Mistakes of '67

By [Amir Afsai](#)

For most Israelis, June 1967 marks a pivotal moment in the history of the Jewish people. The spectacular victory of a small and threatened nation over the daunting armies of three Arab states reshaped Israel's self-image and substituted self-confidence for anxiety, ambition for insecurity.[1] After centuries of persecution and two decades of precarious nationhood, the Jews had reestablished themselves as permanent residents in their homeland. They now commanded the awe of their Arab neighbors, the solidarity of the Jewish Diaspora, and the respect and admiration of the world.[2]

For the Arab residents of the West Bank and Gaza territories, however, the Six-Day War came and went without greatly affecting their situation. Their standard of living continued to stagnate, soaring fertility rates continued to strain scarce resources, no capable leadership movement organized to offer a hopeful future, and public opinion in the Arab world proved largely indifferent to their plight. Indeed, for years the only ones with a genuine concern for the Palestinians were the Israelis.[3]

While a fierce debate raged in Israel over what to do with the inhabitants of the newly acquired territories, there was less uncertainty surrounding what to do with the territories themselves. Policies of religious discrimination in effect since Ottoman rule were terminated, Jewish communities that had been decimated under the British Mandate were restored, and there ensued a revived interest in archaeology and Jewish history. The prevailing wisdom asserted that the Arabs would resign themselves to Israel's sovereignty and that Israel would be free to exercise its will with minimal opposition.[4]

That wisdom has since been renounced. The unforeseen emergence of a Palestinian national consciousness, its rapid mutation into a savage terroristic force, and a veritable demographic explosion challenged Israel's blasé attitudes. In response to changing realities, Israel gradually increased its military presence in the territories, concomitantly seeking out a partner among the Palestinians with which to discuss and conclude a final settlement. But the pattern of Palestinian violence and Israeli retaliation persistently defied every attempt at a breakthrough.

In the years since that war, a perennial motif in Israel's press has been the question *What if?* What could Israel have done differently in order to avert the collision of '87? As recurrent as is the question, so are the answers. Typically, they reduce to three: "withdraw," "expel," or "absorb" – retreat to pre-1967 lines, relocate the stateless Arabs to neighboring countries, or naturalize them. Underlying these formulas is a rationale wherein territory is the main obstacle to peace. The economic, religious, and social dimensions of the conflict are either ignored completely or downplayed as being derivative of the territorial dispute. This equation of territorial concession with peace has become virtually axiomatic, to the point where it is hardly possible to distinguish the one from the other anymore. There is, however, no direct causal relation between the former and the latter.

According to one of Israel's leading financial commentators, Sever Plocker, the Six-Day War represented a unique opportunity both for Israel and the Palestinians. Plocker describes what the future could have been like had Israel implemented a bold economic initiative in the territories retained after 1967 instead of following Moshe Dayan's prescription for indurating the conflict. Among other rewards such an

initiative would have redounded to both sides, the Palestinians would have been on the road to economic growth and self-sufficiency, with a per capita GDP in the area of $6,000 and capital flowing in from throughout the Arab world; Israel would not be dependent on the Palestinians for cheap labor and would not have to contend with an increasingly indigent and frustrated population; favorable economic conditions would have summoned forth a pragmatic, modern leadership, as opposed to the extremism embodied in Yasser Arafat and Hamas; and the refugee crisis would gradually have resolved itself.[5]

Moshe Dayan's decision to relinquish religious administration of the Temple Mount to the *Waqf* also had grave consequences through the years. What Dayan intended as a gesture of trust and reconciliation was translated on the receiving end as a sign of impotence and surrender. Today the Mount is a symbol of Arab, Islamic and Palestinian intransigence and triumphalism – and rightly so, from their perspective. Israel does not exercise its sovereignty on the site, does not allow Jews to pray anywhere on it, and does not restrict Muslim construction operations that are systematically destroying priceless remnants of the Jews' past.

The settlement enterprise in the manner it was pursued was yet another recipe for disaster. Had the Jewish settlers been fluent in Arabic, they may have been able to forge ties with their Arab neighbors in a way that would forestall suspicion on both sides and facilitate cooperation. Rather than be perceived as colonists, the settlers could have become an organic part of the nascent Palestinian society. Once the Palestinians demonstrated their capacity for democratic self-rule, the Jews could continue living in the Palestinian state as a minority on equal footing with the Arab majority – a mirror image of the situation in Israel.

Israel's political leadership missed a golden opportunity to put the Palestinians on a course toward a secular, modern and functional society. By neglecting the Palestinian economy, abetting religious fundamentalism, and alienating the settlers from their Arab neighbors, the stage was being set for the first intifada. Today's imbroglio in Iraq is the product of the same oversights that plagued Israel after the Six-Day War: an almost exclusive focus on security with minimal attention to economic and social considerations. There is no doubt that security concerns deserve to be top priority, but they should serve as a means and not an end. Stability is a vehicle for change, not a long-term strategy in itself.

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[1] Beginning in 1965 with a series of Palestinian infiltrations, primarily from Jordan and Syria, Israeli morale was steadily plummeting. France's drift away from Israel under de Gaulle, especially after the 1962 decision to withdraw from Algeria, together with increasing cooperation between Egypt and the USSR, contributed to Israel's growing sense of isolation.

[2] This awe was all the more acute owing to the fact that on the eve of the Six-Day War the Arabs were thoroughly convinced they were about to witness Israel's annihilation.

[3] With few exceptions, the Arab states believed they could reap political profit by perpetuating the Palestinian refugee crisis. The international community, for reasons of its own, effectively played into the Arabs' scheme by creating UNRWA.

[4] In his memoirs, Moshe Dayan writes: "All of the recommendations, without exception, were based on a presumption – which I felt to be unrealistic – that Israel could, in light of its victory and of the Arabs' defeat, determine its borders as well as the future of the Palestinian Arabs under its control." Dayan himself, meanwhile, imbued with romantic perceptions of the Palestinians as a proud and noble people, believed a policy of laissez faire would encourage Palestinian cooperation and acceptance of Israel's right to exist.

[5] http://www.ynet.co.il/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506,L-2783417,00.html