

Blog Post: The Zionist Project and the Diaspora

Recently, in yet another effort to clean up old files, I stumbled on an essay I wrote five years ago and had entirely forgotten. Some things have changed since then; more have stayed pretty much the same.

I do not know whether I any longer agree with myself, but much of the analysis strikes me as on the mark. Make of the conclusions what you will; the heart of it is the analysis, not the prescription.

Oh yes: It's long. Here goes:

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October 8, 2003

“We fed our heart on fantasies

Our heart's grown brutal on the fare.”

-- Yeats

1. I was an early recruit to what is now called “the Zionist project” – more specifically, the State of Israel. From the age of 11, three years before there was a state, I was convinced by its moral claims and of its historic necessity. From then to now, much of my life's work has been to protect the State as best I could from Baltimore and Chicago and East Lansing and Boston, my homes during these years. While that “protection” has often taken the form of cautioning Israel on the folly of its policies, the caution was always expressed from “within the camp.” However sharp my criticism of Israel's policies, I accepted the fundamental assumptions of the Zionist project as axiomatic. I have not been blind to the tensions involved in being both a Jewish state and a democratic state, of being the national home of the Jewish people and home as well to a million Arab citizens (almost 20 percent of Israel's population), of welcoming all Jews but privileging one form of Jewish religious expression at the expense of others, and, more recently, of the anomaly of opening wide the doors to almost anyone with a claim, however tenuous, to being Jewish while closing firmly the doors to relatives of Israel's Arab citizens.

All these seemed to me either tensions one had to accept as inherent in complex societies or problems that could and surely would in time be resolved. In any event, they were trumped by the Jewish people's need for and right to a national home, as also by Israel's achievements as a young liberal democracy. Israel's cultural and intellectual elites were fundamentally no different from my friends, from me. They understood both the exigencies of history and the claims of decency; their compromises were reluctant and always temporary. In the meantime, the people of the young nation restored the Hebrew language, they restored Jerusalem, they made a valiant and worthy effort (now lamentably almost surely a failed effort) to create, with the kibbutz, a

Utopian society. They built hospitals and universities of undeniable quality, they built museums and created symphony orchestras, they were active and even aggressive modernizers. All this and more appealed to me, validated my commitment and concern, made me proud.

And their children served in the army and did what they had to do in 1967 and again in 1973, heroically, and between wars, less heroically, more and then much more controversially, in the West Bank and the Gaza District.

Over the years, I fought quite publicly with Menachem Begin, I chastised Ariel Sharon, I dismissed Bibi Netanyahu with contempt; I also found reason, now and again, to write critically of Shimon Peres and Yitzchak Rabin. I raised and contributed money for the United Jewish Appeal and the New Israel Fund and sought to broaden the definition of what we mean by “pro-Israel,” distinguishing between support for the nation and its people and endorsement of the policies of its government. I encouraged American Jews to engage with Israel. And I did what I could to help give heart to Israel’s peace camp and to mobilize American Jews and now and then American policy-makers in support of peace in Israel.

So I speak from very deep inside the camp, and I say that it has come time to re-examine the old axioms. We wanted a Jewish state because we wanted safety for the Jews. Let Jews live free of persecution and let them die of natural causes or in traffic accidents, not because they are Jews. But the Jews of Israel are not safe, and even the new wall/fence will not make them safe. Israel is in full control of Jenin, and in the last days there has been a lock-down in Jenin, but that did not prevent a woman from Jenin from entering a crowded restaurant in Haifa and blowing herself up there, as a few weeks earlier another suicide murderer blew himself up on Emek Refa’im Street in Jerusalem, where I typically spend much time during my frequent visits to Israel. And so forth. We have now learned that the Zionist project does not end the dangers Jews face; it merely trades the old dangers in for new dangers – more random, to be sure, even less comprehensively lethal, but hardly acceptable. True, but for Israel Ethiopian Jews would still be in Ethiopia, and the Jews of North Africa would be who knows where and in what condition, and the Jews of Argentina would have had no place to go, nor the Jews of the Former Soviet Union, and for the time being Jews everywhere know Israel as their redoubt should they be in need of refuge. True as well that Zionism expected more, and better; it did not foresee endless and bitter and brutal conflict.

