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Colin Shindler

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The state of Israel has been squandering, not only the lives of its sons, but also its miracle; that grand and rare opportunity that history bestowed upon it, the opportunity to establish here a state that is efficient, democratic, which abides by Jewish and universal values; a state that would be a national home and haven, also a place that would offer a new meaning to Jewish existence; a state that holds as an integral and essential part of its Jewish identity and its Jewish ethos, the observance of full equality and respect for its non-Jewish citizens.

Look at what has befallen us. Look what befell the young, bold, passionate country we had here, and how, as if it had undergone a quickened ageing process, Israel lurched from infancy and youth to a perpetual state of gripe, weakness and sourness.

How did this happen? When did we lose even the hope that we would eventually be able to live a different, better life? Moreover, how do we continue to watch from the side as though hypnotized by the insanity, rudeness, violence and racism that has overtaken our home?

And I ask you: How could it be that a people with such powers of creativity, renewal and vivacity as ours, a people that knew how to rise from the ashes time and again, finds itself today, despite its great military might, at such a state of laxity and inanity, a state where it is the victim once more, but this time its own victim, of its anxieties, its short-sightedness.

So spoke the Israeli writer David Grossman at a rally in November 2006 on the eleventh anniversary of the killing of Yitzhak Rabin.

Such hand-wringing is not uncommon in Israel. Despite all its achievements over sixty years, the harshest critics of Israel are often its own citizens. The dream of what could be, what should be, never departs. On this occasion, many Israeli commentators concurred, the glass was indeed half empty. Grossman's words were all the more poignant since he had lost his own son in the ill-fated conflict with Hezbollah a few months previously. And yet despite his personal anguish, Grossman's soul-searching was tempered by a profound belief that a way could be found to restore the

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ideals of the founding generation. Israel could yet be a light unto the nations.

Grossman's warning brought a rebuke from many who claimed that such noble sentiments did not reflect the current reality of living in the Middle East as a non-Arab, non-Muslim people. Moshe Dayan had famously commented that his generation had been condemned to live by the sword for the foreseeable future and many Israelis, decades later, felt that this was still the case. Indeed, between 1948 and 2006, 22,123 people had been killed in the defence of the state. The Peace Index for January 2007 indicated that nearly 60 per cent of Israelis believed that peace could not be obtained without evacuating the Palestinian territories, conquered during the Six Day war in 1967. Yet at the same time, nearly 70 per cent believed that the Palestinians would destroy the state of Israel, given the opportunity.

The founders of the state believed that they had changed the course of history and returned a marginalized and discriminated-against people to the centre. They had triumphed over their persecutors, from the Egyptian Pharaohs to the Spanish Inquisitors, from the Church Fathers to the Russian Tsars. In the words of the Soviet Yiddish poet Itzik Pfeffer, the Jews had survived to dance on Hitler's grave and to forge their own destiny. Israeli babies in the 1950s were named Atzmaut (independence), Medinah (state), Nitzhonah (her victory), Tikvah (hope) and Dror (freedom). The artist Aryeh Navon sketched a kibbutznik whose floppy hat bore the inscription 'Judea Libera' – a contemporary admonition of the Romans who had minted a coin bearing the inscription 'Judea Capta' following the destruction of the Temple and the sacking of Jerusalem in the year 70. In 1948, a majority of the world's Jews turned their faces towards Zion and identified with the new state of Israel which had seemingly risen from the ashes of the Holocaust. In the aftermath of destruction, Zionism was seen to be the successful ideological answer to the Jewish problem. For most Jews, Israel was at the forefront of Jewish history.

The reality of the tortuous Israel–Palestine conflict, however, challenged such dreams and dampened such deep emotions. The revelations of newly published archival material in the 1980s indicated that the official version of Israel's war of independence was far more complicated. The academics and writers known collectively as the 'new historians' punctured both the Israeli and Palestinian accounts of 1948 – and most human beings prefer an easy black and white version of history. Many Palestinian villages, emptied of their inhabitants by the violence of war, became the sites of new settlements for Jewish immigrants. Indeed, Ariel Sharon's farm was

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situated on the former Arab village of Hodj. The villagers had acted on behalf of the Haganah, the Zionist defence force, before 1948, but were expelled to Gaza despite promises of return. The mukhtar of the village was subsequently executed by the Egyptians.<sup>1</sup>

