

Six-Day War – 50th anniversary

It's time for Israel to end the occupation

Holding on to the captured territories compromises Israel's security and denies Palestinians their human rights.

FIFTY years ago, Israel braced itself for war. Egypt, Jordan and Syria surrounded the country and proclaimed Israel's imminent destruction. But Israel struck first, delivering a fatal blow to Egypt's air force within hours of the war beginning.

The Arab armies, already humiliated by their defeat in the war for Israel's independence in 1948, tasted the same again in the 1967 Six-Day War. At that time Israel's borders were thought of by many as "Auschwitz borders" – that they were indefensible and would lead to another slaughter of Jews. They were wrong.

In Israel, the joy that followed the victory was universal. Jewish communities around the world were ecstatic and proud of Israel's astonishing military success. It meant breathing room. For the first time – perhaps literally – Israel was truly on the map.

With victory came reunion with sites of significance that Jews had longed for over 2000 years in exile. The Western Wall in Jerusalem, Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. For religious and secular Jews alike, these sites meant everything.

Of course, there was another side to the story. It soon sank in that with the renewal of Jewish bonds with these ancient sites came some one million Palestinian residents.

There were Palestinians who had lived there for generations or joined them during the 1948 war; there were others who were pushed out or fled Jewish advances, or were manipulated into leaving by Arab leaders abroad.

It's not that Israel's leaders didn't understand this. They knew the choices – absorb the territories and grant citizenship to a million non-Jews, or withdraw in exchange for peace. As Israeli historian Gershom Gorenberg wrote: the Israeli government "decided not to decide". Instead it began what has now become a messianically driven 50-year national project of settlement in the conquered lands.

Over the years, Israeli governments of the left and right incentivised half a million Jews to settle on land it never claimed as their own. Israel remains only a temporary custodian of the land. But nothing temporary should last half a century.

Many Israelis understand – including



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the father of the settlements, the late prime minister Ariel Sharon, and Israel's High Court of Justice – that Israel governs the West Bank in an increasingly belligerent military occupation.

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Palestinians in the Occupied Territories lack the same human rights afforded citizens of Israel, including freedom of association, speech and movement. Their lives are ultimately controlled by Israel, and yet they have no say in that government. Settlers, who live often just across the road, have full rights.

Terror and violence against Israelis have,

understandably, hardened their hearts. Yet the reality recognised by the country's most venerated former military, security and intelligence officials is different.

Virtually all of them say that Israel will be more secure behind internationally recognised borders. Earlier this year, a former Mossad chief labelled the occupation Israel's only existential threat. The West Bank isn't a security asset, it's a liability.

Peace efforts over the decades have been squandered by both sides. Meetings in

security; Palestinians don't have a state.

The time has now come – 50 years since the Six-Day War and 70 years since the UN's plan to create Jewish and Palestinian states – to realise the dream of a secure and independent Israel next to a secure and independent Palestine.

The alternative – endless violence and conflict – is unacceptable for everyone. Palestinians will not give up until they have their own state. Israelis will not rest until theirs is secure.

The only way forward, as Amos Oz writes, is a fair divorce. After the unhappy reality of 50 years of occupation, it is too much to dream of a happy marriage; only of an amicable separation.

Conflicts no less contentious – Ireland, the Balkans, even Europe after two of the bloodiest wars in human history – have managed an amicable separation. Why not Israel and Palestine?

In the absence of leaders with the courage needed to make tough decisions, we owe it to Israelis and Palestinians not to turn our backs but, instead, to say, after 50 years of occupation, we will not let it continue.

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A Palestinian woman carries her child past the security barrier near the village of Abu Dis. Photo: Brian Hender/JTA

MEDIA WEEK

ALLON LEE

Asinine analyses

MARKING the Six-Day War's fiftieth anniversary, Tony Walker, a former Middle East correspondent and Yasser Arafat biographer, unfairly blamed Israel in Fairfax's papers (29/05) for the lack of a Palestinian state.

Describing the war as an "extraordinary military achievement", he suggested "might it not have been desirable for the country's leaders to declare victory and pull back to defensible boundaries" because the "smashing victory ... did not entitle Israel ... to be a permanent occupier of territory and its people and settlers of land seized in war in defiance of international law".

Walker's argument rests on emotion and not facts.

The reality is that Israel immediately offered to return the Sinai, Golan Heights, Gaza and most of the West Bank in exchange for peace.

The Arab countries responded at the Khartoum Conference with the three "noes" of no recognition, no negotiation, no peace.

Further, Israel accepted UN Security Council 242 and the land-for-peace formula.

Leaving aside Israel's three offers since 2000 to create a Palestinian state, which Walker overlooks, he also ignores that in 1979, Likud PM Menachem Begin withdrew totally from the Sinai in exchange for peace with Egypt and as part of the formal negotiation process agreed to Palestinian self-rule, which the PLO totally rejected.

Moreover, after 50 years,

Israel has still not annexed the West Bank where its settlements still only cover less than 1.9 per cent of the West Bank, and the Palestinian population living there has increased from 660,000 to 2.7 million.

In other words, despite Walker's rhetoric, Israel has largely adhered to the position it endorsed in 1937, 1947 and 1967, i.e. a willingness to share the land, in contrast to those Arab neighbours who have yet to truly accept a Jewish state in any part of it.

Meanwhile, someone else also seemingly adrift in the historical fog was Andrew Clark in the *Australian Financial Review* (27/05) who contemplated the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Clark's article nominated two main impediments for peace.

That is, "according to the Israeli-based Peace Now movement, Israel has increased its rate of establishing settlements in the Occupied Territories by 34 per cent this year and 70 per cent of these 'new starts' are beyond the 'Geneva Initiative' border – a notional line separating any future Palestinian state from Israel. Further, some elements in the Palestinian side remain tainted with the stigma of wanting to ultimately destroy the Jewish State."

Those "tainted" elements would include Hamas, which rules over 1.7 million Palestinians in Gaza, and are not an insignificant force in Palestinian politics.

While the Netanyahu Government did announce plans to build the first new settlement since 1992, overwhelmingly growth

falls within existing settlements that Israel would retain in any conceivable peace deal. The Geneva Initiative borders are a long-since obsolete fringe position.

According to the article, the last serious peace talks were 17 years ago under US President Bill Clinton.

Actually, serious advances were made under George W Bush, including the 2003 Road Map for Peace and the regional Annapolis Conference in 2007 that led to Israeli PM Ehud Olmert's 2008 offer, rejected by Abbas, of a Palestinian state most reasonable people would think meets the Palestinians' stated objectives.

