

The Future of Israel: Three Scenarios

Inaugural Oration

The Leon Liberman Chair of Modern Israel Studies

Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation

Monash University

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Dear Professor Larkins, Professor Cornish, Dr. Baker, Dear Lee Liberman and family, Leon Kempler, Colleagues, friends, good evening and shalom.

We are here to mark the official launching of the new Leon Liberman Chair of Modern Israel Studies at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, at the School of Historical Studies, Faculty of Arts, at Monash University. This is a very long title. It tells a long story and it holds a tremendous responsibility. It is also a very new enterprise. Indeed, this is the first Chair in Israel Studies in the whole of the southern hemisphere.

The vision and commitment put into the planning and launching of this Chair were enormous. Just over two years ago, as I was humbly minding my own academic business at the University of Haifa, I was approached by several rather amazing individuals, at first Lee Liberman and Leon Kempler, followed

by a most inspiring delegation of Monash University academics on a visit to Israel, including professors Richard Larkins and Edwina Cornish. This was a veritable Australian invasion, reminiscent of the glorious old spirit of the Anzac days, but carrying now a message of peace, passion, and learning. I found in these new friends something that I recognized in myself and in my own society. Vision. Dedication. A free roaming intellect. A tremendous curiosity, the traveler's curiosity and the scientist's curiosity blended into one. A strong belief in the perennial value of discussion, doubt and debate. An attraction to the better blessings of science and technology, a commitment to environment and nature. And also a sharp sense of humor and a love of the very adventure of life – the life of the body and of the mind - so typical of a young nation living under a strong sun. This message from Australia was both familiar and exciting.

And so here I am. For luring me into this new adventure of the mind, I would like to say thank you, dear friends. Or should it be cheers, mates. Or should it be toda, chaverim.

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As we are sitting here tonight, perhaps exactly now at this hour, a very different academic conference about Israel is opening in another part of the world. It is titled not “The Future of Israel” but “The End of Israel”. According to internet reports it is convened by “Iranian students” and attended by “intellectuals, scholars and lecturers” from Muslim and non-Muslim countries who will discuss and analyze – in great “academic depth”, the

Iranian News Agency tells us - the pending collapse of Little Satan, the State of Israel.

With all due respect to the Iranians let me tell you that I have absolutely no interest in apocalyptic visions of Israel's demise. Of course my country is still in mortal danger. This in itself is of great interest to me. There is tremendous historical irony, and a grain of unspeakable tragedy, in the fact that of all countries in the modern worlds, of all autocracies and dictatorships and rogues and villains, conquerors and oppressors, cynics and hypocrites, Israel is the only one whose very right to exist, to breathe free and be sovereign, to hold naturally and unquestionably its membership in the global community, is constantly debated and cast in doubt. There is much to say about this sad contemporary truth, but this is not my topic tonight. I am here to speak about a future, not about the absence of a future. I am here to convey to you what I think is a very authentic Israeli spirit, and also something deeply Australian: the spirit of future-orientation, the spirit of conscious optimism, the spirit of evolving hope.

So let me use this stage to tell the Iranian politicians, academics and intellectuals, that I do not believe in the End of Israel; but I do believe in a better future for Iran.

A society that takes the trouble to convene an academic conference to augur the death of its self-appointed worst enemy is perhaps pathetic, perhaps caught in the stranglehold of hate and violence, but it still has hope. Because it believes, after all, in the power of academia. In the uses of science and

research and scholarship, however crooked, however twisted, however grotesque they have become in current Iranian and extremist Islamist usage.

And therefore I believe that one day, perhaps soon, the real forces of study and progress and rationality that have deep roots in Iranian culture will prevail, that a sane and modern-minded middle class will make its voice heard, and that I and my Israeli colleagues will live to see and even attend a different kind of conference in Tehran, one dedicated not to ends but to beginnings, not to destruction but to life and cooperation.

Now let us return to Israel.

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It would have been tempting to dedicate the whole of this Inaugural Lecture to a very special birthday that was celebrated earlier this month. Exactly sixty years ago, from an austere little assembly hall in the modest Tel Aviv municipality building, David Ben Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel.

