Fifty years ago, war broke out between Israel and its neighbours. The conflict lasted just six days but its effect would last to the present day.

At the end of 1948, Israel's Arab neighbours had invaded to try to destroy the new state, and failed. The Egyptian army had been beaten, but a force surrounded in a piece of land known as the Falluja pocket refused to surrender.

A group of young Egyptian and Israeli officers tried to break the impasse. Among them was Yitzhak Rabin, a 26-year-old Israeli military prodigy who was head of operations on the southern front, and the 30-year-old Egyptian Major Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Just a few years after the Nazis had killed six million Jews, the dream of establishing a state in their biblical homeland had come true.

Palestinians call 1948 "al-Nakba", or "the Catastrophe". Up to 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from the land that became Israel, and were never allowed back.

For the Arabs, defeat at the hands of the fledgling Israeli state was a seismic political moment that led to years of upheaval.

Feeling betrayed, humiliated army officers seized power. Syria had regular military coups. Four years after the end of the war, Nasser led a group of young officers who overthrew the king of Egypt.

By 1956, Nasser was president. In the same year, he defied Britain, France and Israel in the Suez crisis, and became the hero and leader of the Arab world.

In Israel, Rabin continued his military career. By 1967, he was chief-of-staff, the most senior officer.

Arabs could not get over the pain of defeat; the Israelis never forgot that their neighbours tried to destroy them. Both sides knew that another war would come, sooner or later.

Bad neighbours

Israel and its Arab neighbours had plenty of reasons for hatred or mutual suspicion. But the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s added extra fuel.

The Soviet Union provided Egypt with a modern air force. Israel had warm relations with the United States, but it was not yet the biggest recipient of American military aid; in the 1960s Israel also bought aircraft from France and tanks from Britain.

After 1948 Israel had worked endlessly to make the best of its exposed strategic position. It also absorbed more than one million immigrants - military service was an important part of making the new arrivals into Israelis.

Israel built a speedy, flexible and deadly military. And by 1967 it was close to acquiring its own nuclear weapons.

The new, native-born Israelis, known as "sabras" - the Hebrew word for prickly pear - were determined not to repeat what they believed had been the mistakes of Jews in the diaspora. They would always fight back, and sometimes fight first.

Rabin was confident that Israel's armed forces were in good shape. Their mission was to win every war, on the grounds that Israel could not afford a single defeat.

Egyptian forces and those of its ally Syria, trained less, boasted more and forgot that the political victory that emerged after the 1956 Suez crisis was preceded by a military defeat.

Nasser concentrated on building a pan-Arab nationalist movement that his supporters fully expected would recreate Arab greatness, and exact revenge on Israel. He made his closest ally, Field Marshal Abdul Hakim Amer, commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

Egypt was an ancient country without the sense of insecurity that underlay Israel's swagger. Amer's most important mission, which he did very well, was to make sure that the army stayed loyal by stamping out plots and keeping the officer corps happy. The military arts were much less of a priority.

By 1967, Egypt was bogged down in a war in Yemen that had become its own Vietnam. It had not fought well. But Nasser could not replace Amer with a better soldier.

The Syrian army was equally politicised, and like Egypt was a client of the Soviet Union. A series of generals were rotated into power by a series of coups d'état.

Arabs talked a lot about unity, socialism and nationalism, but in reality they were deeply disunited. The Syrian and Egyptian leaderships fretted about plots allegedly instigated by the monarchies in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Kings worried that the military populists who led Syria and Egypt would incite revolution.

Jordan's ruler, King Hussein, was a close ally of Britain and the US. Jordan was the only Arab state that emerged from 1948 as a winner.

Hussein's grandfather, King Abdullah, had secret contacts with the Jewish Agency, the main body representing Jews in British Mandate Palestine; they discussed carving up the land between them in the wake of Britain's planned departure in 1948.

In 1951 a Palestinian nationalist assassinated Abdullah at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Fifteen-year-old Prince Hussein saw his grandfather die, and the next day carried a gun for the first time. A year later he was king.

After the 1948 war, Jordan and Israel came close, but not close enough, to making peace. Secret talks continued into Hussein's reign. He was aware of Jordan's weaknesses - it was mainly desert and had a large and restive population of Palestinian refugees.

