

Israel and Zionism: Challenges for the Next Century (Part II)

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Brief Analysis

The course of history since the first Zionist convention 100 years ago—World War II, the Soviet breakup, and of course, the establishment of Israel—would leave the first Zionists in awe. Beginning with the founding of Israel as a homeland for Holocaust refugees and ending with the influx of Soviet Jews after Communism's collapse, the Jewish people have completed a triumphant circle. From a meager 600,000 Jews, Israel's population has increased eight-fold to 4.8 million people in the past fifty years. With a gross domestic product of \$94 billion, and exports of \$30 billion per year, Israel has left most of its neighbors behind economically, while militarily, the Israel Defense Force is second to none in the region. Whereas the Hebrew language was not even spoken at the first Zionist convention in 1897, today it is spoken by Arab and Jew alike—a further illustration of Israel's unexpected success in the past half century.

Zionism's Great Failure Israel's many strengths are the realization of the Zionist dream. However, Zionism's one great failure remains a blemish on this otherwise stunning set of accomplishments: the inability to save European refugees by creating a Jewish state before the Holocaust. Even Israel's greatest achievements have not managed to conceal the Zionist failure to establish Israel in time to save the six million. Of course, this failing provided the incentive after 1948 for Zionists to make superhuman efforts to create a Jewish state and ensure that the Holocaust was never repeated.

Israel's future will continue to be deeply influenced by her past. Indeed, Israel's belated establishment has defined the Zionist movement: to save and protect the Jewish nation as a "democratic state based on Jewish values." Nevertheless, the threat to the physical survival of the state has abated, and in its place, the issue for Israel and Zionism is now the nature of the Jewish state. Today, as unrest grows both within Jewish community and between Israel's Jewish and Arab populations, there is a growing need to nurture a Jewish identity and a cohesive Jewish state.

Redefining Israel's Identity The first issue facing Israeli society is the definition of "who is a Jew?" Today, Israelis hail from more than seventy ethnic or cultural backgrounds, introducing new divisive social and cultural problems into Israeli society, business, and eventually politics. The challenge for modern Zionism is to move from defining the modern Jew to defining a political framework for modern Israel that will enable it to build a new national character. It is the challenge of reconciling cultural individualism and pluralism within an Israeli democracy dominated by a Jewish majority.

To some extent, both Jews and Arabs suffer from their minority status in various communities. Israel's Jewish ethos was molded by European anti-Semitism, and despite their current strength, the Jews of Israel still see themselves as an oppressed minority. As Israel modernizes, the Arab community in Israel is increasingly assuming the role of the minority. Greatly outnumbered in Israeli society, the status of human rights for Arabs has improved, but it has not yet reached true equality. The test for Israel will be whether the Jews—the new majority—can treat the Arabs with the fairness and respect they themselves were deprived when they were a minority. The human rights conundrum

between Jews and Arabs is exacerbated by the absence of a formalized or legalized Israeli constitution. For this reason a constitution is another vital task on Israel's agenda in the coming years.

Regional Security In addition to redefining the identity of the state, Israel must also ensure its security within the region over the next century. Although the Middle East peace process has reached something of a crossroads, it is clear that the Arabs now recognize that Israel is here to stay. Nevertheless, despite a sure existence and a mature peacemaking strategy, if Israel wants to survive, Israelis must maintain their military strength. Aside from American financial help, Israel must still allocate 8 or 9 percent of its GDP for the military, as opposed to European nations, which allocate only 1 or 2 percent for defense. Israelis must further contribute to their own security with defensible borders, a strong economy, and a wary foreign policy toward the Arabs.

Today, regional peace is on a relatively positive track, thanks to a flurry of agreements signed with neighboring Arab countries which ensure at least some degree of compromise and dialogue. Although such agreements are important, they do not guarantee that all conflicts can be fully resolved. Although some Arab countries have proven trustworthy, Iran and Iraq still have hostile intentions and growing capabilities which Israel cannot ignore or negotiate a solution to. Thus, Israel must try to strike a balance: taking risks, but maintaining its basic ability to defend itself.

For Israel, however, the key to solidifying its relations with the Arabs will be a less restrictive economic atmosphere. Although 95 percent of Israel's trade is with countries outside the region, recent business endeavors with Egypt and Jordan exploiting Israeli technology and capital and Arab labor have shown themselves to be very promising. Ultimately, this sort of economic interdependence has the greatest potential to cement a working peace in the Middle East.

Relations with Diaspora Jews The final challenge for Israel in the future is to encourage the growth of a global Jewish circle. Over the centuries, Jews have had a propensity to assimilate at an astonishing rate. Israel needs to find a way to retain the place of Jewish values and identity in its culture. Israel's unique values have attracted Jewish refugees from across the world in the past fifty years. When Communism fell, Russian immigrants even pretended to be Jewish to try to get visas to Israel. The clear attraction between Israel and the Jewish world must be intensified by encouraging the use of Hebrew in daily life and fostering communications among Jewish communities and between Israel and the Jews of the diaspora.

This report was prepared by Megan Fisher.

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