

## "Israelis Ask, What Have We Gained Since the '67 War?"

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JERUSALEM, June 8 — In the months before the 1967 Middle East war, Israel was in a spiral of self-doubt, the 19-year experiment of an independent Jewish state looking shaky.

There were existential worries about destruction by Arab armies, fierce denunciations of the political leadership and deep anxiety about a sinking economy.

Forty years later, Israel is rich and its army one of the best in the world, yet the public mood is oddly similar. There is a quiet panic about a potentially nuclear Iran, condemnations of the leadership as weak, indecisive and corrupt, and deep concerns about “two Israels” — religious versus secular, settler versus beachgoer, Jerusalem versus Tel Aviv, Jew versus Arab.

Of course, Israel is no stranger to anxiety or complaint. A small nation built on the ashes of the Holocaust, many of its citizens are ready to fear the worst. But as Israel marks 40 years after an extraordinary victory, there is far less exultation than questioning about the war's impact on the country, and grave doubts about the future. There is a debate about what kind of country Israel is, about the impact those 40 years of development, immigration, war, settlement and occupation have had on the dreams of those who chose to make their lives here. And there is a widespread feeling that both left and right are out of answers. The left says that Israel must reach out to the majority of Palestinians who want a two-state solution and that the right is too despairing about the possibility of reaching peace.

The right, which remains somewhat more popular, believes that the left was seduced by the dream of normality in the 1990s, after the Oslo accord with the Palestinians, and that the siren song of peace and coexistence is softening the Israeli character.

Israel, the right says, will never be like other countries both because of Jewish history and because the neighborhood is getting more threatening, not less, with radical Islam and a nuclear-ambitious Iran. Israelis cannot sit around Tel Aviv cafes and let their children avoid serious military service.

“What everyone feels, no matter their politics or their understanding of the 1967 war, is a deep disappointment in themselves,” said Yossi Klein Halevi, an Israeli writer and analyst on the center right. “As a people, we haven't carried on this story with the gravitas it deserves. We've been flippant. There's a sense that all of us have abrogated responsibility for the Jewish story that brought us here.” It is true, he said, that the early Zionists talked of building a “normal country.” But “they meant a nation externally normalized and internally exceptional.”

“Sometimes it feels we've done the reverse,” he said. “We didn't want this to be one more mundane country with a mundane morality.”

Deborah Harris, a successful literary agent, said the 1967 victory “was one of the most emotional things that happened to me in my life.” Even as a sixth grader in Scranton, Pa., she said, “I made a decision that no way was I going to take myself out of that victorious progress of Jewish history.”

If the Israelis did it alone, she said, “I wanted to be a part of this people, and if God did it, I wanted to be part of the miracle.”

But having made her life here, Ms. Harris said, “for the first time ever I've allowed myself to think that Israel may be a passing phenomenon.”

The point for her is not simply the fear of a nuclear Iran, but the banality of much of the debate and the “regurgitation of the same failed leaders,” she said. “The question is not whether we'll be here, but what will we look like? What will we look like in 20 or 30 years?”

Mr. Halevi asks a similar question: “Will Israel even be here in 50 years? People now talk about that among themselves.”

Ari Shavit, an influential columnist, is obsessed with the fear that Israel is losing not just its values in a more capitalist and corrupt era, especially in its collective caring for the poor and the disadvantaged, but also its edge in an increasingly dangerous region.

Last summer's war with Hezbollah in Lebanon showed the increasing mediocrity of the military and the political leadership, Mr. Shavit said, while challenging the ethos of the new hedonistic, modern Israel. Many here, he said, think they are living in a poor European country like Greece, instead of in the Middle East.

“Can the mall defend itself?” he asked. “The gap between the inspiring economy and society, and the dysfunction of the state is becoming impossible. There are admirable achievements in the private sphere, and in the public sphere, decay.” Israeli society showed itself resilient in the face of Hezbollah's rockets, he conceded, even as the cabinet and the military command seemed irresolute. But he is worried about the trend.

“Postmodern yuppies can't deal with this region,” Mr. Shavit said. “You gain respect by understanding how the neighborhood behaves, and conducting yourself in a way the neighborhood respects.”

Dan Meridor, a lawyer and former minister who has moved from Likud on the right to the new center, was 20 in 1967, fighting in a tank brigade that spearheaded the assault on the Suez Canal. “I remember hearing about the liberation of Jerusalem, and everyone in the tank was crying,” he said.

It seemed as if God had redeemed a promise to return the Jews to the biblical land of Israel, he said.

The war brought great benefits, he added, including “the beginning of, if not the peace process, then the acceptance process” of Israel as a permanent reality. “But just as there are no free lunches, there are also no free miracles,” Mr. Meridor said. “This idea that we could settle all the land and somehow absorb all the Arabs into Israel, it has cost us a lot, morally and politically,” he said. “You can’t have occupation as a permanent state. That’s why Israelis say: ‘No more messianic ideas. Let’s divide the land.’ ”

Chuck Freilich was deputy national security adviser under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. (Mr. Sharon was felled by a stroke in January 2006 and remains in a coma.) Mr. Freilich is writing a book about what he considers the country’s dysfunctional politics, where small parties and factions vote in their self-interest, no secret is unpublished and there is little political cohesion.

The 1967 war “convinced Arabs that Israel is here to stay,” he said. “But it’s also become a cancer. Occupation is corrupting in the long run for any society, and the war also brought a religious messianism into Israeli life that really wasn’t there.” The Gaza disengagement helped puncture the power of the settlers, he said.

But radical Islamic movements like Hamas are not interested in peace with Israel. With the war that began with the second intifada in 2000, he said, “I think the whole country is now disillusioned with the idea of peace and the peace process.” “Everyone feels doomed to spend another decade like this, managing the conflict.” Tom Segev, an Israeli historian who has just published a book about the 1967 war, said: “For so many years we believed the occupation was temporary. But 40 years is a very long time. And now I don’t believe in peace any more. We can manage the conflict better, but I don’t think we can solve it.”

For Palestinians, of course, the 1967 war was another disaster, but a secondary one to the formation of Israel in 1948, said Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian political scientist. The year 1948 is known as Al Nakba, the catastrophe; 1967 is Al Naksa, the setback. But since it brought Israeli occupation, it helped shape the Palestinian cause.

“Ironically, it started our march toward independence and statehood,” Mr. Shikaki said. “Unfortunately the price was the occupation of our own land. Israel is seriously thinking of ending the occupation, which you couldn’t say five years ago. But is a Palestinian state closer?”

Nasser al-Kidwa, a former foreign minister for the Palestinians and a nephew of Yasir Arafat, sees fragmentation all around. The last 40 years of occupation, he said, “have seen a serious disintegration of Palestinian society.”

The middle class is emigrating, youth dreams of leaving and the economy is dying, Mr. Kidwa said. “We are clearly the weaker side, the destroyed side,” he added. “We can’t do things on our own now, and I’m ashamed to say it. There’s a grand catastrophe in the making here.”

Mr. Meridor, like many in Israel, including Prime Minister Ehud Olmert , has

traveled a long road since 1967 to accept a Palestinian state on a large part of biblical Israel. Though weak now, he said, the Israeli left has won the larger argument, helped by the iron laws of demography. "Dreams are one thing, reality is another," he said.

The novelist Amos Oz put it better: The victory of 1967 had the eerie quality of a dream come true. "But it is the nature of a dream," he said, "that once carried out, it has its flaws."