

MYTHS OF THE SIX-DAY WAR

Reflections on the 1967 Occupation and the Biblical Land of Israel

By Ilan Pappé

Fifty years after the Arab–Israeli war of June 1967, we have new material to better understand the origins and impact of that landmark event and thus a much better historical perspective. The common narrative, still prevalent in Western political circles, is composed of twin myths. One myth is that the war was imposed on Israel, and the second myth is that after Israel’s stunning victory it was willing to achieve peace with all Arab countries and the Palestinians. Both myths can now more easily be challenged and debunked.

The Israeli capture of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967 was an accident of history that Israel had the great fortune to exploit. Ever since the birth of Israel in 1948, the country’s political and military elite felt that Israel had missed a valuable opportunity during the war of independence to create a Jewish state throughout historical Palestine. The regret was that the army did not occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1948 when it seemed that it had the military capacity and opportunity to do that.

Since then, there has been a strong military and political lobby inside Israel that pushed for the occupation of the West Bank (and to a lesser extent the Gaza Strip). The lobby comprised powerful people who, according to my research based on the Israel State Archives, nearly succeeded in convincing the government to take by force these two areas in 1958 and 1960. The threat of such an action, as well the expansion of Israeli work on diverting the Jordan River, prompted Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to dispatch forces to the Sinai Peninsula (a move he would take again during the 1967 crisis).

▷ Jewish settlement near West Bank city of Ramallah, Givat Zeev, Feb. 7, 2017. *Ammar Awad/Reuters*

The looming threat of an Israeli attack on Syria and Jordan in 1967 is downplayed by mainstream historiography in the West, which tends to portray Nasser as an irresponsible leader who took his country into an assured disaster. However, we



should remember that war could have erupted in 1960, but it did not mainly because David Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister at the time, did not wish to launch a military adventure. By 1967, he had been ousted from the Israeli political elite.

A review of documents in the Israel State Archives as well as contemporaneous press reports make it possible to see how the Israeli government had well prepared for a swift takeover of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.¹ This is not surprising. Israel already possessed a system of control over a large number of Palestinians (the system of military rule imposed on the Palestinians in Israel since 1948) that could be reimposed on another Palestinian group.

The decisions taken by the Israeli government following the 1948 war reinforce the impression that the leadership of the state was searching for the opportunity to expand the geographical space of the Jewish state. This Israeli behavior is better understood if we accept the recent scholarly tendency to define Zionism as settler colonialism and Israel as a settler colonial state. The definition is apt if we consider Zionism to be an ideological movement that pushed Europeans (who felt unsafe in Europe) to resettle in faraway locales in search of not only a home but a homeland. This search encountered an indigenous population that more often than not became victims of genocide at the hands of the settlers. In Palestine, ethnic cleansing and segregation (*hafrada* in Hebrew) has been and remains the principal means by which the settler colonial project hopes to turn the whole of Palestine into a Jewish state.

As the great scholar of settler colonialism Patrick Wolfe has put it, settler colonialism is a structure, not an event. Thus, the 1967 war and its aftermath should be seen as a direct continuation and the consequence of the Zionist colonization of Palestine since 1882 and the Palestinian *nakba* (catastrophe) in 1948. Israel went knowingly, and well prepared, to war in 1967, and had contemplated long before the war the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The second myth of the constant Israeli search for peace is also challenged given what we know with the passage of time and exposure of more evidence. The current Israeli strategy for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip should be seen in the wider context of some key strategic decisions taken by the Israeli leadership immediately after the 1967 war.

There was a distinct difference between the way the Israeli political elite viewed, in the wake of the war, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, on the one hand, and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and Syrian Golan Heights, on the other. From the moment the war ended, it transpired that the first two areas were not open for negotiations, while the two other areas were at least considered by some ministers as a possible trading card for future bilateral peace. With time it would take the war in 1973 to reach a deal with Egypt, despite the beginning of intensive Jewish colonization in the

north and south of the Sinai. Peace with Syria was never achieved, and Jewish colonization there became more intensive and was followed by *de jure* annexation.

In a series of meetings around June 19 and 20, right after the end of the war, the thirteenth government of Israel took a few decisions that would be respected and adhered to by all subsequent governments, regardless of their political composition. This government was the most consensual that Israel had ever had, or would have. Every political party and ideological shade was represented, which enabled the government to act with unprecedented authority when it made its decisions.²

The first decision the government took was to keep the West Bank and the Gaza Strip within Israel's rule. There was then, and there is today, a tactical debate over how best to achieve this goal. The options are either direct or indirect rule. With time, this tactical discussion was misconceived by many outsiders as a genuine debate between peace and war camps within the Israeli political elite. This misconception helped to commodify Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East when nonetheless faced with the most blatant proof that it was not: a harsh occupation imposed on millions of people. With time, we learned that indirect rule meant Judaizing parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (areas that did not have a dense Palestinian population). In 2005, indirect rule meant withdrawing Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip and ghettoizing it with siege and closure.

