

Israel's Occupational Burdens

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As the Palestinian quest for statehood grinds on at the United Nations, those who really hold the Palestinians' fate in their hands — the people of Israel — are more pessimistic than ever about the prospects for peace.

According to a survey published in late September, two thirds of Israelis hold no hope of ever achieving peace with the Palestinians. But the poll also revealed a striking contrast: 88 percent say that Israel is a good place to live. Israel may be more isolated diplomatically than at any time since the dark days of the 1970s, but with the Israeli economy booming and with terrorism largely under control, the vast majority of Israelis seem to believe that they can live indefinitely with the status quo.

They cannot. Israel's future — as a democratic, Jewish and prosperous state — faces real threats, but more from within than from without. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict does threaten Israel, but not, as the Israeli right would have it, because militant and even seemingly moderate Palestinians plan to drive the Jews into the sea. Rather, the conflict threatens Israel because of the havoc it continues to wreak on the country's internal politics.

First and foremost, the ongoing occupation has fueled an aggressive ethno-religious nationalism that has become increasingly prominent since the second intifada. This is happening mostly because Israelis have grown despondent over the prospects for peace: They believe Israel has tried everything to end the conflict and has been repaid only with terrorism, obstruction and global opprobrium. Israelis have not felt this alone and embattled for a generation.

The country's abiding sense of anxiety has advanced the fortunes of, among others, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his stridently nationalist party, Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home). Together with allies in the right-wing Likud and the purportedly moderate Kadima, members of Yisrael Beitenu have attempted to silence Israeli NGOs focused on human rights and civil liberties. They have passed laws that seek to restrict Israeli citizens' right to protest the occupation by boycotts. And they have the independence of the Supreme Court in their sights too. Israel's bulwarks against the forces of illiberal nationalism are crumbling.

Among the victims of this growing ethnocentrism are Israel's Arab citizens, today, over 20 percent of the country's population. Long subjected to discrimination, Arab citizens have also, in the past decade, suffered increasing hostility from the Israeli government. Since 2009, Knesset members from the three largest parties have put forward a parade of

anti-Arab bills, from a mandate that all new immigrants swear an oath of loyalty to Israel as a Jewish state to a provision that would end Arabic's status as an official language.

It is no surprise, then, that Arab citizens have come to feel that they will never be treated fairly in an Israel defined as a Jewish state. In 2009 over half viewed a Jewish and democratic Israel as inherently racist, and nearly 75 percent endorsed using all legal means to transform Israel from a Jewish state into a binational one.

It is hard to see how Jewish and Arab citizens can escape the cycle of mutual distrust and provocation as long as the occupation continues to structure Israel's political discourse. The occupation has impeded a serious national conversation about how Israel should negotiate the inherent tensions between its ethno-religious and civic identities.

Finally, the occupation has exacerbated the challenge that ultraorthodox (haredi) Jews pose to Israel's prosperity. Historically, haredi parties exploited divisions over Israel's territorial future to become free-agent kingmakers, selling their support to left- or right-leaning governing coalitions in exchange for massive communal subsidies.

The haredi burden on the Israeli economy is large and growing, and it rightly worries those responsible for Israel's economic future. But this cannot end as long as Israeli governments rise or fall on the support of haredi parties.

The occupation stands at the center of these challenges to Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic and prosperous state. All is not lost, however. A centrist governing coalition could still halt Israel's slide toward illiberalism, offer its Arab citizens hope for equality and justice, and compel its burgeoning haredi population to earn their keep rather than live off the state. But to do that, Israel must first pull out of the West Bank and resolve the conflict with the Palestinians.

Of course, Israel cannot end the occupation alone. The needed Palestinian leadership has too often failed to materialize. But Israel's commitment to peace has also too often been halfhearted. Its leaders must do all they can to end the conflict — to ensure Israel's very survival as the Jewish state and liberal democracy its founders envisaged.

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