

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

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Brief Analysis

Zionism was born of a mixture of desperation, imagination, and sheer coincidence. Theodore Herzl and many of his colleagues wanted only to be accepted into European society, but were rebuffed because of their religion. In the face of such discrimination, Herzl took up the cause of Zionism as his only alternative. He became so desperate to find a place of refuge for the Jewish diaspora that he was even ready to accept Uganda as the new homeland. If Herzl had been born today—when assimilation has become the norm—he never would have created Zionism. Despite these origins, Zionism has achieved the greatest success of any national movement in the twentieth century, exemplified by Israel's prosperity and the rebirth of the Hebrew language.

The Quest for a Normal Life The participants in the First Zionist Congress did not envision their future state as a unique center for Jewish life nor as an example for the world. These secular Jews merely desired a sanctuary where they could live in peace—a simple request in their minds. The founders of Zionism misunderstood the local Palestinians, and therefore did not anticipate a conflict. Herzl romanticized about a Bedouin culture affably cooperating with their newly-returned "cousins" to achieve an economic boom. In addition, the Jews perceived themselves as an eternally persecuted minority that could never represent colonialism. However, the Arabs regarded the Jews as occupiers and imperialists, and these tensions began to manifest themselves soon after Herzl's death. With the 1936 Arab Revolt, the Palestinian-Jewish problem boiled over into outright conflict. From that moment, security, rather than normalcy, became the priority for the Jews—a diversion from the initial vision of Zionism. (Ironically, the early Zionists' dream of an economic miracle was still achieved despite the continual threat to Israel's existence.)

"The March of Folly" Israel gradually developed one of the best armies in the world, a symbol of courage and skill, allowing Diaspora Jews to proudly identify with the nation as a source of power. The Arab world responded by ostracizing Israel, engineering the Jewish state's isolation economically with the Arab boycott and diplomatically with such measures as the United Nations resolution equating Zionism with racism. The majority of countries consistently supported the Arab line which held Israel responsible for all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result of this international isolation and the memory of the Holocaust, fundamentally moral Jews felt justified in performing actions that contradicted the norms of their forefathers. For example, Israel collaborated with South Africa to gain a strategic foothold in an otherwise hostile continent despite South Africa's apartheid system. Israel also deprived Palestinians of certain rights in order to maintain security. This further intensified international opinion of Israel as a "pariah state," especially in the 1970s. However, Israel disregarded this label as unjustified for a state of persecuted people which had suffered more than any other during the twentieth century.

Obviously, there is a "cognitive dissonance" between the Arab world view of the Jewish state and Israel's self-perception, but these differences have narrowed with the Camp David, Madrid, and Oslo agreements. For many years, Israelis and Arabs debated over who was right and who was wrong, and diplomats placed the blame on each other. For instance, in negotiations with the Arabs, the Israelis often raised their charge that the conflict could have

been avoided had the Arabs just accepted the partition plan in 1948. Beginning with the Oslo process, both parties agreed to suspend the debate over which side caused the conflict and concentrate on finding a workable solution to their differences.

Fulfilling a Dream The Zionist tradition emphasizes the value of humanity. It asserts that Jews and Arabs alike deserve equal respect because every person is born equal. Israel must effectively deal with existential threats without ignoring this moral obligation. The biggest existential threat facing Israel today is the combination of weapons of mass destruction and religious fundamentalism. To deal with it, Israel must further the goal of regional peace as soon as possible to prevent this threat from escalating. Although the Middle Eastern states have different degrees of democracy, and educational and economic standards, there exists a common desire for pragmatism that must be seized upon before it evaporates. If Israeli politicians create a "coalition of sanity," among the moderate, pragmatic regimes of the region, their dream of peace can be fulfilled. Then, Israel would be able to prevent any hostile military alliance against Israel, such as Saddam Hussein's attempt to rally Arab states against Israel during the Gulf War.

The Peace Process Peace with Syria means returning to the international borders—not Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's demand of the June 4, 1967 borders, and not merely the Israeli Right's preference for nothing more than cosmetic changes to the Israeli control of the Golan Heights. Israel and Syria should make peace now rather than risking a war that neither can afford. Unfortunately, Assad has not proved to be a willing partner, and his commitment to peace is in question. On the other hand, the Palestinian leadership is ready to make peace with Israel. Both sides know that the solution is a demilitarized Palestinian state with Jerusalem remaining under Israeli control.

Israel cannot have peace until Israeli politicians come to a common understanding of the Arab world. Currently, many members of the Likud party feel that Arabs are made of different "stuff" than Israelis. For instance, they believe that the Arabs are somehow innately incapable of creating a democracy and respecting human rights, and therefore are untrustworthy. On the other hand, the leaders of the Labor party recognize that the Arabs are human beings with the same headaches, children, and bills. As long as these differences in perspective persist between Labor and Likud, a nonpartisan vision for the future will be difficult to achieve. There are, fortunately, leaders in both parties who are willing to try to bridge these gaps and work together to achieve a lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. To a very great extent, they represent Israel's best hope for the future.

The Next Century of Zionism Israel must balance its political system of democracy with its identity as a Jewish state; they are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, Israel must ensure that every citizen is afforded equal rights. Meanwhile, the state must maintain strong relations with the Jewish diaspora. Israel should be a spiritual and educational center which all Jews visit when they are young. However, Israelis should be able to live freely without the imposition of halachic (religious) law.

After the success of the peace process, Israel will be in a unique position to use its experience to help others. For example, the state could send troops with a United Nations peacemaking force. Peace could also spur a Middle East economic alliance—more like ASEAN than the European Union. However, there could be no "Middle East parliament," la Strasbourg, because all of the states are not democratic. Additionally, Israel could serve as a liaison between Africa and the West, and improve agricultural and health conditions on the "forgotten continent."

This report was prepared by Rachel Ingber.

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