

# Give War a Chance: Arab Leaders Finesse Military Defeats

by Daniel Pipes

When Saddam Hussein's chief spokesman met with the U.S. secretary of state on the eve of the Kuwait War in January 1991, Tariq Aziz said something remarkable to James Baker. "Never," an Iraqi transcript quotes him, "has [an Arab] political regime entered into a war with Israel or the United States and lost politically."<sup>1</sup>

Elie Salem, Lebanon's foreign minister during most of the 1980s and a noted professor of politics, concurred:

The logic of victory and defeat does not fully apply in the Arab-Israeli context. In the wars with Israel, Arabs celebrated their defeats as if they were victories, and presidents and generals were better known for the cities and regions they had lost than for the ones they had liberated.<sup>2</sup>



*Iraq's Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz (L) shakes hands with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker at the start of talks in Geneva, January 9, 1991. Aziz is quoted as saying, "Never has [an Arab] political regime entered into a war with Israel or the United States and lost politically."*

<sup>1</sup> Iraqi News Agency, Jan. 12, 1992. The present article builds on a shorter analysis, "[Nothing Succeeds Like Failure](#)," *The Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 28, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Elie A. Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon: The Troubled Years, 1982-88* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p. 27.

They exaggerate slightly, for the loss to Israel in 1948-49 by the Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Jordanian armies did cost those regimes heavily with three of them falling and one barely surviving.<sup>3</sup> This exception aside, military loss usually does not damage defeated Arab rulers. Indeed, disaster on the battlefield can be politically useful, and not just against Israel or the United States but also in intra-Arab conflicts and with Iranians, Africans, or Europeans. In the sixty-five years since 1956, military losses have hardly ever scathed Arabic-speaking rulers and sometimes benefited them.

The following analysis establishes this pattern through twenty examples, nineteen of them brief and two longer analyses, then explains it and draws a conclusion from it.<sup>4</sup>

### Examples, 1956-2014

*The Suez Crisis, 1956.* Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser suffered a humiliating military rout at the hands of the British,



*The Suez Crisis, 1956. Egypt's President Nasser suffered a humiliating military rout by the British, French, and Israelis, yet this event helped him become the dominant figure in Arab politics over the next decade.*

French, and Israelis, yet this event “strengthened him politically and morally,”<sup>5</sup> writes Shukri Abed. This loss, in fact, helped Nasser become the dominant figure in Arab politics over the next decade.

*Egypt's war in Yemen, 1962-67.* After five years of intense warfare, great expense, and many casualties, Nasser unconditionally withdrew Egyptian troops, already debilitated by the Six-Day War, from Yemen's civil war. Nasser paid almost no domestic political price for this disaster.

*The clash between Syria and Israel, April 1967.* The Syrians lost six MiG-21s, and the Israelis lost no aircraft on April 7, but the battle caused no consternation in Damascus. Quite the contrary, President Nur ad-Din al-Attasi ten

<sup>3</sup> Husni Za'im overthrew the losing regime in Damascus in March 1949; the Free Officers, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, overthrew Egypt's king in July 1952. Discontent over the *nakba* contributed to the violent July 1958 overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq and several times came close to doing the same in Jordan.

<sup>4</sup> For a contrary argument, see Albert B. Wolf, “The Arab Street: Effects of the Six-Day War,” *Middle East Policy*, 22 (2015): 156-67.

<sup>5</sup> Shukri B. Abed, “Arab-Israeli Conflict,” in John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 1, p. 107.

days later actually called the loss of planes “very useful to us.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Six-Day War, June 1967.* One of the greatest military defeats in human history prompted Egypt’s Nasser to apologize to his constituents and offer them his resignation, but they responded by massively pouring onto the streets and calling on their *ra’is* (president) to stay in power, which he did, more powerful than ever, until his death by natural causes in 1970. In Syria, Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad went on, three years after the disaster of 1967, to become the absolute dictator of his country for three decades. King Hussein of Jordan remained on the throne until his death, also three decades later, very much in control and highly respected.

