

ISRAEL'S FUTURE

The Time Factor

A Debate between Efraim Inbar and Ian S. Lustick

Time Is on Israel's Side

Efraim Inbar

From a realpolitik perspective, the balance of power between Israel and its neighbors is the critical variable in the quest for survival in a bad neighborhood. If Israel's position is improving over time and the power differential between the Jewish State and its foes is growing, then its capacity to overcome regional security challenges is assured. Moreover, under such circumstances there is less need to make concessions to weaker parties that are in no position to exact a high price from Israel for holding on to important security and national assets such as the Golan Heights, the settlement blocs close to the "Green Line," the Jordan Rift, and particularly Jerusalem.

Time is on Israel's side. Israel has become stronger, while its enemies—with the exception of Iran—have become weaker. An analysis of the economic and socio-political dynamics within Israel indicates that in the near future discontinuities in these trends are unlikely.

First, Israel's strong vibrant economy is a result of wise economic policies—stressing market values and adapting to globalization. These policies, once a source of domestic discord, are no longer hotly debated as almost all Israelis agree that capitalism is the best way to create further wealth. A strong economy is, of course, important to the Israeli society's ability to withstand the protracted conflict with its neighbors. Currently all economic indices indicate bright prospects despite continuous security problems.

Second, most of Israel's social rifts have been bridged, creating a stronger society. Significantly, the acerbic ideological debate over the future of the territories acquired in 1967 is over. The Sinai was relinquished in 1979, and after the 2005 unilateral withdrawal Gaza is no longer a source of conflict.

Over two-thirds of Israelis oppose any territorial concessions in the Golan Heights. Concerning Judea and Samaria, there is a great majority in favor of partition (the traditional Zionist position), and in favor of retaining the settlement blocs, Jerusalem (the Temple Mount), and the Jordan Rift.

The current territorial debate revolves around the percentages of the historic homeland that should be relinquished to Arab control and is not couched in ideological reasoning, but in a pragmatic assessment of what is needed for Israel's security and what is least costly in terms of domestic politics. Moreover, the establishment of a Palestinian state, once seen as a mortal danger, has been accepted by the Israeli public, despite the widespread skepticism over the Palestinians' state-building ability.

Similarly, the high expectations for peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians, which were typical of the mid-1990s and which elicited ridicule and anger on the Right, were replaced by a more realistic consensus that peace is not around the corner. Israeli society has reconciled itself to the idea that the country will have to live by its sword for the near future. Due to this realization, Israelis exhibited tremendous resilience during the terror campaign launched by the Palestinians in September 2000 and during the 2006 Second Lebanese War.

Another social rift, the Ashkenazi/Sephardi cleavage, has also become much less divisive. The number of such "intermarriages" is on the rise, obfuscating ethnic differences. The political system has responded positively to complaints of discrimination by significantly increasing the number of Sephardi politicians at the local and national levels. The past three decades have seen an influx of Sephardi Jews into the middle class and a dramatic increase in the percentage of university students of Sephardi origin.

The only rift within Israeli society that is still of great social, cultural, and political importance is the religious-secular divide. Despite efforts to mitigate the consequences of the growing estrangement of the secular sector from traditional values and Jewish culture, we are in the midst of a *Kulturkampf*. However, this situation does not differ greatly from the afflictions of identity politics faced by other Western societies.

This divide is not impassable. The number of those defining themselves as secular is diminishing (only 20 percent), while a growing number of Israelis identify themselves as traditionalists—in the middle of the Orthodox-secular continuum. Precisely because there are Jews of different degrees of observance and knowledge, the conflict is not between two clearly defined camps, leaving room for mediation and a modicum of understanding. Even after the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, the political system has been successful in cushioning the pressures, but there is no assurance it will continue to do so.

The image of a deeply torn Israel is simply wrong. We have seen a coalescence of views on many issues that were divisive in the past. This is good

news for the ability of Israeli society to withstand inevitable tests of protracted conflict in the future.

In the international arena, developments have been similarly positive. The US victory in the Cold War and in the 1991 Gulf War bode well for Israel, a valued American ally. The November 1991 Madrid conference, convened by the United States, marked greater Arab acceptance of Israel. The Arab League peace initiative (2002) and the Arab states' presence at the Annapolis gathering (2007), indicate the continuation of this trend. Moreover, the ascendance of the Shiite crescent in Middle East politics makes Israel a potential ally of the moderate Arab states.

Many important countries decided to improve relations with the Jewish state perceived as a good conduit to Washington and a strong state both militarily and technologically. The year 1992 marked the establishment of ambassadorial relations by important states such as China, India, Turkey, and Nigeria. Jerusalem nourished new strategic partnerships with Ankara and Delhi, alliances which significantly impact the region. Even the ineffective and morally bankrupt UN slightly changed its attitude toward Israel.

