

The shock of defeat in 1967

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Israeli soldiers celebrate the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem from Jordan on 11 June 1967. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

In 1967, I was 23 years old and attended the second year of law school in Damascus. My father was a judge and two of our neighbors were lawyers. I used to enjoy listening to their discussions on legal and political issues. In the month preceding the June war, one could sense the increasing tension in the air and that some regional conflict might be ahead. As a result, most of my colleagues and I decided to return home to our families in Jerusalem even before the official summer holidays, fearing that we might be unable to do so if the situation in the region did escalate.

My family's house was next to Orient House which served as the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1980s and '90s, until it was shuttered by Israel in 2001. During the week of the war, neighboring families stayed with us in the salon of our house, which was one of the largest in the area, for safety reasons, sharing all facilities with us.

We were glued to the radio, listening to the news bulletins from Radio Cairo, our main source of information. As we were advised by the neighborhood committee not to have lights on in the house, we put mattresses up to cover the windows. I took the risk of leaving the house in the heat of the war just three times in order to collect bread and food from the Ritz Hotel, only a few hundred meters away, which had been left deserted by all its staff.

Like most young men in my neighborhood, I had no military experience nor had I ever joined any resistance organization or training camp. However, there were national activists who established popular committees to provide guidance to civil society on issues such as how to handle any unexpected military presence at their doors. They also warned us to avoid the streets because of the army's presence. As we were indeed afraid to be hit by stray bullets, we stayed home as much as possible.

Interestingly, in those days we never thought of the war from a wider Palestinian perspective, i.e., we didn't think of what was happening in Gaza, Hebron or Nablus. Our world shrank to Jerusalem only, and we felt like we were on a ship in the middle of the ocean, isolated and rudderless. There was no flag or leadership behind which to unite. We were left deeply uncertain about the direction in which things were heading. A major concern for everyone was the occupation of the Old City and of its holy places.

Blinded by illusion

It is important to point out the gap between our understanding, perceptions and knowledge of the unfolding events back then, and the knowledge we have today thanks to the many historical documents, official intelligence reports and personal memoirs that have been released and revealed since.

Fifty years ago, we were told – and this was the common belief then – that Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser had received information from the Soviet Union about a planned Israeli aggression on Syria. He reacted by closing the Strait of Tiran and alerting the Egyptian army. US President Lyndon B. Johnson had declared his full support for Israel, and we heard that King Hussein of Jordan had rushed to Cairo to sign a defense pact with the United Arab Republic (the union that had been formed between Syria and Egypt in February 1958, but by then only consisted of Egypt).

We marched in the streets of Jerusalem, full of Pan-Arab pride at President Nasser's speech on defending Syria and being ready for war to nullify Israeli plans. In the last week before the war, we saw Ahmad Shukeiri, then chairman of the PLO, at the Ambassador Hotel in Jerusalem telling local media after meeting with the city's notables that regaining control over Jaffa and Haifa was only a matter of time. We were awed by national zeal and false portrayals of reality.

Today we can tell the true story of June 1967 and admit that we lived an illusion. We know that the war was not so much the result of Arab aspirations to undo Israel as the result of Israel's agenda against Nasser and its intention to occupy the West Bank. We know that back then, President Johnson told Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban that Nasser would not launch a war on Israel, and that Menachem Begin, well aware of this, later stated "we must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him."

From the memoirs of several Israeli generals, we now know that they aspired to annex the West Bank to Israel, claiming they made a historical mistake in 1948 by not conquering "Judea" and "Samaria." The attack of the village of al-Samu, near Hebron, in 1966, was only a flexing of muscles and a test of Israel's military apparatus. That attack left some 16 Jordanian soldiers and three civilians dead and, more portentously, led to the demolition of between 40 and 120 houses. One Israeli soldier was killed.

Once Moshe Dayan, defense minister then, launched a preemptive strike, completely destroying the Egyptian and Syrian air forces, it became clear to us that, contrary to all the high expectations, the Arab armies were about to be defeated. We heard on the radio Jordan's King Hussein appealing to people to "resist the aggression and challenge it with hands and teeth," but even though Arab media

falsely claimed victory over the Israeli forces, it was only a few days later that we experienced the overwhelming shock of defeat.

Many cried and we felt humiliated, but it soon turned out that the worst was yet to come. Right after the war, one of the biggest shocks was when Israeli forces demolished the 135 homes of the historical Moroccan Quarter in the Old City, adjacent to the Buraq Wall, which – according to an age-old religious status quo confirmed by the British in 1930 – was part of al-Aqsa mosque.