For many Israelis, this heroic period of state-building has been replaced by an epoch of moral and political stagnation, punctuated by accusations of rape against a former President and corruption against a Prime Minister. In 1997, Israel was listed at tenth position in an 'honesty league' compiled by Transparency International, an anti-corruption group. By 2007, it had fallen to thirty-fourth place. The lack of leadership was felt most keenly in the inability to resolve the Palestinian question. The flaws in the Oslo Accords, the assassination of Rabin, the election of Netanyahu, the ineptitude of Arafat and the rise of Islamism all contributed to the stalling of the peace process in the 1990s and the outbreak of violence in 2000. The vehemence of the al-Aqsa Intifada, the Palestinian uprising, undermined Israeli public confidence in any Palestinian leadership. Instead, they placed greater trust in the Israeli military. Following the debacle of the conflict in Lebanon in 2006, the military budget was increased in 2007. The contest for the leadership of the Labour party in the summer of 2007 was between a general and an admiral.

For ten out of the fourteen years between 1992 and 2006, military men, Rabin, Barak and Sharon, were in power. In contrast, normative politicians such as Peres, Netanyahu and Olmert were seen as ineffectual leaders. In the same period – apart from Peres's short tenure in 1995–1996 and Peretz after 2006 – all the Ministers of Defence were army men. Yet Israel is no ordinary garrison state. Unlike other countries in which the military plays a central role, officers are forced to retire early. In spite of the perceived state of siege, there is no conventional loss of liberties, marked by a trend to authoritarianism.

In addition, since the Six Day war in 1967, seven out of the thirteen Chiefs of Staff went into politics – and the last two, Ya'alon and Halutz, have yet to make a decision. It is a long time since military leaders emulated the examples in the 1950s of Ya'akov Dori (Science Council) and Mordechai Maklef (Dead Sea Works).

Between 1998 and 2007, three military men with pronounced right-wing views, Mofaz, Ya'alon, Halutz, all served as Chief of Staff. Their period of office took place under Sharon's premiership during a period of suicide bombings and Palestinian violence. Rivals for the position such as Gabi

<sup>1</sup> *Yediot Aharonot* 6 January 2006.

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Ashkenazi who openly feared for 'the loss of humanity because of the ongoing warfare' were seemingly passed over by Sharon. Ashkenazi's early retirement was short-lived following Halutz's resignation after the Lebanon war of 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Not all military leaders identified with the Right. Ya'akov Orr, the military coordinator in the West Bank and Gaza, condemned the Right's simplistic slogan 'let the IDF win' as a means of quelling the al-Aqsa Intifada:

That is a statement without content or substance. There is no military answer to national popular confrontations . . . the army's task is to maintain security and ensure that our interests are not adversely affected. What does that have to do with the ability to win? Victory is a function of a political definition. I would assume that the definition says that ultimately peace has to come between the two entities.<sup>3</sup>

To some extent, this plea fell on deaf ears. Israelis were preoccupied with the deaths of 874 civilians in the Intifada, many as a result of suicide bombings. In 2006, the National Insurance Institute paid out almost \$9 million to the victims of terror and their families. The prospect of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East is a growing possibility if Iran actually does develop nuclear weapons, but it could also mean closer Israeli contact with both Arab nationalists and Sunni Muslims who feel increasingly threatened by the repetitive certainty of President Ahmadinejad's pronouncements. Moreover, the advocates of Israeli nuclear deterrence point to the fact that Nasser in defeat in 1967 did not order the use of chemical weapons against Israel even though they had been used in the Yemen in 1962. Similarly Saddam Hussein did not implement the arming of the Scud missiles that hit Tel Aviv in 1991 with biological and chemical weapons, even though the Kurds of Halabja had suffered such a fate a few years earlier.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of an army in 1948 meant a break with Jewish history – a break with persecution and extermination. But it also meant a break with pre-state Zionism when Jews had purchased land. In the wars of 1948 and 1967, Jews had conquered land instead. Ben-Gurion promoted the army as the essence of 'Israeliness'. It was perceived as a melting pot for Ashkenazim and Sephardim, religious and secular, privileged and impoverished – a means of building an Israeli identity from over a hundred culturally disparate Jewish communities. The armed forces were increasingly venerated by a grateful public which could only see a continuing and sometimes

<sup>2</sup> *Ha'aretz* 23 January 2007.    <sup>3</sup> *Ha'aretz* 29 December 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Ya'alon, 'The IDF and the Israeli Spirit', *Azure* no.24 Spring 2006.