Let me repeat here what cannot be repeated often enough: Israel began its life as a fully legitimate new sovereign state, ratified by a United Nations resolution, and immediately thereafter it was attacked by a broad coalition of Arab armies. Ben Gurion made his declaration in Tel Aviv because Jerusalem was under full siege. The country's 600,000 Jews, many of whom had just survived the holocaust or lost their families to it, were fighting for their lives against the combined forces of several Arab armies and Palestinian militias.

Here is a mind-boggling fact: one in every 100 Jews men, women and children was killed in that war of independence. At the same time, the Palestinian tragedy was unfolding, as hundreds of thousands left their homes, some forcibly evicted, many others of their own accord or by the orders of Arab leaders, for what they expected would be very temporary exile.

World analysts were giving the Jewish state less than 50% chances of surviving its first and bloodiest military ordeal. The Arab World and its supporters were clearly expecting the quick and total demise of the new Zionist entity. The young Israel was tiny in size and population, desperately poor in its economic capacities, short on technology, a deeply traumatized residue of a decimated people. Yet Ben Gurion stood there, barely five foot tall, and in his authoritative yet non-radiophonic voice read out a Declaration of Independence that was, and still is, one of the most liberal, most humane constitutional documents of modern times. He offered peace to Israel's attackers and vowed to create a true parliamentary democracy, a moderate and cultured society that will guarantee full and equal civil rights to all its citizens regardless of their ethnic origin, gender or religion.

60 years hence, the state born in war is still living in war. Its borders are still undecided. Its very existence is still under open threat of the kind no other country today is forced to face. Jewish-Arab relations are still unresolved internationally, fraught with hostility along much of the Israeli-Palestinian front. Israel's Arab citizens, one fifth of the population, have always had full voting rights, but their civil equality under law is still fraught by both cultural and socio-economic inequalities. Israel is not the social-democratic paradise of communal justice that its Labor-movement founders had hoped it would

become. It is not the perfect Jewish and democratic state stipulated in its own Declaration of Independence. It is the deserving object of a great deal of criticism, most biting from the Israelis themselves.

But let me now reshuffle the cards and tell you a different story. For some reason, for some strange reason that no historian or economist or political analyst or science fiction writer has so far managed to explain, this little country of 7.3 million souls is today the world's number one target of international research and development investment. Its citizens, both Jews and Arabs, enjoy the 9th highest life expectancy rate in the world. (Not to worry, friends; Australia is 6th). This besieged society is number 7 on the Economist's world innovation index measuring business and research creativity. Despite its huge military bills, it spends more on education than 96% of the world's countries, and has one of the best ratios of medical doctors per population.¹ Two of Israel's universities, Ben Gurion University of the Negev and my other academic home, the University of Haifa, have 20% Arab students, matching the ratio in the general population. This figure is immensely higher than in any other major university in a Western country with a Muslim minority. The fact that about half of our Arab students are women is a particular source of pride.

Above and beyond these facts is the greatest achievement of Israeli political culture: that is was, and is, and has never ceased to be, a parliamentary democracy, just as Ben Gurion promised. An imperfect democracy, but a full working democracy at that, with a real separation of powers, an uninterrupted

¹ . These data, alongside many others, can be found in the Pocket World in Figures, 2008 edition, published by The Economist in association with Profile Books (London, 2007).

parliamentary tradition and a fully independent judiciary. Of the 150 or so countries established in the aftermath of the Second World War, only one other country – India - arguably remained a democracy. This is not only a unique accomplishment of Israel, whose founding fathers and mothers did not come from democratic cultures; it is also a sobering reflection on the enormous stumbling blocs still faced today by the global process of democratization.

All this is just a shortlist of some of contemporary Israel's measurable achievements. I will not dwell on the un-measurable ones, the arts and music, literature and cinema, the academic energies, the tremendous flair for sharp but non-violent argument, in what is arguably the world's most lively public sphere. All of these, I hope, are going to be reflected on an everyday basis in our Israel Studies programmes here at Monash University.

Instead, let us move on to talk about the future. I have three scenarios for you tonight. All three are solidly anchored in today's realities, in historical processes that are unfolding in front of our eyes. All three may well happen, but of course all three may not happen at all. Despite my bid to treat them with scientific neutrality, I have strong feelings about each of them. But let me lay them out as fairly as I can and suggest that you judge for yourselves.

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Predictions are a risky business, all the more so when Israel is involved. According to Jewish tradition, ever since the destruction of the Temple, the

gift of prophecy was given to the fools.² Having said this, I strongly believe that academic innovation, in the humanities as well as the social sciences, must afford a little Talmudic foolishness as it assesses future horizons of its past and present-day analyses.

