

A Civil War Looming in Israel?

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Amid the seemingly perpetual turbulence and chaos of the Middle East and North Africa comes the warning of a Jewish Civil War:

"We are on the verge of an uprising of hatred, racism, darkness and upcoming killings and assassination based on the overwhelming internal hatred here. We hear hatred at every turn, whether it is directed toward women by military rabbis, by Ashkenazi Jews against Sephardi Jews and Mizrahi Jews against Ashkenazis. This way the seeds of the uprising of hatred are planted, which will lead to a civil war. This hatred is being carried out by the full support and cover of those in charge." – Isaac Herzog, leader of the opposition Zionist Union coalition in the Israeli Knesset.

Isaac Herzog's words, spoken on Monday 18th July at a Zionist Camp parliamentary bloc session, may strike the unerring observer as alarmist and even fanciful. How on earth could the people of Israel, a state created in the belief that it would provide the best guarantee for the preservation of the Jewish people, be set on a course of fratricidal conflict which would imperil its existence?

The often repeated warnings of Israel being a state surrounded by a multitude of enemies and which has existed under the perpetual threat of being "driven into the sea" by Arab enemies has seemingly provided the basis of an unbreakable communal solidarity whatever the cultural and ethnic differences between the disparate people that comprise it. To many, the tendency towards fractiousness and vexation; of episodic disputes and divisions arising within the subtext of an often volatile political discourse only lend credence to the old adage of "two Jews, three opinions."

Binyamin Netanyahu was able to ruminate over the slaughter of the ongoing Syrian Civil War as follows: "We will never be like them. We will never lift our hands against our brothers with unfettered enmity."

The matter of fratricidal conflict is, of course, not unknown to Jewish history. The Book of Judges records a civil war fought between the tribes of Gilead and Ephraim in which over 40,000 lives are claimed to have perished. The Battle of Gibeah pitted the tribes of Israel against that of Benjamin in which 25,000 Benjaminites were slain while the narrative of Hanukkah is one that recounts the violent overthrow of Jewish Hellenists via the Maccabean revolt that was led by Mattathias. The Talmud says that rebellion against the Romans failed because of the "needless enmity between brothers".

The modern age of Zionism has also provided episodes of violence although they have all fallen short of developing into full-blown communal conflicts. The assassinations of the anti-Zionist Jacob de Haan by the Haganah and Chaim Arlosoroff by Revisionist Zionists in pre-

Israel Palestine as well as the murder of Yitzhak Rabin by an orthodox settler extremist in 1995 provide examples of the killings of prominent people which occurred during periods of deep discord.

Israel is not a monolithic society and the divisions of ethnicity as well as those based on religious and political values could provide fertile ground for the development of serious social confrontation.

While the contrasts offered between the Sabra and Diaspora Jews -the former being those who were born within the pre-state Mandate era and the latter those who made Aliyah- is arguably one that was overstated and, perhaps, an often superficial one in the grand scheme of things, divisions within Israeli society are readily discernible from the ethnicities that make it up as well as in the differences between those who are religious and those who are secular.

A starting point of any consideration of fundamental divisions existing within the society can be found in the nature of its constitutional settlement. Israel is one of only three countries in the world that functions without a 'written' constitution. One reason for this relates to the compromise reached about the legal status of religion between Israel's secular founders and the representatives of orthodox Jewry. The 'Status Quo' Compromise was an attempt to provide a working arrangement for the role that Judaism would play in the governmental and judicial system. Tensions have existed between secular and religious communities over the decades with one centred on exemptions given to Haredis studying in yeshivas and anti-Zionist Hasidic groups.

There are of course divisions in ideology. Israel was dominated at the time of its founding by Labor Zionists, European Jewish socialists who wanted to develop a state through the manpower of a rural Kibbutzim and an urban proletariat. However, the rise of the Likud Party, which first came to power in 1977, has reflected a shift in the national balance of power to that of the political Right. In the time since elapsed, Likud has held power for a longer period than Labor or other Left parties. Further, Likud's adoption of neoliberal economic policies in place of earlier ones predicated on a populist orientation has markedly transformed Israeli society -and not necessarily for the better.

For while the Israeli economy, globally renowned for its high-tech component, has experienced continual growth for over a decade, the National Insurance Institute released a report in 2014 detailing a finding that one in five of families in the country live below the poverty line.

Soon after, the Taub Center, an economic and social policy think tank based in Jerusalem issued a state of the nation report which found that four out of five Israeli households spent more than they earned each month. The following year, the National Insurance Institute found that the poverty rate had increased with one in three children living below the poverty line. Israel, which is a member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, has the highest level of poverty among developed nations.

Although levels of gross disparities in wealth have often formed the basis for social discord which have led to civil insurrections and revolutions, class conflict as the pathway to an Israeli civil war is unlikely.

