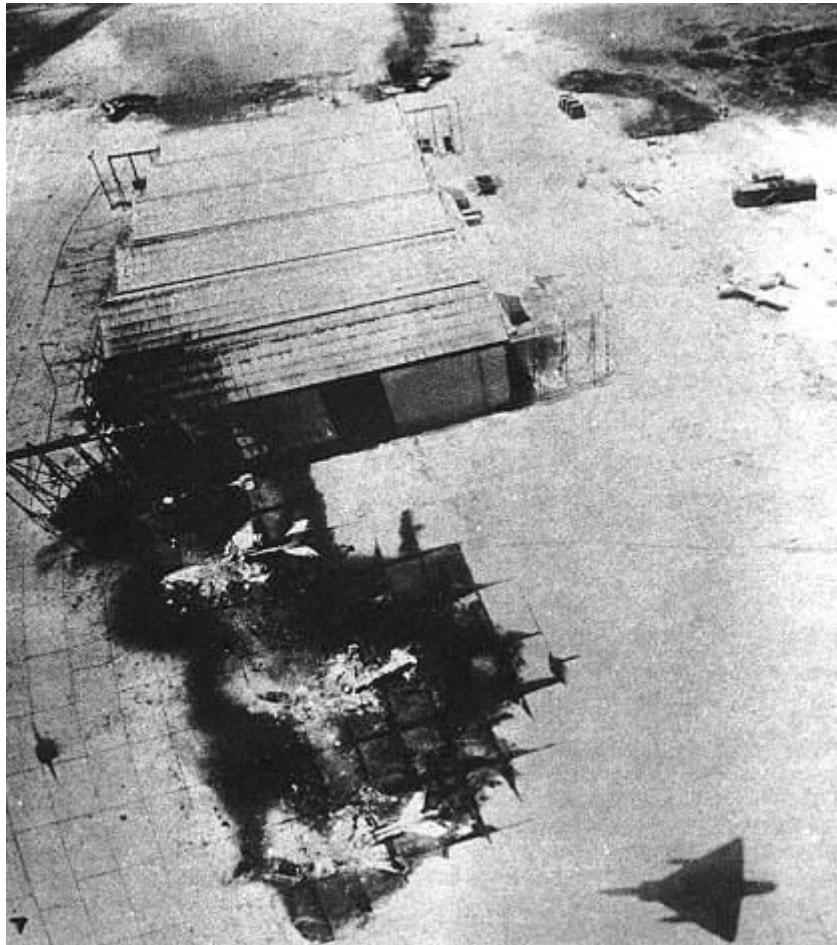


# How Egypt's Gas Warfare in Yemen led to Israel's Preemptive Air Assault in the 1967 Six Day War



Operation "Moked" June 5, 1967, shadow of Israeli Mirage fighter over destroyed Egyptian airfield

Today is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Six Day War victory of Israel over the combined United Arab Republic forces – Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Israel's preemptive air strike in the opening hours of the war that destroyed Egypt's air force and decimated those of Jordan and Syria was a key strategic factor.

What motivated the planning by T'zahal at the Ministry of

Defense in Tel Aviv to adopt such a stunning surprise strategy? Moreover, what is the legacy that motivates Israel's military strategy of attacking nuclear and non-conventional weapons facilities maintained by adversaries in the Middle East? Further, how is that strategy supported by civil defense exercises to deal with potential mass casualties in the Jewish nation, should those adversaries deliver those non-conventional weapons by tube launched weapons, missiles or drones?

The answer to the first question is the subject of a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in today's edition by Asher Orkaby, senior researcher in Harvard University's Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations Department, "[Syria's Chemical Weapons Might Start a New Six Day War](#)." Orkaby is the author of a forthcoming book to be published in July 2017 by Oxford University Press on Egypt's role in the Yemen Civil war in the 1960's.

What Orkaby reveals is that Nasser's use of nerve gas dropped in support of Yemeni Republican forces provided a front row seat for Israel. That was motivated by its already heightened concern over the use of gas arising from the murders of Six Million European Jews at Nazi death factories like Auschwitz-Berkinau during the Holocaust in WWII.

That concern in the 1960's led to an unusual covert operation with Israel supplying weapons to Yemeni monarchist opposition forces supported by British and French mercenaries in exchange for vital intelligence on Nasser's use of prohibited poison gas delivered by air. The fear of Egypt's use of its 300 aircraft to deliver prohibited chemical weapons, as Orkaby writes, may have motivated Israel military planners to unleash all of its air fleet of 200 aircraft, with only 12 planes held in reserve. The initial attack against 18 Egyptian air fields at breakfast time on the morning of June 5th destroyed 300 aircraft at 18. Orkaby writes about what occurred in the Yemen covert operations:

The first country to use chemical weapons in the Middle East was Egypt. During the 1960s, President Gamal Abdel Nasser deployed poison-gas bombs during the North Yemen Civil War. Unknown to the Egyptians, Israel had obtained a front-row seat to study their military capabilities.

