more outlook into the future and much more hope". Such statements belie the professed desire for a just peace. For those on the left, the post-June developments in Israel must be extremely disturbing. Like the June war itself these developments are connected with the policies pursued by the Israeli establishment for the last 15 years.

What is happening today has to be seen in its setting. It has a history and it, like the June war itself, cannot be understood outside of its development. The establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in 1947 by decision of the United Nations was the direct result of the terrible tragedy that had befallen the Jewish people in Europe during the Nazi occupation. Six million Jews were killed systematically and in cold blood in what was the most monstrous operation of its kind in all human history. Europe was repaying a debt to the survivors of this tragedy. But the establishment of a Jewish state in a country populated by another people, the Palestinian Arabs, was bound to create problems.

After all, as Arab spokesmen have often said since, the Arabs were not the ones responsible for the crimes committed by Europeans against the Jewish people. In fact, Jews had lived for centuries in Arab lands in complete peace and harmony among the Arab population. It seemed to them that Europe was paying its debt to the Jewish people at the expense of the Arabs. If an historical claim 2000 years old has meaning to Jews, having lived in the country for generations has also meaning for the Arab population in Israel.

So difficulties were bound to arise: the question was how they were to be met. If a Jewish state was to flourish in the midst of this Arab world, which in the meantime was awakening and demanding its national independence, it had to find a way to live with it. Those circumstances demanded of the leaders of Israel a sincere attempt to find an accommodation with the awakening Arab movement. There were very real difficulties of course. Reactionary Arab feudal rulers, working in league with foreign imperialist powers denounced the state of Israel. Often the more subservient they were to the Western powers, particularly to the oil interests, which dominated the area economically, the louder were their attacks on Israel. It became a means of diverting the attention of their own people to a foreign enemy. Arab reactionaries acting in behalf of imperialist interests had in fact attempted to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel by force in 1948. But with the development of Egyptian revolution in 1952 a real possibility arose to find an accommodation with Egypt, the most important Arab country.
When a group of young Egyptian officers overthrew King Farouk in July 1952, they were motivated by a desire to rid the country of British colonial rule and to free it of the general corruption which had grown up around that rule. They were not preoccupied with the Palestine question. King Farouk had started the 1948 war and left the Army fire blank bullets, the cash difference went into his pocket. To get rid of British colonial rule, which was still in control of the country and the Suez Canal, was their aim—not an attack on Israel.

Nasser became the leader in 1954. He pursued a neutralist foreign policy, attempted to free the country of British domination and to gain control of the Suez Canal. Nasser actively attempted to find an accommodation with Israel. The war of 1948 had left a heritage of over one million Arab refugees, which Israel had steadfastly refused to do anything about. But with the retirement of the hard line Prime Minister Ben Gurion in December 1953 and his replacement by Moshe Shareff, who was a moderate who was looking for a political settlement with the Arab countries, a real possibility existed of finding a solution to the Israel-Arab conflicts. As contacts were established between Nasser and Shareff, the hard line forces in Israel led by Lavon, the Minister for Defence, and Moshe Dayan, the Chief of Staff, did all they could to prevent the attempts at rapprochement.

The Israeli Security Service was instructed to send Israeli agents into Egypt to carry out acts of sabotage against Western property which would be blamed on the Egyptians. This is how this episode is now openly described in a recently published best seller in Israel Eli Cohen, Our Man in Damascus, by E. Ben Hanan, pp. 24-25:

It had happened at the end of the summer of 1954. Information arriving from London caused Israeli leaders a considerable amount of worry. It seemed that the elderly Churchill under Egyptian pressure—accompanied by frequent acts of terrorism—had decided to withdraw the British forces from their bases in the Suez Canal area. For the ruling junta in Egypt this was a considerable accomplishment, but as far as Israel was concerned a British presence in the canal area was vital.

The best solution seemed to be a series of sabotage attempts and open provocations, to be carried out by hired terrorists, secretly trained in sabotage and espionage since 1951 by Israeli agents. Some of the terrorists had even received “scholarships” for advanced training in Israel, which they had reached via France...they were divided into two groups, Cairo and Alexandria.