*The Battle of Karama, 1968.* Although Yasser Arafat’s Fatah lost its first major armed confrontation with the Israelis, it claimed victory, convincing many, something it would do many times hence. Even Gen. Aharon Yariv of Israel conceded that “although it was a military defeat for them, it was a moral victory.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Yom Kippur War, 1973.* The Israelis stumbled at first but recovered to score a brilliant military success against the combined Syrian and Egyptian armies. Nonetheless, Anwar Sadat of Egypt portrayed the war as an Egyptian triumph, one still celebrated to this day, and used this purported success to legitimate subsequent diplomacy with Israel. Syria’s Assad also claimed a great win. His biographer, Moshe Ma’oz, acknowledges, “Although from a

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purely military point of view, Assad had lost the war, he managed to turn his defeat into a victory in the eyes of many Syrians and other Arabs.” Syrians, Ma’oz reports, supported

Assad’s “proud and daring conduct of the war in both its military and diplomatic ramifications.” As a result, his “prestige and popularity soared in Syria during the war and thereafter.”<sup>8</sup>

*Algeria’s war in the Western Sahara, 1975-91.* The Moroccan and Algerian governments supported opposite sides in a long-lasting civil war in which, eventually, Morocco and its allies prevailed. Chadli Bendjedid, Algeria’s president in 1979-92, paid little political price for the failure.

*Syria’s occupation of Lebanon, 1976-2005.* The weak and divided government of Lebanon could not stop Syrian forces from entering the country or staying there for twenty-nine years. Despite this protracted failure, the ruling elite carried on as though nothing fundamentally had changed. When a popular uprising finally pushed out the Syrians, that elite carried on unaffected.

*The Iraq-Iran war, 1980-88.* Saddam Hussein initiated the Iraq-Iran war, which divided into two main eras. In the first, September 1980 to July 1982, he was on the attack. When that went badly, and Iraq subsequently had to play defense for six long years, he paid no domestic price. More remarkably, two years after the end of the war, on August 15, 1990 (which was thirteen days after his invasion of Kuwait), Saddam Hussein abruptly [returned to Iran](#) all the gains Iraq won through the eight years of fighting: “In an

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Theodore Draper, *Israel and World Politics: Roots of the Third Arab-Israeli War* (New York: Viking, 1968), pp. 47-8.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Andrew Gowers and Tony Walker, *Behind the Myth: Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Revolution* (London: W. H. Allen, 1990), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Ma’oz, *Assad, The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), p. 96.

announcement on Baghdad radio, Iraq said it would recognize Iran's disputed pre-war borders, release all war prisoners and begin withdrawing troops from about 1,000 square miles of occupied southwestern Iran as early as Friday.<sup>9</sup> This ignominious retreat went almost unnoticed and did Saddam no harm.

*Israel vs. Syria, 1982.* In an air war over Lebanon, Syrian forces lost some ninety airplanes to the Israeli forces and brought down none. But Assad emerged unscathed; if anything, his audacity in taking on the fearsome Israeli enemy enhanced his stature.

*Israel vs. the PLO in Beirut, 1982.* Through verbal magic, Arafat transformed a humiliating retreat from Beirut into a political victory by emphasizing how long it took for the Israelis (eighty-eight days) to defeat him, much longer than they needed to defeat conventional Arab armies (nine days in 1956, six in 1967, and twenty in 1973). Rashid Khalidi, then a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) flack and now a Columbia University professor, went so far as to compare the minuscule Beirut operation (and its eighty-eight Israeli deaths) with the Nazi two-and-a-half-years-long siege of Leningrad (with its approximately two million deaths).<sup>10</sup> The passage of time further transformed this rout into a glorious success; in the Hamas retelling some years later, "our people ... humiliated [Israel] ... and broke its resolve."<sup>11</sup>

**After suffering the ignominy of an attack by U.S. war planes, Qaddafi still touted the episode as a disgrace to the United States.**

