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Was 1967 a victory too far for Israel?

The Six Day war transformed Israel from relative poverty into a regional military superpower. It also began an occupation which has been slowly destroying the country's meaning and identity — and may yet dissolve its existence.

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Memory deceives us. Forty years after June 1967, many in Israel view the time before the Six Day war as a golden age, a paradise lost when Israel was a small, just society where hard work, modesty and solidarity prevailed over greed and selfishness; everyone knew each other and no-one occupied land belonging to anyone else.

That, of course, is a delusion: 1966, the last year before Israel occupied territories, was terrible. Unemployment had reached a record 10%, there was a sharp recession and for the first time in the country's history, migration from it was higher than that to it (*aliya*). Although military rule over 400,000 Arabs living inside Israel, in place since the 1948 war, was abolished in 1966, their situation remained tough as their lands were confiscated to build new Jewish towns and villages.

The 1967 war changed all that. Everyone knows that afterwards Israel was considered a regional, if not an international, military superpower. What is less known is that the war changed economic history. The recession ended, unemployment decreased and the economy began to prosper. In 1967 gross domestic product per capita in Israel was only \$1,500. By 2006 GDP per capita was \$24,000, putting Israel in 23rd place in the UNDP's Human Development Report. This is reflected in migration to Israel. More than 1.5 million Jews have arrived in the past 40 years and the population has increased from 2.4 million in 1967 to 5.5 million in 2006. No wonder that many consider the war was a turning point in the "Israeli success story".

Yet the war can also be seen as the source of all evil. The amazing victory, in which the Israeli army smashed the three biggest Arab armies — Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian — should have made Israel feel secure. Instead, Israel is anything but a safe place. Since 1967 it has engaged in six conflicts — a war of attrition on the Suez Canal, the 1973 war, two intifadas and two wars in Lebanon. More than 5,000 Israelis have been killed and there have been about 50,000 Arab deaths (Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian).

The problem is not just that the wars go on and on, but that Israel is not

winning them. Dov Tamari, a retired Israeli general turned historian, remarked after the end of the second Lebanon incursion that the 1967 war was the last in which Israel won an outright victory. All others had ended in a draw, if not defeat. Every war has forced Israel to give up something. The 1973 war was followed by total withdrawal from Sinai as part of the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979; the first intifada in 1989 led to the Oslo accords in 1993; the first Lebanese war in 1982 ended in unconditional retreat in 2000; and the result of the second intifada was the dismantling of the Gaza settlements two years ago.

Last year's war in Lebanon is another example. While politicians claimed victory, a *Haaretz* survey showed that only 20% of Israelis thought that Israel had won. This failure to win wars may explain why a senior Israeli politician recently said in a private conversation that he was not sure Israel would survive another 20 years. Decades of occupation have worsened the fears of Israelis instead of alleviating them.

Waiting for a phone call?

Where did it all go wrong? Quite early. General Moshe Dayan, the defence minister and most prominent Israeli politician in 1967, said right after the victory: "We are waiting for a telephone call from the Arabs", meaning — so it seemed — that if the call came, Israel would withdraw from the territories it had occupied, the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank and Golan Heights, in return for peace agreements with the Arab world. In his book *1967 the historian* Tom Segev proved that the Israeli government did not mean it that way, but that is what the world, and Israeli public opinion, believed.

At the same time Israel set in motion a process that would later make the deal of territories for peace difficult, if not impossible. Levi Eshkol, the supposedly dovish prime minister, allowed the first settlers to build a settlement, Kfar Etzion, in the West Bank before the end of 1967, while Dayan ordered the destruction of Syrian villages and towns on the occupied Golan Heights and the building of an Israeli settlement on the ruins of the Syrian town of Kuneitra.

In early 1968 Israelis were allowed to live in Hebron. The results of this can be seen 40 years later: the centre of this ancient city is a ghost town, where no Palestinian is allowed to live or walk or shop so that the place is clear for the 500 Israelis who live there. It was not by chance that Hebron was the location of the first suicide attack in 1992, after Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Palestinians in the mosque of Abraham (also known as Cave of the Patriarchs). The first Palestinian suicide attacks were in retaliation for this incident.

Looking at the map it is easy to see that the settlements in the West Bank were planned to separate Palestinian communities from each other, and create a continuum between the settlements and pre-1967 Israel. Settlements were built around Palestinian East Jerusalem to separate it from towns and villages close to the city. Further settlements were constructed in the Jordan Valley as a barrier between the West Bank and Jordan; and roads with settlements beside them were built in heart of the West Bank, separating Nablus from Ramallah, and Kalkilia from Tulkarem.

