

Forty years on: The bitter legacy of the 1967 Middle East war

By Jean Shaoul
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The 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours has long been recognised as a disaster for the Arab regimes and for the Palestinian people in particular, many of whom fled or were driven out by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Those who remained have been subject to four decades of military occupation and ever worsening poverty.

It is less well understood that a major military victory against numerically superior forces inaugurated a process that has produced a political and social disaster for Israel. Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories has been marked by endless conflict with the Palestinian people and the ruinous costs—economic, social and moral—associated with it.

Israel was established after World War II following a vote at the United Nations in 1947 that was engineered by the US and the Soviet Union, each of which saw the formation of a Jewish state as a way of asserting their own power in the Middle East at the expense of Britain and France.

The ostensible homeland for the Jews was realised in the form of a state based on the dispossession and forced expulsion of its Palestinian inhabitants and on religious exclusivism. Despite this, the creation of the state of Israel was viewed with sympathy and lent legitimacy in the eyes of millions around the world by one of history's greatest crimes—the annihilation of 6 million European Jews in the Nazi holocaust. Israel's rulers concealed their own crimes against the Palestinians behind the claim that Israel was to be “a land without people for a people without land.”

Many of Israel's original citizens were Jews who had been in left-wing movements in Europe, and had amongst their number notable musicians, scientists, intellectuals and writers. The country's communal kibbutzim became bywords for a striving for a new social order. The ruling Labour government capitalised on this and promoted the view of Israel as a brave little state based on social justice—a beacon of democracy and the rule of law in the Middle East surrounded by a sea of despotic enemies.

Beneath this progressive veneer, Israel was maintained for the next 19 years through provocations and military attacks against its neighbours, including a full-scale war against Egypt in 1956. Those Palestinians who remained after the establishment of the state were subject until 1966 to military law, while inequality between Jewish and Palestinian citizens was enshrined in law.

The 1967 war exposed the expansionist character of the Israeli state and brought to the fore the reactionary essence of Zionism.

The war is usually presented as the victory of an Israeli David over an Arab Goliath. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, writing recently in the *Guardian*, described 1967 as an “unwanted war to defend [Israel's] very existence.”

However, Menachem Begin, the former terrorist who became the leader of the Likud party, admitted, “In June 1967, we had a choice. The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that [Egyptian President] Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him.”

The Israelis had, in fact, prepared militarily and mounted provocations

against its neighbours in order to provoke a response that could be used to justify an expansion of its borders.

The Labour Party leaders had long since concluded that Israel, surrounded by numerically superior and hostile neighbours, needed “defensible borders” and could not survive any war unless it attacked first. The Revisionist tendency, then a minority tendency within the Zionist movement, had always championed the seizure of Jordan and the whole of British Mandate Palestine. As far back as 1923, it had insisted that Zionism was “a colonising adventure and therefore it stands or falls by the question of armed force.” Other right-wing elements had advocated the Jordan River as Israel's eastern border.

Facing both domestic and international opposition to such an expansionary policy, a suitable pretext was needed for its implementation. In 1967, Egypt's President Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser provided it.

The war that broke out in June, and which lasted just six days, followed several years of escalating conflict between Israel and Syria over grazing rights in the demilitarised no-man's land between the two countries, as well as repeated Palestinian raids from Syria and Jordan. For Israel, this land was too near one of the sources of the Jordan River to allow Syria to control it. In a particularly provocative aerial battle in April 1967, Israel downed six Syrian planes in a matter of minutes.

The Syrians and the Palestinian leadership had for years appealed for support to Nasser, looking to him because of his overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy, his expulsion of the British from the Suez Canal, and his espousal of pan-Arab nationalism. Nasser ordered the United Nations to withdraw its forces from the Gaza Strip on May 16, which Egypt then controlled, and Sharm el-Sheikh, where, since the 1956 Suez crisis, they guarded the Straits of Tiran—the access route from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Later he announced the closing of the straits to Israeli shipping. But, with his coffers empty and most of his special forces bogged down in the civil war in Yemen, Nasser did not want a war with Israel. And the Israelis knew it. Yitzhak Rabin, then chief of staff with a reputation as a hawk, later admitted as much.