In the months of May-June 1954, Israel decided to activate the group decisively. Instructions were received at the Headquarters calling for sabotage in public buildings, cinemas, post offices and railroad stations. The main target was to be British institutions such as libraries, cultural centres, houses owned by British citizens, and the British legation in Egypt. The aim—to bring Britain to the conclusion that it was still early to pull out of Egypt and that all guarantees offered by the Egyptian government in exchange for evacuation of the bases, were ineffective in the light of the continuing wave of terrorism.
It led to the arrest and execution of two Israeli agents in Egypt. Other efforts, not all yet revealed by any means, were made to aggravate the tension between Israel and Egypt.

The Israel Security Service which played a major role in these operations, is regarded as a most efficient organisation. This is how it has been described by General Von Horn, the Chief of U.N. Observers Staff in the Middle East:

The Israeli Secret Service has no equal in the Middle East in collecting information and special operations. It recognises no sovereignty other than its own, and lacks all inhibitions in its activity. Aided by an almost complete security blackout in its own country, it also knows that it is supported by practically every citizen of Israel, from the Prime Minister on down to the man in the street. And it enjoys the fruit of its penetration into practically every secret service in the world.

The Western oil interests then as now did not want a settlement of the conflicts between the peoples in the area. In fact Britain and France planned to get rid of Nasser who was adopting an increasingly independent attitude. An alliance with the hard line forces in Israel was carefully constructed. The next vital step in this tragic chain of events took place on February 28, 1955—11 days after Ben Gurion returned from retirement to the office of Israel’s Defence Minister. It was the Israeli attack on an Egyptian garrison near the armistice border in the Gaza Strip, three miles into Egyptian territory, in which 43 people were killed. As Jean Lacoutiere describes it in his book, Egypt in Transition, “The Israeli attack on February 28 cannot be compared with the previous acts committed on both sides, and it opens a new phase—that of a sizeable military operation in a zone which has long been living in a state of insecurity”.

Certainly Egypt saw this as the victory of the “hard” line in Israel. Nasser is on record as seeing it in this way. It led to his fateful decision to form the commandos, the fadayeen which were recruited among the refugees in Gaza, and trained in sabotage. This seriously aggravated the situation between Egypt and Israel. But even after that Nasser made another attempt to reach a settlement with Israel. Through Dom Mintoff, who was then Prime Minister of Malta, contacts were established in January 1966 and a secret meeting between Nasser and Israeli representatives was planned for April in Malta.

As soon as the British got wind of this they did their best to prevent peace. The plans for the Suez campaign had been made. The dominant hard line leadership in the Israeli government acted in the same way. Israel’s collusion in the Suez aggression against Egypt established her in the eyes of the Arabs as a Western agency in the Middle East. It made the task of finding a lasting peace in the area more difficult.
It is not difficult to understand why Western oil interests, with their enormous profits from the exploitation of the Middle East should do everything possible to destroy the movement for national independence or to keep up tensions between Jews and Arabs in the area. But what of the people of Israel? Have they not suffered enough? Do they not want to live in peace and security in their own land? This is certainly the popular sentiment, but the people who run the country have different aims.

The Israeli ruling class has long-range and well prepared plans. They involve conquering territory and "clearing" it of its inhabitants. They are based on an alliance with the Western interests in the Middle East. To carry them out requires skilful efforts to deceive its own people, to aggravate tension with its Arab neighbors and to bring up the youth in a spirit of hostility towards the Arabs. The ruling class made good use of the chauvinistic elements in the Arab movement, to create an atmosphere in Israel of a people surrounded by enemies bent on its destruction. They were helped by Arab extremists.

The Israeli ruling class is very skilful—it has learned well from the experiences of the ruling classes of other countries. One of the most surprising impressions one gets in Israel is the manipulated public opinion about the Arab national liberation movement. The public is shown only its muddy streams, its chauvinistic and demagogic elements. Nasser is presented as simply another Hitler. But the creation of this picture is important for the fulfilment of the aims of the Establishment.

Last year a lecturer at the Tel Aviv University, Dr. George Tamarin, conducted a survey of students in 7th and 8th grades of the Tel Aviv Primary School (13 to 14-year-olds) about the attitude to the Arabs. He asked them about some passages in the book of Joshua (which is compulsory study) according to which the invading armies at the “command of God” destroyed whole towns and villages and killed all inhabitants, including women and children. One of the questions to these 13-14-year-olds was: “If today the Israeli Army conquers an Arab village or an Arab town, do you consider it correct that it should act according to the behest of Joshua and kill all the inhabitants”? The horrifying results showed that 66% of the students answered the question in the affirmative. Typical replies were: The Arabs are our arch-enemies, it is necessary to kill them, because they can’t be trusted and will otherwise kill Jews, etc. Eight per cent were partly in agreement, but had reservations and 26% opposed on humanitarian grounds, or because it would damage Israel’s reputation in the eyes of the world. The academic who had criticised the chauvinistic education and its
results was dismissed from his post. This happened only a few months before the June war.