The conflict involved the Yemen Arab Republic, founded in 1962 after a coup d'état deposed the country's religious monarch, Imam Muhammad al-Badr. Egypt took the republican side, sending mechanized and heavily armed battalions to aid the revolutionaries.

The monarchist northern tribal militias, aided by a cadre of British and French mercenaries, took shelter in the country's mountainous highlands. The problem was finding a way to resupply their positions. After concluding that an air resupply was vital, the mercenaries began searching for an ally willing to orchestrate airlifts into hostile and unfamiliar territory. In the end they turned to Israel, the only country with something substantial to gain from an extended guerrilla war against Egypt.

Between 1964 and 1966, the Israeli Air Force flew 14 missions to Yemen, airlifting vital weapons and supplies to beleaguered tribal outposts. Although the identity of the supplier was a closely guarded secret, these airlifts constituted an important physical and psychological lift for the tribal militias.

In exchange, Israel received well-informed intelligence from its own pilots and British mercenaries on the ground. The Israelis' main contact was Neil McLean, a former Special Air Service soldier and member of the British Parliament. McLean passed to Israel details of Egypt's military activity, even samples of its chemical weapons.

The Egyptian Air Force had been dropping the poison-gas bombs, targeting militias hiding in a network of caves, with

increasing frequency and precision. This news alarmed Israelis, many of whom had lost family and friends to Hitler's poison-gas chambers only two decades earlier. They were haunted by the prospect of a similar fate befalling them in a gas attack on Tel Aviv or another Israeli city. A sense of looming existential threat pervaded Israeli society, down to the local school district. In one emergency meeting in May 1967, teachers debated security protocols. In the event of an air-raid siren, should students be ushered into the basement bunkers? Or would climbing to the rooftops be better for escaping poison gas?

The fear of a chemical attack undoubtedly factored into Israel's decision to attack Egypt's air force pre-emptively on June 5, 1967. Over five hours Israel destroyed 300 Egyptian planes and disabled 18 airfields, eliminating the short-term threat of chemical warfare. But the long-term danger has remained.

Israel's military has had a long term pre-occupation with Arab adversaries like Syria and Iraq equipped with demonstrable WMD nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. That is reflected in air strikes such as the one on June 7, 1981 that took out the Osirak reactor of Saddam Hussein near Baghdad in [Operation Opera](#). The same motivation was behind the Israeli air strike called [Operation Orchard](#) on September 6, 2007 that destroyed the North Korean designed and likely Iran funded plutonium Al-Kibar reactor on the Euphrates River near Deir -es Zor, Syria.

During the first Gulf War in 1991, Saddam Hussein fired Scud missiles at Israel from western Iraq, which brought back fears of the possible use of chemical warheads. In 2014, captured audio tapes [revealed](#) that Hussein had given orders to launch chemical weapons attacks against Tel Aviv if he was toppled in the First Gulf War. That was not an idle threat given the extensive use of nerve agents by Hussein's forces that killed more than 5,000 Kurds in [Halabja, Iraq](#) on March 16, 1988 in

the closing months of the Iran-Iraq war Israel's Home Front Command in recognition of that notorious use of aerial delivery by Hussein undertook mass distribution of gas masks, strategic positioning of nerve agent antidotes and instructions for taping plastic safe rooms in homes and apartments.

Israel's continuing concern is reflected in the use of prohibited chemical weapons in the Syria conflict by the Assad regime and evident use of Hussein era caches by ISIS against Peshmerga Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syrian Kurdish YPG forces. Then there are non-state terrorist actors like al Qaeda and Hezbollah which have developed laboratories for development of chemical and biological weapons.



### **Dr. Jill Bellamy of Warfare Technology Analytics**

Someone who knows the daunting aspect of defense against bio-warfare capabilities of adversaries of Israel and the West is renowned expert, Dr. Jill Bellamy of [Warfare Technology Analytics](#) (WTA). In *New English Review* interviews on Syria's bio-warfare programs published in [2007](#) and [2013](#), Bellamy's work has been commended for its breath-taking scope and important defense implications by Israeli experts and commentators of note such as the late Barry Rubin and Lenny Ben-David. She has [written](#) authoritatively about the threat and leverage these WMD programs provide strategically for rogue regimes and non-state actors like [Hezbollah](#). These present day threats pose significant existential threats to the Jewish nation commemorating the jubilee of the June 1967 Six Day War. She has noted that Israel among western nations is the best equipped to deal with these chemical and biological threats. She commends Israel for its annual conduct of mass casualty exercises simulating exposure to chemical and biological threats.

Thus Israeli covert operations in Yemen in the 1960's during Nasser's war there alerted the Jewish nation to the delivery of gas attacks against civilians. That may have formed the basis of Israel's stunning victory in June 1967. That legacy continues today, with Israel protecting its citizens through pro-active military actions and civil defense drills against chemical and bio-logical weapons capable of being delivered clandestinely by agents, or by missile and drone.