



RIPPLES OF THE 1967 WAR

Arab Defeat Changed the Course of Palestinian History,
but the Final Chapter Remains Unwritten

By Ahmad Samih Khalidi

The 1967 war did much more than register the defeat of three regular Arab armies, only this time without any of the alleged mitigating circumstances of 1948 (such as underequipped forces or foreign tutelage), or the unabashed external colonial interventions of 1956. The war demonstrated the fundamental vacuity of the Arab existential threat to Israel and the limits of post-independence Arab military power, amateurish and incompetent at best, criminally negligent at worst. Having studied the enemy well, Israel's generals executed an almost perfect game of surprise and well-rehearsed professionalism, while their Arab counterparts obligingly took refuge in bluster and bravado. Despite the desperate image of a country besieged and threatened with extinction, Israel's generals were well aware that they were on a winning streak and that the Arab threat was mostly shadowboxing and show. The real uncertainty was the extent of victory and exactly where to draw the line—at the Jordan River or the tip of Mt Hermon.¹

The war left Israel in possession of an additional 69,000 square kilometers of Arab land beyond the June 4, 1949 demarcation lines. The new regional superpower was now poised on the mouth of the Suez Canal and at the outskirts of Damascus. Jerusalem and its holiest of sites was taken in two days, and the Jordan River was once again the scene of a mass Palestinian exodus—some 250,000 people (including many who had already been dispossessed in the 1948 war) moving to new and interminable exile in the East Bank.²

In the fifty years since, much has changed but much has also remained the same. Sinai may have been returned to Egypt intact, but elsewhere the physical terrain has been altered beyond recognition. Today, there are around 125 government-recognized Israeli settlements in the West Bank along with some

◁ Palestinian protester during clashes with Israeli troops in the West Bank, Kofr Qadom, Feb. 10, 2017. *Mohamad Torokman/Reuters*

one hundred “illegal” outposts, twelve large new Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and some 600,000 colons implanted on Palestinian soil, and an expanding Israeli presence and claim over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights.³

The depressing reality of occupation hangs like an endless mist over the Palestinian people and their land. Israel’s control over the land, sea, and airspace of Palestine remains pervasive and fundamentally unchallenged. The basic facts generated by the 1967 war have proved largely immune to the challenges of the past decades, from the peacemaking of Oslo in 1993 to the popular eruptions of the two intifadas, to the successive Gaza wars. And as Israel sinks further into its ethnic and nationalist–religious retrenchment today, there is little reason to believe that the near future will produce any significant progress toward a positive change.

Over fifty years, the consequences of the war have branched out and multiplied in various directions. However, a few of its ramifications stand out and may be worth considering in some detail. Perhaps the most immediate and visible product of the war was its impact on Palestinian national consciousness and on the role and standing of the Palestinian people in their longstanding struggle over the land. A central paradox of 1967 is that by defeating the Arabs, Israel resurrected the Palestinians. The war revived the concussed post-1948 Palestinian national movement and transported it from being a relatively marginal element to center stage. The era of Arab tutelage (*wisaya*) over the Palestinian cause that effectively began in the late 1930s (after the defeat of the Palestinians’ Great Revolt against British rule and the Zionist threat) stuttered slowly to a halt after 1967, with the rise of Palestinian armed factions and the emergence of the Palestinian *fedayeen* as a symbol of Arab defiance and bold militancy as compared to the failed incompetence of the Arab armies along with their self-professed progressive regimes. The March 1968 battle of Karameh in which Fatah guerillas took a stand against an Israel Defense Forces incursion across the Jordan River seemed to epitomize the shift from failed regular confrontations to successful guerilla warfare. Indeed, even the name of the locale where the battle took place, Karameh, which means dignity in Arabic, appeared to atone for the humiliation of the Arab defeat the preceding June. Largely lost to the Palestinian and Arab public consciousness at the time was the fact that the battle was mostly won by regular Jordanian artillery rather than any adept guerilla tactics.

