# Fifty years since the Six Day Arab-Israeli War

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The Six Day War ended on June 11, 1967, with Israel's crushing defeat of the numerically superior forces of its Arab neighbours and the redrawing of Israel's borders established in 1949.

It was a watershed moment in the evolution of Israel and the wider region.

The war stemmed from Israel's inherent unviability as a small religious and capitalist state, established in 1948 through the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, surrounded by hostile neighbours, with few natural resources, little water and isolated from the wider regional economy.

The Israeli establishment had from the start refused to accept the 1949 armistice line known today as the "Green Line" or the "June 4, 1967 borders." It prepared to take advantage of any opportunity provided by its Arab neighbours, to engage in war and expand its territory, or to provoke one itself, as numerous official papers, articles and books have documented.

In May 1967, Egypt's nationalist ruler Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser unwittingly provided that opportunity. Nasser had led the coup that had overthrown Egypt's pro-British monarchy in 1952. He had become the recognised leader of the Arab world and the anti-imperialist Non-Aligned Movement, thanks to his programme of economic and social reform at home and opposition to the reactionary Arab monarchies in Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. He promoted a pan-Arab movement using pseudo-socialist rhetoric, and led the opposition to Israel.

Israel had worked for more than a decade to overthrow him, including the joint operation with Britain and France to invade Egypt and seize control of the Suez Canal in 1956, which failed because of US imperialism's opposition to the re-entry of the former colonial powers into the Middle East, which it sought to dominate.

Numerous incidents between 1966 and 1967 on Israel's border with Syria, arising out of raids by Palestinian guerrillas, culminated in Israeli attacks on six Syrian planes in April and threats to invade Syria, with which Egypt had a defence treaty. Nasser deployed Egyptian troops in the Sinai desert, demanded that United Nations peacekeepers leave the Sinai, and closed the Straits of Tiran at the entrance to the Red Sea, bottling up Israeli shipping at its port of Eilat.

Nasser, far from preparing for war, was simply grandstanding, to the point that he did nothing to protect his air force. All the evidence suggests that he did not want, much less expect, a war.

Nevertheless, Israel seized the opportunity. In the weeks leading up to the war, Tel Aviv whipped up a climate of hysteria, presenting the conflict as an existential crisis that prefigured Israel's Jews being "driven into the sea" and invoked the biblical parallel of an Israeli David versus an Arab Goliath.

Nothing could have been further from than the truth. Such were Israel's military preparations that in 1966, the CIA had predicted that in the event of war, which it viewed as highly likely, Israel would be able to destroy the Egyptian air force "within days or weeks." It would be able occupy Sinai, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, albeit with heavy casualties.

The CIA forecast was only wrong to the extent that Israel's dead numbered 776.

Just this week, the *New York Times* revealed the extraordinary levels that Israel was prepared to go. It reported that Israeli officials had even discussed setting off a nuclear device in the Sinai Desert as a warning to Egyptian and other Arab forces, if Israel should be in danger of losing the 1967 conflict. They believed it would deter Egypt and the allied Arab states—Syria, Iraq and Jordan—from making a final push against Israel. In the event, Israel won the war so quickly that the plan, code-named Samson, was never put into operation.

On June 5,1967, after weeks of a frenzied media campaign and having secured Washington's agreement, Israel mounted a first strike against Egypt. Its planes went in under the radar and wiped out almost the entire Egyptian air force on the ground.

Israel then sent in its ground forces against Egypt, taking the Suez Canal, and then swiftly moved against Jordan and Syria before it acceded to a ceasefire brokered by the UN. In the space of six days, Israeli troops defeated the Arab armies and seized the West Bank of the Jordan River, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and Syria's Golan Heights, which it occupies to this day, and the Sinai desert up to the Suez Canal.

The victory enormously elevated Israel's prestige and status. The generals were feted as heroes in Israel. Little was said about their war crimes. One of the most egregious was the army's treatment of Egyptian prisoners. Many were left to die of heat and thirst in the desert. Others were rounded up and killed en masse. In parliament, General Moshe Dayan denied that their deaths were caused maliciously, but he later acknowledged that some 16,000 Egyptian soldiers were killed "most of them in retreat."

