

# A Bird's Eye View of the 1967 War: Palestine Remains the Central Issue

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Half a century separates us from the monumental June 1967 war that, on the surface, resulted in a redrawing of the geography of the Middle East. In essence, this event ushered in a harder chapter in the life of Palestinians and the collapse of an Arab republican order, which at the time was governed mainly by populist-nationalist regimes. Israel marched to occupy the then-Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, the Jordanian-annexed West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the Syrian Golan Heights. The years since have witnessed an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai in 1982 and Gaza in 2005 and a Jordanian relinquishing of the West Bank in 1988. During the same period, Israel annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan and maintained the occupation of the West Bank, where it launched an ever-expanding settlement construction project that threatens any hope for a future Palestinian state.

Arguably less monumental but just as devastating was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon on June 6, 1982, when Israeli forces invaded the country then laid siege to its capital, Beirut, and later occupied it. In the process, Israel killed thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians and enabled the massacre of unknown numbers of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians in refugee camps by allied Lebanese rightwing forces. That war added to the nightmarish civil war that had been raging in Lebanon since 1975, which continued to wreak havoc on the country for another eight years. The Israeli occupation of Lebanon finally ended in 2000 after it became too costly for Israeli forces subjected to attacks and ambushes by Lebanese nationalist forces allied with the Iranian-supported Hezbollah.

That these two events could be considered defining moments in the history of Arab political development is quite the understatement; but that they stand out as perfect examples of Israel's gradual expansion in territory and influence should by now be seen as a geostrategic truth. While Egypt has withdrawn from its traditional role as the Arab world's political powerhouse, Syria wallows in its destructive civil war, Iraq stands on the bayonets of political sectarianism, and Jordan seeks to protect itself from myriad challenges, Israel's Zionist project seems to have escaped all threats in the Middle East neighborhood. Only the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) appear to have succeeded in avoiding the direct impact of an expansionist Israel on their security and prosperity.

As a military confrontation and a geostrategic event, the war of 1967 was a watershed event for the Arab world and the wider Middle East—indeed the world at large—because of what it wrought and its continuing impact fifty years later.

### **The Collapse of the Republican Populist Order**

It was difficult to imagine on the eve of the June 5, 1967, war that the dominant Arab populist-nationalist political order would suffer a resounding defeat at the hands of what it saw as a nascent but apparently weak Zionist entity. The euphoria of Arab nationalism had become the driving force for autarky and emancipation from centuries of colonialism, dependency, and underdevelopment. The Egyptian regime under Gamal Abdel-Nasser had ensconced itself as

representative of Arab masses seeking progress and freedom. Similar regimes in Iraq and Syria were governed by a Baathist ideology that, like Egypt's, rested on the triad of "unity, liberty, and socialism" and declared themselves the guardians of the Levant. Still other regimes in Sudan, Yemen, and Algeria – each according to its ability – emulated the prototypes while also dealing with the same history of occupation and colonialism.

For these governments, the defeat of 1967 was proof of the failure of their processes of state building and development. At the heart of this order and its model was an authoritarian bent that deprived the masses – whom the populist-nationalists assumed to serve – of the ability to organize freely, enjoy an open media environment, and participate in decision making outside the institutions of political control the regimes had built in their societies. Unfortunately – and not that Israel wanted to do away with Arab authoritarianism – what the defeat failed to do was to liberalize the defeated populist order. Instead, it further strengthened the oppressive apparatuses holding these regimes together, largely in order to suppress the popular disaffection with the status quo ante, which had been building for years.

By the early 1970s, a new form of authoritarianism had taken over in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria that concentrated on domestic order and stability. Family-centered and tribe-based institutions thrived and they supported the leaders of Iraq, Syria, and Libya (which had its republican coup in 1969), and a circumscribed political opening was orchestrated in Egypt. A

last hurrah was attempted in 1973 to restore what could be restored of honor and territory when Egypt and Syria launched their surprise attack in October on Israeli forces in the Sinai and the Golan. But that effort only resulted in separation-of-forces agreements that, in Egypt's case, led to a peace agreement with Israel by the end of the decade. Peace negotiations were repeated in 1994 between Jordan and Israel, which signed another peace treaty that pacified the latter's Jordanian flank, and Israel maintained its occupation of the West Bank.

