

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
June 17, 2017

The Six-Day War: 50 Years Later

The 50th anniversary of the famous Six-Day War of 1967 is upon us. With it are coming the normal cries and accusations against Israel for its “occupation” of Palestinian land. For much of the world, Israel remains a nation unforgiven for its occupation and its refusal to seriously negotiate with the Palestinians. The BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement against Israel is popular on American college campuses, if nowhere else. As Bret Stephens recently observed, the world is saying, “Israel can rely on its own strength as well as international guarantees to take risks for peace.” But the world community has a very poor record of fulfilling any guarantees on behalf of Israel. Let’s do a quick review of what actually happened 50 years ago and in the subsequent decades:

In 1967, Israel, a nation that was only eleven miles wide at its center, was now terribly vulnerable: In Chaim Herzog’s words, Israel was “ringed by an Arab force of some 250,000 troops, over 2,000 tanks and some 700 front line fighter and bomber aircraft.” Israel therefore made a pivotal decision to launch a preemptive strike against its enemies. On 1 June, Moshe Dayan was named Israeli Defense Minister and on 5 June 1967, the Israeli Air Force attacked the Egyptian Air Force, destroying over 300 planes on the ground. Israel thereby attained complete air superiority in the region. The Israeli Air Force likewise struck key Syrian areas in the north and Dayan ordered Israeli troops into the Sinai.

Through the United States, Israel pleaded with King Hussein of Jordan to stay out of the conflict, but he refused. Instead, he ordered his artillery to begin shelling West Jerusalem. The Israeli Air Force then responded by destroying the Jordanian Air Force and half of the Syrian Air Force. Over the next five days, Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem, including Temple Mount and the Western “Wailing” Wall. Israel likewise took the entire West Bank of the Jordan River, the Golan Heights from Syria and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. It was the most humiliating defeat the Arab world had experienced—and a triumph for the young Jewish state. Israel had tripled its size and had reunited Jerusalem, making it the capital of the nation.

Since 1967, the results of this important war have framed the developments, politics and foreign policy decisions of the Middle East and much of the world:

1. One of the more difficult issues for Israel was what to do with Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Ten days after the war, Moshe Dayan met with the Muslim leaders at the al-Aqsa mosque on Temple Mount. He explained that Israel now controlled Jerusalem and it had no intention of returning it; it would be the nation’s capital. However, he stated that the Muslim Foundation, known as the *Waqf*, would control Temple Mount. Further, he declared, Jews would not be encouraged to pray on Temple Mount. Some of the most sacred symbols of Islam, the Dome of

the Rock and al-Aqsa, would be respected. In addition, Christians would need to have access to Temple Mount as well. It was an extraordinarily magnanimous act on the part of Israel.

2. After the 1967 War, Israel hoped that the Arab nations would now desire a permanent settlement of their differences with Israel. However, that hope was dashed at an August 1967 Arab meeting in Khartoum, Sudan. Nasser and the other Arab leaders boisterously proclaimed their famous “Three Nos” to Israel—no peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel and no recognition of Israel. No peace; only an ongoing state of war.
3. On November 22, 1967, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 242, perhaps the most important UN Resolution on the Middle East. The Resolution’s preamble refers to the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East in which every State in the area can live in security.” It also “Affirms that the fulfillment of [UN] Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles:
 - Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;
 - Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.”

On 1 May 1968, the Israeli ambassador to the UN expressed Israel's position to the Security Council: "My government has indicated its acceptance of the Security Council resolution for the promotion of agreement on the establishment of a just and lasting peace. I am also authorized to reaffirm that we are willing to seek agreement with each Arab State on all matters included in that resolution." The Resolution is controversial and has been subject to numerous interpretations, but it has formed the basis of a policy Israel has followed since 1967—“land [the first principle] for peace [the second principle].” If an Arab nation is willing to recognize Israel as a legitimate nation and as a homeland for the Jewish people, Israel has demonstrated its willingness to return all land gained in 1967. It has done so with Egypt and Jordan.