As the tension mounted during the weeks preceding the war, Tel Aviv denounced the blockade of the port of Eilat, Israel's only access to the Red Sea, as an act of war and a threat to Israel's existence. The Labour government brought in General Moshe Dayan, an arch hawk, as minister of defence, and Menachem Begin as minister of state, both of whom were outspoken proponents of an expansionary policy.

Both the Soviet Union and Britain's former Conservative Deputy Foreign Secretary Anthony Nutting warned Nasser that Israel would strike against Egypt, and his own army chiefs and Syria advocated a first strike. Nasser refused to accept this, believing that the US, as it had done during the 1956 Suez crisis, would not allow a war by Israel, and made no preparations.

However, in 1956 Washington's intervention had been motivated by its determination to end Britain and France's hold on the Middle East. Now,

the US faced the growing radicalisation of the Arab masses and Moscow's increasing interest and influence in the Middle East, including Egypt's turn to the Soviet Union for development loans and military aid. In addition, Egypt was fighting a war against Washington's ally, Saudi Arabia, in Yemen.

So on June 5, with Washington's support, Israel seized the opportunity to initiate the first strike, wiping out almost the entire Egyptian air force on the ground. In the words of Israeli politician Shimon Peres, "It took 80 minutes to execute a plan that had been in the making for 10 years."

The Arab armies were routed and Israel vastly expanded its territories to include all of what was British Mandate Palestine and part of Syria, confirming Israel's position as the major military power in the Middle East.

The war created a new generation of refugees who fled the Israeli troops. Apart from Sinai, handed back in 1981 after the peace deal with Egypt, and Quneitra, recaptured by Syria during the 1973 war, Israel still occupies these lands today. The Labour government, after achieving the stated objective of the war, the opening of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, refused to hand back the captured lands. Instead, it annexed East Jerusalem, captured from Jordan. Dayan, the defence minister, ordered the destruction of Syrian villages and towns in the occupied Golan Heights.

Within months, Israel began to colonise the occupied Palestinian territories and Syria's Golan Heights. Theodor Meron, the foreign minister's most senior legal advisor, writing to the prime minister on September 18, opposed this, warning, "My conclusion is that civilian settlement in the administered territories contravenes the explicit provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention."

In defying international conventions, the Labour government openly embraced a militarist and colonialist strategy, behind which all the major strands of Zionism united. The realities of conquest and occupation produced a profound political shift that was to affect all aspects of Israeli life.

The Labour government, despite its democratic pretensions, had to administer a repressive military occupation. The Palestinians in the occupied territories were denied any political rights, and the occupation became increasingly brutal as the Palestinians resisted. Homes were demolished, property destroyed, many Palestinians were shot, tear gassed or injured, while many more were detained without trial.

The 1967 war brought to the fore a new generation of political leaders, such as Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, Yigal Allon and Yitzhak Rabin, all with the closest connections to the military. The war had enhanced their reputation, particularly Dayan's.

The passing in 1974 of the premiership to Rabin, who had been chief of staff in 1967, signified the end of the old guard. A senior military command became the prerequisite for a successful political career.

The occupation, the subsequent war of attrition on the Suez Canal, the 1973 war, the wars in Lebanon in 1976 and 1982, and the suppression of the 1987 and 2000 *intifadas* required the increasing militarization of Israeli political life and society as a whole. While the army had always been a conscript army, with citizens liable to reservist duty every year, conscription and reservist duty became longer and more difficult to evade. The corollary of an ever more brutal occupation was the dehumanising impact it had on the Israelis themselves, who were made party to grave crimes and human rights abuses on the basis of the insistence on an existential threat posed by the Palestinians.

Israel was transformed to a greater extent than heretofore into a garrison state. Washington responded to 1967 and the confirmation of Israel's position as the major military power in the Middle East by massively increasing its military and economic aid. Today it is worth \$3 billion a year, more than six times all US aid to sub-Saharan Africa. Without this aid and other economic and political support, Israel would long ago have collapsed.

In return, Israel intervened to suppress the Palestinians in Jordan and Lebanon, suppressing the Arab working class and keeping decrepit regimes in power. It served Washington's Cold War aims by keeping the Stalinist regime in Moscow at bay by defeating the Soviet Union's allies Egypt and Syria in another war in 1973. Having developed its own nuclear arsenal, it acted against Iraq, then allied to Moscow, by bombing its nuclear reactor in 1981.