The Palestinian families living in the Moroccan Quarter were evicted so that Israel could build a square around the Buraq Wall, on the ruins of the demolished homes. The area is now known as the “Western Wall Plaza.”

Another setback was the resignation of President Nasser, who took full responsibility for the defeat. Not only Egyptians, but people across the Arab world called on Nasser to stay in office and lead a new chapter in the liberation of Palestine from occupation and cleaning the Arab house of corrupt political regimes.

A faded hope

For us in Jerusalem, our first “real” experience with defeat was seeing the Israeli military in the streets of the city, calling on people to hand over their weapons, although there were none around to do so. I remember walking through Salah al-Din Street to the Damascus Gate, where the Israelis had assembled a number of buses, encouraging Palestinians from the Old City to evacuate and leave to Amman across the bombed and broken Allenby Bridge to follow those who had fled during the fighting.

I was in a troubled state of mind and couldn't grasp the reality that there was another world next to mine. I had lived in Jerusalem without thinking what was on the other side of the wall, in my city's western part. Only after the war, could I open my eyes. I walked up the hill of Notre Dame Hotel, for example, to the old municipality building, I was searching for a building nearby, where I was told my father and uncle had had their law office prior to 1948. I felt nostalgia, touching history with my eyes, as I walked along Jaffa Street and to King George Street, where I noticed a sign saying the street had been opened under the auspices of Ragheb Nashashibi, who served as Jerusalem mayor from 1920 to 1934.

I felt a sense of loss about what had been ours and now was not. How could a young man like me cope? Apart from the shock and humiliation, there was a strong feeling of “I am here, I am not leaving, I belong and this is ours too.” Later in the month, we all were registered in the new Israeli census of Arab inhabitants of the city. From that time on and until today, we were considered “residents,” not “citizens.” Although the Israelis were henceforth in charge, we tried to avoid any contact with them – after all, they were the enemy and we should have nothing to do with them.

At the same time, we kept dreaming that it would only be a matter of time before this catastrophe would end – that it would not last for long, just as it had been the case of the Israeli occupation of Gaza in 1956. We recited the politically inspired poems of Nizar Qabbani. Back then no one ever thought it would last 50 years. And indeed it could not have lasted if international political will to give any meaning to UN Resolution 242 of November 1967 had not faded or the statements of too many Arab summits been turned into reality.

But these statements proved meaningless and international will did fade and remains faded. It is in fact with the backing of the international community that Israel has been able to continue unabated what it set off in those painful days in June 1967.

Then and now

After the war, apart from the political situation, we were much concerned with the practical difficulties of daily life. Banks in Jerusalem were closed, so people were afraid of money shortages. I needed to assuage my parents' concerns and followed some of my friends to Amman. We knew the Israeli authorities would seize our passports and wouldn't allow us to come back after crossing the Allenby Bridge. I handed my personal ID papers to the Israeli guard at the checkpoint, claiming that I lost my passport, even though it was hidden in my pocket. Luckily, they were not interested in people crossing that way across the bridge, so they let me pass.

I traveled to Amman to collect my father's pensions and to buy very much needed medicines for both my parents. In Amman, I went to meet the well known Jordanian notable Mohamed Odeh Quran, head of the Agricultural Credit Corporation, later appointed member of Jordan's senate, and one of my father's close friends. I will never forget how he embraced me as his son and gave me his own shoes to wear; mine were full of mud from the Jericho area.

Quran also lent me his driver, who drove me to the bank and the pharmacy. In the early morning of the next day, the driver took me to Allenby Bridge where I had to pay, as others did, a huge amount of money to be smuggled back to the West Bank. We had to cross the river, wading through water up to our waists. I hid all day in Jericho and slept on the balcony of our old house there. The next day I shared a taxi back to Jerusalem, a big smile on my face, happy to have successfully accomplished my mission.

By the way, Quran kept sending my father's pensions and medicines for months, saving me from having to repeatedly smuggle myself back into Jordan.

Today, 50 years later, I see our young generation in Jerusalem undertaking similarly courageous missions, acting individually and unpredictably, trying to meet some of their aspirations. I think: I was then where they are now, with a smile on our faces, without fear of what lies ahead as long as we believed in our tasks and responsibilities.

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