*PLO withdrawal from Tripoli, 1983.* When Syrian forces compelled the PLO to leave its last stronghold in Lebanon, Arafat responded predictably by transmuting this

withdrawal into a moral success. According to his biographers, "the PLO leader, in the midst of yet another historic setback, was still intent on milking the occasion for all its theatrical worth."<sup>12</sup>

*The U.S. bombing of Libya, 1986.* After suffering the ignominy of being attacked by U.S. war planes, Muammar Qaddafi turned his very survival into something grandiloquent. Among other steps, he commemorated this achievement by adding the word "Great" (*'uzma*) to the formal name of his country, making it the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Nine years later, he still recalled the episode as a disgrace to the United States:

America never admits its losses. Did we not shoot down fifteen of her aircraft when they raided us [in 1986]? But she only admitted the loss of two aircraft. America never talks about her defeats and losses; she keeps her mouth shut. She even refused to admit that the leader of the squadron which attacked my house was shot down and killed in the crash. They never admitted his loss until we embarrassed them by producing his corpse which we handed over to the Vatican.<sup>13</sup>

*Chadian militias vs. Libya, 1987.* Libya's heavily financed and Soviet-backed ally in Chad

<sup>9</sup> *The Washington Post*, [Aug. 16, 1990](#).

<sup>10</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Under Siege: P.L.O. Decisionmaking during the 1982 War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> "Leaflet No. 22 of Hamas," in Shaul Mishal and Reuben Aharoni, *Speaking Stones: Communiqués from the Intifada Underground* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994), p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> Libyan Television, Apr. 6, 1995.

lost humiliatingly to ragtag forces; as I co-wrote at the time, “four-wheel-drive Toyotas defeated a fleet of tanks.”<sup>14</sup> This devastation, however, had no visible repercussions on Qaddafi’s prestige or domination over Libya.

*Iraq vs. Kuwait, 1990.* The Iraqi assault on Kuwait followed months of Iraqi threats; nonetheless, Kuwaiti forces were not on alert and were quickly overwhelmed, prompting Emir Jaber al-Ahmad as-Sabah immediately and ingloriously to flee across the border to Saudi Arabia where he oversaw the Kuwaiti government-in-exile from a hotel suite. Despite his lack of preparation and unheroic actions, Jaber faced no challengers during or after the fighting.

*Hezbollah vs. Israel, 2006.* Hezbollah lost to Israel but did so respectably, thereby strengthening Hassan Nasrallah’s hold on the organization. Addressing a mass rally after the fighting, he claimed a “divine and strategic victory.”<sup>15</sup> Ironically, Nasrallah later admitted he made a mistake by initiating the conflict,<sup>16</sup> but that got little notice, and he remains solidly in control fifteen years later.

*Hamas vs. Israel, 2008-09.* Known in Israel as Operation Cast Lead, this 3-week war saw Israel do overwhelmingly well on the battlefield (as symbolized by the deaths of about one hundred times more Palestinians than Israelis)



*Hamas vs. Israel, 2021.* Despite the major loss of life and property in Gaza, Khalil al-Hayya, a Hamas leader, announced to a mass rally: “There are celebrations throughout the cities of Palestine ... because we made this victory together.”

and overwhelmingly badly in the political arena (as symbolized by the U.N.’s Goldstone Report and an international Gaza reconstruction conference that brought in \$4.5 billion). Hamas leaders emerged from the warfare strengthened by military defeat.

*Hamas vs. Israel, 2012.* The Israel Defense Forces may have killed many of [Hamas’s](#) leaders, smashed its infrastructure, and left Gaza reeling, but—true to form—Hamas called for a holiday of celebration the day after a ceasefire went into effect. So serious were the revelries that one person was killed and three wounded by gunfire into the air. Not just that, but Hamas declared November 22 a day to be marked every year henceforth: “We call on everyone to celebrate, visit the families of martyrs, the wounded, those who lost homes.”<sup>17</sup>

*Hamas vs. Israel, 2014.* Warfare devastated Gaza, but a poll conducted by Palestinians

<sup>14</sup> Michael Radu and Daniel Pipes, “[Chad’s Victory Over Libya Is Also a Victory for the U.S.](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 14, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> CNN, [Sept. 22, 2006](#).