Government documents show a clear determination to keep the West Bank under Israeli control forever and to permanently demarcate the Jordan River as Israel's natural border. Keeping this territory required an additional decision: what to do with the millions of Palestinians living there? The Israeli cabinet in the early days after the end of the 1967 war gave serious consideration to repeating the mass expulsion of inhabitants carried out in 1948, but this was ruled out. It was decided that the Palestinians would by and large be allowed to stay (which did preclude some massive expulsions from the Greater Jerusalem area and in the Jordan Valley).

This second decision triggered the need to make a third decision. If the territories were to be kept under Israeli rule and the people would remain, what would their future be? The deliberations show that the policymakers quite consciously decided that the inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would not be Israeli citizens but would be without any citizenship, and hence without any basic civil rights. There was also a recognition among the leaders of Israel that citizen-less status would be kept for a very long time (in fact, that remains the case today).

The greatest challenge facing the thirteenth government of Israel was how to commodify these three decisions to the international community at large, and to the United States, Israel's important ally, in particular. The international community through the United Nations demanded that Israel withdraw from the 1967 territories in return for

peace (as expressed clearly in UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and, later, 338). The issue of Jerusalem became an additional bone of contention. The Israeli government decided shortly after the end of the 1967 fighting to annex East Jerusalem into the State of Israel. Israel had already violated a 1949 UN decision to internationalize Jerusalem by moving its governmental offices from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (this is why hardly any country has its embassy in Jerusalem). In June 1967, this was an official and *de jure* annexation, accompanied by the expulsion of Palestinians in the Old City and the expropriation of private land around the city.

This annexation might have been stopped had the United States chosen to block it. The American government did privately voice its dissatisfaction but was willing to turn a blind eye toward these serious violations of international law. The same American attitude later provided a cover for the colonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With the exception of the George H.W. Bush administration, no American government has dared, or wished, to curb let alone stop the Judaization project.

These three decisions became the cornerstone of Israeli strategy toward the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. With American consent, a “peace process” was conceived in 1967 supposedly to implement the principle of “land for peace” sanctioned by the United Nations, which in practice was a charade that provided international immunity for the implementation of Israeli strategy on the ground.

These decisions were not known to public opinion in Israel at the time. There was a genuine debate between what can be called “redeemers” and “custodians.” The redeemers asserted that the West Bank and to a lesser extent the Gaza Strip belonged to the heart of ancient Israel that was “redeemed” in 1967. They advocated the full annexation of these territories to Israel. The custodians, on the other hand, saw these territories as bargaining chips in negotiating bilateral peace agreements, first with Jordan and later with the Palestinians. Until the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, one can say that the custodians had a presence in Israeli politics, press, and academia. In a way, Rabin headed this camp when he decided to support the Oslo I Accord in 1993.

However, those who represented the custodians in the military and political elite succumbed easily to the pressure of the redeemers, fearing being depicted as unpatriotic. More importantly, within Rabin’s Labour Party there was a hard core of redeemers who talked the talk of the custodians but walked the walk of the redeemers. While speaking of the need to keep the territories as a card for peace, they initiated facts on the ground that rendered it impossible to achieve any future peace agreement.

The political elite, whether on the left or right, has adhered to the same strategy as it emanated from the government’s decisions in 1967. That strategy was implemented immediately in June 1967 and its methodology is still affecting the lives of millions of Palestinians on the ground. The methodology involves territorial partition as a means

of control and segregation. Using partition as a means of oppression (while praising it as a “peace process”) is in keeping with the concept of settler colonialism as a structure and not an event. Zionists accepted the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 as a peace proposal, and its rejection by Palestinians has long been seen as evidence of Palestinian intransigence toward opportunities for peace. Yet native populations subjected to the perils of colonization never consent to partition as a substitute for liberation.

Partition was used once more in strategizing the Israeli matrix of control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The basic idea was to divide these parts of Palestine into Jewish and Arab spaces. Jewish settlements were meant to be built in less dense Arab spaces, and serve as buffers between Arab and Jewish spaces while bisecting the Arab spaces themselves. What began on a small scale in 1967 has evolved to a monumental scale a half-century later.

The separated spaces strategy was challenged by Gush Emunim, a messianic settler movement that grew and was nurtured in the religious Zionist field. While governments from 1967 onwards colonized the territories strategically, avoiding settling in the midst of Palestinian communities, Gush Emunim settled according to an imaginary biblical map in the heart of the Palestinian areas. Their presence disrupted the more orderly colonization from above, and created hotbeds of fanaticism and violence that physically antagonized the Palestinians around them. Another tactical change occurred when Israel decided to withdraw its settlers from the Gaza Strip and besiege and ghettoize it instead. However, the strategy’s methodology remained the same: partition and more partition, so as to expand Jewish space, downsize the contiguous space of the Palestinians, and bifurcate the West Bank into small enclaves, separated from each other by roads, military bases, and Jewish settlements.