Israel supplied arms to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and backed other regimes that the US could not be seen to be openly supporting. Last summer, it launched a murderous war against Hezbollah to eradicate opposition to the US-backed government in Lebanon. All this has only served to make Israel more abhorrent in the eyes of its neighbours and turned millions of people around the world—who once looked upon Israel with sympathy—against it.

The settlements, surrounded by a hostile Palestinian population, were not attractive to the majority of Israelis. A new wave of immigrants was therefore encouraged to come and settle in the Occupied Territories. Israelis, who could not otherwise have afforded a home, were given financial inducements to settle there.

The settlements became a magnet for a right-wing and violent layer, epitomised by Rabbi Meir Kahane, leader of the US Jewish Defence League, who recruited a new wave of religious immigrants to come from the US and built a fascist party, Kach.

The expansionary policy was portrayed by religious groups as an opportunity and duty to realise the biblical vision of the "whole land of Israel," of "Judea and Samaria." As Chuck Freilich, deputy national security advisor under Ariel Sharon, recently told the *New York Times*, "The 1967 war convinced Arabs that Israel is here to stay. But it's also a cancer. Occupation is corrupting in the long run for any society, and the war also brought a religious messianism into Israeli life that really wasn't there."

This ultra-right wing tendency was further swelled by more than 1.5 million impoverished and politically disorientated immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union—constituting nearly a third of Israel's Jewish population today.

The "Greater Israel" policy thus spawned a new social layer, for whom right-wing nationalist parties such as Likud, under the leadership first of Menachem Begin, and ultra-religious parties became a political vehicle. They demanded that the West Bank be formally annexed by Israel. Similar tendencies developed within the Labour Party and among its political allies. Sharon, the architect and sponsor of the settler project, made no attempt to hide his objective: To prevent the creation of a Palestinian state.

Like the military, the ultra-nationalist and religious parties have come to wield disproportionate power in Israel's fractured political system, enabling them to play a pivotal role in cobbling together coalition governments. They have imposed their demands on successive governments and shifted official politics sharply to the right.

Settler violence and theft against Palestinians go unpunished. The power of the religious authorities and religious control over Israeli citizens have increased, raising sharp tensions with the secular majority. Thus, the Zionist state has spawned its own brand of religious fundamentalism, no different in essence to that found in various Muslim states.

The layers that proved most susceptible to the siren call of the religious right included in their number significant sections of the most impoverished and oppressed in Israel.

But the drive for Israeli expansion and profits for the ruling elite, coupled with the demands of military spending, has come at a huge cost to the entire working class. State enterprises have been privatised, social benefits slashed, the pension age raised, corporation tax and income tax for the rich cut, and health, education and social programmes gutted.

Unemployment has risen alongside the highest per-capita ratio of

migrant workers in the world. These super-exploited workers are used to force down wages yet further.

Workers and their families face a precarious existence, with more than one quarter of households living below the poverty line, including many whose members are employed. Wage erosion caused by the rapid polarisation of incomes and the growth of employment by manpower companies has pushed tens of thousands of wage-earning families below the poverty line.

While the gross domestic product (GDP) has risen from \$1,500 per capita in 1967 to \$24,000 per capita in 2006, placing Israel 23rd in the United Nations Human Development Report, much of the wealth is concentrated in the hands of just six families, who control 40 percent of the value of the shares traded on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange.

These families control 12 of the 17 economic conglomerates, including the banks and commercial media, giving them enormous financial, economic and political power. Foreign corporations and investors, particularly from the US, own almost all of the remaining shares traded on the stock exchange.

As well as the social chasm between the handful of multimillionaires and billionaires and the mass of the population, Israeli society is riven by numerous other divisions—between secular and religious Jews, between the more prosperous Jews of European descent (Ashkenazi Jews) and the more impoverished layers whose families came from the Middle East and North Africa (Sephardi Jews).