The Israeli public, for all its sophistication, its high level of education, its interest in politics, is astonishingly ill-informed on matters pertaining to Israel and its Arab neighbors. There is no doubt the overwhelming majority of the population of Israel supported the June war. They believed that the country was fighting for its existence and the people for their survival. The threats by Arab extremists to destroy Israel played the main part in this conviction. The experience of the destruction of the six million Jews in Europe during the Second World War has left a deep scar on Jewish consciousness. Some of the remnants of this holocaust are in Israel. Many of them lost members of their family during the war. Such people are naturally very sensitive to the threat of destruction, no matter how empty such threats may have been.

The Israeli ruling class managed to use the traumatic experiences of the Jewish people for their own purposes. It served them as a means to unite the country and lead it into the June war. It made full use of the irresponsible and disgraceful statements of Arab chauvinists and demagogues which called for the destruction of Israel and made threats against the people of Israel. It deepened the feeling among the Jewish population of being surrounded by enemies bent on their destruction. But whatever the ordinary people believed, and were made to believe, the military and political leaders of the country knew perfectly well that there was no threat to Israel. They knew the state of the Egyptian Army, they knew that Nasser tried to avoid a conflict, that he was not in a position to fight, that he was bluffing. They knew of the secret efforts by Nasser to find a peaceful way out of the crisis. They knew of the concessions he offered to reach a peaceful settlement.

But they hid all this from their people. They fed them on biased and one-sided information. They highlighted all the aggressive statements and suppressed the conciliatory ones. They planned and prepared for this war well ahead. The blunders and miscalculations of Nasser as well as the boastful threats of other Arab leaders provided them with the opportunity to put these plans into effect. They exploited them with great skill.

Because of the way in which our information media handled the crisis the picture has been distorted and many of the facts have been hidden. It is certainly not common knowledge that Egypt’s attitude right through was one of moderation towards Israel, that it made frequent attempts to settle the differences, to find an accommodation with Israel. Nasser was constantly under pressure from demagogic Arab rulers for being soft on Israel. Despite Suez,
Nasser's policies since 1956 made United States imperialism the main target, while opposition to Israel was based on its connection with the United States and its support for US policies. This became more acute after the Greek military coup on April 21, 1967. Nasser, who was under growing pressure from the United States, became convinced that this was a new stage in the American plans to remove the anti-imperialist governments in the Middle East.

In the confidential Information Bulletin of the Central organisation of the Egyptian Socialist League, which is distributed to about 100 top Egyptian functionaries only, it was stated:

After the regime in Athens, the Cypriot Government of Archbishop Makarios will probably be next. The Americans will try to establish a subservient government there, in order to strengthen their position in the eastern Mediterranean. After that they will attack Syria, which because of its isolated position is the weak link in the progressive Arab world. The Baath regime in Damascus has not understood how to secure its position among the population. The ultimate aim of the Americans is the Nasser regime in Egypt.

A week after the Greek coup Nasser in his speech on May 1 made a violent attack on the United States, accusing it of being the head of a world-wide counter-revolution.

A week later on May 8, two Syrian representatives arrived in Cairo to inform Nasser that Israel was preparing a large-scale military operation to topple the regime in Damascus. They asked for Nasser's help. Nasser, who was suspicious of the Syrians and who feared that they wanted to push him into a conflict with Israel, replied that he would not promise anything until he had checked their information himself. The two Syrians told him that their information came from two sources; the Lebanese who were regarded as cautious and sober, and from their own information service, which had sent some officers into Israel.

Nasser decided to get his own information service to investigate the matter and also to task the Soviet Union if it believed that the Israelis at the behest of the United States were preparing for an offensive against the Syrian Government. The Soviet authorities confirmed that Israel was planning an attack on Syria and on May 12 responsible Israelis themselves declared that they intended to topple the Syrian Government in order to put an end to the raids of Palestinian units. This was also stated publicly by the Israeli Chief of Staff, M. Rabin.