<sup>16</sup> [Lee Smith](#), “The Real Losers: Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah admits that the war was a mistake,” *The Weekly Standard*, Aug. 28, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> ABC News, [Nov. 22, 2012](#).

after hostilities ceased found 79 percent saying that Hamas had won; simultaneously, Ismail Haniyeh went from being the choice of 41 percent as Palestinian president to 61 percent.<sup>18</sup> (A few weeks later, those figures declined modestly to 69 and 55 percent, respectively.)<sup>19</sup> That support extended to tactics as well, with 94 percent backing the military engagement with Israeli troops, and 86 percent backing rockets fired into Israel.

This survey shows that Arab leaders can lose versus anyone—a Western power (the United States, Great Britain, France), Israel, an African militia, a non-Arab Muslim state (Iran), or a fellow-Arab state (Yemen, Syria, Iraq)—and it hardly matters. The political price is nearly always minimal and sometimes defeat entails actual benefit.

### **Case Study I: The Kuwait War, 1991**

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait led to the formation of a U.S.-led coalition of thirty-nine states. It attacked Iraqi forces on January 17, 1991 and hostilities ended on February 28, 1991, when Baghdad capitulated. A consensus rapidly emerged that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein must resign or would be overthrown.

But Saddam had no such intentions and had prepared the way for grandiose claims. His regime initially spoke of a “truly decisive and historic battle” ahead that signaled “the beginning of the end of world imperialism.”<sup>20</sup> After the U.S.-led attack began, it established

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the shortwave Mother of Battles Radio (Arabic: *Idha'at Umm al-Ma'arik*) to broadcast its coming victory over Allied forces.

Then, things did not go so well, with the rout of Iraqi forces (“[turkey shoot](#)”) and the consequent “[near apocalyptic](#)” damage to civilian infrastructure. Despite this, regime media blithely insisted on achieving a famous victory over Operation Desert Storm. “You have triumphed over all the chiefs of evil put together,” Radio Baghdad informed Iraqi forces, stating that they had trampled America’s prestige “into the mud.”<sup>21</sup>

Even after formally conceding defeat, Baghdad continued to claim victory. One remarkable example of this came four years after the fighting ended, when Iraq’s Chief of Staff Iyad ar-Rawi claimed, “Our victory was legendary. The magnificent Iraqi army recorded the most impressive slaughter in the book of the Mother of All Battles when it crushed the American and Allied forces during the first land battle.” Rawi went on to recount the (fictitious) battle of Kuwait Airport and a huge tank encounter southwest of Basra, calling the latter “among the fiercest tank battles in history.” George H.W. Bush, he concluded, was “forced to call a unilateral ceasefire on Feb. 28, 1991, because he knew that the U.S. forces could not sustain the casualties resulting from the land battles.”<sup>22</sup>

Supporters abroad endorsed these claims to victory. In November 1994, at the graduation ceremony for Palestinian police, a choir sang songs of tribute to Saddam Hussein. That some of Saddam’s supporters did not care whether or not he actually won on the battlefield helped sustain the fiction.

<sup>18</sup> *The Washington Post*, [Sept. 2, 2014](#).

<sup>19</sup> “[Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No 53](#),” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Sept. 25-27, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Radio Baghdad, Feb. 9, Jan. 17, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> Radio Baghdad, Feb. 26, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> *Al-Jumhuriya* (Baghdad), Jan. 22, 1995.

