

# War and Peace: Thoughts on Israel's Security Concept from a Perspective of Fifty Years

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## Background

The Six Day War was a formative event in the history of the State of Israel. From the perspective of fifty years, it is clear that many of the lessons to emerge from the war are multi-faceted, and many are fraught with tensions and complexities that deserve close analysis. This essay focuses on the effects of the war and its outcomes on Israel's geostrategic position in the Middle East, its status with respect to the superpowers, and its national security policies. While there are issues that are as valid today as they were in 1967, there are others that, somewhat ironically, have virtually "changed direction" or become irrelevant; some issues must be examined today from a perspective different than that of fifty years ago.

The events of that fateful week in June 1967 appeared akin to a biblical miracle. Large segments of the public believed that these were the six days of creation of the new State of Israel, and that the seventh day would bring the longed-for peace. But the seventh day never arrived, and a few weeks after the spectacular victory, the long and difficult War of Attrition began, which would cost more lives than the Six Day War itself. Six years later, in 1973, the Yom Kippur War broke out. The contrast between the two wars—between the preemptive strike of the Six Day War, which was preceded by the sense of an existential threat and encompassing anxiety on the one

hand, and the baseless over-confidence six years later, which resulted from the strategic depth that Israel acquired in the Six Day War and the devout, unquestioning belief in IDF superiority on the other—is a main component of any historical and strategic analysis of Israel’s national security.

With the hindsight of five decades, it seems appropriate to relate to the period between 1967 and 1973 as a kind of “seven years’ war.” From a historical perspective, this war removed the external existential threat to Israel from the Arab countries and even generated a process that eventually led to peace between Israel and two of its neighbors: Egypt, the largest Arab country and at the time leader of the Arab world; and Jordan, the neighboring country with the longest border with Israel. Since then, Syria too has come to no longer represent an existential threat, a result of the civil war raging in the country. Thus, three Arab countries whose armies confronted Israel in 1967 are no longer a military and strategic threat. Against this background, one can analyze the strategic changes that have occurred in Israel’s environment on a number of levels: the security-military dimension; the regional balance of forces; Israel’s international status; and the opportunities that have replaced the existential threat facing Israel in 1967.

### **The Security-Military Dimension**

Israel’s “classic security concept” was implemented perfectly in the Six Day War. It suited Israel’s geostrategic situation, and therefore the classic principles of war, as well as Israel’s classic security concept, were successfully implemented in the war’s planning and execution: preemptive strike, tactical surprise, initiative and stratagem, shifting the war to enemy territory, short duration, and decisive victory. Israel relied on superior technology and manpower, the creation of a strong strike force in the form of airpower to achieve air superiority, which is a necessary condition for victory in the modern era, and armored forces for targeted, in-depth maneuver. Dominating everything else was airpower, which decided the outcome of the war within only three hours.

The importance of air superiority in force buildup and the use of this platform have guided Israel since the Six Day War. Apart from the Yom Kippur War, which was a lesson in the limits of airpower and the need always to be on the forefront of technology and operational thinking, airpower has remained the key component in Israel’s security. With respect to other components, the classic security concept has become less relevant than in 1967. In 1973, the

IDF relied on strategic depth and refrained from a preemptive strike or the mobilization of reserves. However, the Yom Kippur War itself was neither short nor yielded a clearly decisive victory. In effect, the advantages of the classic security concept were neutralized by the Egyptian and Syrian armies.

The intelligence failure in the Yom Kippur War is seared into Israel's collective memory. But it is important to remember that also prior to the Six Day War, Military Intelligence did not correctly predict the timing of the war. There was a commonly-held presumption at that point as well (what became known as the "conception" following the Yom Kippur War) whereby Egypt would not initiate an all-out confrontation with Israel as long as it was fighting in Yemen. The IDF prepared for war based on the assessment that it would not occur before 1970, and in May 1967 was caught by surprise by the actions of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and his army. This surprise was evidence of the limits of intelligence forecasts and the ability to understand the enemy's intentions. These limitations, which continue to exist, must be offset by means of pluralistic assessment systems and continual reexamination of working assumptions, as well as an appropriate level of operational readiness.

In addition, the Six Day War broke out following unintentional escalation; in other words, neither Egypt nor Israel planned or intended to launch a war. What led to a war that no one wanted was the tension with Syria, which was exacerbated by the pronouncements of Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin concerning the intention to bring down the Syrian regime; Fatah terrorist activity; incorrect information conveyed to Egypt and Syria by the Soviet Union; Nasser's decision to send his army into Sinai and block the Straits of Tiran; and the unnecessary and hasty acquiescence of the UN to the Egyptian demand to evacuate the observer force from Sinai. Since the Six Day War, Israel has been involved in two additional wars that neither side wanted: the Second Lebanon War (in 2006) and Operation Protective Edge against Hamas (in 2014). The lessons of these wars dictate that Israel must develop mechanisms for controlling unwanted escalation. These lessons are also valid for ending wars that are already in progress.

