

# **The Renewed Debate Over Partition: The Effects of the Six Day War on Israeli Politics and Israel's International Status**

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The Six Day War dramatically transformed the State of Israel's strategic position in the Middle East. From a small country just able to protect itself and maintain its existence despite the dangers from all its neighbors—who enjoyed Soviet support and petroleum wealth—Israel became a regional superpower with undeniable military superiority. The war made it clear to the Arab world, although not always explicitly, that it was not capable of destroying the State of Israel. Even the difficulties Israel encountered in the Yom Kippur War did not fundamentally change this fact. The Six Day War put Israel on the map; it provided Israel with strategic depth, breadth for maneuvering, and a status that it previously did not have within world opinion, nor among international policy makers and the world's Jewish communities. This nonetheless came with a price—the severing of diplomatic relations with the Soviet bloc, followed by the African countries—but the benefits far outweighed the costs according to any measure.

Apart from these elements, discussed in dozens, if not hundreds, of books and articles published in Israel and abroad, the Six Day War and its results had far-reaching implications for Israel's political discourse and internal structure, as well as its international status. Although it was not Israel's intention, the war resulted in reigniting the discussion of partitioning Palestine. Partition was a main point of disagreement in pre-State Israel and within the Zionist

movement during the critical years between the recommendations of the Peel Commission (in 1938) and the partition decision of the UN General Assembly on the November 29, 1947. A high level of apprehension on the eve of the Six Day War followed by the extent of the subsequent victory distracted the Israeli public from this process, whose significance gradually became clear and was not completely internalized.

### **The Question of Partition after the War of Independence**

The debate over partition, which had divided the Zionist movement, culminated with the War of Independence in practice if not in theory. The need to defend the young and weak country, the challenge of mass aliya, and the ingathering of the Jewish communities pushed the argument to the sidelines of the political discourse. Even those who opposed partition, particularly the Revisionist Right, accepted the reality created by the War of Independence as a historical verdict, which had favored the Jewish people after the horrors of the Holocaust. The public pushed aside the geographic concept of Mandatory Palestine to which Zionism aspired, in favor of the concept of the State of Israel, which symbolized the renewal of sovereignty in the historical homeland of the Jewish people.

The supporters of partition at the time used two opposing arguments to justify their support: universalist principles on the one hand and realpolitik considerations on the other. In the universalist context, they claimed that the demand for a state was based on the Jewish people's right to self-determination and that when they sought that right, they could not deny it to others, specifically the Arab population in Palestine. In the realpolitik context, the establishment of a Hebrew state would clearly only be possible with international backing—political, diplomatic, legal, and even military—which would not have been provided had the Zionist movement demanded sovereignty over all of Palestine and over the then Arab majority. These two types of justifications tipped the balance of the debate within the Zionist movement. The achievement of independence in 1948, as well as the results of the war, confirmed—after the fact—the pre-State Jewish community's willingness to agree to a compromise.

The Revisionist Right never formally approved a decision that violated its support for Greater Israel, but its political behavior in practice demonstrated that it also viewed creating a state in the partitioned Palestine as a tremendous historical achievement for the Jewish people. Between 1949 and 1967, none

of the political parties on the right in Israel sought to change the ceasefire lines by launching a war to liberate the territory of Mandate Palestine that remained under Arab control. Neither was there any demand to liberate the Old City of Jerusalem or the Western Wall, Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs or Jericho and Nablus, even though Jordan did not fulfill its commitments to provide free access to the holy places or to Mount Scopus. Menahem Begin did not make a single speech demanding this, and the Herut movement, which led mass protests often verging on violence against the reparations agreement with Germany, never demonstrated in favor of liberating parts of the homeland that remained outside the borders of the State of Israel. The existential and international struggle, the need to maintain a hold on the territory, even just West Jerusalem, and the challenge of the ingathering of the exiles overshadowed the aspirations that assumingly the Herut movement had never abandoned; nonetheless, the issue was not a focus of political disagreement during the first nineteen years of the State's existence.