We wanted a Jewish state because we wanted one place in the world where Jews would be able fully and freely to express their culture. And so they do, in as riotous a mix as can be imagined. At least some of the early Zionists hoped that a Jewish state would also be a spiritual and intellectual center of the Jewish people, home to a refreshed Jewish culture; Israel has amply fulfilled their early hope. By and large, they had contempt for the possibilities of the Diaspora. They believed that the Diaspora was doomed, that Jews outside the Land would either be killed or assimilated, either raped or seduced. And there has been much murder and much assimilation.

But Jews now create and celebrate a refreshed Jewish culture here in America, with boundless freedom and with astonishing productivity. I cannot and would not claim that the Jewish cultural expression of America's Jews is richer than the Jewish cultural expression of Israeli Jews – but neither is it inferior to what is produced in Israel. The themes of the two literatures are inevitably different, the problems and tensions those literatures describe are different, but on both sides of the oceans there is freedom of cultural expression and the freedom is richly utilized. And literature aside, who can doubt that America has been a more hospitable home to liturgical innovation, a far freer home to the varieties of Jewish religious expression, a congenial home to the music, the textual research and exegesis, and the other key elements of a living culture? What we in America most manifestly (and painfully) lack is Hebrew, our language. And there is no easy or early fix to that. But we push ahead with remarkable energy in English.

Theodore Herzl and his colleagues came to their Zionist conclusion having despaired of achieving freedom, real freedom (which includes, of course, physical safety), for Europe's Jews. History, in the cruelest way, proved them right. But now history has tricked us all; what was not possible in Europe in 1900 is manifestly not merely possible but actual in the United States and Canada in 2003.

If North America's Jews are these days unsafe in any way, their unsafety is chiefly of their own making. The threats that afflict them arise principally from a confused set of priorities as well as from the seductions of commercial culture. (The same can, of course, be said of Israel. In a New York Times report just this week on Israeli expatriates in New York, with all their trance parties and whatnot, we read of one 37 year-old who, when asked whether he might one day return to Israel, replies, "I would go back there one day when I'm older, if there's peace and quiet. The weather's great. The food is great. It's beautiful." He pauses, and then: "Or maybe Barcelona.") But the challenges to American Jews and their culture are interesting and even provocative challenges, challenges worth grappling with. Almost all that grappling is internal to the community; very, very little of it has to do with threats from without.

Will America always be safe? None of us can know. These days, with the American Empire so dangerously overreaching, one can see how the system on which we have depended is capable of collapse. Even without such apocalyptic possibilities, history is notoriously full of tricks, or, tricks aside, of major tectonic shifts. But the analogy to Weimar Germany is no analogy, since Germany's democratic institutions had such fragile roots, and the entrenched doctrine of pluralism is indigenous to America, not an afterthought. It is well not to be complacent, to keep wariness alive (along with hope), but here in America we do not need to keep our bags packed. America *is* different.

So: The central axioms that gave rise to the Zionist project a hundred years ago and more no longer hold, at the least have lost their axiomatic status. Israel is not the safe harbor it was meant to be, and the Diaspora is not the dead end it was thought to be. (Even in Germany, Jewish life is resurgent.)

This is not in any way to blame the Israelis. While Israel has made endless mistakes in seeking to come to some sort of arrangement with its Palestinian neighbors, it is not at all clear that those neighbors would have responded positively, let alone amicably, to more thoughtful policies. Israel's policies these last years have surely increased Palestinian and Arab enmity towards the Jewish state, but there is no evidence that more benign policies would have satisfied the Palestinians. One laments Israel's errors, even condemns them – but they do not excuse or justify the errors of the Palestinians (and of the Arab states).

Where does all that leave us today, between yesterday's suicide murder and tomorrow's Israeli retaliation, between tomorrow's Israeli retaliation and the day after tomorrow's suicide murder?