Ariel Sharon, the architect of the settlement project, said openly in 1975 that his aim was to prevent the creation of a Palestinian entity. This project, which over the years has been supported by governments right and left, has proved

successful. More than 250,000 Israelis live today in hundreds of settlements in the West Bank — and 200,000 live in neighbourhoods built in occupied parts of Jerusalem. Their numbers have helped change the political attitude. Apart from the Communist and Arab parties, all political leaders in Israel, from Yossi Beilin to Ami Ayalon, from Ehud Olmert to Ziti Livni, claim that the settlement blocs should be a part of Israel in any peace agreement. The separation wall is built along the lines of these blocs.

Obstacle to peace

Yet political leaders, even perhaps Sharon before his illness, acknowledge in private and sometimes in public that the settlements are the biggest obstacle to a possible peace agreement with the Palestinians and the Arab world. Israel has been trapped by this huge monster it built during 40 years of occupation. It cannot swallow the settlements as this would lead to the annexation of the West Bank, which even the most rightwing governments decline to do because of its international, legal and demographical implications; and it cannot get rid of them because the settlements have already entered the bloodstream of Israeli society. The settlements are a cancer.

Is it possible that Israel has trapped itself voluntarily? Perhaps it has become so used to the occupation that it cannot live without it. For 40 years Israelis have lived in a society based on privilege. Before the 1967 war, new immigrants from Arab countries had fewer rights than those who came from Europe, while Palestinians living inside Israel had fewer rights than anybody else; but after 1967 Israel set up an official system of discrimination. The one million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza (now grown to 3.5 million) were deprived of political rights, and the military commanders controlled every aspect of their lives.

Relations between Palestinians living under occupation and Israelis have changed for the worse over the past 40 years, but the situation in which Israelis had rights and Palestinians did not became natural to most Israelis. The worsening restrictions on the lives of Palestinians over the years, and the apartheid — many Israelis only meet Palestinians when doing military service on the West Bank — intensified these distinctions. Giving up the occupation means giving up privilege. That will be hard.

After 1967 Israel was quickly transformed into a capitalist society. The huge public works after the war created a much stronger entrepreneur class. The billions of dollars (the US has given Israel \$3bn military aid every year since 1973) spent on military technology, which progressively advanced, have helped make Israel a small high-tech superpower. At the same time, because of the privileges resulting from the occupation, Israel became a much more fragmented society. In 1967 more than 80% of the workforce was organised in one big labour union, which controlled 33% of the economy; kibbutzim were held in high esteem. Today, only 25% of Israeli labour is organised and Israel is rated as among the most unequal societies in the West: according to the Gini Index Israel is in 62nd place among the highest advanced economies, and 18 families control 75% of the Israeli economy. This is also a result of the 1967 war.

There is another important result. After 1967 the Israeli–Palestinian conflict became one of the most significant in the world, if not the most significant. Israel has gained from this. Its excellent relations with the US, its international importance, its strong army and wealth all derive from this. That the Arab

League, which refused any deal with Israel after the war, is desperate for Israel to make full peace with all Arab countries is another result.

There is a negative aspect. Israel's position in the West also depends on the view that it is the frontline between the West and the East, between Judeo-Christian civilisation (a peculiar hyphenation given the terrible historical confrontations between the divergent beliefs) and Muslim civilisation. After the 9/11 attacks in the US, belief in this frontline position became widespread in Israel and not just among the religious right, who have claimed since 1967 that building settlements in Israel is a fulfilment of the will of God, thereby making the Israeli-Arab conflict cultural-religious instead of territorial. Avigdor Liberman, deputy prime minister and head of the pro-transfer party Israel Beitenu (Israel is our home), told *Haaretz* in a recent interview that Israel is "the front outpost of the whole free world".

This may explain the doomsday feeling in many parts of Israeli society after the war with Lebanon. Hizbullah was described as an arm of Iran, and Iran was damned as a leader of a clash of civilisations. So the failure of the big and ultra-sophisticated Israeli army to crush a few thousand half-trained Hizbullah fighters (plus the thousands of rockets that were fired by Hizbullah into north Israel for over a month) convinced many Israelis that they were not wanted in the region and in the long run they might lose the war against Islam. Four decades of occupation have so paralysed Israeli society that its leaders lack the courage to look for a real solution to the conflict. The occupation has occupied Israel.

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