These territorial arrangements were accompanied by a regime of oppression that Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Desmond Tutu once singled out as tantamount to apartheid South Africa. The oppression was also used as a means of deterring resistance from the local population. The methodology includes the practice of increasing oppression in the face of Palestinian resistance and, more importantly, extending and deepening colonization in the case of the West Bank and tightening the siege in the case of Gaza.

Power of Complacency

The Israeli methodology has adapted itself well to changing circumstances, notably the Oslo peace process and the emergence of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. The first Palestinian uprising in 1987 convinced some Israeli leaders that, to perpetuate the methodology of partition as the best means of keeping the territories while trying to pacify the local population and world public opinion, Israel needed to devise a more acceptable face of colonization. They found a willing and disempowered Palestinian

partner, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), for this ploy. Of course, the PLO had its own agenda and aspiration when it agreed to sign the Oslo I Accord in September 1993. However, at the end of the day, it played into the hands of the overall Israeli strategy on the ground. That strategy has upgraded the idea of partitioning the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between densely and more sparse Jewish colonization into so-called “Palestinian-controlled areas” and “Israeli-controlled areas.”

The discourse suggests that this is a genuine attempt to resolve the conflict as a whole and to allow for the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In practice, the 1993 Oslo agreement, and in particular the Oslo II agreement of 1995, enabled Israel to perfect the partition scheme for the West Bank. The region was dissected again and again, with an apartheid wall constructed in 2003, to make life even more unbearable. Movement between Palestinian villages and towns is almost impossible today; the so-called autonomous Palestinian space, under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, is constantly invaded by Israeli forces seeking resistance activists or whoever is on their blacklists. Under Oslo, Israeli settler colonialism became even more oppressive.

The demise of the Oslo I Accord forced Israeli strategists to adapt once more to a changing reality. Israel has moved to a unilateral policy with a clearer strategy not only of dividing the West Bank into Jewish and Arab parts, but also of striving to annex officially to Israel the “Jewish” parts. Oslo II had divided the West Bank into three zones: Area A (under the rule of the Palestinian Authority), Area B (joint Palestinian and Israeli control) and Area C (under exclusive Israeli rule). Israel now strives to annex Area C (more than half of the West Bank) into the State of Israel. This final blow to prospects for establishing an independent Palestinian state, though met with indifference by political elites in the West, triggered unprecedented outrage in global civil society manifested in part in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel.

The settler project has also adapted itself to the reality unfolding in the Gaza Strip since 2006. The methodology of partition could not work well in such a small territory. Thus, under then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel decided to remove the settlers and incorporate Gaza into Area A under Palestinian Authority control. It did not work according to plan. The Islamist Hamas group, first through democratic elections and then through more violent means, took over governance of the Gaza Strip. However, this unexpected development did not alter the Israeli strategy nor require a change of methodology. Besieging Gaza and reacting brutally to Hamas’s resistance to ghettoization—in a policy verging on genocide—is aligned with the original 1967 strategy.

Israeli policies in the future will seek to maintain the status quo created by the 1967 war. Israeli leaders will find immediate solutions to changing circumstances without

abandoning the settler colonial project of displacing Palestinians and maintaining the land under indefinite Israeli control.

It is noteworthy how Israeli public opinion enables Israel's political elite to adamantly continue with the settler colonial policies despite the drastic deterioration in Israel's international image. The redeemers–custodians debate petered out after the Oslo I Accord was signed. There was a false sense among custodians, which we better understand in hindsight, that their moment of truth arrived in 1993. The failure of the Oslo process was evident quite soon after the accord was signed.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been no debate in Jewish public opinion about the fate of the territories (and, in the public's mind, Gaza was taken out of the equation with the withdrawal of settlers in 2005). The non-settler Jewish society has no access to the occupied territories anymore; in fact, the territories are formally a no-go area for Jewish citizens.

This complacency has been reflected in the very low priority that the occupation received in party election platforms in recent years. The conflict has been resolved in the eyes of the Jewish electorate. There is a clash with Gaza, but it is with "Islam" and not part of the historical conflict. The complacency has allowed the government to take unilateral measures in implementing its strategy. In recent years, public opinion polls show that an equal number of people support the two-state solution (or, a very uncompromising Zionist version of it) and full annexation of the West Bank.

The colonization of the territories and dispossession of the Palestinian inhabitants is now in its fiftieth year. The implementation of the three strategic decisions the thirteenth government of Israel took in June 1967 unfolded before the world's eyes. The reasons behind the international community's inaction are complex. What is important in this context is that the international community led by the United States accepted a narrative that absolved it from interference and encouraged it to provide international immunity for Israeli actions. The narrative is based on the perception that the reality on the ground is temporary and that the chance for a solution is real and imminent. This perception includes the conviction, genuine or cynical, that Israeli violations of human rights will stop once "peace" is achieved. Since peace is "just around the corner," there is no need for international pressure on Israel. The world has thus enabled Israel to create daily facts on the ground that have rendered impossible any peace process based on a two-state solution.

1 Government meeting, June 11 and 18, 1967, Israel State Archive. See government meeting from June 11 and 18, 1967, ISA, Government meeting, 8164/7-A.

2 Ibid.