2. During the 1930s, a small number of Zionist leaders urged upon the nascent Jewish community in Palestine a bi-national state. They were dismissed at the time as both wrong-headed and impossibly naive. The whole purpose of the project, they were told, was for the Jews to enjoy the benefits of national sovereignty; moreover, the notion that Palestine's Arabs would make willing partners with the Jews in a bi-national state was preposterous.

Perhaps because of their own sense that a two-state solution is no longer viable, several Palestinian moderates have lately resurrected the idea of a one-state solution – that is, of a bi-national state. Or, as a handful of Israeli critics put it, now that a two-state solution has fallen from the table to the littered floor, is a more modest Zionism a constructive alternative?

Imagine the fantastic, that the Jews of Israel were prepared to let go the reins of power: Can one today seriously consider what was only naively thinkable 70 and more years ago? Would there be in a bi-national state a serious prospect of Jewish cultural autonomy? The whole idea is absurdly farfetched – unless, of course, one is prepared to declare the idea of a Jewish state an anachronism, a clumsy leftover from the age of nationalism, a self-defeating example of particularism in a world increasingly committed to universalism.

Plainly, a bi-national state would mark the end, the abject end, of the Zionist project. A state in which Palestinians were the decisive majority could not, in any sober analysis, be expected to be cordial to its Jewish minority, providing for Jewish cultural autonomy. (As if the Jews would be satisfied with “cultural autonomy” or, for that matter, well-advised to rely on the promises of a seething Palestinian Arab majority.) Even without imagining a Palestinian state turning to Islamic fundamentalism, to shari'a law, even without imagining that under the actual circumstances the Palestinians would not be able to resist a politics of triumphalism, even without imagining a flood of refugees exercising the right of return and insisting on returning to their ancestral homes, the prospect that Jews would be able to continue to live fully and freely and proudly as Jews is surely remote. Arab societies are not exactly famous for their endorsement of pluralism, and this particular mix would raise even more problems than most. The examples of

successful integration of two radically different ethnic and/or religious communities elsewhere in the world are not encouraging. India? Rwanda? Bosnia? Ireland? Cyprus? Turkey? Spain?

No, a one-state solution is a prescription not only for the end of the Zionist project, but for the end of Jewish autonomy. At best, it would render the residual Jewish population of the new state – most Jews would in fact leave as quickly as other nations would accept them – a theme park. (For that matter, even a state in which Palestinians were a sufficiently large minority to become a blocking element in the nation’s political life would make that life exceedingly difficult. Note, then, that Israel’s current Palestinian population may well become exactly such a minority in the readily foreseeable future.)

Even the Israeli left, universalists though they be, in its overwhelming majority opposes a bi-national state. These days, the argument most frequently employed by liberal Israelis in arguing for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza settlements and for other “painful compromises” – Ariel Sharon’s term for what Israel must do – is in fact the demographic argument: If Israel retains the territories it now occupies, the growth in the Palestinians sector will quite soon mean that between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River a majority of the people will be Palestinian. At that point, Israel, if it is to remain a Jewish state, will be bound either to deny the Palestinians full citizenship – an apartheid state, in other words – or encourage, pacifically or if necessary by force, the emigration of most Palestinians. (This last, euphemistically termed “transfer” in Israel’s current political lexicon, was just a few years ago regarded as an disgraceful proposal, unsuited for polite conversation. It is now part of conventional discourse, demonstrating the calamitous deterioration of the peace process, providing yet another instance – our world is crowded with so many – of how yesterday’s outrage becomes today’s convention.)

No Zionist, whatever the axioms from which he or she argues, can comfortably imagine an apartheid Israel or an ethnically cleansed Israel. (I say no Zionist can, but instantly am aware of the fundamentalist Zionists who explicitly propose exactly such possibilities or whose arguments implicitly approve them. It does, after all, depend on the foundational axioms.) Indeed, no Zionist can celebrate the erosion of moral restraint we witness in Israel. I say this in full knowledge of the terrible choices Israel is forced to make, and with considerable respect for those Israelis – more than a few – who still recognize the moral predicament to which preserving Israel’s security gives rise. I say this with abiding affection for those in Israel who have long argued against the stupidity of Israel’s policies, destined as they have been to exacerbate rather than mitigate the conflict, the terror.