The ups and mostly downs in Israeli-Palestinian relations have hardly had an impact on how states conduct their bilateral relations with Israel. In fact, the failures of the Palestinian national movement and the ascent of Hamas in Palestinian politics have elicited greater understanding for the Israeli predicament. The attacks of 9/11 also sensitized much of the world to Israel's dilemmas in fighting Palestinian terrorism.

In contrast, Israel's foes in the Arab world display great weakness and their stagnant societies are beleaguered by many problems. The Human Development reports released by the UN underscore their huge deficits entering into the twenty-first century. Their ability to militarily challenge the status quo is limited. Palestinian terrorism was successfully contained since the 2002 large-scale offensives in the West Bank. In all probability Gaza will be subject to a military treatment similar to the 2002 operations in the West Bank to limit its nuisance value. The Israel Defense Forces learned the lesson from the 2006 fiasco in Lebanon and seem better prepared to deal with the Hezbollah.

The only regional challenge is a nuclear Iran—an existential threat. It is not yet clear how the international community will deal with the Iranian threat, but the world seems more attentive to Israel's perspective on this matter. Possibly, Israel might be left alone to deal with the Ayatollahs, but the obstruction of the Iranian nuclear program is not beyond Jerusalem's capabilities.

Finally, the *Zeitgeist* of this epoch that stresses democracy and free market values favors Israel over its Muslim opponents, who continue to grapple with the challenge of modernity.

In conclusion, the Jews in the Land of Israel prosper and maintain strong social cohesion. Their willingness to accept partition strengthens their “Ein Breira” (No Choice) conviction, which is important for fighting future wars. Significantly, they successfully built a military machine that parries all regional threats. In parallel, Israel’s international status has improved, while support for Israel in the United States—its main ally and hegemonic power in international affairs—remained very high. Israel is a great success story and if it remains successful in inculcating the Zionist ethos in the new generations its future looks bright.

With a Bang or a Whimper, Time Is Running Out

Ian S. Lustick

Israel’s existence in the Middle East is fundamentally precarious. Twentieth-century Zionism and Israeli statehood is but a brief moment in Jewish history. There is nothing more regular in Jewish history and myth than Jews “returning” to the Land of Israel to build a collective life—nothing more regular, that is, except, for Jews leaving the country and abandoning the project. Abraham came from Mesopotamia, then left for Egypt. Jacob left for Hauran, then returned, then left with his sons for Egypt. The Israelites subsequently left Egypt with Moses and Joshua, and “returned” to the Land. Upper class Jews who did not leave with the Assyrians left with Jeremiah for Babylon, then returned with Ezra and Nehemiah. In the period of Greek and Roman rule, massive numbers of Jews left the land to inhabit a Diaspora where more Jews lived than in the Land, even before the Roman expulsion. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a minority of Jews returned to the Land, but so far in the twenty-first century, more Jews have left than have arrived. Currently Jews are a minority, or very close to it, of the actual inhabitants of the Land of Israel, even excluding the territories of Reuven, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher (in Lebanon and Jordan).

All this coming and going, going and coming, points to the danger and ahistoricity of imagining that a Jewish state can be considered a “permanent” feature of the region, even if it is as muscular, as domineering, and as capable of producing a wealthy upper class as the Hasmonean kingdom.

The same point can be made by stripping away ideological prettifications and considering Israel comparatively as a settler/pioneering state established by Europeans that did not annihilate or render irrelevant the indigenous population. In North America, parts of South America, Australia, and New Zealand, European “fragment” societies sank deep roots,

overwhelmed indigenous populations, and appear today as unproblematic, permanent parts of the regions where they were planted. Where these fragments survived but did not annihilate or render irrelevant the indigenous populations, European-style societies have been less fortunate. Considering the category broadly (but omitting tiny enclaves such as Hong Kong, Macao, and Goa) we may include the Crusader kingdoms, South Africa, Rhodesia, French Algeria, and Israel. Israel, of course, is the only survivor. Counting from the state's establishment it is almost 60 years old. Counting from the first arrival of Zionist settlers in Palestine it is 125 years old—compared to almost 200 years for the Crusaders; about 80 years for the white version of the Union, then Republic, of South Africa; 120 years for French Algeria; and 34 years for independent (white) Rhodesia.

In the context of Jewish history, Israel's biggest challenge is to break the cycle of abandonment, return, and abandonment. In the context of comparative politics, that means escaping the fate of all other polities falling within the category of Israel's creation by establishing itself as a commonsensical, naturalized, and permanent feature of a non-European landscape. The questions are: Can this be done? And how?

