



Israel at 59

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Fifty-nine years ago on May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion read the declaration of independence proclaiming the establishment of Israel with little display of joy among those gathered together in the Tel Aviv Museum that afternoon. Ben-Gurion remarked, "I feel no gaiety in me, only deep anxiety, as on the 29th of November [1947, date of the UN resolution partitioning Palestine] when I was like a mourner at the feast."

Nearly two thousand years after the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and dispersed Jews from their homeland, the rebirth of Israel offered a slim hope to people who barely survived Nazi Germany's final solution for European Jewry. If Israel had come into being ten years earlier, a great many of

those Jews who perished in the Holocaust would have survived. If Israel had been founded before Hitler launched his war in September 1939, the history of the region arguably might well have been different, and Britain's "moment in the Middle East" (the phrase belongs to the historian Elizabeth Monroe) could eventually have drawn to a close without the acrimony and humiliation of 1956.

Britain sought to appease the Arabs. Instead of delivering the Jewish state that Britain promised by opening Palestine for a Jewish homeland as set forth in the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, London imposed restrictions in May 1939 on Jewish emigration into Palestine, when the opposite was most sorely needed. Appeasement failed in Europe and

it failed in the Middle East as Britain's Arab allies were overthrown in Egypt (1952) and Iraq (1958), or hemmed in (Jordan) by the anti-colonial nationalist tide in the region.

For Ben-Gurion's generation, the writing was on the wall. Two millennia of anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in a war of extermination of the Jews, and in the hour of their greatest need as a people to survive, Jews found themselves abandoned. The UN partition of Palestine opened ever so slightly the possibility of the Jews acquiring statehood, in the process becoming politically a normal people, like others--the Arabs, for instance--with states of their own.

The Jewish Agency accepted the UN plan of two states, one Arab and one Jewish. The Arabs of Palestine rejected the UN plan and opted for war to deny the Jews a state of their own. Even as the world was barely beginning to recognize the magnitude of the Holocaust, the Jews in Palestine faced encirclement and annihilation. Six decades and several wars later, Ben-Gurion's Israel has survived, grown stronger militarily and economically, and is the only free and open society in a region where dictatorships are the norm and tyranny in various disguises conspires against the human instinct for freedom.

Yet Israel remains encircled, and the threat of its annihilation is real and public. Even though Israel has signed peace agreements with Egypt

(1979) and Jordan (1994), public hostility against the Jewish state in the Arab world remains deep and widespread. Since 1979, Iran under the rule of Shiite clerics has extended the radius of threat to Israel beyond the Arab Middle East.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is over a century old. In the opinion of many it is the most intractable conflict of our time. It is layered with opposing nationalisms and non-negotiable claims in the name of religions--Judaism and Islam--made by their adherents.

Israel's treaties with Egypt and Jordan suggest neither Arab nationalism nor Islam represent insurmountable difficulties for peace between the Jews and the Arab Muslims. Then, it might be asked, what is it that has rendered the Arab-Israeli, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so intractable for so long and at such cost, with no apparent solution at hand?

The answer is beguilingly simple. Elias Khoury, a Palestinian Christian writer, observed, "Palestine isn't a country for it to have a flag. Palestine is a condition. Every Arab is a Palestinian . . . Palestine is the condition of us all." In other words, Palestine is a mood, a rage, a rallying call of the tribe against its real and imagined enemies, and against which reason is disarmed. In this tribal framework of honour-shame culture, Jews are a people of another tribe who in the past of Arab Islamic history belonged to a lower social status under Muslim rule.

The Jewish ambition in Palestine to acquire a state, and then repeatedly defeating Arab efforts to score even a nominal victory against Israel, are an affront of such magnitude in the context of Arab tribal culture that the resulting shame could only be washed away by blood. It was not inevitable, however, that Jewish hopes for Palestine and the Arab response would become trapped in such a bloody embrace.

When Prince Feisal, son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca and an ally of Britain, wrote in 1919 to Felix Frankfurter attending the Paris Peace Conference, "We will wish the Jews a most hearty welcome home," he meant it. The princely sentiment represented an aspect of traditional Arab humanity, uncontaminated by the sort of nationalism that would soon inflame the tribal honour-shame culture.

There is nothing in Islam that can legitimate Arab denial of the Jews' rights as a people. The Koran (5:20-21) expressly indicates God instructing Moses to take his people into the land designated as Palestine. And when Mohammed was instructed to pray in the direction of Mecca and not Jerusalem--resulting in Mecca becoming the holy centre of Islam--any religious-based Muslim claim on Jerusalem was taken away by the Koran.

Sadly, Prince Feisal's gesture was lost in the emerging new politics of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini (1890s-1974) that became dominant between the two world wars. Haj Amin's politics were demagogic and rabidly anti-Jewish. He collaborated with Hitler, destroyed any possibility of reasonable accommodation with the Jews and laid the template for Palestinian politics of self-destruction.

At any time during the past century Palestinian Arabs could have worked out a settlement with Jews. They could have adopted Prince Feisal's gesture as their own while recognizing that the return of Jews to Palestine was consistent with God's words as revealed in the Koran. But they opted instead to make war against the Jews and, consequently, they went to war *against the Koran*.

There is a lesson to be learned from this century-old conflict. Appeasement as a policy to settle conflicts peacefully does not work. What works is when parties in conflict discover the meaning and benefits of reasonableness. Jewish survival and progress despite the Holocaust is one of the noblest demonstrations of reasonableness at work in history. It is for the Palestinian Arabs to show their capacity to be reasonable after having amply demonstrated their capacity for self-destruction.