The left uses the demographic argument to alarm Israelis into territorial compromise, not into national compromise. It does not see (to the limited extent the possibility is even mentioned) a one-state solution as a solution, since it believes such a solution would write “finished” to the Zionist dream and to Israel as its fulfillment.

3. All that said, what now? There is no peace process, nor any reason to suppose there soon will be. No American president during an embattled election year is likely to undertake the kind of sustained intervention in the conflict that might – and only might – move peace forward. And any future president will have to face the same strangling constraints that have until now inhibited American action – the sophistication and energy of the pro-Israel community in America, including now not only the storied Jewish lobby but also millions of evangelical Christians whose passionate support for Israel is a new and complicating element of the mix.

As to the Israelis, they are not soon likely to support the kind of massive shift in policy that some press upon it – say, a unilateral withdrawal from the settlements. The demographic argument is weighty, but the security crisis is immediate. In the heat of such a crisis, the more so when there are Israelis in important positions who see all this less as a crisis than as an opportunity, it is exceedingly difficult to plead the centrality of a different crisis, one that is still abstract, still a few years away. Some Israelis, perhaps even most, understand that the West Bank and Gaza settlements are in fact a security liability, not a security asset. But withdrawal? Would that not be interpreted by the Palestinians as a victory for their violence? Would it really satisfy the Palestinian appetite, or would it whet that appetite? Moreover, and most important: The settler movement is by now used to success, and as many as half the settlers, a hundred thousand or so (excluding those in Jerusalem's immediate suburban neighborhoods), are where they are for ideological reasons that are not readily susceptible to cool analytic arguments.

And the Palestinians? It would be folly to count on their being either able or willing to reign in their extremists, to put an end to the terror. True, there was effective cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces during the best of the Oslo process years. But the tumbling deterioration of the last three years, since the second Intifada began, renders remote the prospect of a united stand against terrorism.

These observations are not merely situational. They are not of the kind that will dissolve if only we hold our breath a bit longer. Everything has been tried, everything has failed. And the situation gets worse, year by year. Less secure, less humane, less acceptable. Tactical shifts are no longer sufficient to repair the damage and to prevent the disaster.

The disaster: Until quite recently, we could and did speak of Israel as a Jewish democratic state. We understood that there was an inherent tension in juxtaposing the two ideals, but we imagined that a combination of constructive ambiguity, a readiness to settle for less than perfection, and a relaxation if not a final end to the conflict, would enable both the Jewishness of the state and its democratic commitments to co-exist, even, according to some, to enrich each other.

An Israel stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan in which five million Jews live with an equal and rapidly increasing number of Palestinians, disenfranchised in order to preserve the Jewish State, cannot be thought a democracy. An Israel that seeks to avoid the apartheid problem by “transfer,” whether forcibly or via a mix of tactics, will forfeit

any serious claim to democracy and render its Jewishness a matter of intense debate – nor will it solve the security problem, since the Palestinians will not go quietly nor will the surrounding Arab states for long be able to resist being pulled into the conflict. An Israel committed to ethnic cleansing will become a pariah state, will lose such international support as it enjoys today, and will at best fracture the Jewish Diaspora. (At best: One can also imagine profound and widespread alienation from Israel of the bulk of the Diaspora – which, after all, has its own “red lines.”)

Yet all these threats have not until now been sufficient to accelerate the movement towards a two-state solution, which remains the only solution that enables the Zionist project – a Jewish, democratic state – to survive and to thrive.

The most zealous of the settlers, who come to discussions of these matters with years of experience in debate, armed with thrusts and counter-thrusts that sustain a weird internal logic that is unassailable until its most basic assumptions are challenged, will tell you – have told me – that if it comes to a choice between democracy and a Jewish state, they will sacrifice democracy. They will not accept, do not comprehend, that once their Jewish state gives up on democracy, it will have embarked on a path to suicide. The world community will turn hostile; America will turn away; Diaspora Jews will grieve; many Israelis will leave the country. And Arab enmity will escalate, be expressed with ever-more lethal weapons. Jewish *or* democratic? There is no such choice, not in the real world.