4. Terrorism against Israel increased. As mentioned above, under Nasser’s leadership, the Arab League sponsored the formation of the PLO, which became the vehicle for sustained attacks on Israeli citizens. Well into the 1980s, the PLO spearheaded acts of terror: Numerous hijackings of planes, the murder of schoolchildren and other nefarious acts of terrorism followed. The most famous occurred in June 1976 when PLO terrorists hijacked an Air France jet traveling from Paris to Tel Aviv and forced it to fly to Uganda, a nation which supported the PLO. Israel refused to negotiate the release of the 83 Israeli passengers. Instead, the Israeli Special Forces engaged in a spectacular rescue mission at Entebbe, the Ugandan airport. The terrorists were killed and most of the hostages freed. Israel’s resolve against terrorism remained steadfast.

Israel’s astonishing success in the 1967 War lulled both the political and military leaders of Israel into a degree of complacency mixed with some arrogance. When Nasser died in September of

1970, he was replaced by Anwar Sadat, who had a grand vision of restoring Egypt to a position of Middle Eastern supremacy. In 1971, he announced the formation of an Egyptian-Syrian-Libyan federation, and began to lay plans to regain the Sinai Peninsula from Israel. Through the UN, he informed Israel of his willingness to negotiate, but Israel questioned his sincerity and rejected the offer. On 6 October 1973, while millions in Israel were observing the high holy day of Yom Kippur, Israel experienced its most devastating attack since 1948—Egypt from the south and Syria from the north. Syria's impressive column of 1,400 tanks advanced deep into Galilee and an Egyptian column of 2,000 tanks crossed the Suez Canal deep into the Sinai. Over the next eighteen days, Israel, with the help of airlifted military supplies from the United States, drove the Egyptians back across the Suez Canal, surrounding the entire 3rd Army of Egypt. Egypt's capital at Cairo was now vulnerable. At enormous cost, Israel also recaptured the Golan Heights from Syria, advancing to within sight of Damascus. The ceasefire restored the status quo on the Golan and along the Suez Canal.

But the 1973 Yom Kippur War was a watershed, further altering the course of Middle Eastern history:

1. The seeming invincibility of Israel was shattered. As Karsh comments, "The Arabs were elated. For many of them the war was a moment of treasure, a glorious break with a painful past, redemption of lost pride and trampled dignity, 'a new era of unity of ranks and purpose.'" For Sadat, the War gave him an improved bargaining position when it came to Israel.
2. Anwar Sadat reached a fundamental conclusion about the Middle East—there was no military solution to the feud with Israel: "Israel was in the Middle East to stay and the Arabs had better disavow their unrealistic dream of a unified regional order and follow Egypt's lead in rolling back to the 1967 borders." He was willing to travel to Jerusalem and address the Israeli Knesset as the first step in peace negotiations.
3. The War altered the political culture of Israel. A special committee formed to investigate the lack of military preparedness placed virtually all blame on the military leaders; none on the political leaders. But, after weeks of popular demonstrations, Golda Meir's government resigned. Due to the political residue from the War, plus numerous financial scandals within the Labor Party, the May 1977 elections resulted in the election of Menachem Begin and the Likud Party, ending the Labor Party's continuous rule since Israel's founding in 1948. Therefore, when Sadat proposed coming to Jerusalem, Begin issued the invitation to Sadat in November 1977. Sadat stayed in the King David Hotel, prayed at the al-Aqsa mosque, visited Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem) and delivered an address of peace before the Knesset.

In September 1978, after thirteen days of negotiations at Camp David in the United States, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin signed two agreements—the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East" and the "Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty Between Egypt and Israel" (the Camp David Accords). Then on 26 March 1979, in Washington, D.C., Sadat and Begin signed that peace treaty in which Israel promised to evacuate the Sinai Peninsula, with the establishment of open borders. In addition, the two nations agreed to exchange ambassadors and establish embassies and encourage trade and tourism. Egypt had recognized Israel's right to exist—the first Arab nation to do so—on the basis of "land for peace."