Thus Hichem Djaït, Tunisia's best-known intellectual and a fervid supporter of Saddam, remarked: "We have nothing to lose from this war, even if it ends in defeat."<sup>23</sup>

This transparent deception contributed to maintaining Saddam's rule, permitting him to intimidate any would-be rebels, floating above the disasters his country suffered, including a 90 percent decline in per capita income, and remaining in power for another twelve years. Only when U.S.-led forces returned in 2003, this time with the specific intent to depose him, did he fall from power and end up in a hole.

## Case Study II: Hamas vs. Israel, 2021

Hamas and its allies [near-unanimously](#) agreed that it won the May 2021 conflict with Israel, despite what the Associated Press called "the horrifying toll the war took on countless Palestinian families who lost loved ones, homes and businesses."<sup>24</sup>

Just two days after the fighting began, Hamas leader [Ismail Haniyah](#) already announced his organization had "achieved victory in the battle for Jerusalem."<sup>25</sup> Such claims multiplied after a ceasefire went into effect on May 21, when [Haniyah](#) claimed a



Photo: © Daniel Pipes

*Despite the rout of Iraqi forces (above, the Highway of Death following the attempted Iraqi retreat), the regime media insisted on a victory. "You have triumphed," Radio Baghdad informed Iraqi forces.*

"strategic, divine victory"<sup>26</sup> and [also](#) announced that Hamas "defeated the illusions of negotiations, defeated the deal of the century, defeated the culture of defeat, defeated the projects of despair, defeated the settlement projects, defeated the projects of coexistence with the Zionist occupation, and defeated the projects of normalizing [relations] with the Zionist occupation."<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, [Khalil al-Hayya](#), a Hamas leader, exclaimed to a mass rally in Gaza, "There are celebrations throughout the cities of Palestine ... because we made this victory together,"<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kanan Makiya, [Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World](#) (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press, [May 21, 2021](#). This section draws on Daniel Pipes, "Who Won, Israel or Hamas?" *The Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> *Israel Hayom*, [May 12, 2021](#).

<sup>26</sup> *Kayhan* (Tehran), [May 21, 2021](#).

<sup>27</sup> *Israel Hayom*, [May 23, 2021](#).

<sup>28</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, [May 21, 2021](#).

adding, “We have the right to rejoice. . . . This is the euphoria of victory.” [Ziad al-Nahala](#), the leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, rejoiced in his organization’s victory and threatened to bomb Tel Aviv in retaliation for “any assassination operation aimed at our fighters or leaders.”<sup>29</sup>

Foreign supporters also celebrated. Hezbollah’s [Hassan Nasrallah](#) described Hamas’ attacks on Israel as a “great victory”<sup>30</sup>; Iran’s Ayatollah [Ali Khamene’i](#) sent congratulations for an “historic victory,”<sup>31</sup> and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force’s commander, Esmail Ghaani, hailed the fighting for having “destroyed the pride of the Zionist army.”<sup>32</sup> (In turn, a [PIJ](#) spokesman thanked Iran’s government for being “partners in our victory.”)<sup>33</sup> Even Morocco’s Prime Minister [Saad Eddine El Othmani](#), who months earlier had signed a normalization agreement with Israel, congratulated Haniyeh for the “victory of the Palestinian people.”<sup>34</sup>

The Palestinian populace was apparently also convinced. Indeed, just as soon as the [2 a.m. ceasefire](#) went into effect, “a frenzy of life returned to the streets of Gaza. People came out of their homes, some shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’ or whistling from balconies. Many fired in the air, celebrating the end of the fighting.”<sup>35</sup> Large crowds “celebrated the end of the conflict, chanting praise for Hamas.” Middle-of-the-night [celebrations](#) spread widely:

Gaza residents cheered from their  
terraces. Celebratory gunfire

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<sup>29</sup> Israel National News (Beit El), [May 30, 2021](#).

<sup>30</sup> *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [May 26, 2021](#).

<sup>31</sup> Press TV (Tehran), [May 22, 2021](#).

<sup>32</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 24, 2021](#).

<sup>33</sup> *Kayhan*, [May 21, 2021](#).