The Six Day War demonstrated that the translation of a military victory into a political achievement is a difficult and complex challenge, and that military victory is sometimes an expendable asset, which works against the interests of the victor. Paradoxically, the military standoff at the end of

the Yom Kippur War, the mutual attrition, and the heavy price of the war provided fertile ground for compromise and peace agreements.

Furthermore, the Six Day War was the last instance of all-out war (fighting on three fronts—Egypt, Syria, and Jordan) that enjoyed comprehensive Arab support, including military support from Iraq, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. The fact that since 1973—a war fought on two fronts, Egypt and Syria—Israel has managed to limit the rounds of fighting to only one front should not be taken for granted. It is incumbent on Israel to build up its forces and know how to use them based on the assumption that in the future an all-out war may occur again. A simultaneous conflict with Hezbollah and Hamas and at the same time an uprising in Judea and Samaria, as well as the direct or indirect involvement of Iran is not an impossible scenario. The threats by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah that the next war will involve hundreds of thousands of Shiite fighters (based on an Iranian strategy of sending Shiite militias to Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) signal that this scenario could become reality, and therefore they demand attention rather than a simple dismissal as propaganda and psychological warfare.

### **The Regional Balance of Forces**

The Six Day War was a milestone in the decline of pan-Arabism. The military defeat of the Arabs, and in particular the defeat of the Egyptian army, was a major blow to Arab socialist nationalism, led by President Nasser. The Arab world, disappointed by Western modernity and the ideas that underscored the gap in its own development compared with the West, was in search of a different political philosophy. Against this background, the defeat in the Six Day War became a milestone in the growth of political Islam in the Arab world and led to the transformation of fundamental Islam into a dominant ideology. The entire Middle East, including the Arab world, lives today under the shadow of this development. The intensifying Sunni-Shiite conflict and the internal conflict between various Sunni denominations became clearly visible in 2011, and they are underway with even greater intensity and almost without interruption, with no end in sight, in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq.

An outcome of this development is the marginalization of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the agenda of the Arab countries. Furthermore, the “seven years’ war,” from 1967 to 1973, led to a dramatic change in the nature of relations in the region that affects Israel directly: from a comprehensive Arab-Israeli conflict prior to 1973 to a conflict that revolves around the Israeli-Palestinian

issue. After 1967, the Arab countries focused on the territories captured in the war. As a result of the peace agreement with Israel, Egypt regained the Sinai, and in 1988, following the outbreak of the first Palestinian intifada in late 1987, Jordan renounced its claim to the West Bank. Syria for its part did not manage to achieve strategic balance with Israel (and against the background of the civil war there, later ceased to function as a state). Thus, the Arab-Israeli conflict *de facto* came to an end. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 led to a conflict of a different sort—between Israel and Iran—and against this background, Iran too became involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lebanon, which did not take part in the Six Day War, is currently home to the most serious threat to Israel, i.e., Hezbollah, which has become a frontal stronghold for Iran against Israel.

In addition, Israel has become a regional superpower, in contrast to the period before 1967 when it suffered from extreme asymmetry in territory, population, and resources. Since then, Israel has been a major symmetric actor in Middle East events. It played a principal role in rescuing Jordan in 1970 (from the threat posed by Syrian and Palestinian organizations); it has enjoyed a stable peace with Egypt since 1979; in 1981, it attacked the Iraqi nuclear reactor; and in 1982, it failed in its effort to dictate the composition and nature of the regime in Lebanon. Currently, Israel is a strong regional superpower and recognized as such by its neighbors and by many important actors in the international community.

### **Israel's International Status**

As a result of the Six Day War, Israel has evolved from a small and fragile country that is dependent on the superpowers, into a strong nation with strategic, military, and intelligence capabilities that constitute an asset to its allies. It is a country with an air force, armored corps, and infantry that have the ability to defeat the regional clients of the former Soviet Union and to provide its allies with intelligence information, technology, and strategic strongholds. In particular, Israel has become an asset for the United States, and the alliance between the two countries has become the basis of Israel's national security and the regional balance of forces in the Middle East.

At the same time, any alliance has its limits. In the moment of truth, as was proven in 1967, Israel can rely only on itself. The promises of President Eisenhower following the Sinai Campaign proved worthless in 1967 when the United States, then entangled in Vietnam, was in no rush to fulfill them

and thus open another front with the Communist bloc. France, which was Israel's main ally until then, not only turned its back on Israel but even imposed an embargo. The rest of the world did not go beyond declarations of neutrality or support for Israel that did not require taking any action. This was a complicated reality for Israel, which realized that it can rely only on itself, and that it is not interested in having a foreign army shed blood on its behalf. This conclusion does not contradict the need for Israel to strengthen any alliance that it can. It must therefore find some balance between these two principles.