Furthermore, it can be assumed with a degree of certainty that if the Arab countries had been willing to convert the ceasefire agreements (which were temporary by their nature and language) into a permanent peace agreement with the State of Israel on the basis of the 1949 demarcation lines, a majority of the public and the Knesset would have agreed and would have viewed this as the second most significant achievement of Zionism, after the creation of the state itself. Apparently, the Herut movement would have voted against such an agreement, which would have been accompanied by fiery speeches, or perhaps it would have abstained (since it is difficult to vote against a peace agreement that would have made permanent the existence of the Jewish state and its legitimacy). In any case, such an agreement would have been accepted as the historic approval of Israel's victory in the War of Independence. In other words, the internal debate over partition reached its end, and moreover, the geographic and demographic outcomes of the War of Independence were more convenient for the State of Israel than the borders delineated by the UN Partition Plan.

### **The Six Day War and Its Effects**

All this changed following the Six Day War. Immediately after the war, the public as well as the policy makers expressed two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, it was believed that after such a decisive victory, the Arab

world would begin to understand that it was unable to defeat Israel and would be willing to sign a peace agreement with Israel; on the other hand, given what occurred after the Sinai Campaign in 1956, many believed that international pressure would force Israel to return to the ceasefire lines without a peace agreement.

Neither of the two scenarios were realized and over the years, a new status quo became increasingly permanent, even though within Israel and the international community, this status quo has not been considered stable or even legitimate. Nonetheless, Israel's control over the territory of Palestine created a new reality, changing the consciousness and the political discourse of the state. It took time until the public realized the significance of the new situation and revived the debate over partition, even though the conditions were completely different than those of the pre-1948 debate. Israel now controlled all of the territory of Palestine, and it became clear that a vast difference existed between demanding territory that a country does not control and the readiness to give it up when it is already under that country's control.

The debate over partition was renewed this time from a position of strength. Revival of the debate began with a seemingly technical question: Are these occupied territories or liberated territories? The question took on a deeper meaning when the West Bank became Judea and Samaria, names that had not been used during the period of the British Mandate, which were then referred to as "the triangle," i.e., Nablus, Jenin and Tulkarem, and Mount Hebron.

There were not only terminological arguments. The excitement after June 1967 that encompassed all sectors of the Israeli public and the emotional encounter not only with the Old City, the Western Wall and the Tomb of the Patriarchs but also with what was historically the birthplace of the Jewish people left its mark on politics as well. The Herut movement, whose representatives sat in the National Unity Government prior to the Six Day War, discovered that their positions—which would have been anachronistic and even eccentric if expressed before 1967—had become reality. The Western Wall, the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and Jericho, which were barely present in Israeli consciousness between 1949 and 1967 (except in Bible or history classes), had become physically accessible and real.

This began the political upheaval that rejuvenated the Right and helped it to gain power and remain there over time. As mentioned, there is a major difference between not launching a war in order to liberate the Western

Wall or the Tomb of the Patriarchs and not being willing to give them up once they are already under one's control. In the reality of 2017—fifty years and two generations after the Six Day War—giving up parts of the historic homeland of the Jewish people as opposed to making do with a state in only part of Palestine, as was the reality prior to 1967, are two completely different issues.

At the same time, the parties of the Left, which since 1967 expressed their willingness for a territorial compromise and subsequently also agreed to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, gradually and unintentionally transformed their image among a significant segment of the public. Mapai, which was established as the union of three workers' parties and was succeeded by the Labor party, had identified since 1948 with the establishment of the state and with its defense, as well as the impressive achievement of mass aliya (with all of its flaws). David Ben-Gurion was perceived, sometimes in almost messianic terms, as embodying the Israel's independence and its sovereignty as well as the concern for the security of the state and its citizens. In the new post-1967 reality, as the parties of the Left fashioned a two-state policy, they came to be perceived—though not all at once—as not being particularly patriotic, while the Right, which prior to 1967 was considered irrelevant, became the main flag bearer of Zionism and representative of political realism.

The change that occurred after 1976 in the political orientation of the National Religious Party (NRP) should also be noted. The NRP always had moderate and prudent political positions and therefore was a convenient coalition partner for Mapai. When the activism of Ben-Gurion clashed with the relative moderation of Moshe Sharett, the NRP generally supported Sharett and was always cautious not to identify the State of Israel with realizing the messianic vision, which remained for the foreseeable future in the hands of God.

The exhilaration following the Six Day War gradually transformed the NRP and particularly its younger generation into the vanguard of the political right. Gush Emunim became the symbol of settlement in Judea and Samaria and of the determination to not give up territory that is part of the homeland, which now also took on a clear aura of messianic redemption. Thus, the NRP and its successor, HaBayit HaYehudi party, became the natural partners of the Likud and eventually its most radical partner in realizing the vision of Greater Israel.