Israel has many futures. The one that will eventually materialize will depend on global, regional, and local developments, some reasonably predictable and others wholly unpredictable. What fascinates me most, let me tell you right away, is the Israeli people's own responsibility for their future. Of course, there is no way of telling to what degree we, the individual members of a political community, are truly able to decide our future. It may well be decided for us by world events. Still, the Israelis' stake in shaping their own collective future is a more fascinating issue than, for example, the Norwegians' parallel stake. Precisely because of Israel's sensitive, intricate and unique global, regional and local circumstances, the individual and collective agency of its citizens may well prove to be crucial.

In September 2003 the Norwegian government minister Anna Lindh was shot dead. This was a horrible crime, a human tragedy and a public outrage, but it would be difficult to see this murder as effecting a change in the course of Norwegian, Scandinavian, European, not to mention World history. Nor, as far as we know, was the act intended to cause such a change. Nor, for the matter, is any political assassination in the foreseeable future, in a country like Norway, likely to make a deep change in the course of its history.

² . Babylonian Talmud, Tract Baba Bathra, page 12b.

The Israeli case is totally different. In November 1995, a law student named Yigal Amir, observant Jew and highly idealistic nationalist, shot Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin three times in the back. Amir's individual crime changed history substantially, and on every level: local, regional, global. His act cut short Rabin's own bid to affect Israeli history by promoting a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Both Rabin and Amir, in very different ways of course, exercised their human agency upon the history of their nation.

My scenarios for the future of the Israelis must, necessarily, exclude such instances of individual human intervention cutting into the course of events, as the Rabin assassination doubtless was.

A different type of scenario I will not discuss is the nightmare of a successful Iranian nuclear attack, or alternatively or an extremely well orchestrated surprise attack of the combined armies of several Muslim states. These possibilities are totally imaginable, but they are not part of my attempt to imagine alternative futures largely created by the choices, deeds and defaults of Israeli society itself.

Let me just say one word about religious terminology, which is relevant to many contemporary players. In the language of extremist believers, today's Israel may become a shining 'light unto the nations' in Jewish terms, or a reclaimed Jihad territory in Muslim terms, or the scene of Armageddon in Christian terms. Of course, observant moderates of all faiths are willing settle, in this age, for humbler and human-scale futures. Still, we should keep in mind that the grand eschatological vistas of two of the three major monotheistic religions – the Muslim and the Christian – with regard to the

Holy Land are sweeping, final, and profoundly incompatible. The Jewish view, despite the obvious existence of Jewish fanatics on the margins of Israeli society, is rather less imperious: the Jewish state, even at its most messianic, is not about expanding, subjugating or converting other nations. It is about survival, security, and a meaningful life.

And yet, all three monotheistic religions have developed in our times extremist branches which are fervently political, and deeply impatient in their respective quests for redemption. One of the underlying assertions of my talk tonight is that a viable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict will need to have a strong secular backbone; not that it excludes believers, I don't mean that at all. But peace in our part of the Middle East will have to grow on a this-worldly, not otherworldly, soil. It will need to rely on trust, not faith; for trust is human and political, and faith is transcendental.³ This peace will depend on a realistic solution to a territorial dispute, not on a mystical resolution to a theological conflict. It will rely on human willpower, not on divine authorization.

From this point on I am assuming that Israelis, and perhaps also Palestinians, will have a significant power over their own collective future. I am putting aside both unpredictable individual acts and overpowering external impositions, and focusing on the moral agency of Israeli society as a key player in paving its future road.

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³ . I owe this distinction to Professor John Dunn; see Dunn, "The concept of trust in the politics of John Locke" in: *Philosophy in history : essays on the historiography of philosophy*, edited by Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge and New York, 1984), pp. 279-301.

Our first scenario can be called ‘the nationalization of Israeli society’. It is based on the possibility that Israel’s religious Right will overpower or marginalize other political and cultural groups, and fulfill its dream of a greater Israel, and perhaps also the interlinked dream of a theocratic Israel based on Torah and Talmudic law.⁴

Following several more failures to propel the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, coupled with bloody terrorist attacks against Israeli civilian targets and escalating military retaliations by Israel’s security forces, the electorate will move irreversibly to support the right-of-center political parties. No political platform that includes the evacuation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, or a territorial compromise with the Palestinians, would be able to win enough votes to lead a coalition government. The labor party will split in the middle, some of its members moving to the hawkish Right and others teaming up with the left-of-center, civil-rights oriented parties, to form an increasingly marginal opposition.

