

Israel at 68 – Growth, Progress, Prosperity and Defiance

by Norman Berdichevsky (June 2016)



The 68th anniversary celebrations of Israel's independence were emotional and impressive for all those like myself who first visited Israel more than 50 years ago and found a Spartan community then, lacking in many of the conveniences that Americans take for granted as essential. At the time, I believe Jerusalem had only one traffic light. Israel was then still a county that enjoyed a special popularity on the American popular stage, culture, and among leftwing activists who were fascinated by the kibbutz and the socialist ideology of its leaders, those who had dominated the Zionist movement for two generations and pledged a regime of austerity, and equality among men and women. Entertainers such as Pete Seeger, Danny Kaye and Harry Belafonte thrilled audiences and delighted American Jews by their popular renditions of Hava Negilah.

The release a short time ago of the latest figures by the "Lishka HaMerkazit LeStatitika" (Israeli Central Office of Statistics") put into sharp relief the enormous progress Israel has made on all fronts over the past five decades and a sharp rebuke to all of Israel's critics who have continually forecast the decline and fall of Zionism and the Jewish state and still believe their vain efforts to boycott and weaken the Israeli economy will demoralize the country and its people. They are doomed to failure and their predictions have proven just as wrong as the British economists during the Mandate who argued against Jewish immigration on the grounds of the limited resources of the country and its absorptive capacity, shortage of water, and harsh climate. Or the Arab strategists who made every effort to boycott and blockade Israel, closing passage through the Suez Canal and attempting to divert the sources of the Jordan River and Israel's irrigation projects. Through desalination, Israel has a large water surplus now even in the Negev.

The country today has a population of 8,522,000, of whom almost 74.8% are Jews, 1,771,000 Arabs (including the Druze Christians, Moslems, Bedouin and Circassian minorities). A further 374,000 are "others" and those who have defined themselves as without religion. A full 75% of the Jews are native born and the population will almost certainly reach more than 11 million by 2035 (surpassing the population of all the Scandinavian countries including Sweden whose populations continue to drastically decline due to the low birthrate).

In 1948, the country had only one city – Tel Aviv – with a population of more than 100,000 whereas today that figure has been surpassed by 13 others. In 1948, no more than 6 percent of the world's 11,500,000 Jews lived in Israel compared to 43% of the total world Jewish population of 14.3 million today and by 2035, with continued trends, the Jewish state will contain a majority of the world's Jews and outnumber the Diaspora for the first time in more than 2,000 years.

On the economic front, the Israeli GNP totaled a meager 25 billion shekels in today's economic values compared to 1.1 trillion shekels today (an increase of forty-four times, unparalleled among the world's national economies). On a per capita basis, the GNP figures are 19,800 shekels for 1950 and 132,400 today. Car ownership catapulted from 34,103 cars to over three million, an increase of 87 times. Israel's economy was much less affected by the drastic reductions in property prices due to the housing crisis of 2008 and unlike many other western economies actually showed a major reduction in the national debt. Israelis now rank among the top 5 nations in the world in life expectancy. These achievements are matched by positive developments in practically every major index of health, education and welfare as measured by the United Nations and other forums not known for their bias in favor of Israel but for Israel's harsh critics, these material successes are viewed in a perverse way as proof that the country must somehow been achieved only at the expense of others (the zero sum game that typifies much of the Left's thinking).

The material successes are however dwarfed by the growth of a national consciousness, a rich cultural life, devoted patriotism and intense solidarity that is simply rare or totally absent from most states elsewhere, especially in the failed Arab states and among many who call themselves "progressives" and view the world through the distorted lenses of anti-Semitism as was evident in the recent remarks of some leaders of Britain's Labor Party including former mayor Ken Livingstone who believe they can enhance their careers by playing to

sympathetic audiences.

Those who subscribe to the Boycott and Divestment Movement cannot accept that the only explanation for Israel's great achievements is that they are a product of idealism, intelligence, initiative and devotion. These are readily apparent to anyone who visits Israel and sees the reality of a society that, in spite of its national, ethnic, racial and religious particularity, is also a multi-cultural and multi-religious society in which individuals from the most diverse backgrounds accept the principles of a democratic society.

This is all the more apparent when the visitors here in the month of May and can observe the three holidays that typify the deep sense of Israeli national identity -Yom HaShoa to commemorate the Holocaust, Yom HaZikaron that honors the fallen in all of Israel's wars and victims of terrorism and Yom Ha'Atzmaut – Independence Day. The first two are marked by a long siren blast of two minutes during which total silence and attention is maintained and the State of Israel grinds to a halt. The three events take place within a week and are inescapable.

