

Israel's Not-So-Future Perfect

Leon Hadar

Back 17 years ago, in the winter of 1991–92, when I was contemplating Israel's future in *World Policy Journal*, it was supposed to be the dawn of a new age—and I was there. We were about to enter the roaring globalization years of the 1990s and to be downloaded into a borderless world in which the archaic nation-state would vanish.

Arabs and Jews, Muslims and Hindus, would cease fighting each other over holy temples and olive trees and emerge in our new and brave world as the prime agents of global commerce, competing over market shares and investment flows, as Tom Friedman's McDonalds Law ("no two countries that had McDonalds had gone to war with each other") had forecasted. The "new cosmopolitans" and "global hybrids" would be the winners in this nascent universe where the prime determinant for business, political, and cultural success would be a multicultural sense of self. Pass that Cuban-Chinese falafel, please.

Then came the Internet. Suddenly, I was an Israeli-born American "content provider" covering the Middle East, feeling somewhat ambivalent about the new global reality in which the region I had been studying all my life was rapidly becoming so very passé. The Middle East had started to feel like old news, Desert Storm was gradually turning into a distant memory, and peace seemed to be dawning over the Holy Land. Those young and extra-cool Israelis and Palestinians just want to surf the net, watch MTV, and make a lot of bucks. *Even Yasir Arafat has a website. Don't you get it?*

So when the editors of *World Policy Journal* asked me to write about the "situation" in Israel in 1991, I jumped at the opportunity to celebrate the way the land of my birth—just like me—was joining the global economy. Against the backdrop of the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, I felt very bullish about the end of the Cold War creating conditions for peace between Arabs

and Jews. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had lost its backing from the moribund Soviet Union, and Israel no longer needed to play the role of America's anti-Soviet "strategic asset" in the Middle East. The conflict was being de-internationalized and localized—with both Arabs and Israelis recognizing that they could not rely on outside powers to help them perpetuate an anachronistic tribal conflict. The only way they would emerge as successful players in the new global economy was by making peace and investing their resources in developing their economies, linking themselves to the new Information Age.

For Israel, with its educated population and world-renowned scientific centers (supplemented by a wave of highly skilled Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union), peace and integration into the global economy would allow the Jewish state to become "normal": to reform its then-socialized economy along free-market lines and to transform itself from a Cuba-like military outpost of the United States into a technological and financial center, while inviting the Palestinians to join this futuristic journey.

Being a "normal state" has been the dream of my generation of Israelis, those who came of age in the 1960s when Beatlemania was challenging Jerusalemania. My friends and I were hoping to be relieved from the claustrophobia of being segregated in a small and militarized Jewish ghetto, hoping to be released from the suffocation of a collectivist Zionist ideology that treated with disdain the pursuit of an American-style individual path to happiness. From that perspective, the modern, Westernized city of Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean coast of Israel represented a post-ideological spirit—unleashing a new era of political, economic, and cultural freedom. Or as the saying went, Israelis would be able to "catch America," that is, to live like an American.

Indeed, in 1991 and for the rest of that swinging decade of globalization, it felt as though the dream of my generation was finally being realized. As I proposed in my article in *World Policy Journal*, the city of Tel Aviv, representing a political philosophy that stressed the need to make Israel a normal state, continued to assert itself as Israelis and Palestinians took the first steps towards reconciliation. But those who had hoped to catch America in Israel—by introducing a constitution, changing the relations between synagogue and state, integrating the Arab citizens into Israeli life, and most important, creating the foundations for an independent Palestinian state that would live in peace with Israel—found themselves on the defensive. They were confronted by powerful political forces that emerged in the aftermath of the Six Day War and were still very much alive.

Indeed, as I out pointed in my 1991 article, the coalition of Greater Israel (symbolized by Jerusalem and the Jewish settlements that started to pop up in the West Bank after the Six Day War) represented the new spirit of radical Zionism, led by right-wing nationalist parties that had been marginalized politically until 1967. These Jewish settlers and ultra-Orthodox militants held fast to an isolationist, unilateralist, and angry vision of a Jewish state in a never-ending confrontation with the Palestinians, the Arab world, the Muslims, and the Gentiles.

