The Impact of the 1967 Six-Day War on Israel

by Peggy McInenry, Director of Communications

UCLA International Institute, May 25, 2017 — At a panel discussion hosted by the UCLA Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for Israel Studies on May 4, four Israeli experts addressed the legacy of the Six-Day War in Israel. The event was cosponsored by the UCLA Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies.

The war — during which Israel directly fought Egypt, Jordan and Syria, together with Iraqi troops — lasted from June 5 to June 10, 1967 and ended in a decisive Israeli victory. Mobilization of Egyptian forces, together with the formation of an Egypt-Jordan-Iraq alliance, led the young Jewish state to pre-emptively destroy most of the Egyptian air force. Over the course of the short war, Israel also did significant damage to the Syrian air force.

Ground battles resulted in Israel’s seizure of the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. Israeli losses were few and Arab losses were substantial. Since the end of the war, Israel has continuously occupied the West Bank and has retained effective control over the Gaza Strip.

Gilead Sher, an attorney, former senior Israeli peace negotiator (1991–2001) and former chief of staff and policy coordinator for former Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, addressed the war’s long-term political legacy. Motti Inbari, associate professor of religion, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, traced the evolution of the messianic Zionist beliefs that have driven the building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Historian Elie Rekhess, Crown Visiting Professor in Israel Studies at Northwestern University, examined the impact of the war and subsequent political developments on the Arab Israeli population. And economist Paul Rivlin, senior fellow, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, analyzed the economic development of Israel since the war.

The event was moderated by Yoram Cohen, director, Y&S Nazarian Center, and distinguished professor, UCLA Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering and UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability.

Zionist conundrum

Gilead Sher noted that as a consequence of the 1967 war, Israel has ruled Palestinians in the Occupied Territories for 50 years. Such a reality, he argued, puts Israel at odds with the philosophy of Zionism, which never envisioned a Jewish state that ruled over another people. He insisted that a two-state solution remained the only option for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and preserving Israel as a Jewish democratic state. Accordingly, he urged Israel to adopt a pro-active, graduated approach that would establish a two-state reality first in fact, and eventually, by permanent agreement.

Author of The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations, 1999–2001 (Routledge, 2006), Sher heads the Center for Applied Negotiations of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, where he is a senior research fellow. He has participated in peace negotiations with the Palestinians in both official and unofficial capacities.

“Today’s borders and status quo are unsustainable: militarily, diplomatically and morally,” said Sher. “It is time for Israel to take the initiative, to change the course, to stop being dragged and cornered. We cannot continue being hostage to Palestinian rejectionism, terrorism and extremism,” he said. “[W]e need to realize that a political horizon for the Palestinians is also a roadmap of genuine Israeli independence.

“Israel,” he said, “must draw its borders while disengaging from the Palestinians by renewing negotiations — regionally, bilaterally and
independently. In other words, with or even without a comprehensive agreement in sight.

“Such steps will allow [for the preservation of] the conditions for a two-state solution through the gradual creation of a two-state reality,” he added. “They can take the form of political interim agreements, gradual processes with transitional phases, along with a pragmatic, uncompromising approach to counter terrorism and violence.”

Sher insisted that Israel and the Palestinians must separate into two states and establish agreed borders before ideas such as a confederation (i.e., between the Gaza and the West Bank) could be explored. “You cannot bypass the delineation of a border between the Israelis and the Palestinians,” he remarked. And he judged that a trilateral approach to security cooperation among Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Israel would be more stable than any strictly bilateral arrangements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

“Economic development in the Palestinian territories is indispensable for shaping the region’s stability,” said the speaker. Accordingly, he encouraged the United States to lead a Marshall Plan for Palestinian development in partnership with the Arab quartet of relatively moderate Sunni Arab states [Jordan, Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia], together with Israel and the Palestinians.

In terms of process, Sher urged Israel to abandon its insistence on preconditions for negotiations and replace the past paradigm of “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” with a more gradual paradigm of “what has been agreed should be implemented.”

“Such an approach,” he continued, “would provide the grounds for an arrangement on boundaries, security, statehood and the economy.” The negotiator recommend that Israel take a number of concrete actions, such as issuing a statement that it has no long-term sovereignty claims outside the main settlement blocks in the West Bank; halting construction outside those blocks; preparing Israeli public opinion for the need “to take decisive action for the sake of Zionism” and seek a peace agreement; working to improve Palestinian lives; and initiating an effort to rehabilitate Gaza with support of the international community, with a special role for Egypt and the Palestinian Authority.

At the same time, noted Sher, “An eternal Israeli dialogue and a participatory process are also essential to amend schisms within our society.” Reminding the two sides that they could always go back to killing each other, he concluded, “[P]rottracted conflicts have come to an end. It is in our hands.”

