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# Israel needs stronger leadership to attain normality

Israel suffers from an inner contradiction, one that is the product of a fateful triangle between its political system, its history and its geography.

David Ben-Gurion, the legendary first prime minister of Israel, wanted desperately for Israel to be a "normal" western-style democratic state. The existence of prostitutes in Tel Aviv was reportedly seen by Ben-Gurion as reassuring proof of normality. But in their quest for normality, one can wonder if the Israelis have not gone too far. In the case of Israel, could one speak of the abnormality of normality?

It would be tempting to define Israel politically as the "west-plus". In spite of the war in Lebanon, its economy is booming, with growth rates closer to the US than Europe. Israel's democracy is a curious mix of Italy, in terms of confusion, and the US as far as the popularity of its leaders is concerned. In fact, with dark humour, Israelis point out that in terms of unpopularity, prime minister Ehud Olmert outdoes President George W. Bush.

Israelis are legitimately proud of the independence of their judges; the threat of indictment has, after all, prompted President Moshe Katsav to

stand down following a rape allegation. But they have lingering doubts about the quality of their army, worrying that it has lost its competitive edge. What concerns them also is the fact that corruption scandals are taking place at a pace that is more in tune with non-western cultures than with a proud democratic society.

The contrast between their fast moving economy and their troubled democracy would be acceptable if they had a normal history and a normal geography. Because both are far from being the case, Israel's search for normality risks becoming a recipe for disaster.

In historical terms, Israel is unique in more than one way, especially as far as its origins are concerned. It would be unfair and simplistic to say that the state of Israel derives its legitimacy from the Holocaust. Jewish nationalism, not to mention its religious dimension and its cultural roots, predate the second world war. Yet it is the immense tragedy of the Holocaust that has made Israel unique among the nations: a state of survivors, if not a state for survivors. This background was originally a source of unique strength and energy; the energy of despair, the miracle of hope. Yet 60

years after independence, one can ask whether this source of strength is not turning into one of weakness.

For most Israelis, Iran is perceived as an existential threat, not only because it wants to become a nuclear power, but because of what it proclaims: "The

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Zionist state has no right to exist". For Israelis, one can only expect the worst from those who practise Holocaust denial. Iranian intellectuals are right to denounce the Holocaust conference organised by the Ahmadi-Nejad regime. This conference contributed to the isolation of Iran. How could you allow the absolute weapon to be in the hands of a regime imbued with such an absolute ideology? Because the Holocaust

haunts Israel today more than it did 60 years ago, Iranians have been foolishly playing with fire, linking their ambition to become a nuclear power with revisionist discourses.

Beyond the legacies of its past, what makes Israel's situation so unique and difficult is its geography. Israel is in the middle of a region at war with itself, even more so than it is at war with the Jewish state. If one could describe Israel as "the west-plus", the Palestinians are "the Middle East-plus" and Israel's responsibility in this state of affairs is undeniable. To plagiarise Lord Acton's famous sentence about power: "Occupation corrupts and indefinite occupation corrupts absolutely".

Israel thrives on globalisation and is situated in the continent that, with few noticeable exceptions, is the one that fares the least well in the global age. Even Africa, in spite of its terrible plight, can be seen more as a continent of hope than the Middle East. Confronted with this reality, Israel is caught between two equally unrealistic temptations; to play a balance of power game on the side of the Sunni regimes, or to negate geography and to practise escapism. To have a common enemy – Iran – is not sufficient to establish nor-

mal relationships with the rest of the region. Israel is not about to become the "last Sunni state".

The first form of escapism practised by Israelis is to close their eyes to the Palestinian issue. The security barrier may be a strategic necessity, but, together with the Iranian threat, it allows Israelis to neglect the Palestinian problem. Yet the Palestinian issue is just as much of an existential threat as Iran. President Jimmy Carter was wrong to use the word "apartheid" about Israel, but the ethical legitimacy of the Jewish state is damaged by the treatment of Palestinians, regardless of how suicidal their behaviour can be.

Israel has failed to become a normal state, for a combination of historical and geographical reasons. What it needs are exceptional leaders. The small Israel of yesterday had a great leader, Ben-Gurion. With the exception of Yitzhak Rabin and probably Ariel Sharon, the great Israel has had a string of small if not mediocre leaders. Israel's political system has become abnormal, if not suicidal.

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