The Israeli air force also attacked a US spy vessel, the USS Liberty, in the final days of the war, killing 34 and injuring 171 crewmembers, supposedly in error. While the US and Israel have released some of the official documents relating to the affair, the incident still remains shrouded in secrecy. According to *Body of Secrets* by the investigative journalist James Bamford, this was because the Liberty had monitored communications traffic that would prove Israel had slaughtered 1,000 prisoners at El Arish in North Sinai.

The war, far from bringing a new period of peace and prosperity, brought oppression, further wars and social misery to working people in both Israel and the Palestinian territories. It created a wave of some 200,000-250,000 refugees in addition to those of 1947-49 who, with their descendants, now number some 8.5 million. It brought the Arab population in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Egypt's Sinai Peninsula (returned to Egypt's rule in 1981) and the Syrian Golan under direct Israeli rule.

Within days of the war's end, Israel illegally annexed East Jerusalem and within six months had built ten Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, including two in Sinai, in violation of international law. Since then, the 50-year-long occupation has spawned 126 settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan, inhabited by nearly 800,000 settlers, many heavily armed, extreme nationalists and religious zealots. Almost 10 percent of Israel's population now lives beyond the Green Line.

Such control and dispossession of the Arab population could only be maintained by imposing military dictatorship. This became ever more brutal as the Palestinians resisted, particularly during the intifadas that started in 1987 and 2000, culminating in the murderous assaults on the West Bank in 2002 and Gaza in 2008-9, 2012 and 2014.

More than 50,000 Palestinians have been killed since the 1967 war, and 800,000 imprisoned. Palestinians have been subjected to land seizures, expulsions, the demolition of their homes, detention without trial, shoot-to-kill policies, torture and targeted assassinations.

The brutal subjugation of the Occupied Territories in furtherance of the goal of creating a Greater Israel had a major impact on Israeli political, economic and social life.

Despite earlier differences that had driven the main political factions—the Labour Zionists and the Revisionists, whose political heirs are Likud and subsequent split-offs—to the point of civil war in the 1940s, they were both now committed to this expansionist policy. In government, each in turn further consolidated Israel as a military state and in so doing confirmed that democracy was incompatible with a state based upon religious exclusivity, and the expulsion and suppression of the Palestinians.

The settlements became a pole of attraction for right-wing religious fundamentalists, a thoroughly reactionary social layer with a direct vested interest in an expansionary policy. The settlers and ultra-religious groups played a key role in shifting society rightwards and providing a political base for the Likud party and its allies—not only in the struggle against the Palestinians but also politically against liberal-minded secular Jews. In part, at least, this was because they found an important champion: General Ariel Sharon, who bore political responsibility of the massacre of around 3,000 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, in the suburbs of Beirut, in September 1982.

The end of the long post-war boom in the 1970s, the mounting cost of the wars, settlements, suppression of the Palestinians and the resultant budget and trade deficits precluded social policies to alleviate the worsening plight of Israel's poor. As a result, Israel has become one of the most unequal societies of the advanced countries, riven with social, religious and ethnic divisions.

Successive governments, at the behest of the handful of billionaire families that sit atop Israel's economy, introduced a raft of free-market reforms—privatisations, cuts in social expenditure, tax windfalls for the rich—that have brought misery, unemployment, sky-high prices, particularly for housing, and poverty to increasing numbers of workers and their families.

Israel's President Reuven Rivlin acknowledged the extent of the social deprivation in both West and East Jerusalem at the official ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of Jerusalem's "reunification" (the illegal Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem). He said, "We can't sing the praises of a united Jerusalem in which 40 percent of the population live in what is the most impoverished urban area in Israel. We must not accept that 50 years after the reunification of Jerusalem, the situation of Jerusalem, capital of the State of Israel, has declined, so that it is now ranked among the lowest socioeconomic clusters in the country."

The success of the 1967 war turned Israel into the major military power in the Middle East, thanks to the backing of US imperialism, which began to provide it with ever more significant economic and military aid, now totalling about $3.8 billion a year, the highest per capita figure for any country in the world.

Washington's purpose was to create a garrison state that would suppress the revolutionary strivings of the peoples of the region and a bridgehead for extending US influence in this strategic oil-producing region.

It enabled Israel to pursue an ever more aggressive and expansionist drive against the Palestinians and their supporters outside Israel's own border: in Jordan in 1970, Lebanon in 1976-82 and 2006, as well as in the Occupied Territories.