While the destructive Lebanese civil war raged for fifteen years, Iranian mullahs destroyed the Peacock Throne in Tehran, the Iraq-Iran war killed over a million people over eight years, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and myriad other calamities unfolded in the region, Israel strengthened its occupation of Palestinian territories and the Golan. Today, it would be folly to even try to sugarcoat the state of utter collapse in nationalist rhetoric and action that characterize the state of chaos in the Arab Levant. More importantly, indeed tragically, the long-term impact of the 1967 Arab defeat is the seeming absence of the question of Palestine from current Arab collective and activist politics.

### **The Rise of the Periphery**

A less strident entente of Arab nations was less influential and not party to the ideals espoused by Egypt and the others. These countries were either launching the process of modern state building, like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco, or approaching independence from British rule, like today's other four GCC

countries of Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Among this group, only Jordan—considered poor and underdeveloped—was involved in the war and its aftermath for obvious geographic reasons. It arguably suffered the most, particularly because it hosted hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians since 1948 (augmented by more refugees from the West Bank). Furthermore, the nature of the bipolar international system of the 1950s and 1960 gave impetus to the rise of the populist regimes as resisters to imperialism and capitalist forces.

But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, and with the important development of the Arabian Gulf hydrocarbons sector at a time of voracious consumption by industrialized and industrializing nations, what is now known as the GCC entente of countries began to show political muscle buttressed by economic prowess. In fact, they played a pivotal role in supporting the previously defeated Egypt and Syria in organizing the October 1973 surprise and, later, drawing attention to the Palestinian question when they and others in the Arab world imposed an oil embargo on oil exports to countries supporting Israel.

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia launched a number of peace initiatives, the latest of which was dubbed the Arab Peace Initiative that was adopted by an Arab League summit in Beirut in 2002. Importantly, what differentiated the new monarchical order of the Gulf was and remains a moderate orientation toward resolving intractable problems while focusing on building modern states. Today, the

nations of the Gulf stand as the bulwarks of the Arab order that by now has lost yesteryear's populism and bravado.

### **Religious Revival**

Not that the Arab world had lacked in religiosity before the war, but the corollary of the collapse of the populist-nationalist ideology of the republican order—and indeed as a response to this failure—was a revival of religious fervor and increased belief in the efficacy of religious discourse and praxis. Secular ideology quickly receded in official communication; Egypt, in particular, witnessed a rise in the advocacy of religious answers to development problems. That the late Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, for example, used this new religiosity to build a new constituency apart from that of his predecessor, Nasser, was incidental to the overwhelming trend virtually to desert secularism and seek refuge in the mosque.

But alongside this general religious orientation in many Arab societies, assisted as it was by infusions of financial support from the Gulf to religious institutions, there arose the converts to the extremist ideology of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood leader who was hanged by the Nasser regime in 1966. These converts exploited the wider berth given to Islam in public discourse to start what later became the virulent strain of extremist Islamist ideology represented by al-Qaeda. They and others also benefited from the support afforded to them by the United States and Saudi Arabia who, along with Pakistan, were the main benefactors of the anti-Soviet resistance in

Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion of 1979. While the relationship between the defeat of 1967 and the rise and expansion of extremist ideology is not linear, it is arguably the case that the collapse of the old ideological and republican state system allowed for the rise of a religiously committed constituency in the Arab world which expanded with the war in Afghanistan and the state of chaos engulfing that country.

### **Palestine Rises ... But**

All Arab regimes in 1967 rightly considered themselves responsible to certain degrees for trying to redress the catastrophe of Palestine which, less than two decades earlier, had resulted in the displacement and exile of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians after the collapse of Arab resistance to the Zionist forefathers of today's Israelis. The League of Arab States, established in Egypt in 1945 under British auspices, had in 1964 even created the Palestine Liberation Organization as a supposed representative of the Palestinian people but which remained under the direction and supervision of the dominant Arab order led by Egypt. But while not ignoring the plight of the Palestinians, the Arab regimes would not allow them to speak for themselves—a situation that only changed after the June 1967 collapse and the loss of credibility and position that followed.