One consequence was a premature rush toward concepts of popular armed struggle and a proliferation of armed groups that soon found themselves in bloodier and more sustained confrontation with the host Arab countries—first in Jordan and then in Lebanon.⁴ The gradual revelation of the limits of Maoist/Guevarist-type guerrilla warfare combined with Israel’s expanding occupation and settlement of Palestinian and other Arab lands, eventually gave birth to the tactics of airline hijacking and external “terrorism.”

The Zionist terrorist groups in the late 1930s and 1940s may have been the Palestinians' most creative innovators and predecessors in this respect, but today's tiresome airport security measures, among other things, may be seen as just one of the longer lasting legacies of the 1967 war. All that was yet to come. In the immediate wake of 1967, the Palestinian national movement, with Fatah at its helm, seemed to defy the Arab defeat and to promise a new revolutionary era, beyond the post-colonial Arab authoritarian and military regimes and bound in spirit to the popular struggle of other nations such as in Algeria and Vietnam.⁵ By discrediting the Arab regimes, the 1967 war eventually opened up a space for the Palestinians to reclaim ownership of their own cause, and for what Fatah and its leader Yasser Arafat proclaimed as a sacred achievement: independent Palestinian representation and "independence of decision" (*huriyyat al-qarar*).

Yet Palestinian proprietorship of their cause, while formally acknowledged by the Arab states in 1974 (via the Arab League's recognition of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people"), did not put an end to Arab intervention or manipulation of the Palestinian cause, or prevent the Arab states from seeking to use the PLO's disparate factions as tools of their own foreign policy.⁶ Nonetheless, Fatah/PLO largely succeeded in maintaining their "independence of decision" for some three decades after 1967, finally culminating in the decision to sign a separate peace with Israel at Oslo in 1993.

"Independence of decision," however, was not to be the precursor of the fuller and more complete political freedom and independence as sought by the PLO since 1988 based on self-determination and statehood in a negotiated two-state solution with Israel. Indeed, it could be argued that given the imbalance of power with Israel (and its American ally), the post-1967 attempt to create an independent Palestinian actor was an uncertain and risky enterprise from the start. By inflating the Palestinians' perceptions of their own role and by denying the Arabs their say in the cause, the 1967 defeat ultimately helped to absolve the Arabs of their responsibilities (as in Camp David in 1978 and Wadi Araba in 1994) and left the Palestinians vulnerable to Israel's overbearing force and powers of compulsion, and to the Arabs' readiness to turn their attention elsewhere.

The Struggle Continues

Today, the Palestinians may have lost much of their ability to act independently. The apparent current shift toward a regional approach promoted by Israel and encouraged by the United States and that restores the Arabs as a primary factor in determining the Palestinians' fate is in part the consequence of a fading separate Palestinian role and voice. The Arabs who signed off on the PLO after 1967 are now striving to reaffirm their say in determining what the Palestinians may or may not expect from Israel, and for its part, Israel is seeking to bypass the Palestinians by building bridges to the

“Sunni” Arabs on the assumption of common enmity to Iran and its Shiite surrogates. Whether this will amount to much is open to question as it is very unclear whether the Israelis are ready to offer the Arabs what they have failed to offer the Palestinians and what the former will find acceptable on the latter’s behalf. The changing Arab attitudes toward Israel have yet to yield any fruit, and Israel’s current infatuation with its self-proclaimed Sunni allies appears more as a prevarication than a prelude to peace.