<sup>34</sup> *YNet News* (Tel Aviv), [May 24, 2021](#).

<sup>35</sup> *The Times of Israel*, [May 21, 2021](#).

sounded over the mostly dark neighborhoods, a few horns blared from cars braving streets pocked with shell craters, and praise for God rang out from mosques around Gaza City. Gazans paraded along the beach, holding up their phone lights.<sup>36</sup>

The following days saw [large-scale public celebrations](#) by Hamas and its smaller ally, Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

These revelries had beneficial political implications for Hamas. Its “reputation among Palestinians has risen dramatically,” [Khaled Abu Toameh](#) observed, “due to its firing thousands of rockets and missiles throughout Israel.” Palestinians, he concluded, “consider Hamas leaders as the true heroes of the Palestinians and seek to engage in an armed struggle against Israel”; they have no time for Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority.<sup>37</sup> In other words, defeat on the battlefield brought Hamas major political dividends.

## Explanations

Whence this impunity? Six factors help account for it: honor, fatalism, conspiracism, bombast, publicity, and confusion.

*Honor.* Honor has an importance among Arabic-speakers to the point that maintaining it can count more than what is actually achieved. “To Arabs, honor is more important than facts,” explains Margaret K. Nydell; the cause matters more than the results.<sup>38</sup> Elie Salem agrees, saying of Arab leaders, “They were glorified for

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<sup>36</sup> *The Washington Post*, [May 21, 2021](#).

<sup>37</sup> [Khaled Abu Toameh](#), Gatestone Institute, May 24, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret K. Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Contemporary Guide to Arab Society*, 6th ed. (Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2018).



their intents not their achievements.” This accounts for why, “In losing the June 1967 War, Jamal Abd al-Nasir became a hero. In gaining peace, but dissenting from prevailing Arab psychology, Anwar al-Sadat became a villain.”<sup>39</sup> More broadly, Fouad Ajami explains:

In an Arab political history littered with thwarted dreams, little honor would be extended to pragmatists who knew the limits of what could and could not be done. The political culture of nationalism reserved its approval for those who led ruinous campaigns in pursuit of impossible quests.<sup>40</sup>

*Fatalism.* Fatalism holds that an outcome was *maktub* (written), so do not blame the leader. As’ad Abu Khalil of California State University notes the tendency to explain in times of defeat that “people have no influence or effect whatever on their actions and deeds. It is only God who acts.” By invoking “the inescapability of destiny,” they absolve “Arab regimes and armies from any responsibility” for defeat. This pattern, he notes, “has become typical to the point of predictability.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in the aftermath of Israel’s routing of the Egyptian armed forces in June 1967, Nasser tried to show that neither he nor the

**After the June 1967 defeat, King Hussein consoled his subjects: “If you were not rewarded with glory ... it is Allah’s will.”**

army could have avoided the defeat they experienced. To absolve his government of blame and signal that it could have done none other than what it did, he fell

back on an Arabic proverb (“Precaution does not change the course of fate”) and an everyday analogy (Egypt was “like a man hit in the street by a car”).<sup>42</sup> Simultaneously, Jordan’s King Hussein consoled his subjects with this insight: “If you were not rewarded with glory, it was not because you lacked courage, but because it is Allah’s will.”<sup>43</sup>

*Conspiracism.* Conspiracism creates an assumption that every confrontation with Israel or Western powers implies the enemy intends to eliminate their rulers, occupy their countries, change their political systems, and exploit their resources. When these consequences fail to happen, their avoidance is portrayed as a victory. [Abdel-Moneim Said](#), an Egyptian analyst, notes, “We celebrated victory because the enemy failed to achieve its objectives as we defined them. As for our objectives, it was taken for granted from the outset that they would not enter our equations of war and peace.” For example, Egyptians widely believed this to be the Israeli goal in 1967, backed by the United States, and Said recalls his time at a student publication after that loss: “To my great surprise, I found that quite a few of my colleagues at that newspaper believed that we had won the 1967 war!” How so?

the logic went as follows: the

<sup>39</sup> Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon*, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> Fouad Ajami, [The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey](#) (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2009), p. 296.

