

57 Years Ago: The Six-Day War

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In 1967, the armistice between Israel and its neighboring countries was called into question. On May 14, Egyptian President Nasser sent six divisions into the Sinai with great pomp. On May 16, he demanded the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from the Israeli-Egyptian border, which UN President U-Thant accepted within 24 hours, despite the fact that these forces were supposed to remain until a peace agreement was reached. On May 22, Nasser blocked Israel's access to the Red Sea by imposing a blockade on the Strait of Tiran. Jordan placed its army under Egyptian command on June 3, followed by Iraq on June 4. Meanwhile, radio broadcasts inciting violence echoed in the Middle Eastern capitals, cheered by enthusiastic crowds.

For two months, tensions had been escalating in the Middle East. Israel was on high alert, digging trenches and graves in preparation for war. In the scorching heat of the Jordan Valley, volunteer students from around the world, including myself, frantically dug trenches until our hands went numb. We took a bit of respite in the evenings, singing songs by Brel, Brassens, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Naomi Shemer to the sound of the guitar.

The conflict erupted on June 5. The speed of Israel's victory surprised the entire world, including the Israelis themselves. The entry into Jerusalem was a moment of indescribable intensity. Israel found itself in control of new territories, which it offered to return in exchange for peace. However, on September 1, the Arab League, meeting in Khartoum, responded with three no's: no to peace, no to negotiation, and no to recognition of Israel. On November 22, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242, stating that the withdrawal from territories (not the territories) occupied could only occur within the framework of secure and recognized borders. Israeli settlements were established on the Golan Heights and in the West Bank to better secure the coastal plain. The importance of the security issue becomes clearer when one realizes that the distance from the Mediterranean to the former border is equivalent to a third of the length of Sherbrooke Street in Montreal.

Fifty-seven years have passed. Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties with Israel. Egypt regained the Sinai Peninsula, while Jordan relinquished the West Bank, which it had occupied since 1948. The 1993 Oslo Accords envisioned a negotiated division of this territory. The withdrawal from the West Bank in exchange for peace was nearly achieved with the Palestinian Authority in 2001, but a resurgence of suicide bombings paralyzed the peace process. Peace agreements for the establishment of two states were rejected by the Palestinian Authority in 2000 and 2008. Gaza was evacuated by Israel in 2005, but Hamas, affiliated with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, took power there, refusing any peace with Israel.

Since 1967, Israel has faced three options: a) withdrawal without a peace agreement, but the experience in Gaza was disastrous; b) maintaining the status quo, a low-intensity conflict until peace is guaranteed, yet the heavily armed Hamas in Gaza, supported by Iran, was only waiting for the moment to trigger a large-scale conflagration. The current situation is catastrophic, with populations displaced to clear Gaza's underground tunnels of the missile arsenal intended for Israeli civilians; c) withdrawal accompanied by peace with security arrangements, which was achieved with Egypt and Jordan.

Proposals for a binational state, an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian federation, or annexation are sometimes put forward. However, the teaching of hatred and the tolerance, even reward, of attacks against Israeli civilians, applauded by the Palestinian Authority, harden positions and hinder the prospect of peace.

A long journey remains ahead. Fifty-seven years have passed, and the Middle East is still plagued by unrest with an uncertain outcome. After decades of hatred against the Israeli scapegoat, the Arab Spring confronted many Arab leaders with their own responsibilities. However, Turkey under Erdogan, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and Iran have taken up the mantle of this anti-Israeli escalation. Iran's calls for the elimination of Israel harden positions and destabilize any peace process.

This complex conflict, omnipresent in the media, cannot be understood without a thorough knowledge of its historical evolution and the past of Jewish minorities in Arab and Christian countries. It bears the weight of a Judeo-Muslim and Judeo-Christian past marked by periods of massacres, but also periods of tolerance and

flourishing. It contains elements of division, but also hopes for the unity of civilizations.

When we sang "We Shall Overcome" in 1967, we never imagined that the path to peace would be so long and that calls for Israel's extermination would resurface. The teaching of hatred perpetuates the conflict, further fueled by Iran and Turkey. Only a peace of hearts can restore trust between adversaries and alleviate fears.

It is up to people of good will to work towards this end.