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Six days in Israel, 45 years ago

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In early June 1967, as I cowered with my mother and sisters in the "safest" room of our house near [Jerusalem](#) [2] — the downstairs bathroom — we feared the worst. None of us imagined that the war that had just begun would end in six days. It was inconceivable that the Israeli army would destroy three Arab armies, kill upward of 15,000 Arab soldiers (at a cost of 700 Israeli casualties), triple the size of the state of [Israel](#) [3] and, for the first time in two millennia, give the Jewish people control over the entire land of Israel, including the crown jewel, the Old City of Jerusalem.

Many believe now, as they believed then, that Israel was forced to initiate a preemptive strike in 1967 because it faced an existential threat from Arab armies that were ready — and intending — to destroy it. As it happens, my father, Gen. Matti Peled, who was the Israel Defense Forces' chief of logistics at the time, was one of the few who knew that was not so. In an article published six years later in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, he wrote of Egypt's president, who commanded the biggest of the Arab armies: "I was surprised that Nasser decided to place his troops so close to our border because this allowed us to strike and destroy them at any time we wished to do so, and there was not a single knowledgeable person who did not see that. From a military standpoint, it was not the IDF that was in danger when the Egyptian army amassed troops on the Israeli border, but the Egyptian army." In interviews over the years, other generals who served at that time confirmed this, including [Ariel Sharon](#) [4] and Ezer Weitzman.

In 1967, as today, the two power centers in Israel were the IDF high command and the Cabinet. On June 2, 1967, the two groups met at IDF headquarters. The military hosts greeted the generally cautious and dovish prime minister, Levi Eshkol, with such a level of belligerence that the meeting was later commonly called "the Generals' Coup."

The transcripts of that meeting, which I found in the Israeli army archives, reveal that the generals made it clear to Eshkol that the Egyptians would need 18 months to two years before they would be ready for a full-scale war, and therefore this was the time for a preemptive strike. My father told Eshkol: "Nasser is advancing an ill-prepared army because he is counting on the Cabinet being hesitant. Your hesitation is working in his advantage." The prime minister parried this criticism, saying, "The Cabinet must also think of the wives and mothers who will become bereaved."

Throughout the meeting, there was no mention of a threat but rather of an "opportunity" that was there, to be seized.

Within short order, the Cabinet succumbed to the pressure of the army, and the rest, as they say, is history. The Six-Day War began three days later and was over on June 10, 1967. When the guns fell silent, one general saw yet another opportunity, one that would take most of Israel's other leaders some decades to recognize. This was my father. A 1995 newspaper profile reconstructed the first weekly meeting that the IDF general staff held after the war. When it came his turn to speak, my father said: "For the first time in Israel's history, we have an opportunity to solve the Palestinian problem once and for all. Now we are face to face with the Palestinians, without other Arab countries dividing us. Now we have a chance to offer the Palestinians a state of their own."

His position was well known. He argued in 1969 that holding on to the territory gained in the war was contrary to Israel's interests: "If we keep these lands, popular resistance to the occupation is sure to arise, and Israel's army will be used to quell that resistance, with disastrous and demoralizing results." Over the years, he argued repeatedly that Israeli control in the West Bank and Gaza would turn the Jewish state into an increasingly brutal occupying power (he was right) and could eventually result in a binational state (he may yet be right, as events are moving in this direction). Allowing the Palestinians an independent state of their own, he maintained, would lead to stability and calm.

For 45 years, successive Israeli governments have invested billions of dollars in making the 1967 conquests irreversible, and they have eliminated any chance for the two-state solution to become a reality. Cities, highways, malls and factories have been built in the West Bank in order to settle Jewish Israelis there, while a reign of terror was put in place to govern the Palestinians whose lands were being taken. From denying access to water and land and obstructing free travel, through a maze of discriminatory laws and restrictions, to full-on military assaults, Israel has dedicated huge resources to the oppression and persecution of the Palestinians.

Now once again Israel is faced with two options: Continue to exist as a Jewish state while controlling the Palestinians through military force and racist laws, or undertake a deep transformation into a real democracy where Israelis and Palestinians live as equals in a shared state, their shared homeland. For Israelis and Palestinians alike, the latter path promises a bright future.

Miko Peled is an Israeli activist living in San Diego and the author of the recently published book, "The General's Son: Journey of an Israeli in [Palestine](#) [5]."

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