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Israel Is Less Fragile Than We Feared, More Fragile Than We Imagine

T 75, Israel is already one of the world's oldest countries. In 1949, it became the 59th member state of the United Nations. There are now 193 states, meaning that well over two-thirds of the world's countries are younger.

That feels counterintuitive. Instinctively, we think of the Jewish state as very new and thus forever vulnerable to one existential threat or another, particularly given that its neighbors and much of the world do not consider it legitimate. Coupled to our sense of Israel's vulnerability, however, is another, almost opposite instinct: We think of Israel as the country that invariably manages to survive. Today, it faces an existential threat in the

shape of judicial reform. What should we expect? An examination of Israel's earlier crises may be instructive.

Challenges to Israel's existence have come in many forms. Its earliest moments of vulnerability were, of course, military. Asked by the People's Administration on May 12, 1948, about the Yishuv's chances of surviving the military onslaught certain to follow a declaration of independence, Yigael Yadin, later a leading archaeologist but at the time the commander of the Yishuv's military forces, said, "50-50." Just three years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the leadership of the Yishuv understood that independence might result in yet another slaughter.

They risked it, and Israel more than survived, expanding considerably beyond what UN Resolution 181 had allotted in the 1947 Partition Plan. But defeat did nothing to lessen its enemies' appetite. May 1967, the month before the war that was certain to come, is called the *hamtanah*—"the waiting period." Though some Israelis left to escape the "certain" bloodbath, Israel tripled its size in six days. Having gained control of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights, it had defensible borders for the first time and the beginnings of a world-class military. Six years later, however, when Egypt and Syria attacked on Yom Kippur with support from Iraq and Jordan, IDF soldiers died by the hundreds in the Golan and the Sinai, IAF jets were shot down by the dozen, and Israeli forces either retreated or struggled to blunt the Egyptian and Syrian incursions. And yet, by war's end, Israel had clawed its way back to the borders from which it had started, encircled Egypt's Third Army, and could easily have marched on Damascus.

Economically, the ship came close to sinking more than once, too. Throughout the 1950s, food was so scarce that the government in-

stituted rationing: Its agents could inspect parcels on public transport and in iceboxes at home. Families were allotted 1,600 calories a day per person. They received a monthly allowance of 750 grams of meat, 200 grams of cheese, and 12 eggs. Nor was scarcity confined to food. The country, desperately strapped for cash, had few resources to house the hundreds of thousands of impoverished, broken souls making their way from Arab countries to the Jewish state after the war, expelled for the crime of being Jewish. Israel faced economic collapse again in the 1980s, when inflation reached 445 percent and was projected to run as high as 1,000 percent.

Salvation came in the form of both national resilience and assistance from abroad. Israelis toughed it out during the War of Independence, despite the deaths of 1 percent of the civilian Jewish population (which would be 70,000 people in today's Israel). But the international community also proved critical. American Jews provided money, while some American Jewish pilots, veterans of World War II, became the backbone of Israel's new air force. Stalin supplied aircraft and massive amounts of weaponry via Czechoslovakia. By 1967, Israel fielded a seasoned army well supplied with weapons from France, Britain, and the United States. And after the 1967 war, America supplied Israel with a steady flow of arms. At the beginning of the 1973 war, when Israel found itself outnumbered, outgunned, and outmaneuvered, President Nixon delivered over 100,000 tons of matériel by air and sea to resupply the equipment Israel had expended.

The same was true on the economic front. Israelis were largely compliant with the strictures of the *tzena* (as the food rationing program that lasted from 1949 to 1959 was known), but help

came again from American Jews and — infinitely more significantly — from German reparations, saving the Jewish state from collapse. Germany gave Israel 3 billion marks (approximately $714 million based on 1952 exchange rates), equivalent to $8 billion today. Israel used the money to improve housing, create a national shipping fleet and airline, build roads and telecommunication systems, and establish electricity networks. Reparations also helped finance Israel's National Water Carrier project, which made arid parts of the country habitable — critical as the population swelled. Similarly, when Israel faced economic collapse once again in the 1980s, it was a combination of Israeli resilience and Shimon Peres's austere economic-recovery plan, developed in concert with the United States and supported by American funding, that pulled the country out of its nosedive.

Some of those early crises are difficult to imagine today. No enemy state has attacked Israel since the IDF's recovery from its disastrous performance in the early days of the 1973 war. Israel, the Arab world came to understand, could not be defeated by standard armies using conventional weapons. In 25 years, Israel had gone from Yadin's "50-50" chance of survival to seeming invincibility. As for those economic maelstroms: Young Israelis, accustomed to a burgeoning food scene, find it difficult to imagine rationing. Israel's formidable economic engine makes it difficult to recall the fiscal vulnerabilities of yesteryear.

Even the diplomatic isolation with which Israel once contended now seems almost quaint. The international community does not love Israel any more than it did during the Arab boycott of the 1970s, than in 1975 when the General Assembly passed the "Zionism Is Racism" resolution, or than in 2001, when the World Conference Against Racism proclaimed Zionism a form of racism and discrimination and used the conference as an opportunity for anti-Israel

marches. T-shirts with swastikas were handed out, as were copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Today, however, Israel has signed joint normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

Israel, we told ourselves, had mastered the art of avoiding disaster even in the face of existential threat. The Jewish state, it seems, always avoids the abyss.

That, though, is but part of the story. Grave errors have left deep scars that still plague Israeli society. Most obviously, Ben-Gurion's decision to put Israeli Arab citizens under military administration from 1948 to 1966 continues to haunt Israel's relationship with the Arabs who make up 20 percent of its population. We do not yet know what that means for Israel's viability.