The Arabs’ openness to Israel is not new. Even before United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 was passed in November 1967, the main Arab states had collectively moved from outright rejectionism to a more nuanced and flexible political–diplomatic stance. The much-maligned “Three No’s” of the Arab summit in Khartoum in August 1967 disguised a profound shift that reflected the scale of defeat and injected a powerful dose of realism into Arab decision-making. In a forgotten line prefacing the call for “no peace, no recognition, no negotiations,” the summit communiqué explicitly endorsed “*political action at the international diplomatic level to eliminate the consequences of the aggression and to ensure the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Arab territories occupied during the June war* [emphasis added].” Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser felt that this would give him leeway with the Soviets as he sought to rebuild his shattered army with their help. But he and his fellow conferees were equally convinced of the need to give Jordan’s King Hussein a green light to pursue whatever political–diplomatic action was necessary to reclaim the lost West Bank, the Palestinian lands that were irretrievable by military means given the imbalance of power with Israel. Nasser also encouraged those countries with strong relations with the West (such as Saudi Arabia) to use their good offices to influence Western capitals in favor of an Israeli withdrawal.⁷ With its endorsement of “political action,” Khartoum paved the way for Egypt and Jordan’s historic acceptance of Resolution 242 only a few months later that explicitly called for recognition of Israel’s right to exist.

Khartoum thus gave a green light to what was the most important Arab shift since 1948. Rather than seeking to undo the Zionist takeover of Palestine, Arab efforts were henceforth concentrated on “eliminating the consequences of the [1967] aggression,” and the Three No’s were rapidly subject to modification and reinterpretation as necessary. Qualified acceptance took the place of outright rejection: no to *formal* peace, no to *direct* negotiations and, no to *de jure* recognition of Israel. The rest was negotiable. While never formally reneging on Khartoum’s strictures, both Egypt and Jordan slid rapidly toward formal recognition, negotiations, and peacemaking with Israel; Israel’s 1948 borders were thus consecrated by the 1967 war and by the Arabs’ acknowledgment that the struggle henceforth would only be over the territories lost in that conflict.

The 1967 war also did something else. By unifying all the territory of Mandatory Palestine under Israeli rule for the first time, it reversed the post-1949 de facto partition

of Palestine and undid the last vestiges of the 1947 Partition Plan map. The interregnum between the 1949 truce and the 1967 war had established a basis for partition, albeit along substantially different demarcation lines than that envisaged by the UN. In many ways, the past fifty years have been a struggle to return to partition in one form or another. The 1967 war erased the boundaries between Palestinians and Israelis, and developments since have only aggravated the prospects for such a separation.

And this may be 1967's most significant and lasting legacy. Today's unfolding reality has created a demographic Jewish presence east of the Green Line that has made it increasingly difficult to imagine the withdrawal of any significant body of settlers: the standard estimate is that one hundred thousand at the very least will need to be evacuated in order to create a viable Palestinian entity on the West Bank. But the prevailing wind in Israel is sweeping matters in totally the opposite direction toward further expansion and annexation, and it is very hard to conceive of an Israeli government present or future that will have the political will and determination to "remove Jews from their homes" as the recent tussle over Amona has so aptly demonstrated.

But the perpetuation of the post-1967 occupation and the spread of Israeli annexation-ism will not automatically lead Israel to a one-state dilemma where the choice will be between offering equal rights for the Palestinians in the territories or apartheid, as some have supposed. The fact is that as an increasingly sham democracy, Israel can continue to play between the lines of legality: it will pass one law curbing the settlers' excesses in one direction and will pursue practical policies that give them free rein in another. The Israeli right, active, dynamic, and determined, will continue to press for various forms of annexation. The West (or rather some of it) will continue to complain, liberal and enlightened circles will continue to protest, the Russians, Chinese and Indians will continue to trade and do business, the Trump White House will stand aloof, and the U.S. Congress will continue to punish the victims.

Conversely, however, the Palestinians will not go away. The fact is that Israel cannot but appear as an aggressor given the imbalance of power between the two sides. Part of why it has lost sympathy is because since 1967 it has been fighting against peoples not armies. The threat of "de-legitimization" confronting the Jewish state may not all be about occupation; and there may be some who will oppose Israel regardless. But to ignore the occupation as a factor in Israel's moral undoing is ludicrous and self-defeating; Israel cannot credibly claim de-legitimization as a *defense* of continued occupation, as it is doing.