<sup>41</sup> As’ad Abu Khalil, “Al-Jabriyyah in the Political Discourse of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and Saddam Husayn: The Rationalization of Defeat,” *The Muslim World*, July-Oct. 1994, pp. 246-8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>43</sup> Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 310.

purpose of the Israeli-U.S. aggression was to overthrow the glorious president and the socialist system in Egypt, but given that the president was still in power after the people came out in mass demonstrations in support of him and his wise leadership, on 9 and 10 June, and given that the socialist system was still in place, the enemies had not obtained their objectives. Hence, we won!

Said finds that this same “general line of logic” prevails in other instances, such as for Saddam Hussein after the 1991 Kuwait War, Hassan Nasrallah after the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war, Bashar Assad in Syria’s civil war, and the 2014 fighting between Hamas and Israel.

In the 2014 case, Said notes the huge disparity in war dead (2,100 Palestinians vs. 72 Israelis) and in destruction, then concludes that “the results of the recent war in Gaza can hardly be chalked up as a Palestinian victory.” Nevertheless, Hamas leaders proclaimed victory on the grounds that “the Israeli aim was to eliminate Hamas and end the firing of missiles. Therefore, as long as both Hamas and the missiles still exist, Palestinians should rejoice in this resounding victory.”<sup>44</sup>

*Bombast.* Bombast is a prominent feature of Arab political life, causing leaders and followers alike to be captivated by the power of words even if unrelated to reality. E. Shouby, a native Arabic-speaker and psychologist, reported in 1951 that Arabic speakers “overemphasize the significance of words as such, paying less regard to their meaning” than is usual in Western languages, leading to a “confusion between words and

the things they represent.”<sup>45</sup> Walter Laqueur noted in 1968, the Arabs’ “almost unlimited capacity for believing what they want to believe.”<sup>46</sup>

Theodore Draper further explained this notion in 1973:

Whenever Arab statements are cited, the question of Arab “rhetoric” arises. Should it be taken seriously or are Arabs peculiarly addicted to hyperbolic bombast? Whenever an Arab spokesman says something particularly provocative or outrageous, there is always someone who says that “they never really mean it.” ... I have even heard the foreign minister of an Arab country instruct a group of Americans that Arabs are allergic to Western rationalism and that, if Westerners wish to deal with Arabs, they must adopt the seemingly irrational Arab mode of thinking.<sup>47</sup>

*Publicity.* Publicity inspires some Arab leaders to seek support for their cause. Curiously, this takes two opposite forms, one for Arabs and Muslims, the other for Israelis and

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<sup>44</sup> Abdel-Moneim Said, “[Victory and Defeat](#),” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Sept. 11, 2014.

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<sup>45</sup> E. Shouby, “[The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs](#),” *Middle East Journal*, 5 (1951): 295. Remarkably, Shouby anticipated (on pp. 296-7) the emergence of Gamal Abdel Nasser just a year later: “one occasionally comes across a half-educated individual who so exaggerates the Egyptian type of wit ... that he gives the impression he has ceased to think of the meaning of words altogether, and is indeed using a sort of ‘word-salad.’”

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Walter Laqueur, *The Road to Jerusalem: The Origins of the Arab-Israel Conflict, 1967* (New York: MacMillan, 1968), p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> Theodore Draper, “[From 1967 to 1973: The Arab-Israeli Wars](#),” *Commentary*, Dec. 1973.

the global Left. In the first case, the “strong horse” adage comes into play: rulers seek to show themselves as heroic figures the masses should follow. Saddam Hussein’s motives in taking on most of the Western world are thus explained by Hussein Sumaida, an Iraqi: “Winning didn’t matter. What mattered was putting on a good show and gaining the hearts and minds of the smoldering Arab world.”<sup>48</sup>

Israelis and the global Left respond to quite the opposite, namely presenting oneself as the sympathetic underdog and victim. Toward this end, Hamas periodically (2008-09, 2012, 2014) attacks Israel, knowing full well the certainty of losing on the military battlefield but expecting to gain advantage in the political arena—among Israeli leftists, on university campuses globally, in the international press and international organizations, and beyond.