For many observers of Israel, the only serious basis of a war breaking out among its

population is rooted in the matter of Jewish settlement on the occupied Palestinian West Bank which many believe to be the ancient regions of Judea and Samaria. A survey conducted this year by Israel Democracy Institute's Guttman Center for Surveys and the University of Tel Aviv found that 71.5 per cent of the Israeli Jewish public did not consider Israel's presence in the West bank as an occupation. The considered view has long been that the larger in population size these settlements get and the longer they endure, the less likely it increasingly becomes for the settlers to be evicted as part of a final peace settlement with the Palestinians. It has always been understood that any attempt by a serving Israeli government to dislodge the settlers would risk provoking a Jewish Civil War.

While the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 evoked bitter protests and much acrimony on the part of the Israeli political Right, it did not lead to a serious conflict with military overtones. A large scale withdrawal from the more significantly colonised West Bank and dismantling of the settlements would be an altogether different enterprise. There is evidence that in 1980, Ariel Sharon, by then a retired army general but one with continuing influence, convened a secret meeting of higher echelon figures from the military and security services in which the attendees signed a blood oath under which they pledged to make common cause with settlers on the West Bank in resisting to the death any such move.

The source of the information of such a meeting having taken place came, according to the English journalist Alan Hart, from Ezer Weizman, a former commander of the Israeli Air Force, when he was serving as the minister of defence.

The oath is one which is believed to have been taken by subsequent generations of generals. It strongly underpins the notion that no Israeli Prime Minister could ever countenance the idea of ordering the army to shoot settlers, many of whom among their ranks are permanently armed religious Zionists who would be prepared to initiate an a rebellion.

The threat of a civil war in the Jewish state was a real one in the months soon after its creation in 1948. In fact, bullets were fired and fatalities resulted. The belligerents were the army of the newly created Israeli Defence Force and the terror group, Irgun which was led by Menachem Begin.

Begin, a disciple of Vladimir Jabotinsky who was the creator of New Revisionist Zionism, wanted the nascent Israeli state to continue fighting its Arab neighbours until the whole of Eretz Yisrael was conquered. This included not only the West Bank but the rest of the British Mandate territory that had been east of the River Jordan.

Prime Minister David Ben Gurion preferred not to pursue such a course and demanded that Irgun as with other paramilitary organisations be absorbed into the IDF. Begin resisted this and when his group attempted to bring in a cache of arms from a ship berthed off the coast of Tel Aviv a fierce firefight erupted between both sides leading to 16 Irgun dead and 3 from the IDF.

Begin was the founder of the Likud Party which is merged with Herut, the Right-wing nationalist party he had formed in 1948 to serve as a successor to the defunct Irgun. The formation of Herut was met with great dismay by many Jewish intellectuals including Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt who took it upon themselves to write an open letter to the New York Times to warn that Israel would head down a path which legitimized "ultranationalism,

religious mysticism and racial supremacy”.

Herzog has pointedly blamed the present leadership of Likud, headed by Netanyahu, for allowing the political discourse to slide into a hate filled atmosphere. “This way,” he said, “the seeds of the uprising of hatred are planted, which will lead to a civil war.”

And he is not the only high-ranking Israeli political figure to express profound disquiet at the direction in which Israel is heading. Moshe Yaalon, a former IDF chief of staff resigned as minister for defence after hearing that his position would be offered to Avigdor Lieberman, a hardline figure from the political Right. Yaalon claimed that he was “fearful for Israel’s future”. A few weeks earlier, the deputy chief of the Israeli military, Major General Yair Golan compared contemporary Israel to Nazi Germany of the 1930s.

The rise of Likud, some critics have argued, signified the coming to power of the terror gangs of the Mandate era. And with this they argue has come a more uncompromising position regarding the possibility of a two-state settlement with the Palestinian people. With the expansion of settlements on the West Bank having reached a stage where they are essentially irreversible owing to the certainty of a Jewish Civil War in the event of an attempt to have settlers evicted, the only course left to effect a lasting solution to the ‘Palestinian problem’ is a purge of the Arab population under the cover a serious military conflict with an external enemy.

Herzog’s strongly worded remarks no doubt reflect what many consider to be an entrenched pattern in Netanyahu’s often polarizing and incendiary style. His comments during the last elections regarding the Israeli political Left busying Arab voters “to the polling stations in droves” typified this as did his statements regarding illegal immigrants from Black Africa who he described as “infiltrators” and who he claimed were threatening the “identity of the Jewish state.” Netanyahu’s rhetoric at a rally in which he criticised Yitzhak Rabin’s efforts at effecting a peace with the Palestinians -one in which people in the crowd held aloft signs bearing Rabin’s image in an SS uniform- is remembered with lasting repulsion by many who consider him at least partly responsible for inciting an atmosphere that led to the assassination of Rabin by Yigal Amir.

It is clear that the statements made by Herzog, Yaalon and Golan point to the increasingly extremist drift of Israeli politics, but whether they reflect a state of affairs capable of metastasizing into an internecine civil conflict remains doubtful. That of course is little comfort for those such as Herzog who observe what he describes as “the budding fascism that is rising and flourishing in Israeli society”; a state of affairs predicted by the aforementioned Einstein and Arendt who had urged American Zionists not to support Begin and what they termed the “latest manifestation of fascism”.

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