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unremitting hostility towards the state of Israel from one quarter or another. By the twenty-first century, the IDF had evolved into an equal almost symbiotic partner with the political echelon in terms of policy making.

Given the place of the Israeli military in the governance of Israel, a growing view is that only military men rather than politicians can make peace with the Palestinians. Menachem Begin was able to agree on a bilateral agreement with Egypt in 1979, but he never accepted the PLO as a negotiating partner. It took a former Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, to do that.

On the other hand, Labour and the Israeli Left have no real answer to the rise of Islamism except the hope that it will die a quick death and negotiations will be resumed with rationalist Palestinian nationalists. Hamas does not wish to recognize Israel – and by extension does not wish to recognize or negotiate with the Israeli peace camp. Moreover, Islamism's suicide bombers have destroyed the political standing of advocates of a negotiated peace in the Israeli public arena. Yet Palestinian leaders including President Abu Mazen understand the crucial importance of an alliance with the Israeli peace camp in seeking a solution. Time, however, is running out for the rationalists. By 2010 there will be almost two million inhabitants of Gaza, which has the highest birth rate in the region. Half the population is under fifteen. The Jabalya refugee camp is three times as densely populated as Manhattan.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, despite the Intifada, Israel's GDP grew by 4.4 per cent in 2004 over the previous year. Over half of Israel's exports are sophisticated products of advanced technology. Engineers make up the highest percentage of the workforce. Nearly a quarter of the Israeli workforce has university degrees – the third highest proportion in the industrialized world. In 2002, the national expenditure on research and development per capita was higher than in the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom. Manufacturing exports in high technology in that year were four times the figure for 1990. In 2008, Israel participated in the European Union's Galileo navigation satellite project – a network of thirty satellites designed to improve intelligence-gathering operations. However, the ongoing conflict has contributed to Israel's metamorphosis as a centre for arms manufacture. In 2003, it exported \$2.8 billion of defence materiel – some 10 per cent of the world trade in that commodity.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sara Roy, *London Review of Books* 3 November 2005. <sup>6</sup> *Ha'aretz* 29 February 2004.

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The involvement of a large proportion of the population in the technology sector has meant a widening of the gap between rich and poor – on a par with other developed countries. Poverty levels have been increasing steadily since the 1970s. A special Knesset committee compiled a report in 2002 based on figures and analyses from the Central Bureau of Statistics, the National Insurance Institute and academic specialists. It commented:

Israel is now rated second in the Western world, after the United States, in terms of social gaps in income, property, capital, education and spending, as well as in the extent of poverty. While many countries have suffered from a widening of social gaps, caused by the influence of globalization and the technological revolution over the past twenty years, this trend is more pronounced in Israel than elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

Some 70 per cent of private capital is in the hands of the upper 10 per cent of the population. Indeed, Israel's move from old-time socialism to globalized capitalism manifested itself in the fact that it has the largest number of start-up companies proportionate to its population in the world. It is second in the world for venture capital funds. Outside of the United States and Canada, it has the largest number of NASDAQ listed companies. On a per capita basis, Israel has the largest number of bio-tech start-ups. Even so, the National Insurance Institute noted that 1.65 million people lived below the poverty line in 2006.

This transition was symbolized in the announcement in February 2007 that the very first kibbutz, Kibbutz Degania, had voted to reform its collective system in favour of limited individualism and amending the cooperative way of life. The dining room and the laundry service were privatized; individual cars and bank accounts were now permitted. Kibbutz members could now even invest in the stock market via the Internet.<sup>8</sup>

However, the collective ideal has not vanished. In 1998 a new kibbutz, Kibbutz Eshbal, was founded in the Western Galilee. The kibbutz members devote themselves to social work with underprivileged youth from the poorest sections of society and have established on its premises a boarding school mostly for Ethiopian young people. There are educational projects with a Bedouin tribe that lives in a recently recognized village near Kibbutz Eshbal. Yet this village does not receive even basic amenities from the state – running water, the provision of electricity, the disposal of sewerage. An estimated 75,000 Bedouin lived in unrecognized villages without public funding and services in 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *Ha'aretz* 7 December 2002. <sup>8</sup> *Ha'aretz* 23 February 2007.

