
Challenges on the Road to Tranquility

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We cannot expect Israel to be normal, as the country is constantly under threat and stress. But we can expect Israeli leaders to have some knowledge and expertise in dealing with the main challenges that lie ahead. These challenges include resolving the conflict with the Palestinians; integrating Israeli-Arabs into society; and changing the relationship between the state and religion.

In order to address these challenges effectively, Israeli leaders will have to summon the courage and apply their skills to the pursuit of several objectives: 1) dividing the land and ending the occupation, thereby facilitating a two-state solution; 2) accommodating the interests of the Israeli-Arabs — striving to safeguard equal rights and liberties for *all* citizens notwithstanding nationality, religion, race, or color, while insisting that citizens fulfill their duties as such; and 3) ensuring the separation between state and religion.

RESOLVING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Between the Jordan River and the sea there are now about 7.2 million Israelis (among them 1.3 million Israeli-Arabs) and 4 million Palestinians. The annual growth rate of the Palestinians is among the highest in the world. Israel faces the danger of becoming another Bosnia, or another white South Africa, or a combination thereof. Therefore there is an existential need to realize a two (hopefully not three) state solution.

In the Camp David talks of 2000, Israel proposed giving up 92% of the West Bank and 100% of the Gaza Strip. Yasir 'Arafat insisted on the Right of Return, which meant suicide for Israel. In the following Taba talks, Israel was willing to acknowledge family unification on humanitarian grounds, arguing that it cannot accept a full-scale right of return for all Palestinian refugees. By insisting on this, 'Arafat insinuated that he wished the demise of Israel as a Jewish-Zionist state.

The occupation should be minimized if not terminated, and the sooner the better. Every person aspires to be free. As the historian Lord Acton (1834-1902) stated so eloquently: "Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end ... liberty is the only object which benefits all alike, and provokes no sincere opposition."

Generally, I favor bridges rather than fences. However, when during the March of 2002 Passover terrorists attacked Hotel Park in Netanya, where people convened to



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hold their traditional meal, Israel's understandable response was to erect the fence in order to defend its population.

The effects of the partial construction of the fence have been stunning and conclusive. Whereas there had been an average number of 26 terrorist attacks per year, the number of attacks has dropped to three per year. Meanwhile, the death toll has fallen by over 70% (from 103 to 28), and the number of injured has dropped by more than 80% (from an annual average of 628 to 83). Terrorist penetration into Israel from the northern West Bank, where the initial portion of the fence was completed, has dropped from 600 per year to zero — as Israel was able to foil every suicide bombing originating from the northern West Bank and specifically from the cities of Nablus and Jenin, areas that had previously been infamous for exporting suicide bombers.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the route of the fence is discriminatory. Large parts of the fence pass inside the Green Line. 16.6% of the West Bank land is expected to serve as a buffer between Israel and the fence. These are the most fertile lands of the Bank. Upon the fence's completion, 160,000 Palestinians are likely to be locked in buffer zones. Forty-seven gates are supposed to enable the movement of farmers to their lands. However, these gates are opened at the discretion of Israeli guards; Palestinian freedom of movement is extremely limited.

The fence should have been built along the 1967 Green Line, with some accommodations necessary to include large cluster settlements in the Jerusalem area and Ariel, with compensation for the Palestinians in other areas. The idea of using the fence to create geographic-political facts through the *de facto* creation of a "greater" Israel and a "lesser" Palestine is unwise and unjust. The fence should be moved, and it will be. The questions revolve only around time, money, and blood involved. In the Bible, there is one word for both money and blood: "Damim." Israeli politics eloquently and forcefully explains why.

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INTEGRATING THE ISRAELI-ARABS INTO SOCIETY

After the Holocaust, the goal was to found a safe haven for Jews from all over the world so as to avoid the possibility of another horrific experience of that nature. Indeed, the United Nations acknowledged the need to establish a Jewish state. Yet, by its nature a Jewish state discriminates against Israeli Arabs.

To assure an equal status for the Arab minority, which constitutes some 19% of the Israeli population, the Declaration of Independence holds that Israel will foster the development of the country for the benefit of *all* its inhabitants; that it will be based on the foundations of liberty, justice, and peace; that it will uphold complete equality of social and political rights to all of its citizens irrespective of religion, race, or sex; and that it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience; language, education, and culture.

There is a lot to do in order to realize these ends. Israel needs to strive for equality in housing, in municipal budgets, in allocation of resources; fight against racism, bigotry, and discrimination; introduce changes to accommodate the interests of Israeli-Arabs so that they would "feel at home" in their own country. Delegates of the Arab minority should be represented, in accordance with their size in society, in the Knesset and in the government. Studies of *all* religions that exist in Israel should be made available.

SEPARATING THE STATE AND RELIGION

Democracy is supposed to allow each and every individual the opportunity to follow their conception of what is good without coercion. Israel today gives precedence to Judaism over liberalism. I submit that on issues such as this one, the reverse should be the case. Israel, being the only Jewish state in the world, should strive to retain its Jewish character. The symbols should remain Jewish, with some accommodations, in order to make the state a home for its Palestinian citizens as well. Shabbat should remain the official day of rest. Palestinian villages and towns may make Friday their day of rest. Hopefully, one day, Friday and Shabbat will become the two official days of rest.

However, the preservation of the Jewish character of the state should not entail coercion of the predominant secular circles of Israel. We need to differentiate between the symbolic and the *modus operandi* aspects. Regarding the latter, there must be a separation between state and religion. People are born free and wish to continue their lives as free citizens in their homeland. Coercion is alien to our natural sentiments and desires to lead our lives freely.

Hence, while Shabbat should be observed, malls and shopping places outside the cities should be available for the many people who work during the week and do their shopping during weekends. Public transportation should be made available for all people. Kosher shops and restaurants should be available, as should non-Kosher shops and restaurants for the secular, agnostic population. Most importantly, the significant events in one's life — birth, wedding, divorce, and death — should be handled in accordance with the people's own choices. If they so desire, people may involve the rabbinate and other religious institutions in their private lives. If people wish to have secular ceremonies, then they should have the ability to conduct them and not be forced to undergo practices that mean very little, if anything, to them. The state should have as little say as possible in intimate, family affairs.

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CONCLUSION

Israelis yearn for tranquility — for normalcy. In the short term, at least, this will surely be difficult. Nonetheless, the surest path to ensuring that the country survives and thrives as a democracy is for Israeli leaders to maintain a zero tolerance posture toward all forms of terror while seeking to build trust and good will with Israel's neighbors, and between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. It will further require them to ensure that liberalism prevails over Judaism.