The struggle between the two value systems, Jerusalem vs. Tel Aviv, and the political forces that represented them was never really resolved, as power shifted back and forth between those favoring accommodation with the Palestinians and those fantasizing about Greater Israel. But as I had forecast in my original article, Tel Aviv seemed to be on the rise. The ensuing defeat of the Likud Party in the 1992 election of Yitzhak Rabin and the Labor Party represented a clear victory by the peace camp over the Greater Israel coalition.

Rabin led the process of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation that brought about the Oslo Accords and the peace agreement with Jordan. He enjoyed the support of young Israelis hoping to transform their country into a modern center of high-tech and business—the Singapore of the Middle East—which was exactly how another Labor party leader, Shimon Peres, described his vision of Israel when I interviewed him in 1992. Sitting on the lawn of the White House on September 13, 1993, and watching Rabin shaking hands with Arafat it seemed to me as though the Six Day War normalcy was arriving to the Holy Land.

While the first Intifadah may have demonstrated to Rabin and other members of Israel's elite the costs involved in continuing to maintain control over the territories they helped "liberate" in 1967, the demographic reality was already apparent. Arab Palestinians, with their higher birth rate, would outnumber Jews in Israel by the first decade of the twenty-first century; Israel would have to make a choice between remaining a democratic state with a Jewish majority or becoming a bi-national state. "We tended to believe that the whole world is against us, that we have to live alone in a new ghetto of ours," Rabin said five months before the Oslo accords were signed. But now it was "an entirely different world."

Only two years later, as he was leaving a mass rally in the center of Tel Aviv in support of the Oslo process, Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a right-wing Orthodox Jewish extremist living in a West Bank settlement. Amir and the Greater Israel camp had won. The Oslo process came gradually to an end, the Palestinian-Israeli talks collapsed in 2000, the second Intifadah started, and post-9/11, the Israeli and American narratives that combined victimology with arrogance seemed to have tragically merged.

In a way, the second Intifadah and 9/11 were part of a powerful challenge to the globalization of the 1990s, as old and new political animosities started rearing their ugly heads. Two countries with McDonalds—the United States and Serbia—went to war with each other. India embraced the market economy, but that did not deter New Delhi from going nuclear. The Israelis and Palestinians made it clear they were willing to continue fighting over holy temples in Jerusalem and olive trees in the West Bank, even as they continued going online. Trade and investment in the global economy does not seem to have deterred any nation from launching costly military campaigns. The suggestion that those who make money do not make wars—that a capitalist peace would envelope all—proved to be a grand illusion.

In a marriage made in hell, the post-9/11 era created conditions that enabled the ideologues and planners of the U.S. hegemon to wed those Israelis

whose vision assumed that only a Middle East dominated by American power would secure the survival of a militarized Jewish ghetto. Hence the notion of “the whole world is against us” ended up resonating among the neoconservatives and Christian Zionists who hijacked U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11 and plunged the Middle East into war in Iraq. But while Americans are bound to leave Iraq one day, Israelis will probably be stuck in the territories “liberated” in 1967 for many years to come. And the dream of a normal state could be buried forever.

In some respects, Israel’s ties with the United States are starting to resemble the relationship between the old political and economic elites and the Jewish community in Europe during the nineteenth century. As Hannah Arendt observed in her classic study of European anti-Semitism, it was the erosion in the power of those elites—and their growing inability to protect the Jews of Europe—that sealed the latter’s fate. Then, new and angry social classes and political players turned their frustration against the group they associated with the hated status quo—a group that was also very vulnerable.

Today, a similar scenario could take place on an international scale, when a weaker and less confident United States would be under pressure at home and abroad to reduce its global commitments. This would leave Israel, the weakest link, vulnerable to attacks not only from Arab and Muslim nations, but from other new anti-status quo powers. ●

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