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The Six-Day War and the Mid-East Peace Process

By Cameron Brown*

OVERVIEW

- Many refer to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as 'the root cause' of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. But Israel's overwhelming victory in 1967 made possible the Arab-Israeli Peace Process on the basis of 'land for peace.'
- Before the Six Day War, the Arab-Israeli Conflict revolved around Israel's right to exist—and had little to do with specific boundaries.
- Following the war, much of the Arab World slowly began to realize that total victory would be impossible and that the only choice was a compromise peace deal whereby Israel would give back occupied territory in exchange for recognition and peace.
- Thus, if one day there will be a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement, it will be the result of the 1967 war.

PRE-1967 ARAB DENIAL OF ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST

Before 1967, the Arab world had always remained adamant that there could be no compromise with Jewish nationalism, that Israel must be destroyed and that any new state must be Arab in character and part of the larger Arab world.

This was expressed in nearly every pre-1948 statement on the subject, and continued well after the birth of Israel in 1948. The following are but a few examples of many:

- In its memorandum presented to the King-Crane Commission, the General Syrian Congress (July 2, 1919) stated 'We oppose the pretensions of the Zionists to create a Jewish commonwealth in the southern part of Syria, known as Palestine, and oppose Zionist migration to any part of our country...'

- In the evidence submitted by the Arab Office in Jerusalem to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in March, 1946, the authors argued that: ‘The whole Arab people is unalterably opposed to the attempt to impose Jewish immigration and settlement upon it, and ultimately to establish a Jewish State in Palestine.’
- On May 28, 1967, during a press conference, Gamal Abd al-Nasser stated clearly, ‘We will not accept any possibility of co-existence with Israel.’
- On May 26, 1967, Nasser, in a speech to Egyptian trade unionists, said ‘The battle will be a general one and our basic objective will be to destroy Israel.’
- The previous day, on May 25, 1967, Cairo Radio announced ‘The Arab people is firmly resolved to wipe Israel off the map and to restore the honour of the Arabs of Palestine.’

ISRAEL OFFERS 'LAND FOR PEACE' FOLLOWING WAR

After Israel won the 1967 War, it found itself in possession of land several times greater than its own territory.

- On June 19, 1967, only a little over a week after the war had ended, the Israeli unity government—including Menachem Begin—passed a decision, then transmitted to the Americans, stating that Israel was prepared to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and the Golan Heights to Syria, in return for signed peace treaties.
- Separate negotiations would then be conducted regarding the future of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and the refugee issue.

ARABS INITIALLY REJECT OFFER

When the Arab heads of state adopted their resolution at the end of the Arab summit in Khartoum on September 1, 1967, their initial response was as hardline as before the war.

- In setting their strategy for ‘[eliminating] the effects of the aggression and to ensure the withdrawal of the aggressive Israeli forces from the Arab lands’, it was declared this must be ‘done within the framework of the main principles by which the Arab States abide, namely, no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it’.

LAND FOR PEACE WITH EGYPT: THE PEACE PROCESS BEGINS

- Egypt's Anwar al-Sadat was the first Arab leader to break with this Arab consensus and sue for peace. In November 1977, Sadat took the dramatic step of flying to Israel and appearing before the Israeli Knesset to plead for peace.
- Within 10 months, on September 17, 1978, the Camp David Frameworks for Peace had been signed. Only a few months later, on March 26, 1979, the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty was signed. Egypt received the entirety of Sinai in return for full peace.
- Unfortunately, the agreement was rejected by the PLO, Syria, and the rest of the Arab League, which then proceeded to boycott Egypt.

PEACE PROCESS ON SIMILAR BASIS WITH PALESTINIANS LAUNCHED

- The initial change in the Palestinian position became evident in November 1988, when in declaring independence for the State of Palestine, the PLO declared willingness to seek a 'permanent peace' which accepted the territorial integrity of other states, and to renounce the use of violence. This acceptance made feasible a compromise peace between Israel and the PLO.
- Initial peace talks then began in Madrid in 1991, though the most significant progress began with the Oslo Accords, signed on September 13, 1993. This was followed by the Cairo Agreement on March 4, 1994, and the Interim Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians (Oslo II) on September 28, 1995.
- As part of the several attempts to come to a final status agreement, most importantly at Camp David in the summer of 2000, Israel offered to withdraw from all of the Gaza Strip and between 90-96 percent of the West Bank. Unfortunately, Palestinians rejected these offers and returned to the use of violence.

LAND FOR PEACE WITH JORDAN

- Following the opening provided by the Palestinians with the Oslo Accords, on October 26, 1994, a peace treaty was signed between Israel and Jordan. Israel officially withdrew from occupied Jordanian land, though the treaty allowed for private Israeli use of the land.

PEACE PROCESS WITH SYRIANS LAUNCHED

- Negotiations began at the Madrid Conference in 1991, but began in earnest in 1994. At three points, under Israeli PMs Rabin, Netanyahu, and Barak, Israel offered to withdraw from all or almost all of the Golan Heights—that is to the international boundary, but not the 1967 line, in which Syria occupied Israeli territory.
- In March 2000, Hafiz al-Asad rejected Ehud Barak's offer for full withdrawal, saying that he could only accept a return to the 1967 lines.

In 1967, Israel demonstrated to the Arab world that the Jewish state was capable of successfully resisting attempts to destroy it. Since then, Israel's strategy has centred on trading some of the land assets gained in this war in return for peaceful relations with neighbouring countries. This strategy was made feasible by the extent of the 1967 victory. Hence - the 1967 Six Day War is the 'parent' of the Middle East peace process.

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