The destruction of the welfare state and social insurance has eliminated the basis for creating an integrated and more egalitarian society. It has prevented any assimilation of East European immigrants, allowing rightist parties to pose as defenders of orthodox minorities against “arrogant” and secular elites that are descended from the postwar immigration of European Jewry and organised in and around the Labour Party.

The Sephardi Jews and other impoverished layers are increasingly to be found in the so-called development towns, euphemisms for concrete slums on Israel’s borders with its hostile neighbours, which bear the full brunt of the Palestinian attacks on Israel. A further 16 percent of all employees are migrant workers (with and without work permits), the highest per capita ratio in the world. They, like the Palestinian workers, receive less than the minimum wage, without benefits such as overtime pay or annual vacations.

Even more telling is the division between Jewish Israelis and the 20 percent of Israelis of Palestinian origin. Second class citizens, denied equality in the eyes of the law, Arabs suffer budgetary discrimination. No new Arab towns have ever been built, while the old ones fall into decay. They lack access to healthcare and education and are twice as likely to be unemployed and poor. Their family land has been expropriated. Political parties that do not recognise Israel’s right to exist are banned.

All this has been implemented by a ruling elite that is one of the most venal in the world. Israel’s business and political leaders are mired in scandals and corruption, including both the prime minister and the two most recent presidents, both of whom were forced to step down.

The Israeli government does not represent the majority of the Jewish people who live in Israel, let alone the interests of its citizens, Jewish and Palestinian. It is the political representative of Israel’s financial elite, which is allied to its chief sponsors in Washington.

In acting in its own interests and as the US’s policeman in the region, Israel’s ruling elite has relentlessly suppressed the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. For the last 40 years, the lot of the majority of Palestinians has been hardship and misery.

Today, three quarters of the Palestinian people are displaced, while there are 5 million refugees throughout the world. By closing the borders with the West Bank and Gaza, denying tens of thousands the right to work in Israel, and imposing more than 500 roadblocks within the occupied territories, Israel’s armed forces have penned the Palestinians into a

virtual prison and strangled their economy.

More than 66 percent of households in the Palestinian Authority live below the poverty line, while 24 percent of the workforce is unemployed. Since 1967, more than 650,000 Palestinians have been detained by Israel, a figure equal numerically to 40 percent of the male population.

While the West Bank was not formally annexed, East Jerusalem has been incorporated into the Zionist state. The settlements have continued to grow, even after the 1993 Oslo agreement promising a Palestinian state on the land captured during the 1967 war.

The so-called security wall is intended to permanently expand Israel’s borders, ensuring control of the whole of Jerusalem and much of the West Bank. There are today about 250 settlements scattered throughout the West Bank, with a total population, including East Jerusalem, of 450,000. These settlements have access to roads off-limits to the Palestinians.

The prospect of statehood held out to the Palestinians, even were it to be realized, would do nothing to secure their basic democratic rights and social needs. The official policy of Israel and the US—honoured mostly in the breach—would leave the Palestinians with a bifurcated state, with the West Bank and Gaza cut off from each other and the West Bank itself reduced to a series of isolated and impoverished towns and villages, penned in by the security wall and surrounded by Israeli troops. These are the circumstances that have given rise to the bitter internecine war between Hamas and Fatah.

Quite rightly viewed as crimes by the vast majority of the world’s population, Israel’s actions, both in its own and in Washington’s interests, are some of the most incendiary factors in world politics today.

Zionism’s solution to its problems, the expansion of Israel’s borders, has proved to be no solution at all. Events since the 1967 war have exposed the failure of the Israeli state to deliver its promise to provide a safe haven for the Jewish people and a just and egalitarian society. Rather, Israel is a social tinder box that threatens to destroy itself. As a further tragic irony, it is reproducing within Israel and the Occupied Territories the ghettos, repression, civil strife and wars from which earlier generations of Jews had fled.

Many Israelis are sick and tired of the constant state of war and disgusted by the brutal treatment meted out to the Palestinians. They want peace, but are confronted on all sides by parties based on militarism and war.

A break with Zionism and a recognition that its failure is the inevitable consequence of a nationalist perspective is a precondition for the development of an independent political struggle to unite Arab and Jewish workers for the building of a socialist society that would eliminate the artificial borders dividing the peoples and economies of the region.

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