Internal political violence has been no less problematic. It is comforting to point to the "Altalena Affair," in June 1948, when deadly gunfire broke out among IDF soldiers who retained many of their Irgun or Haganah loyalties, as a case where violence among Jews was quickly reined in. The evacuations of Yamit in 1982 and Gush Katif in 2005 were bloodless, too. But perhaps Israel has been lucky thus far. The potential for violence is never far below the surface when Israel faces deeply divisive decisions.

Consider Israel's history of political assassination. Most people recall only Yitzhak Rabin's death in 1995, but there have been others. Jacob de Haan, who accused the Yishuv of not doing enough to reach agreement with local Arabs, was killed in 1924 by a member of the Haganah. The gunman reported decades later that Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Israel's second president, had ordered the hit. Haim Arlosoroff, head of the Jewish Agency's political department, was shot on a Tel Aviv beach in 1933, almost certainly by a political opponent. Emil Grunzweig was killed by a hand grenade thrown by a Jew at a peace rally in Jerusalem in 1983, after the Kahan Com-

mission report on Sabra and Shatila established the culpability of Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin.

External crises foster a sense of shared identity. Israel has done much worse with those that stem from deep-seated fissures in Israel society itself. Competing visions for the Jewish state prevented the writing of a constitution in 1948 and have done so ever since: Jew versus Arab, religious versus secular, Left versus Right, Ashkenazi versus Mizrahi—these unresolved fissures have resulted in violence on more than one occasion.

And now these fissures, and the lack of a constitution that is just one expression of them, have led us to this year's judicial-reform crisis. Europe-oriented elites are largely comfortable with the status quo, even if many acknowledge that some change in the judicial system is warranted. Others want to see the Supreme Court constrained. Mizrahi Jews are generally suspicious of privileged elites and "liberal" judges. Religious Jews see the Court's defense of individual liberties as undermining Israel's Jewish character. They believe that the Court is opposed to settlements, despite its having overwhelmingly ruled in support of the settlement project, except for construction on private Arab land. Hawkish Jews support stronger measures against terrorism, even though the Court has almost without exception given the army great latitude and has consistently upheld the demolition of homes of terrorists.

Those on the Right in favor of the reforms appear for the most part not to have read them: If the reforms pass, the Knesset could decide to hold elections every 15 rather than every four years, and there would be no Court to overrule it. A simple majority would allow the Knesset to shutter mosques, Reform and Conservative syna-

gogues — again, with no court having a say. Even many of those who voted Likud or Right would find those steps abhorrent; that is why the number of Likud voters in favor of slowing down the process has been steadily rising.

Israelis in the center and on the Left who oppose the reforms also appear not to have read them. Nor are they conversant with those cases in which the Court has, indeed, taken great liberties that those on the Right now wish to curtail. They sense, however, that what their parents and grandparents died for might now be stolen from them. Many have pledged that they will do whatever it takes to prevent Israel's democracy from being irreparably altered. Zeev Raz, the national hero who led the 1981 Osirak attack that destroyed Iraq's nuclear capability, posted on Facebook that "if a man, Israeli or foreign, takes over my country and rules it undemocratically, there is an obligation to kill him." Ron Huldai, the mayor of Tel Aviv, stated publicly that "dictatorships only become democratic again with bloodshed."

Toward the end of his life, Menachem Begin remarked that he was prouder of the moment when he ordered the Irgun troops not to fire back even if fired upon than of any other in his storied life, and rightly so. After Rabin's murder, the sense of national shock was so pervasive that everyone stepped back from the abyss. No single statesman led the country back to sanity. The nation somehow managed it because of collective terror and grief.

As of this writing, it is impossible to know how the winter–spring of 2023 will play out. Certainly, if Israel chooses to damage itself irreparably from within, international help will not be able to save it, as it did in earlier military and domestic crises.

The Altalena reminds us that violence has erupted before and could

easily have spread. It bears recalling that that battle did not divide the entire nation or bring massive crowds into the streets week after week. The last time Israelis *did* protest in such numbers, Yitzhak Rabin ended up dead. Israel is no less flammable today than in July 1948 or November 1995. For a few weeks in February, the muffled conversations in my synagogue were not about whether violence would erupt, but when, and who would start it. That a congregation consisting largely of academics, lawyers, and other professionals should consider violence all but inevitable was terrifying.

This time, as in 1948, great statesmanship did emerge: On several occasions, President Herzog warned the country that it was about to devour itself and begged sides to step back before reaching the point of no return.

Many who care deeply about Israel, who understand that the future of the Jewish people is inextricably tied to the future of the Jewish state, take comfort in Israel's history of averting the worst. Those with deeper knowledge know that neither civil discourse nor political compromise has ever been the country's strong suit.

Will some version of Herzog's proposed compromise be accepted? Can he convince the country to embark on a serious conversation about a profound constitutional issue? Can those urging caution convince the people in power that genuine democracy is more than majority rule — before they use a narrow parliamentary majority to ram through legislation that will radically alter the country? Will the prime minister abandon the thugs he had invited into his government and reach out to Benny Gantz, Avigdor Lieberman, and Yair Lapid to create a centrist national-unity government — something that first happened in May 1967? On the other side, can Israel's religious and political leaders encourage the passionate engagement of the center and the Left, but persuade them to curtail the general calls for "any means necessary," and for the more specific, bloodcurdling ones?

We don't know. This moment is rich with potential for national greatness but may bring irreparable disaster. One thing we do know: For the first time in many years, everything hangs in the balance. ✴

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