## **The Effects of the War on the International Community**

Just as the new post-1967 reality gradually changed the political discourse in Israel to the Right's advantage, it also affected Israel's international image and the perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict among the public and policy makers. Israel's spectacular victory in the Six Day War received almost unanimous support in the democratic West. The fact that the Soviet Union backed the Arab countries only strengthened the support for Israel, which was perceived as threatened by both the Arabs and the Soviets. The Western media reported sympathetically and sometimes emotionally about the unification of Jerusalem, because of its historic and religious dimension. Israel's readiness for peace and the adamant Arab refusal to negotiate, which was manifested by the "three no's" at the Arab summit in Khartoum (no to peace with Israel, no to recognition of Israel, and no to negotiations with Israel), only reinforced Israel's support and the understanding of its policies, while criticizing Arab aggression. Moreover, even though the UN Resolution 242 declared explicitly that the acquisition of territory by force was not acceptable, Israel's occupation of territory in 1967 was perceived as a temporary situation until conditions for a peace agreement would ripen. The fact that Israel did not annex the territories (apart from East Jerusalem) was also perceived as an implicit Israeli agreement to the provisional nature of the occupation, until peace could be achieved and the issue could be decided through negotiations between the sides.

The status quo, however, became increasingly permanent as Jewish settlement in the territories expanded and Palestinian opposition to continued Israeli control intensified. As a result, the way that the conflict was perceived in the democratic West gradually shifted, particularly with respect to its Israeli-Palestinian component. The repeated victory of the Right in the elections in Israel, the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and the coming to power of parties and movements that opposed the Oslo Accords reinforced the perception that Israel's occupation of the territories was not, in fact, temporary and was not motivated only by security considerations; on the contrary, continuing the occupation of the territories and their Palestinian inhabitants was driven by fundamental ideological reasons.

The governments and public opinion in the West condemned Palestinian terrorism against Israel, but countries such as Britain and France, which had suffered from terrorism in their colonies—Kenya and Cyprus and in Algeria and Indochina, respectively—and in the end gave up their control,

viewed the situation in the territories occupied by Israel as being similar to their own experiences. There is also no doubt that the accelerated settlement effort in the territories reinforced the tendency of these countries to see the situation as analogous to their own colonial history.

At the same, the support for Israel in Western public opinion began to diminish, which to some extent was the result of the media. If prior to the Six Day War the West had been subjected to Arab claims that Israel would soon be destroyed and its inhabitants thrown into the sea, decades of media exposure to events in which Israel appeared as a strong military superpower ruling over a civilian Palestinian population suffering under military occupation had reversed the equation of David and Goliath. In other words, the inter-state struggle between tiny Israel threatened by an alliance of Arab countries had transformed into a conflict between Israel, perceived as an occupying superpower, and the weak Palestinian people who were being denied the right of self-determination.

The parallel sometimes drawn between Israel and South Africa was not at first widely accepted, except on the extreme margins of the radical Left. However, the reality in which different laws apply to Israelis than to Palestinians in Judea and Samaria could not be accepted over the long run even by Israel's strongest supporters. In contrast to the claims sometimes made by Israeli officials, there is no delegitimization of Israel in Western public opinion nor among policy makers; nonetheless, there is no consensus about the legitimacy of continued Israeli rule over millions of Palestinian nor does public opinion in the West indicate any support for the growing settlement enterprise or the massive construction in the territories.

In contrast to its image of the underdog in the past, Israel is now increasingly perceived as a violent bully. The international fight against terror, which Israel is part of, cannot ignore the fact that there is a difference between a terrorist in London or Paris, who is sometimes a full citizen in his country, and a Palestinian, who, along with his family and his people, is under Israeli rule. While there is no support for terror in the West, the values of Western democracies do not allow them to espouse continued Israeli rule in the territories. The fact that the anti-Islamic Far Right or even semi-fascist groups in the West sometimes defend Israel only exacerbates the gap between Israel and the Western democracies.