Because of the peace treaty with Israel, a radical Egyptian Muslim group led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, called the Organization of the Jihad, assassinated Anwar Sadat on 6 October 1981. (Zawahiri would later become a leader of al Qaeda.) Sadat's assassination was an early sign of a new power rising in Islam—radical Islamic fundamentalism. In addition, Hamas, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been a part of Egyptian Islam for years, surfaced in Gaza. An Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas adopted the slogan: "Allah is [Hamas's] goal, the Prophet its model, the Qur'an its Constitution, Jihad its path and death for the cause of Allah its most sublime belief." Hamas combined the goal of extinguishing the state of Israel with the lofty goal of spreading the message of Allah. The issue of Palestine was no longer a dispute about territory; it was now a holy war involving worldwide Islam: "when our enemies usurp some Islamic lands, Jihad becomes a duty binding on all Muslims." Hence, "the land of Palestine has been an Islamic trust (*waqf*) throughout the generations and until the Day of Resurrection, no one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it."

The most formidable example of this fundamental shift in Islam was the Islamic Republic of Iran, created in 1979 by the religious Shiite radical Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. For Khomeini, history was a struggle between the house of Islam and everyone else. Since World War I especially, the Western powers sought to keep the Muslim communities in a state of ignorance, fragmentation and oppression, Khomeini argued. Muslims were therefore obliged "to overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in service to the people." Khomeini's goal was "An Islamic world order [that] would see the territorial state transcended by the broader entity of the umma [i.e., the Islamic community]."

A further illustration of the changing dynamic of Islam was the Intifada ("the Uprising"), which began in Gaza in 1987 and spread quickly to Jerusalem. At first spontaneous, the Intifada involved Palestinian teens throwing rocks, Molotov cocktails and even grenades. As it developed, Yasser Arafat (expelled from Jordan and Lebanon and now in Tunisia) began directing the uprising, calling for "days of rage" among the Palestinians. As Israel dealt with the Intifada, its image in the world was affected. These were no longer murderous PLO hijackers killing Israeli children; these were Palestinian teens using sling shots against uniformed, armed Israeli soldiers. Israel was losing the propaganda war.

The new Israeli government under Yitzhak Rabin, the hero of the 1967 war, was elected in 1992 with a clearly defined peace platform. Rabin expressed a willingness to talk with the PLO, even though the PLO had not yet abandoned its dedication to Israel's total destruction. Hence, secret talks began in Oslo, Norway between Israel and the PLO. These talks culminated on 13 September 1993 with the signing on the White House lawn of the "Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangement." It was an extraordinary agreement based on the premise that each party would agree on simpler issues, while leaving the more difficult (e.g., Jerusalem, borders and refugees) for future negotiations. It provided for Palestinian self-rule in the entire West Bank and Gaza for a transitional period not to exceed five years, during which time Israel and the PLO would negotiate a permanent peace.

Although there was understandable euphoria over the Oslo Accords, the reality was that Arafat was not really embracing a two state solution. Rather, he was achieving what the PLO had failed to attain after years of violence and terrorism. Karsh summarizes Arafat's objective:

As early as August 1968, Arafat had defined the PLO's strategic objective as 'the transfer of all resistance bases' into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, occupied by Israel during the 1967 war, 'so that the resistance may be gradually transformed into a popular armed revolution.' This, he reasoned, would allow the PLO to undermine Israel's way of life 'preventing immigration and encouraging emigration . . . destroying tourism . . . weakening the Israeli economy and diverting the greater part of it to security requirements . . . [and] creating and maintaining an atmosphere of strain and anxiety that will force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel. . . Indeed the prominent PLO leader Faisal Husseini famously quipped, Israel was willingly introducing into its midst a 'Trojan Horse' designed to promote the PLO's strategic goal of a 'Palestine from the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea'—that is, a Palestine in place of Israel.

