IS PEACE POSSIBLE?
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A Historical and Biblical Understanding of Current Events in the Middle East
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Jonathan Bernis

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JONATHAN BERNIS
A DESPERATE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948. That same night, the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, along with troops from Saudi Arabia and Yemen invaded Israel. Their stated aim was to create a “United States of Palestine” in place of the Jewish nation established by the UN vote. The invasion was condemned by the United States and other nations as illegal, but it proceeded as thousands of soldiers streamed across the borders.

Arabs living in the new Jewish state were told by Arab leaders in other nations to leave their homes until the Jews could be driven out. They were told it would only be a matter of days or weeks until they could return to their homes.

Often a few hundred Israeli soldiers faced thousands of Arabs. Though outnumbered and outgunned, the Jews fought ferociously for their new homeland. The Israeli Defense Force grew rapidly as civilians joined the fight and immigrants came to Israel by the thousands. By December of 1948 their ranks had grown from less than 30,000 to more than 100,000. The Israeli army focused on protecting Jewish settlements from the invaders and trying to hold their lines to prevent the tiny nation from being broken up into indefensible segments.
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Much of the early fighting was inconclusive. Gains of territory by both sides were frequently lost by counterattacks in following days or weeks. Israel gained air superiority with planes purchased from Czechoslovakia, which greatly aided their efforts to repel the invading forces. After nearly a month of fighting, the United Nations brokered a 28-day ceasefire, which took effect on June 11, 1948.

Negotiations made no progress toward achieving a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and on July 8, the day before the ceasefire was to end, Egyptian forces again attacked Israeli positions. Fighting resumed on all fronts for another ten days and Israel made significant territorial gains until a second ceasefire was established on July 18. The second ceasefire lasted until October, although again no progress toward resolution was made during peace talks.

The fighting resumed on October 15 with a massive Israeli assault against Egyptian forces in the Negev Desert that pushed the Egyptian army out of Israel completely. By the end of October, Jewish forces had captured the entire Galilee region and driven Lebanese and Syrian forces out of Israel. Israel continued to realize miraculous military success, and by the end of the year the nation was about one-third larger than it had been when independence was declared. Armistice agreements were signed in the spring of 1949, bringing Israel's first war as a new nation to a close.

Though open fighting ended, there was uneasy peace at best. Terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians—men, women, and children—and population centers continued, and there was a constant threat of war from Israel's larger neighbors. In the mid 1960s the threat of war increased. Egypt signed mutual defense agreements with Syria in 1966 and Jordan in 1967. Jordan also invited Iraqi troops into the country to “protect” against an Israeli attack. Following a false report from Russian intelligence of a pending Israeli offensive, Egypt massed troops on the Sinai border, preparing for an attack of their own.

In early June, Israel discovered plans for a pending coordinated attack from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Israeli leaders made the decision to launch a massive preemptive aerial assault. On June 5, 1967, nearly 200 Israeli jets at-
tacked the Egyptian Air Force, virtually wiping it out. Attacks later that day duplicated that success against both Jordan and Syria, guaranteeing Israel air superiority for the remainder of the war.

The ground war that followed was startlingly one-sided. Israeli troops under the command of General Ariel Sharon routed the Egyptians in the Sinai Desert, driving them back all the way across the Suez Canal and capturing the entire peninsula. Jordan attacked Israel after shelling the Jewish sections of Jerusalem, and Israeli troops pushed them back, capturing the West Bank. Following word that the United Nations was about to impose a ceasefire, General Moshe Dayan ordered his troops into the Old City of Jerusalem. On June 7, Israeli paratroopers completed taking control of the entire old city of Jerusalem. Nearly 2,000 years after the Romans captured the Holy City, Jerusalem was once again in Jewish hands.

In the north, Israeli forces succeeded in capturing the strategic Golan Heights region from which Syrian forces had repeatedly shelled Jewish communities in the valley below. By the time the ceasefire was signed on June 11, ending six days of fighting, the size of Israel had tripled. Despite the fact that this entire territory is part of the original land given to Abraham and his descendants by God, Israel’s right to hold these “captured” areas of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights has never been officially recognized by the world community. It is this territory that remains at the core of the current dispute between Israel and the Syrians and Palestinians.

In 1973 the tables were turned as Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel during Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement. On the holiest day of the year for the Jewish People, virtually the entire nation was at a standstill when Egypt and Syria, with participation from Jordan and help from at least nine Arab states, coordinated a massive surprise attack on Israel—from Sinai on the south and the Golan Heights in the north. The initial heavy loss of Israeli soldiers and equipment shocked the Israelis, who had grown confident in their military strength after their earlier successes. Israel was now in grave danger and struggling for her very survival.