4. What is left? In an unpublished paper, the veteran Israeli analyst Yossi Alpher present a detailed review of the two-state solution. He reminds us that it is of relatively recent vintage, that is not inherent in the scheme of things, and that it is now – now! – in mortal peril. So we must, those of us who care for Israel, force ourselves to imagine what was yesterday unimaginable.

Is it possible to imagine some variant of the mandate system, an assumption of responsibility by the European Union for a nascent Palestinians state, a step that would also necessarily involve the formal (and presumably imposed) assertion of Israel’s final boundaries? Might such a development become an appropriate rallying point for Israel’s friends, for Zionists and post-Zionists alike – as also for those Palestinians who seek peace and who accept (as a majority of both Israelis and Palestinians in diverse polls have indicated they do) a two-state solution? Can the international community somehow accomplish what the parties to the conflict are plainly incapable of accomplishing?

One of the things that characterized Zionism during its middle period – from the beginning of the British Mandate in 1921 to the declaration of Israel’s independence in 1948 – was a readiness on the part of the Zionist movement to accept what it could get. It accepted the Peel Commission report in 1937, and it accepted the United Nations Partition Resolution in 1947. Neither satisfied Zionist maximalists, and it is possible that among those who did accept these compromises there were those who imagined a more expansive day would somehow come – but the compromises were accepted. More than half a century later, it is doubtful that Israelis would revert to an easy acceptance of

boundaries drawn by others. Nor does it seem at all likely that the other central actors – the Palestinians, the United States, the Europeans themselves – would endorse such a regime. But amidst all the likelihoods and unlikelihoods, the grim prospects that can no longer be avoided with any degree of honesty, what else is there?

Were Israel prepared to negotiate around the Saudi plan, had it officially noticed Arafat's backing away from the Right of Return in his OpEd essay in *The New York Times* two years or so ago, had Oslo been more carefully drawn and its terms more assiduously implemented by both sides, things might today be different. But they are not. Nor is there anything like a coherent peace camp in Israel that can come to the Israeli people and offer a reasonable plan for a negotiated resolution of the conflict. And even if there were, it is virtually certain that terrorists from the other side would seek to undermine it, to give peace no chance.

Still, an imposed resolution would quite likely bring with it a huge sigh of relief from the people – the masses, if you will – on both sides. The leaders might squeal and otherwise complain, but if the hostilities were truly finished, done, Palestinians and Jews alike would welcome, with prayers of thanksgiving, the new day.

Israel could be expected to complain the more vigorously, its independence so rudely assaulted. But one can hardly say that Israel is free today to determine its own destiny; it is free only to determine its own reaction to the choices made by others. And if Israel genuinely fears the decision others might make with regard to its borders, and most especially to the fate of Jerusalem and the holy places, there are ways of approaching the problem that provide at least some limit to the imposition: The relevant entity – presumably, the United Nations, or perhaps the Quartet, might announce that the parties have a year to settle their differences at the negotiating table before international troops arrive to enforce the settlement they have reached or, absent such a settlement between the parties, the settlement they themselves intend to impose. Proxies for both sides might be selected to see how far they can move towards an agreement, and then, if successful, submit their agreement to plebiscite by both sides. The terms of the agreement, with the exception of the borders, might be subject to renegotiation every few years, with the understanding that the behavior of the parties between times would be taken into account in addressing their proposed changes. Or: The entity might insist on that form of arbitration which announces in advance that it will consider only two proposals, one from each party to the conflict, and then choose one or the other, as is – forcing the parties towards moderation up front.

Alas, the joker in any such deck is the government of the United States, hostage as it has for so long been to the most shrill voices within its own polity – voices not only of (some) Jews, but also and increasingly of evangelical Christians. But surely these matters are too weighty to be determined by Pat Robertson (the Christian Coalition) and Mort Klein (Zionist Organization of America). The people of both sides, the people whose lives are at stake, must be given the opportunity to vote for an end to the conflict, based on reasonable compromise, and with the appropriate guarantees that their choice – if, indeed, they vote as I expect they would – will then be vigorously enforced.