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Several kibbutzim were established on the Golan Heights following the defeat of Syrian forces in 1967. They have developed the area as a prime grape-growing region which has elevated Israel's standing as an internationally recognized wine producer. The country's first organically grown Chardonnay was produced there in 2003. Yet the continuation of such enterprises is always precarious. Labour governments under Rabin and Barak have offered to return part of the Golan to the Syrians in exchange for peace and recognition. In May 2006, Arabs comprised 20 per cent of Israel's 7,026,000 citizens. The first Bedouin diplomat was appointed to San Francisco in 2006. In January 2007, the trade union leader Raleb Majadele became the first Arab minister to sit in an Israeli cabinet. Yet a survey of 10,000 Israelis in 2003–4 by the World Health Organization indicated differences in health care between Jews and Arabs. 23 per cent of Arab women underwent mammography compared with 48 per cent of Jewish women. 59 per cent of Jewish women were tested for cervical cancer, but only 13 per cent of Arab women. Access to medical facilities was more difficult for Arabs, often living in remoter areas and without knowledge of such testing techniques, but such issues were frequently raised in the context of Israeli Arabs as being less than full citizens of the state. Moreover, Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel, published data in March 2007 that asserted that the infant mortality for Arab babies under twelve months was double that of their Jewish counterparts.

In 1988, the Knesset decriminalized homosexuality and prevented discrimination on the shop floor. By 1997, such issues were permitted to be discussed on television and in 2000 the age of consent was lowered to sixteen. Both Islamist Arabs and ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel opposed activities such as the Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem. Israel was established as 'a community of communities' and the transition from dispersion to a nation state is still in progress. Nearly a million Russians arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s and have successfully been absorbed. A vibrant sub-culture has developed through Russian language theatre, literature, music and the media. There are also close business ties with the old country. Their political parties, established in the 1990s, have now been devoured by both Likud and Labour. The Kishinev-born Avigdor Lieberman has emerged as a hate figure for Israeli Liberals. His party, Yisrael Beitanu (Israel Our Home), has transcended its definition as a purely Russian party and now attracts many other Israelis to the far Right.

The Sephardim or Mizrachim, mainly from Arab countries, may often be non-observant, yet they show a remarkable respect for tradition, religion and ethnicity by voting for the ultra-orthodox party, Shas. In the 2006

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election, Shas secured twelve seats – as many as Netanyahu's Likud. Its political decisions are often made according to the judgement of its aged spiritual mentor, Ovadia Yosef, rather than through a democratic show of hands. Yet there are signs that it is beginning to move into the ground vacated by the national religious who are in ideological turmoil following the evacuation of the Gaza settlements in 2005 and who are now identified with the far Right in Israeli politics.

The Zionist national religious camp (*mafdalim*) have tended to become more religious while the non-Zionist ultra-orthodox (*haredim*) have become more nationalistic producing an emerging hybrid, appropriately termed the *hardalim*. Significantly, the number of pupils in ultra-orthodox primary schools is three times greater than a decade ago. There has been a steady stream of secular Jews leaving Jerusalem for other cities because of its accelerating religiosity. Moreover, 11 per cent of those who do not serve in the army receive exemptions for yeshiva study. This compares with only 2.4 per cent in 1974. Yet the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel reported that secular Jews and those who define themselves as 'traditional, but not so religious' account for almost three quarters of all Israelis.

Secular Israeli identity is also fragmented. There are those in the national camp who believe that 'a Jewish state' and 'a Jewish majority in the state of Israel' are one and the same. Others see 'Israeliness' in a post-Zionist context, based on normalization, embourgeoisment and materialist individualism. In addition, those who relate to the Zionism of the founders of the state have been empowered in their convictions by the violence of recent years and the withering of the peace process. Ben-Gurion's vision of a homogeneous secular society has given way to a disparate multiculturalism.

Israel in its seventh decade is thus far removed from the state founded in 1948. The days when Israel abducted Adolf Eichmann, one of the facilitators of the Nazi extermination of the Jews, from Argentina and brought him to Israel to stand trial are now a distant memory. Though Israel is no longer admired by the international community, there is still, however, a sense of excitement in Israel at what has been achieved through its rebellion against the designated place of the Jews in history. Despite all the flaws and the foibles of its leaders, the clash between religious and secular, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, there is still a sense of a voyage of discovery – and that the present is far better than the passivity and persecution of the past. This understanding extends to identifying with the dismissed peoples of the world. An angry editorial in the daily *Ha'aretz* in February 2007 attacked the refusal to take in survivors of the massacres in Darfur.