This is also why international legitimacy is important for Israel. The “waiting period” that was forced on it in the three weeks prior to the Six Day War, due to the request of its allies for an opportunity to find a political solution to the crisis, was perceived by Israelis as highly risky. During that period, in which Israel's leadership projected weakness, concern, and a lack of decisiveness, it appeared that time was not in Israel's favor. Its enemies reinforced their armies along the borders, and proposals for compromise grew increasingly problematic. In retrospect, the “waiting period” was actually in Israel's favor since it provided time to call up reserves, ready its forces, update operational plans, and above all seek legitimacy—both internal and external—for military action. The solidarity that appeared in Israeli society, the sense that there was no alternative and the understanding that this is a war to defend the homeland formed the foundation of the unique fighting spirit that was a significant ingredient in the victory.

On the international level, the fully charged “battery of legitimacy” gave Israel military and political freedom of action that it has not enjoyed since 1967. Although it was Israel that in the end initiated the war through a preemptive strike, the legitimacy it had achieved provided it with international support and the ability to translate the military victory into a political process, which after long and difficult negotiations led to peace with Egypt and Jordan. Likewise today, the component of legitimacy requires careful management and balance with the use of force and military actions, and its inclusion within overall strategic considerations is more important than ever before.

### **From Existential Threat to Existential Opportunities**

The “waiting period” that preceded the Six Day War was accompanied by a feeling among the people of Israel and its leaders that the Zionist enterprise was in danger of annihilation. This was grounded in the strategic reality that

indeed constituted a grave threat to Israel's existence. Since the victory in that war, Israel has not had to face another existential threat. The IDF is the strongest military in the region; two major Arab countries have signed peace agreements with it and maintained their commitments; and the armies of Iraq and Syria are no longer a threat. Even in 1973, the Arab objectives in the war were limited, while from Israel's perspective, the Sinai and the Golan Heights provided strategic depth that enabled it to halt the surprise attack. If such an attack had been carried out from the 1967 border, it could have destroyed Israel. The only potential existential threat is the Iranian nuclear threat, which at this stage has not been realized.

The most dramatic change as a result of the political and territorial outcomes of the Six Day War was the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an issue that is at the core of Israel's existence. The Six Day War highlighted the Palestinian issue as a singular conundrum, with territorial and national dimensions that were mostly ignored prior to 1967. The war made it possible to classify and compartmentalize the Palestinian issue as a separate problem, rather than as part of the conflict between Israel on the one hand and Jordan and Egypt on the other. This process began in 1967, continued first with the recognition by the Arab countries of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians in 1968, and later with the severance of Gaza from Egypt in the peace agreement with Israel in 1977, and peaked with Jordan's renunciation of claims to sovereignty over Judea and Samaria in 1988. The Palestinian problem became Israel's responsibility. The negative significance of this development is the diminished ability to arrive at a solution to the issue at the initiative of the Arab countries.

Nonetheless, the current reality also offers a historic opportunity to achieve peace that did not exist fifty years ago, when the Khartoum summit of Arab leaders prevented the war's outcomes from evolving into a peace process and historic reconciliation. The sides needed the Yom Kippur War, the "seventh year of the war," in order to underscore that peace is preferable to war and show willingness to move in the direction of compromise.

Currently, Israel is a regional superpower surrounded by a divided Arab world, and it has a historic opportunity to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Such an agreement will bring it closer to the Sunni Arab world, which desires it as an ally against the Iranian threat. The key to forming an alliance with the Sunni Arab world against the Iranian efforts to achieve hegemony and nuclear capability is to resolve the conflict with

the Palestinians, or at least exhibit a genuine desire, backed up by action, to move toward a negotiated solution. The correct approach to the Palestinians can lead to a peace agreement, even if only a partial one, which will avoid another round of war and the need to pay a moral price that violates Jewish and Zionist values.

## **Conclusion**

Already from the final stages of the War of Independence, and likewise since the Six Day War, Israel's society and its leadership have debated the character and borders of the state. There is irreducible tension among the five main components of Israel's national security DNA: the ancient right to the Land of Israel and the right of the Jews to a state; maximum security as a response to the existential fear among the Jewish people; the demographic factor and the reluctance to rule over another people; an understanding of the importance of international legitimacy; and an uncompromising desire for peace.

David Ben-Gurion clarified the issue by pointing to two elements that will ensure the existence of the State of Israel: "strength and the justice of its claim." Since the Six Day War, Israel has become stronger, but its claim has become less just. Fifty years after the war, Israel has an opportunity that should not be missed: to arrive at a more optimal balance of the five components of national security and to reinforce the integration of its strength and the justice of its claim. The reformulation of an updated security concept is a necessary step in this direction. Alongside the traditional pillars of its security policy—deterrence, early warning, decision, and defense—it is essential that Israel likewise include legitimacy and peace.