In demographic terms, the basis for this scenario is the fast natural growth of populations belonging to the Jewish religious Right, both within Israel’s internationally recognized borders and in the West Bank settlements. This electorate, that may reach 20-30 percent of eligible voters within one or two decades, will be buttressed by politically likeminded members of two other groups: the ultra-Orthodox Jews and a nationalist-leaning majority of recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their descendants. To complete

⁴ . On the Israeli national and religious Right, see Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel’s Radical Right* (Oxford, 1991) and Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *The Lords of the Land: The War for Israel’s Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007* (New York, 2007).

the process, thousands of other Israelis, weary and hardened by years of terror attacks, cynical about the seemingly futile peace rhetoric, will move rightward from the political center and adopt a hawkish world view. Together, this mass of voters will secure a political majority led either by Likud or by right-of-Likud parties such as the National Union.

This majority government will set out, first and foremost, to reform Israel's system of government. Its first and prime target, as already seen today, is the Supreme Court. A parliamentary majority will enact a major reform of the judiciary, culminating in a new Constitutional Court whose judges are elected by a politically controlled body and according to a political majority principle. Effectively, this will end the separation of power concept that underlay Israel's rule of law from its very beginning. The courts will abandon their civil-rights orientation, give up the attempt to apply the principle of civic equality, and retreat from their traditionally liberal approach towards the rights of minority populations including Arabs, and towards personal issues such as alternative families and gay rights.

If a strong Orthodox segment forms part of this coalition, it is likely that moves would be made toward enacting a Torah-based constitution, a halachic rule (Halacha being a general term for Orthodox Jewish legislation). A religious codex will replace the current process of writing a Constitution for Israel. Personal civil rights that cover marriage and divorce, child-rearing and alternative family forms, that have reached a progressive liberal phase in Israel today, will be changed in accordance with halachic legislation. Shops, as well as restaurants and places of entertainment, will join public transportation and cease to operate on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Rules

of modest dress, especially pertaining to women, will affect the public sphere, the media, and possibly the private sphere as well. It is not easy to predict how far such halachic legislation will go, but its direction will steer Israel from the course of liberal democracy to that of traditional theocracy; probably not based on the violent enforcement practiced by Muslim theocracies, but through legislation that would make the secular and liberal part of society feel increasingly out of place.

This religious-Right Israel will refuse any deal with the Syrians involving a full or partial return of the Golan Heights. It will embody a collective readiness to annex the West Bank, heartland of Biblical Israel, into the modern sovereign State of Israel. The settlers of today would, in this scenario, accomplish their dream of becoming the pioneering backbone of a great Jewish return to the ancient Israelite lands. How could this be achieved, facing 2-3 million Palestinian residents and an almost global opposition to such a unilateral move?

On this crucial question, my scenario can only follow the declared visions of several leaders of the Israeli Right today. The violent option involves a forced evacuation of tens or hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the occupied West Bank, and perhaps even from Israel itself. This may happen in the context of open warfare or guerilla hostilities. Alternatively, Palestinians may be able to remain in the annexed territories as permanent residents without access to active civil rights. The most moderate option, already discussed by several settler leaders, would create Palestinian enclaves with limited self-government and cultural autonomy, surrounded by Jewish territory that would become a formal part of the State of Israel.

In ideological terms, Zionism will be reduced to only one of its many current meanings: a power-based, hawkish territorialism based on ancient symbols and modern fundamentalism. The moderate Zionist creed of Israel's prominent founders, preaching a territorial compromise and honorable peace with the Arab neighbours, will be eradicated. The politics of faith will win over the politics of trust.

The effect of such a process on Israeli society will be dramatic. Middle Israel will cease to exist. Over a half of the Israelis, by today's count, will become strangers in their land. The liberal, modern-minded, mostly secular Center and left-of-center, and even some of the liberal Right, will gradually disappear. Not only a majority of the academic, scientific, technological and professional elites, not only the descendants of the old labor Zionism, but also many ordinary middle-class Israelis, are likely to feel that they have lost their country. To them, the ancestral Land of Israel will matter far less than the modern liberal democracy that Israel was.

