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After 62 years, Israel has much to celebrate

Thursday, 13 May 2010

As an Israeli academic and pundit, part of my job is to read, watch and listen to what other talking heads are saying about us.



Gerald Steinberg

Over the years, I've learned to have low expectations, both from Israeli and foreign journalists, who often put their own agendas and moods into news articles and analyses. (I admit to occasionally falling into the same trap – so caveat emptor.)

For many, analyzing Israel has become an exercise in gloom and doom, and this pessimism has dominated stories recently. Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day) is a prime time for musing about the general state of the Jewish state, both externally and internally, and this year's analyses have been particularly ominous. In the New York Times, Ethan Bronner's Memo from Jerusalem was headlined "Mood Is Dark as Israel Marks 62nd Year as a Nation." Israel's zealous prophets warned of impending wars, civil strife and overall disaster.

In contrast, the prevailing mood was far from dark on Israel's streets, parks, beaches, and pre-holiday marketplaces. We joined thousands of Israelis packing Jerusalem's newly renovated Mamilla arcade, which leads to the brightly lit ancient remains of David's Citadel and Jaffa Gate. The diverse crowd enjoyed re-enactments of historic moments in the city's 3,000-year history, followed by a sing-along.

This scene wasn't merely an exercise in nostalgia or escapism, but a popular and deeply felt statement of freedom and homecoming. For many Israeli Jews (journalists and doomsayers excepted), every day is Independence Day. Despite the wars and hatred, both in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and increasingly on university campuses, newspaper columns and blogs, we are here – an independent, sovereign Jewish nation, able to defend our interests after 2,000 years of exile. From the perspective of Jewish history, 62 years is a very short time. The taste of independence, with its accompanying responsibility for both accomplishments and failures, is still exhilarating.

While media headlines continue to highlight threats of war from Hamas and Hezbollah, and the Iranian regime pursues nuclear weapons designed to crush the "Zionist entity," the national mood also reflects a renewed self-confidence that these enemies can be deterred, and if necessary, defeated. For Israelis who still hear the echoes of Palestinian mass terror bombings, our Independence Day stroll through Jerusalem was also a quiet celebration marking the defeat of Yasser Arafat's terror war.

Economically, Israel has emerged from the global recession almost unscathed – the shekel is more stable and stronger than either the dollar or the euro. The best-selling book Start-up Nation, which examines Israel's emergence as a leading hi-tech innovator, is as much a confident statement about the future as it is a history of this unexpected success.

Certainly there's concern about the signs of tension coming out of Washington, and, among some, fear of efforts to impose a counterproductive and unsustainable peace process. But some of this is overreaction and media hype, fanned by pundits with vested interests in overstating the friction.

Demonization of Israel – with its boycotts and bogus accusations of "war crimes," as reflected and promoted by Judge Richard Goldstone and his supporters – is also threatening. But there's a sense that this threat has overreached and is descending into absurdity and hysteria. Groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and their numerous Israeli and Palestinian allies, which have led this political warfare campaign, have been exposed as hypocritical and far from the "moral watchdogs" that they claim to be.

Internally, we have more than enough problems, including continuing revelations of massive corruption among former officials, compounded by an ongoing leadership crisis. There's plenty work to do for the next generation of Israel's leaders, whomever

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they turn out to be.

Yet, standing with crowds outside of Jerusalem's ancient walls at sunset, singing classic Zionist hits, our internal conflicts also seemed overstated. Amid the cacophony of Hebrew – with Russian, English, Italian, Ethiopian, and many other accents – and the full range of Jerusalem costumes, from sandals and miniskirts to black hats and coats, there was more unity than discord.

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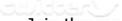
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