



ISRAEL MATTERS!

Publication of the Israel Affairs Committee of Temple Beth Shalom

co-chairs: Dr. Martin Laskin and Allan Myer

Issue Number 123



May 2018

Reflections on Reaching Seventy

May 14th marks the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel. On the Hebrew calendar, this is the fifth day of Iyar, the eighth month of the year 5778. The anniversary of this date is known as Yom Ha'atzmaut and this year falls on April 19th. The return of the Jewish people to our ancestral homeland and the creation of an independent state after 2,000 years in exile was an extraordinary moment in history. The Jewish people were no longer voiceless and defenseless. They launched a sovereign state, responsible for their own well being, security, and future. In the 70 years since that momentous occasion, Israelis have overcome tremendous odds, made the desert bloom, absorbed millions of immigrants, embraced innovation, built a thriving first-world economy while developing and nurturing a flourishing democracy in a region of authoritarian hostility. A Jewish democratic state with a vibrant press and an open, self-critical culture – strong, exuberant, proud, and free.

medical devices, in nanotechnology, in cyber security, in humanitarian assistance, in agriculture, water technologies, and in defense systems that are used by countries on every continent. The capabilities of the Israel Defense Force (the IDF) are second to none. From 100% energy importer to near self-sufficiency with vast off-shore natural gas resources. We've cheered eleven Israeli Nobel laureates. We've invested in the hundreds of Israeli companies listed on Nasdaq. The massive wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union has been successfully integrated. The country is also seeing significant changes taking place among the ultra-Orthodox community that is increasing its participation in civil society.

Recent poll data tell another part of the upside story. In the UN's 2018 "World Happiness Report," Israel ranked 11th happiest country in the world (out of 156) for the fifth year in a row. By comparison, the United States ranked 18th. In another global survey, Tel Aviv was rated



David Ben-Gurion beneath a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. At 4pm in the main hall of the Tel Aviv Art Museum (now Independence Hall), Ben-Gurion banged his gavel and read the Declaration of Independence to 250 leaders of the Jewish National Council and the Yishuv. Sixteen minutes later, Ben-Gurion said, "Let us accept the Foundation Scroll of the Jewish State by rising." This was followed by Rabbi Yehuda Fishman reciting the Shehecheyanu blessing. The Declaration was then signed and the ceremony ended with the singing of Hatikvah, soon to be Israel's national anthem. The State of Israel was born, just before Shabbat, less than eight hours before the British Mandate ended. The timing was deliberate and purposeful.

Israel has come a long way in 70 years. It has grown from a population of 800,000 to a remarkably diverse population of nearly nine million: 75% Jewish and 21% Arab Muslims, Christians, and Druze. At the end of 1948, 12 countries had established diplomatic ties with Israel. Today, Israel has diplomatic ties with 163 of the 192 member states of the United Nations. From a largely agrarian economy at its beginning, the world has witnessed Israel's extraordinary transformation into a start-up nation with dazzling expertise in information technologies, in medicine and

the most gay-friendly city in the world. In national polling, the vast majority of Israelis remain optimistic about the future of the Israeli state with 84% of all Israelis believing their country is a good place to live. More than two-thirds of the population is optimistic about Israel's future. However, the same study confirmed that substantial disagreements exist between Jews and Arabs on the state level. But relations on a societal and to an even greater extent on a

(Continued)

(Continued)

personal level, relations are far less tense and in certain aspects are quite positive. Today, 54% of Israeli Arabs feel an integral part of Israeli society; not where it needs to be, but certainly moving in an encouraging direction.

But Israeli life has never been easy, not for a single day. There have always been geopolitical difficulties including three or four wars, maybe five depending on who's counting. Two horrific intifadas and countless terrorist attacks. Yes, there is peace with Egypt and Jordan but sadly, none with the Palestinian Authority. Quiet break throughs have been achieved with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States but none whatsoever with Fatah, Hamas, or Iran. In fact, Iran now controls the capitols in Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus, and through its Hezbollah proxy, Beirut. Iran's Revolutionary Guards are seeking to establish permanent positions in southern Syria, a stone's throw from Israel's border. On Israel's northern border, Hezbollah has an army of 30,000 combatants financially supported by Iran and armed with 150,000 rockets. Hamas continues to dig military tunnels from Gaza into Israel. Yes, Israel's neighborhood continues to be a dangerous place.

On the domestic front, income inequality and high housing and commodity prices continue to be a concern for many Israelis. There's also tension over the settlements and the confounding nature of Israel's political parties. In a recent poll, Israelis were asked, "Which State institutions do you trust?" Political parties came in dead last, with a 15% rating among Jews and 16% among Arabs. Of course, that's not much different from attitudes in many countries, including the United States. But most Israelis would probably agree that their foremost domestic problem is the lack of consensus as to what it means to be a Jewish, democratic state. Israelis have yet to figure out how to balance these two components. Almost every Israeli agrees that Israel is both a Jewish and a democratic state. But there is absolutely no agreement between religious and secular groups on what it means to be a Jewish state. And moreover, what does it mean to be a democracy? When it comes to Judaism, Israel wasn't established as a religious state. Halakha (Jewish law) was not to be part of the Israeli judicial system. But Israel is a homeland for Jews and embraces Jewish values. Furthermore, the rabbinic courts have authority under certain areas of Israeli family and personal status and are typically treated according to halakha. But a democracy speaks to democratic values, human rights, the protection of minorities, and equality for all citizens. All of this creates considerable tension, and finding the right balance remains a major challenge.

But challenges seem to be the coin of the realm in Israel. One can certainly conclude that no other nation in the world could have preserved a stable democracy in the face of such major social and security challenges over such a long period. Israel has certainly done so. So

taking into account all of Israel's positive aspects, its underlying goodness, and the amazing brainpower and extraordinary resourcefulness of its people, the remarkable achievements of the past 70 years should be prologue to the next 70 years. Yes, it is time to celebrate.

Co-chairs, Israel Affairs Committee, TBS

Allan Myer

Dr. Martin Laskin
