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Why Israel's Military Victories Are Never Final

By Shlomo Ben-Ami

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Israel, an audacious vision that came true, is now celebrating its 65th anniversary with a sense of well-deserved satisfaction at its extraordinary domestic achievements. In its relations with the outside world, however, the Jewish state still has a long way to go.

Historically, the Jewish experience in international relations has not been particularly edifying. A Jewish state has existed for only short periods in Judaism's history, and it twice committed political suicide. The reasons were always the same: political and religious fanaticism and the blunder of challenging the prevailing world powers. Hence, modern Zionism's obsessive quest for a binding alliance with a superpower.

Ethnocentrism is bound to distort a people's relations with the rest of the world, and Israel's doctrine of power was drawn from the depths of Jewish experience, particularly the eternal, unforgiving hostility of a Gentile world. The role of the Holocaust as the constituent myth of the Zionist meta-narrative reinforced Israel's tendency to face "the world," an amorphous but imposing construct with which the Jews wage a dispute that cannot be resolved through

the traditional tools of international relations.

It was through Zionism, an essentially secular nationalist movement, that the Jews were returned to political action and developed the necessary diplomatic tools. But while early Zionism was blessed with pragmatism and diplomatic savoir-faire, the preponderance of the military ethos of the nation in arms has relegated Zionism's extraordinary foreign policy achievements to a remote corner of Israelis' collective memory.

A crucial moment in the history of Israel's oscillation between diplomatic and military "activism" took place on the eve of the 1967 war. That crossroads exposed a deep cleavage between the young, self-confident Israeli-born generals, who were spiteful of the older generation's "submissive" attitude, and the Diaspora-born politicians who, haunted by Holocaust memories and existentially fearful of international isolation, resisted making a break with the old politics of diplomatic Zionism.

The pragmatic wisdom of early Zionism is easily explained. In contrast to the anti-Semitic cliche about "Jewish power," Zionism was the national movement of a weak people, decimated by oppression and genocide — a people that might face annihilation if it made the wrong choice at a moment of decision. Admittedly, the Zionist leaders never really abandoned wider territorial dreams, but they would never have considered delaying the establishment of the Jewish state for the sole reason that it would not have access to the Western Wall or the Temple Mount. The positive ethos of building a new society was supposed to compensate for the poverty of the territorial solution.

The 1967 war, however, represented an ominous watershed. Israel's lightning victory recalls German philosopher George Hegel's dictum about "the impotence of the winners." Military victories are never final and definitive.

In 1980, in a famous open letter entitled "The Homeland Is in Danger," Israeli historian Jacob Talmon tried to share this simple lesson with Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Talmon criticized the Israeli right's belief that one major "event" would radically and permanently change the situation in Israel's favor, and he repudiated the "religious sanction" used to justify unrealistic policies in the Occupied Territories. He explained the Messianic illusions that were reborn with the Six-Day War as false compensation for the martyrdom of the Shoah. There was nothing mysterious about Israel's victory, he claimed. It was the result of a simple concatenation of circumstances.

A small country like Israel, lacking a serious demographic foundation or favorable geopolitical conditions, could never perpetuate its presence in occupied territories, Talmon argued. Hence, the danger to Israel lay in the Sisyphean effort to subjugate the Palestinians. "Blind is the leader who does not see that a war of races is what lies ahead," he wrote.

Israel's annexationist right would dismiss its "defeatist" detractors with the claim that the entire Zionist enterprise was an unrealistic dream that miraculously came true. In fact, Israel materialized because historical and political conditions favored it and because Zionist diplomacy navigated the international-relations challenges that it encountered.

But the victory in the 1967 war was not a license for Israel to set utterly unrealistic objectives for itself. Not every fantasy is a vision. The ethos of Israel's far right is its insistence

on blurring this distinction.

The right's fatalism about the chances of peace is a useless adviser in foreign policy. Political positions are not eternal and are always susceptible to change. Nor is it true that nothing can sway the Arab world from its hostility to Israel. The Arabs might never accept the moral justice of Zionism, but as the Arab Peace Initiative indicates they would consider accepting the political legitimacy of a Jewish state.

Not even Israel's staunchest allies will risk an indefinite confrontation with the entire world by supporting Israel's territorial ambitions. Reasonable border modifications are one thing, but legitimizing a Jewish empire is quite another.

Indeed, international acquiescence to the situation created by Israel's victory in the 1967 war proved to be extremely short-lived. When a war of salvation and survival turned into a war of conquest, occupation and annexation, the international community recoiled and Israel went on the defensive. It has remained there ever since.

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