Numerous people will feel obliged, for economic or for moral reasons, to emigrate. But migration is not a real option on a mass scale; other countries, even nominal friends, may not be eager to take them in. Many others will opt out of the public sphere. In the current terms of Israeli public discourse, it will be said that the Land of Israel – biblical, messianic, atavistic - defeated the State of Israel – modern, liberal, globally oriented. Some will say that Jerusalem defeated Tel Aviv. Israeli literature and art may continue to flourish, as arts tend to do in times of trouble, but the social and cultural milieus of many of the writers and artists will cease to exist.

One problem with this scenario is its economic viability. The modern and moderate 'middle Israel' is today making Israeli economy a global success, especially thanks to high tech innovation. Paradoxically, Israeli moderate liberals are now the main breadwinners, paying with their taxes for the maintenance of their messianic and fundamentalist brethren. If the nationalist scenario materializes, foreign investments will dry up, and the most gifted and global economic performers will leave or go bust. Someone will have to pay for the military and political feats of the nationalists' 'Greater Israel', but Tel Aviv and her social-economic structures will no longer be able or willing to do so.

A second viability problem is the Global context of such a development. Will the international community allow Israel's Right-wing majority to get away with annexation, and perhaps with forced transfer of Palestinians? Quite likely, the answer is no, and the Greater Israel dream would be curbed from the outside if it is not previously curbed by Israel's own political systems. But let us imagine a world of rising tension between Islam and the West; or a world resorting back to a cold war situation between Russia and America; or a tremendous rise of a new form of Christian fundamentalism both in the United States and in Europe, perhaps as a crude response to the rise of Islam within Western societies.⁵

In each of these cases, a clever Israeli leadership with messianic dreams and real-politik wisdom might be able to seize the moment, to exploit a global

⁵ . On the current link between Christian Zionism and the Israeli religious Right, see Zev Chafets, *A Match Made in Heaven* (New York, 2007) and Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism* (New Haven, 2007).

conflict situation, to secure the support of other fundamentalists in a Christian-Jewish alliance for liberating the Holy Land. This scenario is indeed apocalyptic, but given the right triggers and a convenient international constellation, Apocalypse can happen almost Now.

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The second scenario runs in an opposite direction. It is about the end of Israel as a Jewish state. As said, I am not referring to physical destruction, but to a political process based on collective choices.

Again, demography may be a chief player. Instead of a growing electorate of national-Right and orthodox Jews, the decisive factor may be the fast-growing numbers of Palestinians. Already today, the West Bank and Gaza can boast a population that counts among the youngest in the world.⁶ Here is one reason why current Palestinian leaders, certainly those of Hamas and arguably those of Fattah as well, are in no hurry to conclude a peace deal with Israel: the future, they think, belongs to them. By the sheer force of numbers.

Let us see what we have today: about six million Israeli Jews, just over a million Israeli Arabs, and an estimated four million Palestinians according to the most recent estimates for Gaza ('disengaged' from Israel but not an independent political entity) and the West Bank.⁷

⁶ . For a reliable demographic overview see The Economist Pocket World in Figures 2008;

⁷ . Ibid; CIA World Factbook, updated to 6 March 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

There are competing statistical accounts of the Israel/Palestine demographical balance in the year 2020 or 2050. Demography has become a highly controversial science on both sides of the conflict and on both sides of the inner Israeli debate. But one thing is clear. If no territorial compromise is reached, followed by the establishment of a sovereign Palestine separated from Israel by internationally recognized borders, then Palestinians are likely to outnumber Jews between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River within two generations or less.

This does not spell doom for the Jewish state, unless Israelis choose to cling to the West Bank. The common denominator of Israel's moderates, who share a dovish worldview, is therefore very simple: letting go of the Palestinian territories is imperative not just for moral reasons but also for reasons of state.

Our second scenario is thus clear: no agreement is negotiated, Palestinians rely on the brute force of demographics, and Israelis are unable to reach a political decision. This, then, is not a scenario based on conscious Israeli choice, but rather on the lack of deliberate choosing. As soon as Palestinians outnumber Israelis, due to their higher birth rate and despite the accelerated population growth of Israel's nationalist-religious Right, Israel will either cease to be democratic or cease to be a Jewish state.

