

Saving the Israeli Oasis

by

Dan Ben-David

In the south, mayhem in Egypt reigns – protests, riots, murder and rampant gang rapes. Sinai is turning into a base for Islamic extremism, and what is occurring in Hamas-controlled Gaza speaks for itself. In the Northeast, fundamentalist Shiites are murdering and being murdered by fundamentalist Sunnis in a Syrian regime that is using chemical weapons against its own people. The fundamentalist clash is spilling into a Lebanon on the other side of our northern border, where thousands of missiles aimed at us are waiting. And in Jordan, the unrest is beginning to bubble.

“Around us, the storm is raging.” It has been many years since my parents’ generation sang the Palmach anthem during our War of Independence. It is possible that the winds may yet blow the current storms in our direction. But the times are different and today we have means to defend ourselves that our parents could only dream of – thus far.

While fundamentalist storms thunder all around our immediate neighborhood, one of the deepest recessions of the last half century is afflicting the wider area around us, from Greece, through Italy to Spain, with double digit rates of unemployment and a real catastrophe with regard to youth employment.

And here, in the center of the regional sizzle? A true oasis. Overflowing cafes, cloudless blue skies and an amazing sea. There are serious problems of poverty, income gaps and high prices. But nonetheless, low rates of unemployment, inflation and government debt together with relatively high economic growth in recent years have made Israel the envy of the Western world – not to mention the countries around us. Which of our neighbors would not sign up today for the tranquility and personal security that Israelis have? Which of the Mediterranean basin countries would not sign up for an economy like ours, not to mention Israeli-level universities, hospitals and hi tech? Take a moment to breathe deeply, to look beyond the criticism that we constantly level at ourselves, to comprehend the miracle that we have created here. With all of the discrimination and problems – and there are many – is there an Israeli citizen, Jew or Arab, that does not thank heavens that we live on this side of the border?

But our oasis is not guaranteed forever. Many Israelis have still not internalized that basic paradigms such as demography and national security have shifted. The Right and the Left still count how many Arabs and Jews live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, arguing whether or not there are enough Jews to maintain a Jewish and democratic country. While these two sides argue, their entire debate has long since become academic since this is not the real question.

Long before the extreme Right goes ahead and adds millions of Palestinian Arabs to the country’s population, it would be worthwhile to consider that even without them, at least half of Israel’s children already today – Arab-Israelis and Ultra-Orthodox Jews constituting 28% and 20%, respectively, of the children enrolled in the country’s primary schools – receive an education at a level that is below that in many Third World countries.

Everyone enjoys the fruits of the oasis. But who will preserve it in the next generation after we pass the demographic-democratic point of no return – even without the Palestinian Arabs? Who will have the tools to maintain and foster a First-World economy that can ensure our ability to continue defending this oasis? Cutting-edge knowledge still exists in Israel, the country is still attracting investments from abroad and it is still possible to find a majority in the Knesset to make the tough decisions that are needed to change course. We just need the political leadership and wherewithal to do so.