Few Zionists were as clear-eyed on the imperative of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians in order to solve this problem as Ze'ev Jabotinsky. His solution was to reach an agreement with the "Arabs of Palestine," but only after they had been taught to abandon what he explicitly acknowledged were their natural, normal, and even inevitable struggles to eliminate the Zionist project. In his justly famous, but almost always mistranslated and misquoted 1925 article "On the Iron Wall," Jabotinsky emphasized three points: (1) Zionism needed peace with the Arabs of the Middle East to succeed in the long run; (2) Palestinians were acting rationally by violently resisting Zionist objectives to transform the country through massive Jewish immigration and Jewish state building; and (3) a fair compromise, "based on national equality and guarantees not to drive them out," could be negotiated only after decades of war had proven to Arabs the indestructibility of the Jewish presence.

From Ben-Gurion to Jabotinsky, Dayan to Begin, this has been Zionism's hopeful and rational response to the fact that Arab opposition to the "alien settlers" (as Jabotinsky dubbed Zionists), was neither barbaric nor fanatic, but perfectly normal for an indigenous people. The Iron Wall plan was that after decades of bloody defeats, the Arabs would divide among themselves. Some would be ready to accept half a loaf, rather than continue a fruitless battle for objectives that would still be understood as just, but more like a dream than an attainable reality. Extremists would continue to fight under the "No, Never," slogan. But according to Jabotinsky, Jewish political leaders behind the Iron Wall would be able to begin negotiations with the

moderates, thereby isolating the extremists, and then use those negotiations to establish a permanent peace for both nations.

The first part of the strategy worked brilliantly. Bravely and effectively the Jews built and defended an Iron Wall by inflicting defeat after defeat on the Arabs. Although signs of a split were present even earlier—in the aftermath of 1967, and certainly in light of Jordanian and Egyptian initiatives in the early 1970s, and the split between the “acceptance front” and the “rejection front”—the stage was set for the next phase of the Iron Wall plan: outreach to Arab moderates to isolate the extremists and drive a fair and permanent bargain.

It was here that Jabotinsky’s reasoning failed. He did not realize that while a normal nation does produce moderates willing to compromise when it is regularly and painfully defeated for trying to achieve what it feels is just, a normal nation (such as the Jews) that experiences victory after victory over an apparently impotent foe will tend to eliminate moderates within itself, empower maximalists, and search for reasons to avoid negotiations and compromise in the expectation that fulfilling all its dreams simply requires the dogged and ruthless exercise of power.

Only when the Arabs, including the Palestinians, erected their own “Iron Wall,” and began teaching Jews painful lessons about the impossibility of eradicating the Arab problem by force (e.g., the War of Attrition, the Yom Kippur War, two Intifadas, two Lebanon wars) did the Israeli populace gradually split between “moderates,” grudgingly ready for a two-state solution of some kind, and extremists, adhering to the “No, Never,” slogan. What ensued from the mid-1970s through the 1990s was a period of a “hurting stalemate,” during which opportunities for reaching a historic agreement based on the kind of compromise that, in principle that classical Zionism was aiming for, were lost.

Now that period is over. Triumphalist Jewish redemptionism, the bait and switch tactics of Barak at Camp David, the cumulative effect of Islamist trends in the Middle East, and Arab fury and disgust with Israeli tactics against the Palestinians, have opened an ominous new era in which Muslims in the Middle East hate Israel more than they love the Palestinians, while Israelis see the Middle East as a whole as akin to the Lebanese “botz,” encouraging those who can to prepare future lives for themselves and their children in Europe, America, or Australia. Instead of moderates on each side exploiting the rational human desire to avoid losing everything in order to save something, extremists on each side are prevailing. Reinforced by despair at the apparent inhumanity of the Arab/Muslim or Jewish/Zionist enemy, their messages of “No, Never!” have helped turn both Israelis and Arabs toward styles of thinking that avoid even contemplating a future in which Israel is an integral part of the region.

It may be too soon to say all hope is lost that Israel, via a generous Palestinian state solution, might escape the tragic patterns of both Jewish history and comparative politics. But for any Israeli to believe that time is on the side of the Jewish state, or to bet the future of the country on a contest in brutality, is actually to endorse one of two options—Samson, or, eventually, Jeremiah—to die with one's enemies or leave.