Nasser decided that the threat was serious and required him to act to save the Syrian Government from destruction. His own information service confirmed Israel's intentions. He decided to take steps that he believed would frighten Israel and prevent it from proceeding with its plans to attack Syria. What did he do?
Did he send this troops secretly to the border in order to prepare for a surprise attack on Israel? No, he marched his troops openly with bands in broad daylight through Cairo, past the American Embassy. The whole thing had a theatrical touch about it. The Americans understood that this was meant to tell them Egypt was prepared to defend Syria, and that warned them to restrain Israel from destroying the Syrian regime.

The Egyptian troops reach the border. Nasser takes the next step (of a purely local character) by asking, not U Thant, but the Commander of the UN forces, General Rikhye to withdraw his troops temporarily from the border, until the crisis is over. There is no suggestion that the UN forces should leave Egypt or that Egyptian troops should replace UN forces at Sham El-shekh. But what happens is that General Rikhye says he has not the authority to do this, “only President Nasser can put such a demand to U Thant”. Nasser is compelled to ask U Thant to withdraw the troops from the border. Even then he does not even mention Sham El-shekh. But U Thant’s reaction is surprising. He says to Nasser that “if he wants the UN troops to leave the border he has to ask that all international troops be removed from Egypt.” Nasser is caught. He has to ask for the withdrawal. Even then U Thant acts with a strange rapidity. Nobody, least of all Nasser himself, expected this.

Why did U Thant act in this unusual way? Two theories have been advanced. One is that he wanted to creat difficulties for the Americans in order to force them to scale down the war in Vietnam. The other is that the Americans had in fact encouraged him to act in this speedy fashion to call Nasser’s bluff, and to damage his reputation. In any case Nasser was now caught in a vise. For eleven years he has been under constant pressure to remove this remnant of the Suez aggression of 1956. Now in the crisis he gives in to the pressure. He proves he is not an “accomplice of the Zionists” as his enemies have accused him.

Even then he tries to prevent the crisis from growing. He accepts a request for a meeting with U Thant on May 22 in Cairo. They reach a secret agreement to ease the tension. Nasser agrees to let non-strategic material through the Gulf of Aqaba. U Thant undertakes to ask the maritime nations to send strategic materials through Haifa (as before 1956) pending the settlement of the issue. The Egyptians take still another step to avoid war. They offer “If the Israelis will publicly undertake not to attack Syria we are prepared to withdraw our troops from the frontier”.

A week later President Johnson sends Charles Yost as his personal representative to Cairo. The visit is secret. He has a discussion with
the Foreign Minister Mahmud Riad. They reach an agreement that (1) diplomatic efforts will continue to solve the problems in a peaceful way, (2) Egypt will raise no objections to the dispute being placed before the International Court in the Hague, (3) Zakaria Muhieddin, the first vice-president of the Republic, will go to Washington to work out an acceptable compromise. Charles Yost leaves Cairo on Saturday, June 3, two days before the start of the war. He leaves Nasser with the calming reassurance that Israel will not attack whilst negotiations continue.

Was the war necessary for Israel's survival? Certainly Israel's leaders knew how weak and unprepared the Arabs were, how much all the threats amounted to. How else is it to be explained that Ben Gurion, the old warrior, was opposed to the war? Would he have done so, if Israel was in mortal danger? Of course, Ben Gurion knew what the real position was. The war and its outcome has changed many things in the area. It has exposed the irresponsibility and downright treachery of Arab chauvinism. It has shown it as an instrument of those forces who want to subvert or destroy the Arab liberation movement. The war has also shown up the big weaknesses in the socio-economic structure of the Arab countries—the limited nature of the social changes, the existence of a privileged caste in the army, the reliance on nationalist demagogy as a substitute for the serious job of social reconstruction. There are some hopeful signs that some of these lessons are beginning to be learned.

The tragedy is that at the very time when the Arabs after bitter lessons are beginning to think with their heads instead of their hearts, all too many people in Israel are thinking with their hearts instead of their heads. Yet the real friends of Israel are those who advise her to seek, even at this late hour, and despite all the difficulties, the only road that leads to a secure future—the road of conciliation and compromise, the road that seeks a settlement based on the rights of both Jews and Arabs. Any other way can only lead to ultimate disaster.