The last few years of fruitless peacemaking have sought "finality of conflict and an end of claims." This is not an irrational object for a peace process. But "finality" in this case is a hard thing to define. Unless one side is totally beaten into submission and surrender as in World War II, the conflict is only liable to morph rather than cease altogether. The 1967 war looked pretty final at the time, but it merely redefined rather than ended the conflict.

One hundred years after the Balfour Declaration, seventy years after the partition of Palestine, and a half-century after 1967, the struggle over Palestine looks set to continue, and is likely to take on new forms. Some of it will replicate the familiar tropes of the past: violent outbursts punctuated by longer or shorter episodes of political and diplomatic activity that will more likely prove futile than not. But some of it is likely to take new directions, whether in terms of the emergence of new Palestinian and Arab forces, radical realignments within Israel itself, or a result of some unforeseeable changes on the world scene. Perhaps the best judgment on 1967 is that its ripples will continue to spread long after the passing of its initial shock.

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- 1 The literature on 1967 is voluminous and of extremely varied quality. Worth noting are Tom Segev *1967: Israel, the War and the Year that Transformed the Middle East* (2007) and Wm Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim (eds) *The 1967 War Origins and Consequences* (2012). For the so-called “war of the generals,” the Israeli military debate over the extent of the Arab threat in 1967, see Joseph Ryan’s *The Myth of Annihilation and the Six-Day War* (Carnegie 1973), https://worldview.carnegiecouncil.org/archive/worldview/1973/09/2214.html/_res/id=File1/
 - 2 The 1967 exodus produced a new category of Palestinians known as “displaced persons” as opposed to the 1948 refugees. See Robert Bowker *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity and the Search for Peace* (2003). The descendants of Palestinians displaced by the 1967 war are now estimated at around one million people mostly in Jordan. For details of these and other “internally displaced Palestinians,” see http://www.badil.org/phocadownloadpap/Badil_docs/publications/Q&A-en.pdf. Often forgotten is that another 130,000 Syrians and Palestinians were displaced from the Golan Heights and scores of Arab villages on the Heights were destroyed by Israel in the wake of the war. In 2009, the UN estimated their descendants at 500,000. See Muhammad Muslih’s *The Golan: The Road to Occupation* (Institute For Palestine Studies 1999) and the UN Human Right’s Council 2009 report <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/5EDA05102FDE89548525757C00655B20>
 - 3 Precise and updated figures for Israeli settlements and settlers are not easy to come by, but B’tselem offers a reliable source. See <http://www.btselem.org/settlements>. Note that Israeli settlement land appropriations far exceed the built-up areas. There are an additional 20,000 Israeli settlers on the Golan. See comprehensive figures in <http://fmep.org/resource/comprehensive-settlement-population-1972-2010/>. Also note Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent call for Washington to acknowledge Israeli sovereignty over the annexed Golan. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.772025>
 - 4 See Yezid Sayigh’s magisterial study of the Palestinian national movement *Armed Struggle and the Search for the State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949-1993* (Institute for Palestine Studies/Oxford University Press 1997).
 - 5 The Palestinian movement’s universal revolutionary claims and appeal have almost been forgotten in the post-Oslo years—but this was a significant element in the revival of a Palestinian identity and its eventual global recognition. See Paul Thomas Chamberlin’s *The Global Offensive; The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (2012).
 - 6 The Lebanese civil war of 1975–89 was one devastating case in point.

- 7 A full account of the Khartoum deliberations was published in 1979 by Abdel Majid Farid, as part of his book *Min Mabadir Ijtima'at Abd al Nasir al-Arabiyya wad-Dawliyya 1967-70* (Minutes of Abdel Nasser's Arab and International Meetings). Farid was Secretary of Nasser's Presidential office between 1959 and 1970. See also Yoram Meital *The Khartoum Conference and Egypt's Policy after 1967: A Reexamination* (Middle East Journal Vol. 54/1 Winter 200) for a detailed examination of the background and primary motives of Egypt and the major Arab players at Khartoum and its consequences.