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The state of the Jews which was established as a land of refuge, does not have the moral right not to absorb refugees fleeing genocide. . . . We have had enough of the excuses of ministers, judges, clerks and officers, the quotes from sections of the law against illegal entry that allow for the arrest or deportation of a Sudanese woman with a sick four year old boy who crossed the desert with nothing but the torn clothing on their backs, and were tossed back to Egypt or into jail despite their pleas.<sup>9</sup>

At the core of Israel's many problems remains the insolubility of the Palestinian question. If the Arab world had accepted UN Resolution 181 in November 1947, then a sovereign state of Palestine would also have been celebrating sixty years of progress and betterment for its people in 2008. The refugee camps remain islands of despair which Palestinians, from generation to generation, inhabit and regard almost as a substitute homeland. Guarding the past has become more important than building the future.

The saga of the conflict has produced thousands of books and remains a subject of incomprehensible fascination for outsiders. It occupies a disproportionate amount of space in the western media. Generations of politicians conjure up innovative plans to manage the conflict. Historians elegantly maul each other's version of events. Propagandists support their team in the megaphone war. Decent people from the four corners of the earth wade into the mire in the hope of ameliorating the suffering and bringing peace to the region.

The last sixty years have therefore induced strong emotions. Yet, within this scenario, a vibrant, dynamic state has been created which is recognized as a success – even within the Arab world. One hundred years ago, Tel Aviv did not exist and Jerusalem was an impoverished backwater. One of the founding fathers, Chaim Weizmann, commenting on the rise of Israel, famously noted that 'Difficult things take a long time, the impossible takes longer.' Yet even his lifespan of advocacy and activity has been exceeded by the duration of the intractability of the Israel–Palestine conflict. As Israel inexorably moves forward, Palestine tragically stands still.

The intention of this book is to explain the *raison d'être* for a state of the Jews and to elucidate the history of Israel using the yardstick of ideological debates and internal polemics. This book traces this remarkable odyssey and intends to illuminate the rationale for the path taken.

<sup>9</sup> *Ha'aretz* 4 February 2007.

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## CHAPTER I

*Zionism and security*

## ZIONISM BEYOND DEMONIZATION

The course of Israel's history since the state's establishment in 1948 has been determined by two central factors, the guiding influence of a specific Zionist ideology and the need for security.

A central aim of Zionism was to safeguard the existence of the Jewish people from physical extinction and persecution on the one hand, and assimilation and disintegration on the other. The establishment of a state of Israel in the Land of Israel in 1948 was the most prominent realization of Zionism. A probable majority of the world's Jews identify with Israel as a spiritual centre – unlike any other diaspora and their mother country. Still others would argue that Zionism was more than the transient desire for a state; it was the ideal to build a perfect society.

Today, however, Zionism is often depicted in pejorative and satanic terms, as an appendage of imperialism and an offshoot of colonialism. Just as the Jews historically proved difficult to fit into political and theological theory, the uniqueness of Zionist ideology has meant that it is often easier to demonize it. The fog of the propaganda war surrounding the tortuous Israel–Palestine conflict has also aided in the intellectual burial of Zionism. Yet before 1948, it attracted the support, not only of large numbers of Jews, but also of the progressive intelligentsia. Bertrand Russell,<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre and Aneurin Bevan<sup>2</sup> all embraced the Zionist cause, not simply as a haven for the persecuted, but because a state for the Jews offered the prospect of building a new society, free from Europe's flaws. Even Trotsky in Mexican exile expressed interest in the Yishuv, the Jewish settlements in Palestine.<sup>3</sup> His biographer Isaac Deutschler admitted his regret that he had not urged

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Zionism and the Peace Settlement in Palestine: A Jewish Commonwealth in Our Time* (Washington 1943) p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1945–1960* (London 1975) p. 653.

<sup>3</sup> *Davar* 6 July 1956; Joseph Nedava *Trotsky and the Jews* (Philadelphia 1971) pp. 206–207.