Immediately after the war, Palestinian factions advocated for independent Palestinian action and worked toward and achieved an independent Palestine Liberation Organization. By early 1968, when Palestinian fighters

challenged invading Israeli forces in the Karama battle in Jordan, Palestinians had asserted the right to be their own representatives. By 1974, when the PLO achieved international recognition at the United Nations, no Arab regime could negotiate their cause and fate on their behalf. The Palestinian leadership, in the person of the late Chairman Yasser Arafat and a cohort of leaders of factions, became the face of a displaced people with national rights apart from the established Arab order. But throughout this fluid period, the PLO ran into trouble with Lebanese and Jordanian authorities, arguably the weakest among Israel's neighboring states but also hosting the largest concentrations of Palestinian refugees and refugee camps, where PLO recruitment and training took place.

Indeed, the Palestinian cause after 1967 remained in stalemate, hostage to Israeli intransigence and Arab countries' lethargic commitment to its resolution. In fact, the PLO leadership was exiled to Tunis after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, far from the original battleground—albeit Palestinian fighters remained involved in the Lebanese war and fought against each other in Lebanon on behalf of Syria's rulers. Only after the United States agreed to negotiate with the PLO, and the latter's recognition of Israel in 1988, was the Palestinian leadership capable of really participating in serious negotiations, leading to a process at Oslo that led to two agreements in 1993 and 1995. These formed a Palestinian Authority that exercised limited control in the West Bank and Gaza, but under a continuing

Israeli occupation, supervision, and military government.

Since Oslo, however, Palestinians have not been able to withstand the difficult challenges of occupation to or influence Israeli actions, most importantly increased settlement of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. While Israel ended its occupation of the Gaza Strip in 2005, the area remains in its own reality as an open-air prison under a land, sea, and air blockade and exposed to incessant Israeli incursions and deadly wars. Political divisions also still define Palestinian existence, although almost all factions have reconciled themselves to a two-state solution that, on the one hand, represents the only hope for an independent Palestinian state and, on the other, allows for Israel's existence on historical Palestinian land and its secured domination of the entire geographic area of historic Palestine.

### **1967 ... 2017**

As a watershed year that transformed the Arab political order, changed the map of the Middle East, allowed for continued and expanded Israeli military dominance, and worsened the state of the Palestinian cause, taking a long view of the seismic changes that 1967 unleashed can teach a few lessons.

First, the Arab political order had better resume proper state building that at least partially relies on allowing for popular participation in decision making and political development. The war made plain that autocratic republicanism, populism, or nationalism cannot lead to development or victory on the battlefield without genuine preparation of the domestic conditions of democracy and respect for human

and civil rights. While war on the scale of the 1967 conflagration is no longer thinkable, desirable, or palatable, the Arab order still needs to build an open civic culture constructed around the centrality of the individual and the inviolability of rights.

Second, the question of Palestine and redressing Palestinian rights should remain central to the Arab political order. Palestine continues to be an example of rights denied and a nationalist project so far thwarted. The Arab order will always lack legitimacy if it does not devote its energies and resources to the project of establishing an independent Palestinian state where Palestinians can exercise their inalienable rights to statehood and development. Making a Palestinian state a reality is vital for rolling back the Zionist project that attempted in the 1967 war to relegate the idea of Palestinian statehood to nostalgia and memory when it occupied what remained of historic Palestine. Thus, it is the Arab world's responsibility to do what it can to convince the world that the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 is the best option for peace and security for all parties.

Third, the international community has a responsibility and an obligation, despite the passage of time, to address the effects of Israeli aggression whenever and wherever it takes place, specifically in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank. Such aggression is not merely military but also has taken the shape of land seizures and settlement construction that threaten the future of a Palestinian state. That the United States monopolizes the peacemaking process between the Palestinians and the

Israelis – and that it has failed to be neutral in the conflict and looks out only for Israeli interests – should not prevent other parties

around the world, like the European Union, from trying to influence events and advance their own peace plan.

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