**The post-1967 messianic path of religious Zionists**

In a fascinating exegesis of the trajectory of religious Zionism, *Motti Inbari* explained how religious Orthodox Jews originally reconciled themselves with Zionism, adopted messianic beliefs that drove the settlement movement after the 1967 war and how they are struggling today against the “land for peace” strategy of the Israeli state.


“Zionism was a great dilemma for Orthodox Judaism because... in the Jewish tradition,” he explained, “it was understood that all those things that the Zionists were implementing were things that would take place eventually at the End of Days when the Messiah would come and perform miracles.”

Rabbi Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Cook (1865–35), the first chief rabbi of the Zionist movement, solved this dilemma by positing the idea that Zionism represented the first steps of the redemption of the Jewish people. In this formulation, said Inbari, redemption would be a long process, the first step of which was being taken by the Jews establishing a
homeland. It was assumed that they would later go on to establish a Jewish theocracy and build (the Third) Temple.

Upon his death, Cook’s son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), took over the religious institutions established by his father. “His role,” said Inbari, “was to implement his father’s theories into political action—a moment that came after the 1967 war and the Jewish conquest of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and, most importantly, the Temple Mount.”

The victorious war and the conquest of Holy Lands reinforced the idea among religious Zionists that Zionism was indeed a messianic process. Inbari noted that the war’s outcome was variously described as “the hand of God,” “a miracle” and “God’s intervention.” “[These beliefs],” he continued, “gave rise to a young generation of religious Zionists who would go on to establish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.”

Rabbi Yehuda Kook, in fact, became the spiritual father of the Gush Emunim (Block of the Faithful) movement, which was responsible for the first settlements. The theology of this movement, explained Inbari, defines both the land of Israel and the state of Israel as holy — the first because it is written in the Bible, and the second, because “God chose the state of Israel to bring about the redemption of the Jewish people.”

The idea of territorial compromise, however, eventually caused a schism between religious Zionists and the state of Israel. With the exception of East Jerusalem, which was annexed, Israel has ruled the other lands it acquired in the Six-Day War as occupied territory. That is, the state held out the idea that the lands would eventually be returned as part of a “land-for-peace” compromise.

For Rabbi Yehuda Kook and his students, however, Israel had received these lands because of God’s intervention in the war. Returning it was therefore inconceivable. The speaker used the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance to explain how religious Zionists are responding to the eventuality of territorial compromise with the Palestinians. Based on research done by psychologists on a community in Montana that lived past a prophecy of an alien invasion, cognitive dissonance describes how beliefs that are clearly falsified come to be held even more intensely after falsification, leading to intensified proselytization, rationalizations and renewed actions to reaffirm faith.

The religious Zionists who have driven the sustained expansion of Israeli settlements, first in Gaza (abandoned during Israel’s unilateral withdrawal of 2005) and then the West Bank, said Inbari, have responded in different ways to the idea of territorial compromise. Some have admitted a religious mistake and retreated from messianism (e.g., Rabbi Yehuda Amital). Other have abandoned Zionism altogether for Ultra-Orthodoxy (e.g., Rabbi Shmuel Tal).

Still others have argued that the messianic path to redemption is indeed moving forward, but in heaven, not on earth. The vast majority of the settlers have adopted this approach (which Inbari called “the statist approach”). They view mass outreach to secular Israeli society as the solution to the territorial dilemma, believing it will help them gain support for the settlements and convince Israeli society of the dangers that territorial compromise holds for the redemption of the Jews. Rabbis Shlomo Aviner and Zvi Tau have actively espoused this approach, said Inbari, with Aviner creating the mass proselytization effort known as “Settling in the House.”

The fourth and most radical response among religious Zionists has been “forcing the end,” that is, abandoning any hope of redemption at the hands of the secular state and resolving instead to take control of it — either by entering politics, winning power and eventually establishing a theocracy (e.g., Jewish Leadership Movement) or by withdrawing from the state in order to gather strength and conquer it (e.g., Rabbi Itzhak Ginzburg).
Although the withdrawal from Israeli settlements in Gaza in 2005 saw the risk of civil war, Inbari said this risk had been averted and that most settlers had adopted the statist approach. However, after the Gaza disengagement, he observed that a “tag price” phenomenon had emerged. If the state of Israel does something that annoys the settlers, he explained, certain settlers then exact their revenge on the Arabs. “So what we can see is that the more radical movements among this circle... is gaining more support, to the extent that they are starting to use terrorism in a more day-to-day [basis],” he said.

