June 5, 2017

The Six-Day War: A Triumph of Survival

When the Six-Day War began 50 years ago this week, Israel confronted an existential threat. Four Arab armies bent on Israel's destruction encircled the Jewish state. Yet Israel triumphed. It reunified Jerusalem, opening it to worshippers of all faiths. Since then, Israel has continued its quest for peace, signing peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and seeking peace in the context of a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

Arab countries repeatedly threatened Israel with annihilation.

- In the weeks leading up to June 1967, the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq—with additional military backing from Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Kuwait—amassed over 465,000 troops, 2,800 tanks and 800 aircraft in preparation for war.

- On May 15, Egyptian troops began moving into the Sinai Peninsula—just south of the Israeli border—and making preparations to strike the Jewish state.

- On May 22, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping—an act of war that cut off Israel's only supply route with Asia. "If a single act of folly was more responsible for this explosion than any other," President Lyndon Johnson said later, "it was the arbitrary and dangerous announced decision that the Strait of Tiran would be closed."

- On May 27, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the most powerful leader in the Arab world, asserted: "Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel. The Arab people want to fight."

- On May 31, Iraqi President Abdul Rahman Aref declared: "The existence of Israel is an error which must be rectified. … Our goal is clear—to wipe Israel off the map."

Israel reunified the city of Jerusalem and opened it to all worshippers.

- When Jordan controlled east Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967, it denied all Jews and Israelis of all faiths access to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim holy sites. Jews could not visit the Western Wall, Judaism's most important prayer site.

- By contrast, worshippers today from across the world can safely visit their holy sites in a unified Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty.

- In an extraordinary gesture of peace and tolerance, Israel has allowed Muslim religious authorities to retain administrative control over the Temple Mount—Judaism's holiest site—in recognition that it contains important Muslim places of worship.

Israel immediately sought peace with its Arab adversaries.

- Less than two weeks after the war ended, Israel's cabinet voted to return all the land it had won from Egypt and Syria in exchange for peace treaties with Cairo and Damascus, and to open peace talks with Jordan—which had controlled the West Bank.

- Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan famously said that he was waiting for a phone call from any Arab leader wishing to discuss peace with Israel.

- Rejecting Israel's overtures, the Arab League ruled out any reconciliation with Israel, proclaiming on September 1, 1967, in Khartoum that there would be "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel [and] no negotiations with it."

- Despite Arab' rejectionism, Israel accepted the Nov. 1967 U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, which established the "land for peace" formula governing all subsequent Israeli-Arab peace talks.

Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to peace.

- When Egypt became the first Arab state willing to engage Israel and negotiate an agreement, Israel returned the entire Sinai Peninsula to Egypt under the terms of a 1979 peace treaty.

- In 1993, Israel gave the Palestinians autonomy over the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for the Palestine Liberation Organization's recognition of Israel and pledge to end terrorism.

- In 1994, Israel ceded territory to Jordan when Jordan became the second Arab state to accept Israel and sign a peace treaty.

- In 2000, Israel offered the establishment of a Palestinian state and Israeli withdrawal from about 95 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza. Sadly, Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat rejected peace and helped instigate a campaign of violence against Israel.

- Israel in 2005 unilaterally withdrew all its citizens and soldiers from Gaza and from an area twice Gaza's size in the West Bank, granting the Palestinians a chance to govern their own territory. But the terrorist group Hamas soon took control of Gaza, further diminishing the prospects for peace.

- In 2013, Israel made painful sacrifices to secure the resumption of peace talks, including releasing 78 Palestinian terrorists. Ultimately, the talks broke down when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas entered a unity government with Hamas.

- Today, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to call for direct, bilateral peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians with no preconditions. But the Palestinian leadership has thus far declined to return to negotiations.

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