

Israel's pride and prejudice at 60

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If 60 is for an individual the age of maturity, it is a very young age for a state. Israel remains, for the lack of a better word, an adolescent state, the young incarnation of a very old dream. It is an adolescent torn between pride and resentment on one hand, and hope and fear on the other.

That combination of pride and resentment was most visible in Warsaw two weeks ago during the ceremonies commemorating the 65th anniversary of the insurrection of the Ghetto. Three years ago, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Israeli military aircraft had flown over the site of the camp. This time, in the Royal Opera House of Warsaw, young Israeli soldiers in uniform were present in large numbers, strolling past walls adorned with hundreds of photographs of the faces of Polish Jews who had disappeared during the war. A vanished eastern European world had been replaced by a vibrant and defiant western presence in the Middle East. Poles, some of them in black tie, looked on baffled at this uniformed presence in the midst of a Beethoven concert designed to celebrate the reconciliation between Poland and (not its Jews, for they have mostly disappeared) the state of Israel. The message was clear. The spiritual heirs of the leaders of the Ghetto insurrection were back in Warsaw full of both pride for what they had been able to achieve – a state guaranteeing the security of its citizens – and continued resentment for what had taken place. If they had been there 65 years ago, millions of Jewish lives would have been saved. Are Palestinians today paying a price for the resentment still felt by Israelis towards Europe, in a transfer of ire of the most detrimental nature?

Yet the presence of these Israeli soldiers in the Warsaw Opera was a clear illustration that 60 years after its creation the very existence of the state of Israel remains nothing short of a miracle: a miracle of human will, determination and ultimately of hope. In less than three generations and in spite of extremely difficult conditions, Israelis have managed not only to survive but also to create a rich and original culture; to achieve spectacular results in science and medicine; and to create a technological hub in the region.

But hope should not be confused with self-delusion. Israel cannot dream of ever becoming the democratic Singapore of the Middle East if it remains in an ethnic and religious war with its immediate neighbours, the Palestinians. More than 30 years ago some of Israel's strategic thinkers dreamt of an alliance with the non-Arab countries of the Middle East, Iran and Turkey. In their eyes the triangle between Tehran, Ankara and Jerusalem held the key to creation of a new balance of power in the Middle East. Today, this diplomatic dream has evolved and is taking the shape of a new configuration of forces in the region. It consists of an alliance between moderate Sunni Arab regimes and Israel against the alliance of fundamentalist forces behind Iran. There is something in that logic but for the former alliance to emerge there needs to be real progress and at least a truce between the Israelis and all Palestinians, including Hamas. Strategically many Arab leaders fear the prospect of a nuclear Iran as much as, if not more than, Israel but emotionally their people would not ratify efforts to stop Iran without real progress in Palestine.

Demographically, strategically, politically, ethically and even economically, Israelis cannot put the Palestinian problem to one side. They should not give in to resignation because all previous peace attempts have failed, or because Palestinians have not produced a leader of the quality of Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. As long as Palestinians are in despair the Israeli miracle will remain, like Schubert's eighth symphony, unfinished.

Israelis and Palestinians could have provoked the best in each other. Unfortunately their interactions have led to the opposite result. David Ben-Gurion, the first and so far best leader of Israel, dreamt of an Israel that would act as a bridge between the developed north and the underdeveloped south. The African continent loomed large in his vision of the world. But the Israelis did not have to look that far afield for an economically undeveloped region to engage with. Their Africa was next door and after 1967 it became, through occupation, part of them.

It may be that the goal of peace with its most reluctant Arab neighbour is simply too tough for Israel to realise, at least in the foreseeable future. Separately, America's goal of democratisation for the region has also proved too ambitious. Instead, it would be better to set more realistic goals: for Israel, ensuring peace by truce with the Palestinians and for the US, seeking the rule of law in the region, not democracy. These twin goals would constitute significant progress and would complement each other. Acceptance of a truce with Hamas is not the equivalent of a unilateral withdrawal from territories. Truces take place precisely between belligerents and not partners for peace. The end of violence would mean that the collateral damage of Israeli military action would not become a cradle for a new generation of terrorists.

In *Lemon Trees*, a recent Israeli movie, one of the characters quotes his father, saying: "I shall sleep at night when Palestinians start having hope." Much depends, of course, on the meaning of the word "hope". Is it hope for a better life, or hope of a world without Israel? For the Middle East will be transformed only when Israelis stop being obsessed by their need to exorcise the past, and when Palestinians start believing that they can have a future next to Israel.

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