The final one provides a sense of deep satisfaction, solidarity and shared destiny that the citizens share, something so devastatingly absent in the surrounding states of the region, all of which are torn asunder by civil war and strife, a fact made all the more obvious by the growing reflexive habit of antisemites to magnify Israel's problems, faults and blemishes and diminish the monumental problems of her neighbors.

In the months running up to Israel's celebration of its 68th anniversary, the media was absorbed with reports of the failure of the "socialist" ideologies of Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela where populist regimes had all suffered setbacks reminding everyone of the similar agonies of Cuba's people under 50 years of collectivist rule in which the basic necessities of life are rationed and require hours of waiting in line.

Nevertheless, for many young people in the United States and Western Europe who define themselves as "progressive," none of this matters. Israel's progress under moderate conservative governments remains the constant target of blind invective while the many extremist regimes of the Middle East or Latin America continue to be regarded as "victims" of some conspiracy frequently identified as having either an American or Israeli/Jewish origin.

As early as 1890, August Bebel, the founder of the German Social Democratic Party and considered the foremost exponent of democratic socialism in Europe warned that "Anti-Semitism is the Socialism of Fools." The modern leftwing parties in much of the world that continue to define themselves as socialist cannot rid themselves of the conspiracy explanation in order to explain the terrible failure of those states where cultural and religious factors, as those found in the Muslim world and much of Latin America, have prevented such progress as has been made in Israel.

The failure of the local working classes in Europe to embrace the call to revolution has made the desperate parties of the Marxist Left a failure. They have resorted in desperation to utilizing many Muslim immigrants whose inherited anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel make up for the losses of Leftwing parties among the indigenous working class. This unholy alliance has made these parties inherently antagonistic to Israel. The great tragedy of many European socialist leaders is that they have made both conscious decisions and have accepted assumptions that this anti-Israel line is what their supporters want and it is not worth making the effort to openly combat such vile ideas, particularly since they fit so neatly into a long and similar tradition of anti-American sentiments.

Israel's continuing successes in so many economic and technological fields as well as its military prowess, readiness to defend itself and the continued sympathetic support it receives from many Jews world-wide are increasingly viewed as suspect. The knowledge that this progress has dramatically increased during the decline of the Left in Israel and the successes of both Menachem Begin and Binyamin Netanyahu has only rubbed salt into the wounds of those on the Left in the United States, Europe and Latin America.

The sad reality of much of the Left's policies is that they view the self-destructive failure of many Third World countries and most notably the Palestinians as proof that the latter are "victims," the veritable "Wretched of the Earth" as analyzed in Frantz Fanon's influential 1961 book of the same title. The Jews of Israel have escaped this tragic destiny, one they had to endure with no hope of rescue from the genocide of 1940 to 1945. For the immediate future, Israelis will have to continue to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune as they prosper even further.

There is however the beginning of a change in the mentality of even the arch supporters of an automatic pro-Palestinian appeasement position in a Europe hit repeatedly by the fanatics of ISIS and their many Palestinian sympathizers. Even Belgium, which once issued a warrant to arrest Israeli general Ariel Sharon, has now promised to use its airforce (what other purpose do its 55 fighter and bomber planes have?) to strike at ISIS in Iraq.

Of course, serious problems remain on the Israeli political, social and military fronts. Success in the past is no guarantee for the future and Israelis have to continue to walk a narrower tightrope than any other nation. Nevertheless, any impartial observer would agree that Israel successfully overcame what were considered insuperable obstacles in the past that threatened to overwhelm it – the hostility of the British government and its fleet preventing Jewish survivors of the Holocaust from reaching Palestine in 1945-48 and flooding the country with 100,000 troops to smash the Jewish underground groups, the defection of the British Labor Party from its pro-Zionist promises during the war, the bitter opposition of most of the Arab and Muslim world incited by religious hatred and armed to the teeth, the compliance of the U.N. in every anti-Israel resolution from 1956 to the present, the close alliance of the Soviet bloc with Israel's many foes and the continual hostility of career-Arabists in the American State Department under both Democrat and Republican administrations (see the recent revealing book "Doomed to Succeed" by Dennis Ross who knows them very well).

For all that, it still seems more likely if you were to bet on it, that Israel will thrive and prevail than Ken Livingstone and Jeremy Corbin along with trendy anti-Israel comrades in their London bubble (almost 15% Muslim today compared to less than 5% in the general national UK population) will continue to dominate the Labor Party for a very long time.

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