In the first scenario we have seen an imaginary future Israel retreating from democracy. In the second, Israelis are forced by warfare or international pressure to grant citizenship to the West Bank (and possibly also the Gazan) Palestinian. The new Arab majority, even if it acts with perfect democratic manners, will change the Israeli constitutional layout and legally obliterate,

rather than physically destroy, the Jewish state. The very name 'Israel' is likely to be voted down too.

The effects of such a transformation on Israeli society are fundamental. For a few Jews and many Arabs, a dream will come true – the so-called 'one state solution', where two nations cohabit in a neutral polity. But for the vast majority of Israeli Jews, including most of the secular liberal Left, such a development would spell no less than a historical calamity. Regardless of sharp intellectual voices on the Israeli extreme Left, almost all Israeli Jews are Zionists in the broadest of senses: they hold the simple conviction that Israel is, and ought to be, the State of the Jews. Democratic, certainly. Assuring the civil equality of its non-Jewish citizens, of course. And nevertheless, a homeland to the Jewish people.

If Israel exists no longer as a Jewish and democratic state, many Jews are likely to leave it if they can. The graffiti one sees sometimes in Europe, 'Jews, out of Palestine!' will come true. There will be kind liberal souls – again, mostly in Europe- who will piously reproach the Jews for not acquiescing to live with their Palestinian brethren in one happy polity. The international community, weary and sarcastic, would sign with relief.⁸

Or perhaps not.

This scenario can develop in several directions. Each of them would test what today is a highly controversial hypothesis. Is Islam angry with the West

⁸ . On the 'One-State solution' debate compare Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative", *New York Review of Books* 50:16, 23 Oct. 2003, with Yoel Esteron, "Who's in Favour of Annihilating Israel?", *Ha'aretz* 28 Nov. 2003.

mainly because of the Jewish presence in the Holy Land? If so, the ending of the Jewish State will put this particular War of Civilizations to rest. But if conflict continues, both among Middle Eastern nations and between Muslims and the West, then it would appear that other clocks were ticking. That other fronts existed all the time, smoke-screened by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Another critical test, I fear, will touch on the status of Jews in their diasporas. Is a strong Israel the basis for Jewish security everywhere? The question is hotly debated today, also in Israel itself. The question must be put in even sharper terms: will anti-Semitism in a world without Israel be similar to anti-Semitism today? Will it be diminished, or by contrast grow ever stronger and increasingly unpunished? Worse still: if Israel's Jews are forced to leave it, for any reason whatsoever, will there be any country willing to accept them? One of the strongest Zionist doctrines is that we simply have nowhere else to go. That was the *raison d'être* of the Jewish state to begin with.

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The third scenario envisages a Jewish and democratic Israel next to a sovereign Palestine, as part of a stable and mostly peaceful, perhaps even democratizing, Middle East.⁹

This is not a simple scenario and I do not propose to idealize it. Over the next few years, the electoral crucus of what I have called 'Middle Israel' retains its electoral power and puts its political trust in leaders and parties – center, left

⁹ . The only senior Middle Eastern statesman who is consistently future-oriented in this optimistic sense is Israel's president Shimon Peres. See his interview to Wikinews of 9 Jan. 2008 on http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Shimon_Peris_discusses_the_future_of_Israel.

and even right of center – who vow to promote a responsible but real progress in peace negotiations with the Palestinians, as well as with Syria. Despite the ongoing crisis of leadership in Israel, several experienced politicians from Kadima, Labor, and even Likud, team up for a pragmatic and corruption-free coalition. They are backed by some members of the academic, legal and business community who are willing to abandon their traditional aloofness from things political. They are buttressed by the formidable rhetoric and international credibility of Israel's current president, Shimon Peres. They enjoy the level-headed, determined support of Israel's business community, intellectual circles, most senior members of the civil service and many globally-minded, cyberspace-versed young persons, who have experienced both active military service and backpacking treks in Asia and South America.

In parallel, a younger generation of Palestinian administrators and community leaders, some representing economic interests, gradually come to the fore. They are moderate, they have real-politik approach, they are versed in international discourse, and – most importantly – they are willing to cut their nation's losses and overturn a seventy-year tradition of rejectionism. These men, and hopefully also women, are secular in their deepest political heart; they are pragmatic in their best political instincts; they no longer agree to see Jewish Israelis as latter-day crusaders, here today and gone tomorrow. They are willing to return the demon of Islamic Jihad back into its bottle. They are willing to relegate the Palestinian dream of re-conquering the whole land, the Palestinian's sacred 'right of return', to the realm of the meta-historical. They are, at last, ready to claim what they can practically expect to get, in this world, in these times.