Barry Rubin dubs this the “suicide strategy” and paraphrases its logic: “I will start a war that I cannot win in order to create a situation where the other side wrecks my infrastructure and kills my people. Then I will lose militarily but win the battle. How?” Rubin lists three benefits: Israelis are cowards, so any damage they suffer will cause them to pull back; suffering Gazans will make Israelis feel sorry and pull back; the “international community” will press the Israelis to stop fighting and bestow benefits on Hamas.<sup>49</sup>

*Confusion.* What is the truth? Caught

**According to one Iraqi, for Saddam, “Winning didn’t matter. What mattered was putting on a good show.”**

between two contradictory reports of reality, humans tend to opt for the one they prefer, whether it concerns immigration (Angela Merkel: “Wir schaffen

das”), referendum prospects (Brexit), or the outcome of elections (“Stop the steal”). What to believe when “Baghdad Bob” is reporting that Americans would find their “tombs” in Baghdad at the moment when U.S. tanks are coming into view? Naturally, when Saddam Hussein was captured, some Arabs responded with incredulity; one Hassan Abdel Hamid, an Egyptian trader, refused to believe the news, calling it “American propaganda and lies.”<sup>50</sup> This miasma encourages Arab populations to ignore the reality of military defeats, as well as the carnage they inflict, and instead, stick with those leaders.

## Conclusion

This pattern of surviving or benefiting from defeat extends to other Muslim leaders. In the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, for example, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto led his government into a disastrous conflict with India and emerged from the fiasco more popular than ever, and this took him to the prime ministry eight years later. As his biographer puts it, “The more outrageous his rhetoric became ... the more heroic Zulfikar Bhutto appeared to Pakistani audiences.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the Iranian leadership extended their war with Iraq and went on the offense from July 1982 to August

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<sup>48</sup> Hussein Sumaida, with Carole Jerome, *Circle of Fear: My Life as an Israeli and Iraqi Spy* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1994), p. 282.

<sup>49</sup> Barry Rubin, “The Israel-Hamas War and the Suicide Strategy: How Arab Forces Expect to be Weak, Start Losing Wars and Still Hope to Win.” Gloria Center, Herzliya, Nov. 19, 2012.

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<sup>50</sup> “Capture de Saddam Hussein: les Egyptiens incrédules.” Agence France-Presse, Dec. 14, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Stanley Wolpert, *Zulfikar Bhutto of Pakistan: His Life and Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 95.

1988; when this failed, Ayatollah Khomeini “drank from the poisoned chalice,” accepted a ceasefire, and neither he nor his regime suffered for their six years of folly. Most recently, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s dismal military adventures into Syria and Libya have not dented his power.

In contrast, losing wars usually has major implications for a non-Muslim leader. In the Middle East, Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan paid a heavy price for the disappointing Israeli showing in 1973 as did Nikol Pashinyan for the terrible Armenian performance in 2020. Even defeats in peripheral wars usually have a major impact: Algeria on French politics, Vietnam on American, and Afghanistan on Soviet. It is especially hard to imagine non-Muslim leaders surviving such devastating routs as Egypt’s in 1967 and Iraq’s in 1991.

That defeated rulers can celebrate defeats invites moral hazard and renders them more aggressive. Why worry if a defeat and its terrible implications do not affect you? This pattern goes far to explain why the Middle East hosts so many wars. Money for arms is always abundant, the population’s suffering is irrelevant, the economic losses of little import, and the ruler can expect to survive unscathed. With the stakes so low, give war a chance and hope for the best.

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