In fact, as Karsh also observes, until September 2000, when Arafat launched his second Intifada, he consistently was schizophrenic in his public statements about the Oslo Accords: "Whenever addressing Israeli or Western audiences he would habitually extol the 'peace of the brave' he had signed with 'my partner Yitzhak Rabin,' while at the same time denigrating the peace accords to the Palestinians as a temporary measure to be abandoned at the first available opportunity, and indoctrinating his people, and especially the youth, with an abiding hatred of the state of Israel, Jews, and Judaism."

By September 2000, the Palestinian Authority (the PA) had gained control of about 40% of the West Bank, including Hebron, Bethlehem and Jericho. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians were frustrated by the absence of significant progress in serious negotiations on the next phase of the Oslo Accords—the more acute issues dealing with the borders and the status of Jerusalem. But with the 1999 election of the former Israeli Defense Force chief of staff, Ehud Barak, hope increased in Israel, for Barak proposed a peace strategy that included a final status agreement with the Palestinians and settling the ongoing Lebanon crisis.

In the summer of 2000, President Bill Clinton of the United States summoned Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat to Camp David for the express purpose of negotiating a final settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After marathon negotiations, Barak agreed to recognize a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and give the PA about 95% of the West Bank, even agreeing to dismantle many Israeli settlements on the West Bank. He also agreed to allow up to 100,000 Palestinian refugees to return to Israel and would financially compensate other Palestinian refugees who had lost land when Israel was created in 1948. Amazingly, Barak also agreed to share sovereignty over Jerusalem with the PA.

Arafat's position evidenced no desire to compromise. He demanded the right of return of all Palestinian refugees to Israel. He demanded that Israel return to its pre-1967 borders and he insisted on total sovereignty over Jerusalem. During the negotiations, Arafat rejected any notion that Jerusalem had ever been the site of the Jewish Temple—"a modern invention," he insisted. In fact, Arafat personally banned Palestinian historians and archeologists from admitting that there had ever been a Jewish Temple on Temple Mount. The negotiations had failed! A typical Palestinian commentator placed this in a Palestinian historical context: "If time constitutes the [criteria of] existence, then Israel's temporary existence is only fifty-two years long while we, the

Palestinian Arabs, have lived here for thousands of years, and we, the indigenous population, will eventually expel the invaders, however long it takes.”

From 2000 to 2003, violence exploded across Israel in what has been called Intifada II. It has also been called the “Al-Aqsa Intifada” because in September of 2000, Ariel Sharon, the leader of the Likud Party in Israel, visited Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which incited a massive violent response from the Palestinians. The violence was dreadful, for it included numerous homicide bombings killing dozens of Israeli citizens. Seeking to kill or capture the terrorist leaders, Israel retaliated, in what was known as Operation Defensive Shield, by invading Palestinian cities, refugee camps and other terrorist hideouts. Israel even blockaded Arafat’s compound in Ramallah. In addition, the new Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, implemented a different strategy, the physical separation of the Palestinians and Israelis. An immense security fence, and in some sections a wall, was built during 2003-2004—and the terrorist violence and homicide bombings ended. Further, Sharon ordered the Israeli evacuation of the Gaza Strip, turning it over completely to the PA in the summer of 2005. In 2006, elections in Gaza were held and Hamas won a resounding victory. Today, Palestinian control of the disputed territory is divided between the Palestinian Authority (the West Bank) and Hamas (Gaza). The PA continues to negotiate with Israel; Hamas refuses to do so.

History demonstrates that the present situation in the Middle East has much more to do with Palestinian intransigence than Israeli “occupation.” Israel is willing to negotiate, but with whom does it negotiate? Mahmoud Abbas, who is in his eighties, with no known successor to lead the Palestinian Authority? With Hamas, which, despite its revised charter, refuses to negotiate or even recognize Israel? The security of Israel is at stake and no world “guarantees” will provide that security. Israel remains vulnerable and, even with its superior military, is still a very small nation. Since 1948, it has provided its own security and fought its own wars. It will continue to do so.

See Beret Stephens in the *New York Times* (3 June 2017) and James P. Eckman, *A Covenant People: Israel from Abraham to the Present*, pp. 311-326.