Inbari concluded his analysis by citing the words Gershom Scholen, a historian of Jewish mysticism: “There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. This lessons serves as a warning to Zionism.”

The evolving identity of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel

According to Elie Rekhess, the Six-Day War resulted in a profound, overwhelming identity crisis for both Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel. Today, he noted, this minority (together with the Druze) comprises roughly 21 percent of the Israel’s population (about 1.8 million people).

Rekhess is a retired Senior Research Fellow of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of numerous works, including the well-known “The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel (Israel Studies 12 (3), 2007) and “The Arab Minority in Israel: Reconsidering the ’1948 Paradigm’” (Israel Studies 19 (2), 2014).

From 1948 to 1967, said the speaker, the Arab minority was “relatively subdued” primarily due to the traumatic loss of Palestine, the impact of military rule (imposed through 1966) and their physical isolation from the rest of the Arab world.

Israel, meanwhile, “adopted a dual policy underlined by two contradictory, almost diametrically opposed considerations,” he said. These were the Jewish nature of the state, which focused on security, and liberal and democratic principles, which focused on an integrative process that Rekhess called “Israelization.”

As the Arab minority in Israel were reunited with other Palestinian Arabs from whom they had been physically separated after the 1948 war, “[their reunion] led to a reconstruction and revivification of a Palestinian consciousness and a solidification of the Palestinian component in their national identity,” said the historian. As a result, he added, the 1970s saw “a vigorous activism replace the more passive, quietist approach of the 1950s and 1960s.”

Many factors then contributed to building up the Palestinian component of their identity. Rekhess pointed in particular to the ascendance of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the armed PLO struggle in Israel and abroad (and the short-lived engagement of Arab Israelis in this struggle), the horrendous outcome of the 1973 War for Israel, the recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people at the Rabat Summit (1974) and the PLO’s achievement of observer status in the UN (1975). Later, the first intifada (1987–91) gave an added impetus to these trends.

As the Palestinian identity of the Arab minority grew stronger, observed Rekhess, their demand for self-determination surged. In his view, the predictable outcome was the political reversal in Israelis politics ushered in by the 1977 general elections, when power shifted from the left to the right and the Israeli Communist Party (which he called “a standard bearer of Palestinianization”) won the 50 percent of the Arab minority vote.

Yet, Rekhess reflected, “Palestinianization was not a mutually exclusive process in the sense that it categorically outweighed or eliminated Israelization. It wasn’t a zero-sum game. On the contrary, parallel to the reformulation of national identity and political affiliation, the Arab minority under[went] an intensive process of socioeconomic change, modernization, and Westernization....” A substantial improvement in the
living standards of Palestinian Arabs in Israel led to rising expectations, particularly among the younger generation, who compared their situation to that of their Jewish neighbors. “And comparisons, of course, reveal[ed] sizeable gaps [at] every socioeconomic level,” observed the speaker.

The peace process of the 1990s, noted Rekhess, “further accelerate[d] impact of 1967 on the question of identity within a totally different context.” Israel’s recognition of the PLO and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority fulfilled what he called the “external dimension of the political platform of the Arabs in Israel.”

However, he continued, “[g]radually we see intellectuals and political elites realize that a future Palestinian state would not necessarily fulfill the national aspirations of the Palestinian Arabs is Israel. In other words, what we see is an acknowledgment that the solution to their particular situation does not lie outside, as some ‘generous’ Israelis would have wanted, but rather, inside.” This realization ultimately led to a new self-definition of the Palestinians in Israel as “an indigenous minority or a homeland minority existing within a colonial entity,” explained the speaker.

For the Arab minority, argued Rekhess, there is a built-in contradiction between the idea of Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state. Arab academics, he explained, “believe the incompatibility between Israel’s Jewish and democratic nature can be resolved... by either setting up a state for all its citizens, autonomy, and most popularly so, a binational state.

“[O]ne thing is clear,” concluded Rekhess, “when Israel reaches an agreement — with the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, whatever — it will still have to handle the challenge of being Jewish and democratic with a sizable Arab Palestinian minority in its midst.” He returned to this point in the question-and-answer session, saying, “[A]s far as I’m concerned,” he said, “I think it’s very simple: ‘If you want to stay in the state of Israel, you are most welcome — you are Israeli citizens. But you cannot keep on undermining the very legitimacy of the state of Israel according to the trends that we have been seeing recently.’”

From threatened country to regional powerhouse

Prior to the Six-Day War In 1967, said Paul Rivlin, Israel had a total population of 2.8 million and was living through its deepest recession since 1948. “It was a tiny, threatened country,” he remarked, “The war transformed it overnight into a regional power with widely perceived technological and organizational prowess.”

