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The Six-Day War: 40 Years On

By Dr. Jonathan Spyer*

The Six-Day War of 1967 was a watershed moment in the history of Israel and the modern Middle East. In the war, which raged from June 5-June 10, 1967, Israel comprehensively defeated the armies of three Arab states - Jordan, Egypt and Syria. The capture of the Old City of Jerusalem and the West Bank enabled Jews once again to pray freely at Judaism's holy sites in these areas.

The war also played a vital role in impressing upon the perception of Arab leaders that Israel was a permanent presence on the Middle Eastern map - not a temporary aberration soon to be destroyed. The slow recognition of this fact, along with the acquisition of territories to be used as 'bargaining chips' in negotiations in return for peace and recognition, laid the basis for the commencement of the Middle East peace process beginning in the 1970s.

The subsequent peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan thus derive from the victory of 1967. The war led to the eclipse of the bellicose pan-Arab nationalism of President Nasser of Egypt and his allies, for whom the destruction of Israel had been a central goal. Israel's 1967 victory fired the imaginations of Jews throughout the world, leading to a greater centrality for Israel and Zionism in Jewish life.

At the same time, the victory of 1967, and the capture of the West Bank led to the beginning of the long-standing, agonised debate regarding strategies for peacemaking which has dominated Israeli politics and policymaking ever since.

The war led to the capturing by Israel of sites of deep and profound importance in Jewish history. It also led to the beginning of Israeli administration over a large, dissatisfied Palestinian population which the State of Israel could not absorb while retaining its Jewish and democratic character.

Finding the correct formula for maintaining Israel's Jewish and democratic character, granting self-government to the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and maintaining Israel's security and deterrent stance have been key issues facing Israel ever since.

Forty years on, Israel has secured peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan as well as an interim agreement with the PLO for the administration of the Palestinian Authority. Diplomatic relations were also established with Mauritania. The stance established in 1967 of Israel as a country well able to defend itself if necessary remains solid. Israel has grown exponentially in terms of its economy and its society. At the same time, the search for a lasting peace and reconciliation between Israel and the Arab and Islamic worlds continues.

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