

On Israel's 60th Anniversary: An Open Letter to Israeli Friends

By Stephen Scheinberg

It is undoubtedly a time for celebration, and I join with you in recognizing the many achievements of these sixty years. I have visited Israel twice in the last three years, and have also continued to read much about your society. The visitor can only be amazed by the pace of development and change. You now enjoy a First World standard of living, with all that accompanies it, for good and for ill, including a great range of consumer goods and more cars, but also ugly malls and congestion. Your high-tech industry is justly acclaimed for its contributions to computer software, mobile phones, and the like. Israel's research in science and medicine is top notch. Your musicians not only tour the world but often take the helm of our leading orchestras, while your writers are widely translated and enjoyed by millions of readers. One must show due admiration for what a few million of our people have been able to create in such a short time.

I do not wish "to rain on your parade," but my joy and my hopes are tempered by other facets of Israeli society which give me cause for great concern. I hope you can respond to these concerns. First, there is the issue of basic inequities within Israel itself. Granted, none of us live in perfect societies. Canada lives with the enduring stain of her treatment of her native population, and the United States with her insistent race problem. However, I remain optimistic that with much zig-zagging these societies will continue to change, and I have seen great changes in my own lifetime, with the fundamental shared recognition that we have committed great wrongs against our minorities, and that this must change. I see little evidence of such an awakening in Israel.

Israeli survey research reveals strong currents of racism in your society. One survey revealed that 75% of Jews opposed living in the same apartment building as Arabs, 55% of your people believe that Arabs cannot achieve your level of cultural development, and the same number favoured government encouragement of Arab

emigration. We have racism and anti-Semitism in Canada, but the levels are significantly below those figures. Your society's treatment of Israeli Arabs is despicable. They constitute some 20% of your society, but their share of the state's resources is pitifully below that proportion. I know two of the answers usually given, which I view as totally inadequate responses. First, I am told that they are happier to live in Israel and claim its social benefits, and not share the plight of their Palestinian brothers. I find this response to be reprehensible. In effect, it allows Israel a right to discriminate, but in a manner that does not apply, say, to your Russian population, which is not told to be content because things are worse in Minsk. The second predictable answer is that the Arab level of political participation is too low to claim much attention from the politicians. This answer presumes, I suppose, that a stronger Arab presence in the Knesset could possibly assume the same role in coalition governments as the religious parties which are so expert in exploiting political power. I think the likelihood of such a

coalition is nil. Both answers are insufficient apologies. If there is a real commitment to building an equitable society, then it certainly is not evident to one who reads the Israeli press every day.

Israel's treatment of a second group of her own citizens has always puzzled me. The Bedouins were always praised as loyal to Israel, members of and the best trackers in the IDF. But these same soldiers return from their military service to see their communities uprooted from Negev lands and their families forced into what is for them a horrendous urban life. I recognize our own appropriation of North American aboriginal lands, but to see it going on in your country in the "enlightened" 21st century is simply inexcusable. I suppose that I could treat these issues as just the "growing pains" of a relatively new state. I recognize that there are small groups of committed Israelis who do care about Arabs and Bedouins, but there is no relevant political force behind them. Yet I hope that this can change, and permit myself a degree of optimism on this front.

Most of you, my friends, know that I have been active for some years in the leadership of Canadian Friends of Peace Now. The very name

continued on following page

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of this organization, now celebrating its 30th anniversary, is a statement of optimism, but how long can we be optimistic in the face of changing realities? We have espoused a two-state solution as a means not only of securing peace, but also as a way of delivering Israel from the horrors of its occupation. Those of us who believe in a **democratic** Israel do not believe that it is consistent with rule over another people, and therefore we have consistently advocated a negotiated end to the occupation.

However, it is becoming more apparent that Shalom Achshav and its allies in Israel are losing not only the battle but perhaps the war. We have lost not only to Yesha, the settlement movement, but also to government after government of Israel. Every day brings us more bad news—"new construction authorized in Ariel," "Defence Minister Barak Will Not Act Against 25 Illegal Outposts," "More Apartment Units to be Built in Expanded Jerusalem," etc. Of course, these are only the headlines of the last few weeks, but not of the years and years in which settlement expansion has been countenanced and supported by the State of Israel. We are coming to—or perhaps, I fear, we have arrived—at the day when Shalom Achshav's demand for a two-state solution becomes irrelevant because the hopes of the Palestinian people cannot possibly be realized on the land remaining, and none of us envision a large-scale evacuation of settlements.

If this is the case, I would like to know what scenario you see unfolding. I will offer three for your contemplation: 1) the status quo with more and more settlement construction, a tight stranglehold by the IDF but that would likely encourage two Palestinian responses—a third intifada, on the one hand, and on the other a civil campaign for one person, one vote between the Mediterranean and the Jordan. In other words, it would be a Palestinian retreat to a bi-national state, a one-state solution. 2) Given these likely Palestinian responses, there will be an intensified movement within Israel to "transfer" (oust, ethnic cleanse) all Arabs from the West Bank. This movement would spread well beyond Lieberman and others among today's extremists into the political mainstream. I view this scenario as all too likely. 3) a possibly new administration in Washington that could be prepared to push Israel towards an agreement, but I must frankly admit that, at the moment, I see no group of moderate Palestinians capable of administering a state and able to guarantee that it would not be used as a base for terrorism. Of course, I do not exempt Israel, as well as the Palestinians, for responsibility in creating this state of affairs. In any case, this scenario can only offer promise if Israel, the U.S. and the EU

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rapidly do more to create the foundations of a stable government, and if Israel releases Marwan Barghouti and other Palestinian leaders who may have blood on their hands, but Barghouti is the only moderate Palestinian leader with any credibility who might be capable of leading his people.

I believe, my friends, that as you take this moment to celebrate all that Israel has accomplished, it is all in jeopardy. Perhaps I should put it more narrowly. It is Israel's democracy that is in jeopardy. Many of you mourn that Israel is becoming for much of the world a pariah state, and some of you attribute it to anti-Semitism or to the employment of double standards used by those who judge Israel so harshly. However, I can testify that despite all the efforts of the Israel Lobby, the criticism is becoming louder and louder, from Jimmy Carter, to the scholars Mearsheimer and Walt, and most recently to former

Clinton aide Aaron David Miller, and it is not based on anti-Semitism. There will certainly be no rupture in American support for Israel, but the discomfort for some of you will become greater and greater, as the critical voices grow louder.

This is a far cry from the Israel you grew up in or immigrated to. Pre-conquest, pre-occupation, Israel was often a model for the progressive legions of humankind. Thousands came to study or just to live on your kibbutzim, millions identified with your struggle to build a thriving society, though surrounded by enemies. In recent years you held your heads high, despite the storm of criticism. Some of you identified with Rabin and the peace camp, and a few of you have even fought for minority rights. There may be comfort in that, but are you becoming a minority in a right-wing sea? The Ashkenazi left failed to include and win over most of the Sephardic immigrants, it has made little headway within the Russian immigrant bloc, and the Black Hats seem, from this distance, to be a hopeless cause. I hope that you can reassure me on this count and give me hope that there is a demographic basis for a new progressive movement within Israel?

I hope that on this important anniversary you will not only take pride in what you have built but will also take stock of where you are going. Am I too depressed? Can progressives in the Diaspora look to Israel with a degree of hope? Are there forces for positive change in your country that escape our vision? I look forward to hearing from you and continuing this discussion. In the meantime, I sincerely wish you and yours a happy celebration of this 60th anniversary.

Best wishes,
Steve Scheinberg