Rivlin, who is also a visiting professor at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, has written, co-authored and edited numerous publications, including most recently, “Inglorious Revolution: State Cohesion in the Middle East after the Arab Spring” (Moshe Dayan Center, 2014), “Syria: Domestic Political Stress and Globalization” (Moshe Dayan Center, 2013) and “The Israeli Economy from the Foundation of the State through the 21st Century” (Cambridge, 2011).

The economist cautioned against over-estimating Israel’s military organizational prowess, saying this capability goes up and down in all countries. But he said the country’s rapid economic growth after the 1967 war was both impressive and sustained. “Confidence is a key factor in investment and this is what the war resulted in,” he said. In 1968 alone, the Israeli economy grew by 14 percent.

“From 1967 to 2015,” he said, “Israeli national income increased twofold, from US$ 33 billion to US$ 380 billion in constant prices — that’s real progress,” he said. Over the same period, “The population tripled from 8.5 million and the national income per head [went] from US$ 1,100–US$ 1,200 to almost US$ 35,000 — a 29-fold increase,” he continued. “It’s amazing that Israel was able to join OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development], the club of the rich, in 2010.”

The rapid economic growth that followed the 1967 war was accompanied by much higher defense
spending and a significant expansion of Israel’s military industries, said the speaker, although that spending became a small percentage of gross national income over time. The military industry expansion, together with close links that were forged between the U.S. and Israeli economies when the U.S. became the country’s chief weapons supplier, laid the groundwork for the later emergence of Israel’s high-tech sector.

Rivlin called the Israeli government’s investment in military industries a successful government intervention. “It overreached itself with an attempt to create a fighter plane... which had to be scrapped,” he remarked, “but it yielded many benefits on the way.”

The relative feeling of security after the war, said Rivlin, permitted social unrest break out in the cities between elite Ashkenazi Jews from Europe who had ruled Israel since before its creation and poorer Sephardic Jews from the Middle East. “In response to this social unrest [between Ashkenazi and Sepphardic Jews] and against the background of higher defense expenditures, the government of Golda Meir increased social spending in order to improve the housing, welfare and education of those groups of the society who felt alienated and were underprivileged,” he said. “All this resulted in much higher budget deficits and faster inflation — problems that were pushed aside because the economy was growing so fast.”

In the decade or so that followed the Six-Day War, the country also welcomed some 100,000 immigrants from both the West and the former Soviet Union. Those from the West, remarked Rivlin, were highly educated and self-financed, arriving with human capital and established networks that would have, in his words, “immense economic significance over time.”

For Rivlin, the most important outcome of the war was that “Israel took over the West Bank Gaza, Sinai and the Golan. It took on responsibility for 600,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and nearly 400,000 in Gaza — a total of almost a million people that Israel was going to manage the affairs of and rule over,” he said. “It became the main market for their exports and labor services and the main source directly and indirectly, of their imports.

“When the 1973 war came on,” he continued, “it brought economic growth to a halt and Israel faced massive problems of budget deficits, balance of payments deficits, debt problems and also inflation. One of the factors that contributed to this budgetary pressure,” he pointed out, “was the construction of settlements in Sinai and Gaza and in West Bank.

“But the change in the politics placed greater emphasis on the construction of settlements in the West Bank,” added Rivlin. “In 1972, there were 1,500 Jews living in all the territories taken in 1967. By 1983, there were 24,000, and in 2015, excluding the annexed parts of Jerusalem, there were 385,000.” Annexation of East Jerusalem and expansion of that city’s borders increased the Arab population in that city from 1 to 26 percent, he added, a proportion that had reached 36 percent in 2015.

Rivlin ended by sharing two tables of demographic figures for Israel with the audience:

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<tr>
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<th>1967 (millions)</th>
<th>2017 (est.) (millions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israelis</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palestinians</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs*</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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*Includes Arabs who are citizens of Israel

“You can make what you like of those figures — and those are figures that are hotly debated... in many circles in Israel and abroad — but I am bringing them to you because they are the consequence of the 1967 war,” he concluded.

**Conclusion**

Although the speakers addressed different aspects of the outcome of the Six-Day War, their analysis of developments in Israel over the following 50 years
revealed multiple unresolved challenges: a stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, a religious Zionist movement at odds with the idea of territorial concessions, a growing Palestinian Arab population in the Occupied Territories, an assertive Arab minority within Israel and continued high defense expenditures due to the ongoing conflict and occupation.

In the words of Gilead Sher, “Israel has reached globally outstanding achievements in almost every field... while absorbing millions of immigrants. However, these 50 years also saw an incremental erosion of our fathers’ vision: an ongoing internal struggle over Jewish and human values and the identity of Israeli society.”