

Thoughts on the Middle East Conflict

Bridges for Peace

Introduction

Thank you for reframing the title of the symposium. I believe it provides a more useful framework within which to work.

We represent a position on Israel that is common among Christians and Jews that would describe themselves as “Bible-believing.” In other words our faith is based on an expectation of the literal fulfillment of undertakings recorded in the Bible. A large proportion of Christians in South Africa and indeed Africa would count themselves as a part of this community. This practical expectation relates to our day to day existence and not just as far as the destiny of Israel and the Jewish people is concerned. Please do not construe this position as one that devalues any of the other players on this dramatic stage.

Israel as the “other”

My approach will be to define Israel as the “other” and to illustrate why this “Otherness” especially when coupled with apparent success, creates a tension that relates more to Israel’s existence than to its behavior.

Israel’s Neighbourhood

Israel is in an immediate region that is homogenous in two respects.

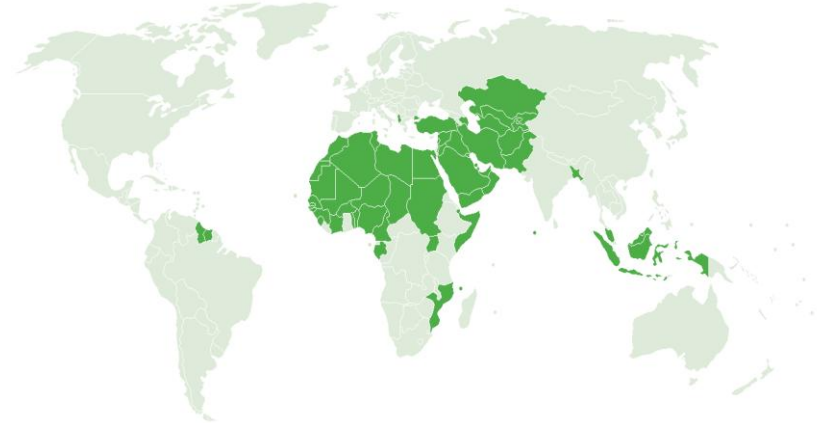


Firstly, the prevailing culture in the region is Arab and non-Arab Israel, stretching from the

The map illustrates this situation. Israel therefore is culturally different to its immediate region.

(The League of Arab States comprises 22 members, a population of 360 million and a land mass of 14 million km². Israel’s land represents one eighth of 1% of this area and its population a mere ½ of 1%)

Secondly, with considerable overlaps, Israel is located within a region that is overwhelmingly Islamic.



(The Organisation of The Islamic Conference represents 57 countries that identify themselves as Islamic and have a population of 1.5 billion. Israel's population is 7 million.)

Once again Israel divides this world into eastern and western sectors. There is a further tension in the case of Israel. Prevailing Islamic interpretation determines that land once ruled by Islam becomes a part of a collective that has changed its status. Israel was once part of this collective and pressure exists to return it to the collective.

This is illustrated by this comment made by the chief of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal and is frequently embedded in the public statements of President Ahmadinejad of Iran.

"The first step [to liberating Jerusalem] is refusal to negotiate with Israel...and to establish a new, reconciled Palestinian" Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal in a live broadcast in Khartoum on Sudanese state television. 11 Feb 2011

The maps illustrate a bizarre point. While Israel is accused of being too big, it is precisely because it is so small relative to these two collectives that it causes tension and in fact, halving Israel's size will only add to this phenomenon. It is like a chip in your windscreen right in your line of vision. Halving its size won't reduce the irritation.

Other Challenges

Israel constitutes a challenge in its world in several respects. Although there are several such challenges, I have chosen two to illustrate this point and will then conclude.

Governments are appointed to represent the needs of the people.

Until the start of the Arab Spring, Israel bucked the prevailing trend in the region of entrenched national leaders. Israel has had 18 elections in its 65 year existence and every Israeli government that has been unsuccessful in addressing the needs of the Israeli populace has been replaced through the ballot box.

This has reflected poorly on other regional leaders (and that is most of them) that have seized power and refused to relinquish it irrespective of their performance.

Country	Leader	Since
Libya	Ghaddafi	1969
Egypt	Mubarak	1981
Israel	Netanyahu	2009
Jordan	Abdullah	1953*
Syria	Assad	1970*
Iran	Khameni	1989

* Current leaders preceded by their fathers

This survey, issued by Freedom House, evaluates Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Neither score well in the region.



Economically, based on gross domestic product per capita, Israel shames its immediate neighbours and almost all the major role-players in the region. In a region where basic food prices have more than doubled in the past 18 months is it any wonder that the populations in these countries have risen in revolt against their governments? The presence of severe corruption in several of the countries in the region, further adds to the frustration of citizens of these countries.

Country	Leader	GDP Capita	Corruption Index
Libya	Ghaddafi	\$13,800	2.2
Egypt	Mubarak	\$6,200	3.1
Israel	Netanyahu	\$29,500	6.1
Jordan	Abdullah	\$5,300	4.7
Syria	Assad	\$4,800	2.5
Iran	Khameni	\$11,200	2.2

Corruption Index : 1 = Extreme corruption; 10=Negligible corruption

(Sources : GDP Per Capita *CIA World Fact Book*; Corruption Index : *Transparency International 2010 report*)

Similar disparities exist in other area's such opportunities for women, absorption of refugees, education, minority rights and more.

Jewish and Christian attitudes towards Israel

Jews and Christians are interested and indeed proud of Israel. It is a successful nation that delivers innovation in every field of human endeavor, punching way beyond its weight. Psalm 147's assertion that the Lord will rebuild Jerusalem and restore the dispersed of Israel and many other Bible passages are happening before our eyes. We consider this to be good news.

Conclusion

In conclusion. If Israel was the 23rd member of the League of Arab States and was the 58th member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference. If the minorities in question were Christians, Kurds or even Bahai's and every accusation leveled against Israel today was evident in this make-believe state then, I

would venture to say that neither the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Cosatu, Arch-Bishop Emmeritus Tutu and even the Russell Tribunal would have been on the frontlines of this battle.

It is the “otherness” of Israel that sets it up as a scapegoat in a region that is far from perfect as illustrated by the frustration of people throughout the region and that has brought about the Arab uprisings.

Hitler used the phrase, “*The Jews are our misfortune*,” despite the fact that the Jews were good citizens of Germany. Neither Israel, the Jews or Zionism are our misfortune. The converse is true.

Presented by:

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