Response to Ian S. Lustick

Efraim Inbar

Ian Lustick's piece suffers from conceptual problems and factual inaccuracies. First, Israel is not limited to only three future scenarios (Samson, Jeremiah, and integration in the Middle East). We agree that the first two are not desirable, and that the third is rejected by most Israelis. Yet, their instincts are commendable as it would be suicidal for Israel to integrate into the current Middle East, which is beleaguered by dictatorial regimes, fanaticism, disrespect of human rights, and economic and social stagnation. Unfortunately, the Middle East lives in a different time zone than Israel and the West.

Fortunately, Jewish history presents the Zionist movement another alternative—the Davidic option of building a Jewish commonwealth in the midst of an idolatrous world. The House of David ruled the Land of Israel for over 400 years, playing a balance of power politics in the region. Our history teaches us that Jewish political survival requires power and wisdom, rather than integration with culturally different neighbors. Moreover, Israel has already reached an acceptable *modus vivendi* with large parts of the Arab world without integration. Second, viewing Israel as a European settlers' society is similarly inadequate. Jews are indigenous to the Middle East just as other non-Arab ethnic groups. Moreover, most Israelis are not of European, but of Middle Eastern origin. The proper conceptual prism for treating Israel's international fortunes is the small state category. Indeed, such states have always had greater difficulties in maintaining their sovereignty. Favorable conditions in the international system and an astute foreign policy complemented with a strong military have been the requirements for preserving independence in a tough neighborhood. Czechoslovakia, Finland, Nepal, and Singapore are the case studies for this comparison.

Lustick's demographic comments are ignorant of recent studies that show that the generally quoted numbers of Palestinians living in the West Bank are exaggerated by at least one million. Yet, the most important fact negating the demographic argument is Israel's acceptance of partition of

the Land of Israel. It does not matter how many babies are born in Nablus or Gaza if Israel does not intend to acquire these territories.

Lustick is also misreading Israeli politics by claiming that only after the 1973 War and the two Intifadas, Israel split between “moderates” and “extremists.” In fact, all Israeli governments since 1967 searched for a partner to take over the heavily populated Palestinian areas, with the exception of when Likud alone ran the country between 1977 and 1984. Over the past two decades, an even larger consensus evolved around this issue. Alas, no real partner emerged, further strengthening unilateralism’s great appeal.

Response to Efraim Inbar

Ian S. Lustick

It is not realpolitik that guides Efraim Inbar. It is machtpolitik—policies based solely on military might. The master of realpolitik, Otto von Bismarck, understood that consolidating German domination of Europe required restraining German military power in favor of “reinsurance treaties” with France and Russia. Only prudent diplomacy could save Germany from the geopolitical realities of Europe and Eurasia that military power alone could never change. The machtpolitik of Bismarck’s successors resulted in Germany’s devastating defeats in two world wars. Germany as a nation-state in Europe could survive its reliance on brutality. Israel cannot.

Moreover, Inbar’s rosy picture is not convincing. In *National Resilience in Israel*, a survey-based study designed to buck up Israel’s sagging morale, General (res.) Meir Elran proudly reported that 69 percent of Jewish Israelis say they want to remain in the country. It is not a good sign to have to ask how many of a country’s citizens want to stay!

Inbar himself has repeatedly warned of Iran as posing an “existential threat” that within two years or so may require an all-out preventive war, a war whose consequences for the possibility of peace he does not bother to consider. Not thinking of the future comes natural to Inbar and other champions of “brutality is the solution.” Besides declaring the uselessness of Israel’s nuclear Iron Wall, they have abandoned any vision of a Middle East that is peaceful, includes Israel, and is achieved via negotiations. Accordingly, they have no reason to think about the long-term political consequences of playing Dr. Strangelove. As the Pakistani and Iranian cases show, any reasonably prudent person must expect Middle Eastern Muslim states will acquire nuclear weapons—aimed at Israel or one another—within the next two decades. In the absence of peace agreements that could make Israel a

partner in the region, rather than a hated and besieged “villa in the jungle,” even a nuclear-armed Israel would face what Inbar would call “multiple existential threats.” Traumatized by a cultivated memory of the Holocaust that gives opportunities for enemies to exploit that trauma, Israeli Jews who can leave the country will do so—a process that I believe in some ways has already begun.

Time is running against Israel. The Israeli elite knows it. Note how often Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni speak of “time running out” for the two-state solution that they, so belatedly, have realized is the country’s only hope. By now, even if Israel rends itself to offer the Palestinians a real West Bank/Gaza/al-Quds state with a satisfying solution to the refugee problem, this may no longer matter to the masses of Middle Eastern Muslims, or to the governments bound to replace decrepit regimes in Cairo, Riyadh, Amman, and Damascus. That would mean the end of the Palestinian option. Then peace really would only be attainable via abandonment of the Jewish state or the arrival of the Messiah.

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