This, if carried out, will signal the victory of trust over faith in Palestinian as well as Israeli political society.

Supported by these constituencies, Israeli and Palestinian leaders walk through the slow and tortuous process of putting together an agreement based on principles that almost everyone already knows and understands. They draw a border; close enough to the internationally recognized Green Line of 1967, with adaptations aimed at keeping borderline Jewish and Palestinian population centers sensibly within their respective national territories. Jerusalem is to be divided, or perhaps creatively shared and co-governed, much to the chagrin of the Israeli Right and the Islamic and nationalist Palestinian extremists. Palestinians do not renounce their 'right of return', but they openly renounce its implementation. They will treasure it as a symbolic keepsake and relic of past disasters, perhaps in the way that the Jews kept their longing for the lost Land of Israel alive for two thousand years. But unlike the historic Jewish diaspora, tomorrow's Palestinians will have a sovereign state to call their own: a small chunk of the ancestral land, but a real homeland nevertheless.

As the process of peace begins to materialize, all extremists break loose. Dozens of Arab suicide bombers and a handful of Jewish-nationalist thugs do their best to reverse the course of history, to react to every trust-building step with brutal bloodshed. But a majority of Israelis and Palestinians steps in, decisively and assertively, pulling their weight with the peacemakers. The global community is awake and at hand, giving crucial support and sponsorship in the form of diplomatic brokering, financial investment, peacekeeping troops and security technologies.

Importantly, world leaders – the next American president, and perhaps still some of the today's European governments – stand up and speak clearly and honestly to both sides of the conflict. They tell Israelis that their national existence and survival is guaranteed beyond all doubt, and they will tell Palestinians that they are not abandoned. Collective fears – the most neglected part of the conflict to date – are at last addressed.

Even more importantly, global public opinion will produce a climate conducive to the process. Europeans, in particular, will make their voice heard not in the form of sanction and boycott, but of positive support. By helping the Israeli and Palestinian civil societies, international community may find its own voice as a civil society too. Because this particular conflict-resolution is a maturity test not only for Israelis and Arabs, but also for the global community as a whole.

Despite the real pain of territorial incision, the two nation states will live to launch their new relationship. Economic innovation will play a huge role, and moderate Arab regimes, especially Jordan and Egypt, will act as crucial partners. Israel will be wary of colonizing its young neighbor economically, but we must be realistic: the gap between their capacities may remain big and problematic for many years to come.

There will be tension. Anger. Hostility. Racism. There will be regressions and drawbacks. Little love will be lost between the two sovereign nations. The Arab minority in Israel and, imaginably, a Jewish minority remaining in Palestine, will face particular difficulties. I don't think that Committees of

Peace and Reconciliation, South African style, are likely to spring between Jews and Arabs. Neither people are mentally inclined to such an exercise in Christian forgiveness. But a few years may pass, and peace will begin paying its dividends. There will be the growing sense of justice: a broad, imprecise but tangible historical justice, at last, between Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps, dare I suggest it, Jews will begin to feel, for the first time in their history since antiquity, that they are truly safe, truly unpersecuted.

As our evening draws to a close, I might as well conclude by telling you that I am hoping to become, in my lifetime, a denizen of the third scenario. But is this third scenario nothing but wishful thinking? Am I making the intellectual error of predicting my own best hope? And how likely is the latter scenario to be accomplished, rather than its two predecessors?

My answer is short, and it harks to the long political and intellectual history of the People of Israel. Our collective memory records feats of human willpower, individual and collective, which are more than a match to the task at hand. Arab-Israeli peace is doable, the vast majority of Israelis know that it is doable, and a growing number of Palestinians may well be able to join this conviction. It is doable precisely because our political culture is essentially based on trust; trust in the human capability to enact positive change.

The beloved Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote: “hope needs to be like barbed wire, to keep out despair”.

I fully subscribe. Apart from honest scholarship and realistic involvement in current affairs, I can only offer my bare hands to help spread the barbed wire of hope.