A bold and sustained effort by the United States – in support of a settlement very much like that agreed to by the parties at Taba in 1990, very much like what has come to be known as President Clinton’s plan – is the obvious need. The key ingredients of a resolution to the conflict are known to all. But if the United States is unable to muster the energy and yes, the courage required to move the process, if, in order to get from here to there, it is necessary for the United States to relinquish its special role as principal interlocutor, so be it. Given the current disrepute of the United States as a disinterested broker, as also domestic political considerations, it may be best and most realistic that America not be considered the lead actor. But the United States will always retain, by virtue of its power, an implicit veto over the process, sufficient, one presumes, to assure the Israelis that their genuinely fundamental interests will not be neglected.

If such a process were to move on a highly accelerated track, if there were sufficient inducements to the warring parties to turn a new page, then one can imagine America accepting such a tempered role. Indeed, for its own reasons, the State Department and the White House might themselves welcome the opportunity to be rid of the problem.

All this can hardly be thought a likely prospect. Is the scenario I have here sketched any more realistic a prospect than a resumption of real negotiations between the parties themselves? Almost all those with whom I’ve shared an earlier draft of this essay think it entirely beyond the realm of possibility. But they are no more optimistic than I regarding alternative possibilities. Their replies are a sigh of despair. One friend accepts the underlying gloomy analysis, refers to the “antisemitic European countries,” goes on to discount the prospect of American military intervention (on account of domestic American political considerations), and concludes that the only solution must therefore be internal. But his letter trails off into a fog in defining the conditions under which the parties might shrink back from the apocalypse. And it asserts as fact what has hardly been established – namely, that the EU nations (as distinguished from the Moslems of France) are antisemitic. A second agrees that things will likely have to get much worse than they are before they start getting better, notes the outcry that might be expected from the American Jewish mainstream community, and wonders, incidentally, why I use the term “mandate” rather than simply calling “for an international buffer to allow a Palestinians state to come into being in a way that is safe for both sides.” But my use of “mandate” is not incidental to my argument. I meant and mean quite specifically more than troops defending borders, constituting a buffer. I mean a period of tutelage (yes, I know) as also a period during which central internal police functions will be performed by the mandate authority. Such a situation would perhaps give the Israelis added confidence that the new Palestinian state would not merely be a home to the next generation of terrorists, and would give the Palestinians time to cleanse their own house, with the help of the external power.

Yet another correspondent wonders whether I ought not be more specific about the degree of external pressure I would endorse – specifically, would I support an “or else” move by America in which Israel is offered the proposal and threatened with a cutoff of all American aid in the event of its rejection.

I duck his question. I do not intend here a full-blown articulation of how an imposed solution might be arrived at nor what its dimensions should be. I introduce the idea (and I am scarcely the first so to do) in order to encourage its more detailed exploration. I feel pressed to do this because of the murmurs that I hear in the course of my travels that point in directions quite different from any I would find acceptable. I mean: “Perhaps the entire enterprise was a mistake.” I mean: “A lot of other states are accepting multiculturalism in place of ethno-nationalism, why not Israel?” I mean: “Who can predict the future? For now, there is simply nothing to do. If things get worse, new possibilities may arise. If, somehow, they get better, then we’ll open a bottle of champagne.”

The Zionist project, shorn of its foundational assumptions, rests today on one proposition and one proposition only: The State of Israel, which is the name of that project, has the right to exist within secure borders. All but the extremists (on both sides), and that means most, understand that Israel can achieve such a happy state only with a new State of Palestine as its equally secure neighbor. If the parties cannot figure out how to get there on their own – and, manifestly, they cannot – then let others who for whatever their reasons (self-interest, vision, kinship, guilt) cause it to happen. And if others are not willing or able to do that, let them stop their meddling at the fringes, let them stop their bloated preaching, let them leave the parties to their own dismal destiny.