

Radicalism and Fundamentalism in Israel

After only one month in Israel we are still adjusting, observing, discovering and sometimes wondering. Wondering as to how this resilient society intends to overcome some of the worrisome challenges that are threatening to divide if not splinter it. We asked ourselves the other day what are the mega trends that make Israel today so different from the Israel we knew or thought we knew for the last 40 years of us living in Canada. We are unanimous in observing at least 3 major and worrisome phenomena. We already dedicated a blog entry to the social unrest that is sweeping the country and the “Just Society” protest movement. <http://amnonzohar.tumblr.com/post/12115738842/the-people-demand-social-justice-the-israeli-spring> . In this entry, somewhat inspired by the 16th anniversary of the murder of Itzhak Rabin that was memorialized earlier this month across the country, we want to focus on the great and growing divide between the Right and Left political ideologies within the Israeli society. This widening chasm as we see it, threatens the prospects of ever arriving at a national consensus which is so vital to the prospects of peace in the region.

A few years ago I had coffee with Meir Dagan then the head of the Israeli Mossad, in the lobby of a Toronto downtown hotel. I will never forget his answer to my cliché question about the prospects of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. “Not in your lifetime, he said”, not meaning to wish me ill, “Not until Israel can achieve a national consensus as to its vision of Peace”. I hope he was wrong for the sake of Israel and my longevity.



Both of us were shocked to discover what most Israelis were perfectly aware of, the JFK like conspiracy theories surrounding Rabin's murder. On November 5, 1995 Itzhak Rabin was shot at point blank by Igal Amir at a peace rally in a Tel-Aviv square, now named after him: Rabin Square. He was immediately captured, admitted to the murder, expressed no remorse. He was tried convicted and is serving a life sentence in an Israeli prison. A commission was formed to investigate the first ever Jew-on-Jew terror attack in the history of Israel and concluded that Igal Amir a leader of a radical right wing group was the lone murderer. Yet we just watched a program on TV where children of kindergarten age, young adults and senior citizens from the Settlers community passionately rejected the notion that Igal Amir murdered Rabin and instead attributed the murder to the Shabak (The Israeli equivalent of the FBI) , to Shimon Peres, Rabin's arch rival for many years and other such weird theories. Much more concerning were their almost unanimous views that Rabin was a traitor who was ready to sell off Israel's rights in signing the Oslo accords and that he deserved his fate. We now understand that November 5, 1995 was the watershed event that

(forever?) divided the political landscape of Israel and made the prospects of reaching a national consensus so improbable. If you were not aware of the conspiracy theories just Google: “Conspiracy theories on Rabin’s murder” and see for yourself. <http://bit.ly/rC1wDj>



Recently a faction of radical settlers commonly referred to as “Price Tag” embarked on a militant some even say terror campaign to extract a price for the violence against the settlers perpetrated by West Bank Palestinians. Few in Israel approve off and many more condemn their ideology and tactics. Tactics like burning or desecrating mosques, vandalizing Arab villages and more are by no means the norm in the Settlers community but in my opinion needs to get nipped in the bud before it becomes a legitimate force.



Just as the Right is being radicalized so is the extreme Israeli Left. The Israeli Knesset is planning to pass a law that will render illegal donations to Israeli NGOs (mainly left wing activist group) made by foreign contributors. These Left wing academics, journalists and other activists have become a contributing factor in the wide spread condemnation of Israeli policies. They are being exploited by the anti- Israeli forces who are advocating Boycott, Divestiture and Sanctions (BDS) in an attempt to de-legitimize Israel and its policies. Being a democratic country respecting freedom of expression, political association and descent, Israel is doing little to mitigate the damage caused by these groups to the image of Israel that has been under siege through a deliberate campaign by Israel’s opponents. They include but are not limited to trade unions in the U.K, Human Rights NGOs, Islamic organizations world-wide and some Christian organizations such as the United Church in Canada.

For factual evidence of the radical Israeli left's messaging just read some of Gideon Levy articles in the daily Ha'aretz (read this: <http://bit.ly/tfUJ7w>) read also some of the publications by "Post Zionist" Israeli academics such as Hanna Herzog , that are included in the reading material for courses such as "War and Peace In The Middle East" at York University. These articles only reinforce the anti-Israeli bias built in to this "scholarly experience". When you see what is happening at the two extreme ends of the political spectrum you begin to wonder how could Israel ever project a unified front to the world one that represent what in actuality (I think) the desire on the part of most Israelis: to live in peace and security next to their Palestinian neighbors. Extremism anywhere and for whatever cause, can hardly be justified let alone tolerated – anywhere and that includes Israel.



The Orthodox community has always enjoyed a disproportional influence on daily life in Israel. This understandably has been a function of the "King Maker" role of the religious parties in forming both Left and Right coalition governments in Israel. What we have discovered in the last month is that this influence is beginning to spin out of control. In Jerusalem posters and billboards with female faces or images (and I am not referring to anything suggestive) are not allowed. In some Orthodox communities in Jerusalem men and women have to use separate sidewalks divided by a screen to separate the genders. Some of the Ultra-Orthodox communities do not recognize and in fact condemn the right of Israel to exist yet have constant grievances about government social and security services. The most recent one is the controversy regarding the abolishment of men listening to female singing voices (you heard it right) as it has been recently declared by Orthodox Rabbis as "Erva". If you do not know what this means you would not believe your eyes when you see it here: <http://dorshav.typepad.com/hebrewwisdom/2007/09/erva—sex.html> .

Listening to female singing voices is Erva!!! I am not kidding. Religious soldiers in the IDF are asking to be relieved from attending functions, ceremonies and performances that include female singers. I know – you can't believe it – check it out! And just to conclude the argument that Orthodoxy in Israel is marching backward in time towards fundamentalism faster than you realize, look at this photo. It depicts the day-to-day life of an Ultra-Orthodox faction fondly referred to as "Taliban" Jews. Need I say more?



But do not give up on Israel it is likely the most resilient society in the world, it's one of the most vibrant, energetic and beautiful countries and believe me – we shall overcome!