After a few days of desperate fighting, Israeli forces brought the invading armies to a halt and began driving them back. In the south, the Israeli
counter-attack completely cut off the entire Egyptian Third Army. Only intervention by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger kept them from being utterly destroyed. Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal and drove deep into Egypt, at one point reaching a position some 60 miles from Cairo.

At the same time, fighting in the Golan Heights in the north was intense. The Syrian forces there were much closer to Israel’s civilian population than were the Egyptian troops in the Sinai. Poorly trained and poorly led, eventually the Syrian troops fled their positions. The Israeli army followed them into Syria, coming as close as 25 miles to the capital of Damascus.

Tensions between the Soviet Union, which supplied and backed the Arab armies, and the United States, which did the same for Israel, escalated. Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev threatened to join the war on behalf of Egypt if the Americans did not pressure Israel to accept a ceasefire, which they did on October 25, 1973. As part of the ceasefire agreement, Israel agreed to return the Suez Canal to Egyptian control. Despite the agreements, minor outbreaks of violence continued into the spring of the following year. Israel had narrowly survived the gravest threat she had faced since declaring statehood in 1948.
Israel had faced the constant threat of war from her neighbors since her rebirth as a nation in 1948. Outbreaks of actual fighting were punctuated by ceasefires, but there was no real peace. That began to change in the late 1970s when Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat made a trip to Israel in 1977. After months of negotiations, and the 1978 Camp David meetings of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Sadat, and Israel Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Egypt became the first Arab nation to formally recognize Israel’s existence and a peace treaty was signed on March 26, 1979.

Israel agreed to completely withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula, which they had captured in 1967 and return it to Egypt. Israel gave up settlements and oil drilling rigs and the millions of dollars of investment they had put in place to develop the Sinai. In return Israel received free right of passage for ships through the Suez Canal. The Sinai was kept as a demilitarized zone to prevent it from being used to launch future attacks against Israel. Sadat and Begin would share the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. The peace treaty normalized relations between Israel and Egypt, and the two countries exchanged ambassadors and became economic and trading partners.

Reaction in the Arab world to the treaty was bitter and vitriolic. The Arab League expelled Egypt from its membership. Palestine Liberation Organization head Yasser Arafat said the “false peace will not last.” In October of 1981, soldiers linked to the radical Muslim Brotherhood assassinated Anwar Sadat. His vice president, Hosni Mubarak, who was wounded in the assassination attempt, succeeded him. Mubarak ruled Egypt as a military
dictator (despite being referred to as president) for 30 years, until his ouster early in 2011.

To date only one other Arab country is officially at peace with Israel, and that is Jordan. Negotiations between the two nations began in the late 1980s in an effort to resolve the lingering tensions from the Yom Kippur War. Israel had warned Jordan’s King Hussein to stay out of the fighting, but he yielded to pressure from his Arab neighbors and joined the war, suffering great losses as a result.

The negotiations were hampered by political considerations in both countries, and it was not until 1994 that Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty. The treaty established the Jordan River as the border between the nations, and covered other issues such as water rights and mutual efforts to prevent terrorism. The Clinton Administration promised Jordan billions of dollars in debt forgiveness in exchange for their agreement to the treaty.

With the exception of Egypt, the Arab world responded to Jordan with contempt and anger. Hezbollah terrorists launched mortar and rocket attacks against Jewish civilian targets on the day the treaty was to be signed, hoping to disrupt the move toward peace. It is believed that Israel’s Mossad intelligence service saved the life of King Hussein from at least one terrorist assassination attempt. On the death of King Hussein from cancer in 1999, his son King Abdullah II took the throne in Amman. He has continued to build trade and economic ties to Israel in the intervening years.

The governments of other Arab nations have had a complicated relationship with Israel over the years. Some, such as Syria and Iraq, have been extremely hostile. Others such as Saudi Arabia, while internally expressing anger toward the “Zionists” find Israel useful in restraining the same terrorists who threaten their own rule. Perhaps the most interesting case study in the shifting nature of relationships in the Middle East is Iran. Under the Shah, Iran was very friendly to Israel. Today under President Ahmadinejad, Iran represents what is perhaps Israel’s greatest threat.

Though there have been other conflicts, including Israel’s wars in Lebanon in 1982 and 2006 as well as military operations in Gaza, there has not been another multi-front war such as Israel faced so often during her
early years. As part of its constant preparation to respond to threats, service in the Israeli Defense Forces is mandatory for all Israeli citizens when they reach 18 years of age. Aside from exemptions on religious grounds or physical inability, men serve three-year terms and women two-year terms. After their term of regular service, the men must remain active in the reserves. This provides Israel with a large pool of trained personnel should another war break out. Israel has been forced to live by the motto expressed by the Roman military historian Vegetius “Si vis pacem, para bellum”—if you wish for peace, prepare for war.