Syrian syndrome

War in 1967 came as a result of years of increasing tension and vicious border skirmishes between Arabs and Israelis.

The border between Egypt and Israel was relatively quiet. The biggest flashpoint was Israel's northern border with Syria, where they fought over disputed territory and Syria's attempts to divert the River Jordan away from Israel's national water grid.

The Syrians sheltered Palestinian guerrillas, who were mounting raids into Israel.

Western powers had no doubt which side in the Middle East was stronger on the eve of war in 1967. The US military's Joint Chiefs of Staff judged "that Israel will be militarily unchallengeable by any combination of Arab states at least during the next five years."

In a report on the Israeli army in January 1967, the British defence attaché in Tel Aviv assessed that "in command, training, equipment and services the Israel army is more prepared for war than ever before. Well-trained, tough, self-reliant, the Israeli soldier has a strong fighting spirit and would willingly go to war in defence of his country."

The border wars stoked the tension. Palestinian guerrillas broke through the border fence. Israel condemned them as terrorists; it believed that to deter and punish, it had to hit back hard.

A big Israeli raid into the Jordanian-occupied West Bank targeting the village of Samua in November 1966, followed a land mine attack inside Israel.

The raid caused uproar among Palestinians in the West Bank. Hussein was aghast. He told the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that for three years he had been in secret talks with Israel; his Israeli contacts had sent him assurances there would be no reprisals on the morning of the raid.

The Americans were sympathetic. They supported a resolution at the UN Security Council condemning the Samua raid.

Hussein imposed martial law on the West Bank and became more convinced than ever that his throne was in jeopardy, and that he could be overthrown by angry Palestinians. He feared a coup by radical pro-Nasser officers in the army that Israel could use as a pretext to swallow the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The king did not want to share the fate of the other Hashemite monarch in the Middle East, his cousin and friend King Faisal of Iraq. He had been shot in the yard of his palace in a military coup in 1958.

The march to war continued with escalating trouble on the Israel-Syrian border. Unlike Hussein, who the Americans believed was doing all he could to stop Palestinian infiltration, Syria actively encouraged it; Israel was pushing its claims to disputed territory in the border area aggressively by cultivating fields in demilitarised areas with armoured tractors.

It came to a head with a full-scale air and artillery battle between Israel and Syria on 7 April, 1967. Israel routed the Syrians.

The next morning young Palestinians in Jerusalem, according to British diplomats, showed "a stunned awe at the Israeli competence and Arab helplessness in the face of it" and they asked "where were the Egyptians?" Pressure was growing on Nasser to add action to his talk.

Israel basked in a mood of national self-congratulation. But some elder statesmen and soldiers were alarmed. In a corridor in the Israeli parliament (the Knesset), the military's former chief-of-staff Moshe Dayan bumped into General Ezer Weizmann, the former head of the air force and now Rabin's number two. "Are you out of your minds?" Dayan said. "You're leading the country to war!"

Syria, and the Palestinian guerrillas it sponsored, tried even harder to provoke the Israelis, who obliged them by rising to every provocation.

It looked to Syria and Egypt, as well as to Britain and the US, that Israel was planning a bigger move.

An exaggerated news agency report, quoting "a high Israeli source" said that Israel "would take limited military action designed to topple the Damascus army regime if Syrian terrorists continued sabotage raids inside Israel".

The source was Brigadier General Aharon Yariv, the head of military intelligence. He mentioned toppling the regime only as the most extreme of a range of possibilities. But the report was taken seriously in Syria - and also in the Israeli press.

Then an intervention by the Soviet Union changed everything. On 13 May, Moscow delivered a warning to Cairo that Israel was massing troops on the border with Syria and would attack within a week.

Why exactly the Soviet Union fired the starting pistol for war has been debated ever since. Two Israeli historians, Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, argue that the USSR deliberately instigated the crisis; they say it wanted to block Israel's nuclear weapons plans; and that the Soviets were ready to commit their own forces to the fight.

At the time a "medium-level" Soviet official told the CIA that the Soviet Union was stirring up the Arabs to try to make trouble for the US. With the big problems in Vietnam, another war in the Middle East would be an even worse headache.

In 1967 neither Israel nor its Arab neighbours needed much encouragement. They plunged straight into the crisis that they had all expected for years.