It thus helped suppress the Arab working class, maintain decrepit regimes in power and kept the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow at bay during the Cold War. In 1967 and then in more protracted and bloody combat in 1973, Israel defeated Egypt and Syria, both of whom were armed and aided by the Soviet Union.

US aid increased after every military intervention and attack on the Palestinians. It increased after the 1993 Oslo peace talks, and again after they collapsed. It continues today when Israel faces no military threat because its purpose is to ensure military superiority.

The war signified the beginning of the end of Nasser's pan-Arab project and of the Arab regimes' goal of overthrowing Israel—which was never pursued by his successor Anwar Sadat even at the time of the 1973 October/Yom Kippur War waged in alliance with Syria, which failed to retake most of the territory seized in 1967.

One by one, the Arab states all abandoned their anti-imperialist stance. Egypt was the first to make peace with Israel in 1977-78, ensuring the isolation and defeat of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Lebanon in 1982. Not one of the Arab states came to the defence of the PLO.

Establishing the state of Israel, the Zionist movement insisted, would provide not just a safe home but one guided by a progressive social and political vision for a people who had suffered the most terrible slaughter and persecution. Its evolution into a mechanism for the systematic repression and persecution of another people has been a bitter and tragic experience, particularly as sections of the Jewish people have had a long history in every progressive movement, including the international socialist movement.

The failure of the Zionist project is only one expression of the inability of bourgeois national movements and the struggle for "self-determination" to resolve fundamental social and political problems confronting the masses of working people, which are rooted in capitalist exploitation and imperialist subjugation.

The PLO emerged in the aftermath of the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, as a genuinely popular movement seeking redress for terrible historic wrongs. But despite the heroism and sacrifice of its leaders and supporters, it could not overcome the fundamental problems confronting the Palestinian people.

Its programme represented the interests of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, which sought a national framework in which to exploit its own working class—a programme that had already failed in the Middle East. Consequently, it could never overcome the political impasse created by the treachery of the Arab regimes.

In 1993, it too ultimately sought to come to terms with Israel and establish a mini-state for the Palestinian bourgeoisie via the US-brokered Oslo Accords. Today, the Palestinian Authority, led by a handful of millionaires who are widely reviled for their corruption, ineffectiveness and subservience to Israel, polices small patches of disconnected land and desperately impoverished cities, surrounded and cut off from the outside world by Israeli troops.

In 1948, the Fourth International issued a statement, "Against the Stream," which insisted that Zionism was both utopian and reactionary. It denounced the 1947 UN decision to partition Palestine into two tiny states, saying:

"By partition a wedge is driven between the Arab and Jewish worker. The Zionist state with its provocative lines of demarcation will bring about the blossoming forth of irredentist (revenge) movements on either side. There will be fighting for an 'Arab Palestine' and for a 'Jewish state' within the historic frontiers of Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel). As a result, the chauvinistic atmosphere thus created will poison the Arab world in the Middle East and throttle the anti-imperialist fight of the masses, while Zionists and Arab feudalists will vie for imperialist favours."

It warned, "The Hebrew state can only infest the Arab East with anti-Semitism and may well turn out—as Trotsky said—a bloody trap for hundreds of thousands of Jews."

The Fourth International warned that that neither side in the Arab-Zionist conflict bore a progressive character, serving only to obscure the class antagonisms, fuel nationalistic excesses, divide the working class and strengthen imperialism. It called on the workers of both peoples to unite in a common front against imperialism and its agents. It warned Jewish workers that they would not be free and safe without doing away with religious discrimination, national isolation and subordination to imperialism.

The statement drew its remarkable prescience from Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which was confirmed in the experience of the Russian Revolution in 1917. The theory demonstrates that an oppressed people cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs and social equality—by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie. In the imperialist epoch, the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations—tasks associated in the advanced countries in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie—poses the taking of power by the working class.

This can only be achieved as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution, to place all the resources of the national and international economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

Today the only way out of the terrible impasse into which Jewish and Arab workers have been driven is through a common struggle against capitalism and for the building of a socialist society that would erase all the artificial borders dividing the peoples and economies of the region. Only this way, and in alliance with the workers of the United States and other imperialist states, can workers in Israel and throughout the Middle East end the brutal oppression and bloody wars to which they have been subjected for decades.

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