

Bittersweet Legacy

40 years later, Israel struggles in the peacemaking process.

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Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Jerusalem

Was the Six-Day War a blessing or a curse for Israel's place in the Middle East and its long-term survival? Forty years on, the jury is still out.

In the war's immediate aftermath, it seemed Israel's sweeping victory would guarantee the Jewish state's future and set the stage for a grand regional peace. But the war also unleashed powerful new forces that militated against a settlement of the core Israeli-Palestinian conflict and left simmering the overarching Israeli-Arab dispute.

Today, the parameters of the struggle have shifted, but comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace remains as elusive as ever and threats to Israel's existence still give rise to concern.

In the new equation, the Arab world is split. As Israel seeks accommodation with the moderates, radicals in the Palestinian and wider Islamist camps conspire to quickly abort peace efforts.

In June 1967, Israel emerged from six days of lightning strikes on three fronts as a regional superpower that the Arab side no

longer could realistically expect to destroy. The war also left Israel with large swaths of territory it could try to exchange for peace. Thus it seemed that the argument no longer would be about Israel's existence but over the terms of accommodation.

Israel's Cabinet met shortly after the war and agreed to return territory in exchange for peace. The Arab League thought differently, however, meeting in Khartoum for its famous summit of the "Three No's" — no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel and no peace with Israel.

Israel's offer to return conquered territory, before the occupation had been established and before there were any settlements, was rejected.

Still, "land for peace" quickly gained currency as the new international panacea. U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, passed five months after the fighting stopped, reflected the new approach. But that's not how things worked out.

Settler Movement

The magnitude of Israel's victory rekindled dormant messianic notions among religious Zionists. Before 1967, Israelis felt stifled by the weight of surrounding, hostile Arab

states, and in the run-up to the war many feared impending physical annihilation.

The fact that the victory was so decisive fueled speculation about divine intervention and the coming of the Messiah. Religious Zionists argued that returning parts of biblical Israel to the Arabs would delay the Messiah's coming.

These ideas gave rise to the religious settler movement, which advocated the settlement of "Greater Israel," especially in the West Bank.

The war also led to the rehabilitation of the secular Israeli right. Herut leader Menachem Begin — a virtual pariah during David Ben-Gurion's Labor-led administrations from 1948 to 1963 — had been included in Levi Eshkol's wartime national unity government. It was the first step on the path that Begin's Likud Party took to power in 1977 in alliance with the religious Zionist movement. Both were dedicated to the integrity of the entire land of Israel and opposed to Palestinian state-

hood.

Concurrently, the Six-Day War spurred a new, militant Palestinian nationalism determined to wrest control of Palestinian decision-making from Arab states like Egypt and Jordan and opposed to any recognition or accommodation with Israel.

Founded several years before the war, in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasser Arafat embarked on a campaign of terror against Israel, advocating the establishment of a "secular democratic" state in Israel's stead.

The twice-defeated Palestinians continued to demand control of Jerusalem and the "right" of Palestinian refugees to return

to Israel proper. Accommodation between these powerful new forces of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism seemed impossible.

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Jerusalem's western Temple wall at dawn.



Yasser Arafat



Menachem Begin

On The Front Lines



Uri Segal

Uri Segal of West Bloomfield was 25 years old and lived on Kibbutz Kfar Aza, just outside the Gaza Strip, when Egypt began to beat the drums of war in 1967. A paratrooper during his army service and in the reserves, he fought with the Southern Command to help protect his kibbutz during the war.

On the kibbutz, about 100 men and women started to dig in and get ready for an assault.

"It was one of the worst places to be," Segal said. The kibbutz was situated on the front lines and the Egyptian and Palestinian forces massed right near them. "Gamal Abdul Nasser decided to take the U.N. out the Sinai, and they said they were going to destroy us.

"Day and night and day and night we were on full alert," he recalled. "On June 5, we got a command that we could go to sleep. As soon as we left the trenches, they started to bombard us. We saw the Israeli jets fly over Gaza. We had very few guns and one cannon that was very old. There were 100,000 Egyptians on the other side.

"There was big confusion," Segal said. The Israeli radio stations didn't issue reports but only played patriotic music. So, to get news, they listened to Radio Cairo, which broadcast that both Haifa and Tel Aviv were on fire. "Then we heard them report that the people of Kfar Aza were very

brave, but are all dead. But, I looked around and we didn't have any casualties. We realized if that was the news we were in good shape."

Though the wheat fields of the kibbutz were on fire from the shelling and there was heavy smoke, the onslaught never came.

"The soldiers who were attacking started to turn around and run back. If they had known how few we were, they would have come with a smile on their faces," Segal said. "It began to be clear to us what was going on."

During the fighting, Segal remembers his friend Michael Demsky driving a D-6 tractor toward the fields to dig up earth to halt the approaching fire. Rafal Eitan, then a colonel and later Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, jumped on the tractor and fought with Demsky to instead protect the forest where the Israeli ammunition was stored. Segal knew Eitan and yelled to Demsky to follow his instructions. The forest and ammunition were saved.

Later, Eitan was wounded, and Demsky, who was married with a pregnant wife, was killed by a bullet in the heart as he was riding in the jeep just ahead of Segal.

"When we heard that our friends got into Jerusalem in the Old City, that was the height of the celebration," Segal said. "We jumped in the ditches and began to sing *Jerusalem of Gold*, the song by Naomi Shemer that had won the Israeli Song Festival just weeks before." Some of his best friends were among the paratroopers who liberated the Old City.

— Don Cohen, JN special writer

Bursting With Pride

Carol and Jerry Israel of Bloomfield Hills had moved to Southfield in 1966 and were still getting connected to the community when the war occurred.



Carol Israel

"I remember going to temple with everyone and biting our fingernails waiting to see how things would turn out," she said.

"We were glued to the television and were on tenterhooks. Then afterward, when it was over, we were just bursting with pride. To the whole Jewish community, it became fashionable to be Jewish now."

Jerry Israel remembered that the "talk was really about being flabbergasted that Israel could defeat all those armies in just six days." The reaction from non-Jews was mostly supportive, though he remembers "you'd hear jokes like, 'What did you do, rent the tanks?'" implying that the Jews must have won quickly to save themselves money.

— Don Cohen, JN special writer