This situation, of course, has far-reaching strategic implications. Israel is without a doubt the strongest power in the Middle East. Despite the

challenge of Palestinian terror and in contrast to the situation prior to 1967, there is currently no existential Arab threat to Israel. Nonetheless, the view that the Palestinians are an oppressed people and that Israel is the oppressor has implications for Israel's international standing, particularly among intellectual circles in the West (which, unlike the general public, are interested in international issues).

Undoubtedly, many Jews, and especially young ones, who support the State of Israel and its existence find it difficult to identify with a policy of continued rule over the Palestinians and sometimes choose to cut their ties with Israel and without any public criticism of its policies. In this way, the important political asset of diaspora Jewry, especially in the United States, of lending support for Israel has weakened as a component in Israel's strategic resilience and its power.

Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, which have survived despite the upheavals in the Arab world, and the weakening of enemies, such as Syria and Iraq, have led to the current situation in which danger of a military confrontation with an Arab army no longer exists. At the same time, the continued occupation of the territories and the construction of settlements have led to the loss of support for Israel in the West. Although Israel as an isolated fortress can defeat its enemies, one of the values of Zionism is to be part of the family of nations. This value will be compromised if an armed confrontation develops in the future and the support for Israel in the West remains only lukewarm. This is in contrast to the sweeping support it received in 1967, which constituted a major strategic asset for Israel in its presentation of the Arab countries as the aggressor.

Attempts to boycott Israel by the BDS (Boycott, Delegitimization, and Sanctions) movement, for the most part, have failed and will continue to do so in the future. Nonetheless, their very existence and the attention they receive harms Israel. Although some of the groups active in the boycott movement do not distinguish between Israel's policies and occupation in the territories and the existence of the State of Israel and deny the validity of both, in general, the boycott movement focuses on Israel's control of the territories, rather than on the existence of the state. Moreover, a unanimous condemnation of the settlements by the UN Security Council perhaps does not have any immediate operative effects, but it undoubtedly causes harm to Israel. Connecting this phenomenon to anti-Semitism is, of course, absurd, since it does not explain why Israel enjoyed widespread support in 1967,



while today it is widely criticized even by its friends. It is doubtful that there is more anti-Semitism today than in 1967, and even if the number of reported anti-Semitic incidents has increased, this reflects the overt manifestations of it and do not necessarily imply a change in its nature or scope.

This situation involves a cruel paradox: On the one hand, the Six Day War led to the renewal of the internal debate in Israel over the partition of Palestine and strengthened the opponents of partition and the believers in Greater Israel. It also brought them to power and enabled them—almost without any internal opposition—to continue the multipronged settlement effort in the territories. On the other hand, that same reality weakened Israel's international position, while the support it received in 1967 was replaced by criticism, even among its friends.

In addition, an internal development, which has external implications, is the significant change in the character of the IDF—due to the continued Israeli occupation of the territories—from an army that defends the homeland to one in which most of its soldiers are involved in policing in the territories. Prior to 1967, the number of conscientious objectors was miniscule, and the army learned to deal with these few cases wisely and with understanding. The current reality is different, and the number of conscientious objectors who refuse to serve in the territories is rising (as is the number of conscientious objectors on the Right who oppose the evacuation of settlements). The legal and administrative answer to this phenomenon has not totally met the challenge since it does not relate to its public aspect and the ramifications of such cases in Israel and abroad. As occurred in the United States during the Vietnam War, the refusal to serve in the army undoubtedly undermines the country's national resilience and strategic power. Moreover, what happened in the trial of Elor Azariah, who was accused of killing an already neutralized terrorist, is the result of the continued Israeli occupation and points to the dilemma of a country whose army not only defends it against external enemies but also must cope with the friction resulting from daily contact with a civilian population that wishes to be liberated from the occupation.

## **Conclusion**

The Six Day War was clearly a defensive war. In 1967, Israel went to war to defend itself against Arab armies, led by Nasser's Egypt, which threatened its very existence. The war was not meant to occupy territory or to liberate parts of the homeland that remained under Jordanian or Egyptian control

after the War of Independence. But like any other historic process, the Six Day War was accompanied by unexpected and unplanned consequences, which dialectally changed the balance of power and the way in which it is perceived both in Israel and abroad. Israel emerged strengthened from the war and the Arab dream of destroying it was shattered. But the results of that war, whose effects continue to be felt fifty years later, changed the landscape and the political discourse in Israel, brought to power individuals, movements, and ideologies that were marginal up until 1967, and presented a serious challenge to Israel's international position.