


Thinking the Worst: An Inglorious Survival Posture for Israel

by Louis René Beres (December 2015)

Sometimes, especially in humankind's most urgent matters of life and death,  truth may emerge through paradox. In this connection, one may usefully recall the illuminating work of Jorge Luis Borges. In one of his most ingenious parables, the often mystical Argentine writer, who once wished openly that he had been born a Jew, examines the bewildering calculations of a condemned man.

Approaching desperation, this unfortunate soul, upon suddenly remembering that expectations rarely coincide with reality, intentionally imagines and re-imagines the circumstances of his own impending death. By completing this process, the doomed prisoner's final reasoning quickly becomes quite simple. Because these circumstances have already become expectations, he calculates, death (at least for the present) will have to find someone else. For now, at least, his own mortality can be gratefully pushed aside. By thinking the worst, he will actually be saved.

With this complex lesson, Borges illustrates, by deploying both indirection and inference, the unanticipated benefits of deliberately "negative" thought. Oddly, perhaps, but not incorrectly, he leads us to understand, in certain life-threatening contexts, that actively imagining worst-case outcomes can be life-extending. Although starkly counter-intuitive, such easily discarded forms of understanding can still have unanticipated strategic benefits.

Understandably, in the Middle East today, Israel – arguably, the ill-fated individual Jew writ large – refuses to typify the enthusiastically trembling character of Borges. To be sure, especially as it now faces the latest onslaught of barbarous Palestinian terror, Israel should not assume (1) a deliberately unheroic or fearful posture in world politics; or (2) that it has already been "condemned to death." But there is more.

Israel does face genuine existential perils. These perils are not "merely" the

readily visible threat from a steadily nuclearizing Iran, and/or the dangers from expanding terrorism. They are also the result of distinctly tangible interactions, or synergies, between several seemingly separate dangers. More precisely, considered in more narrowly military parlance, and over time, the combined effect of escalating rocket attacks from Gaza or Lebanon, and Iranian nuclearization, could create a negative "force multiplier." Left unimpeded, Israel's resultant "cascade of synergies" (that is, its utterly core vulnerabilities) could then bring the Jewish State face-to-face with potentially unprecedented harms. Soon, this portent could become even more ominous in the midst of steadily growing regional and global chaos, including what assorted Palestinian murderers and their supporters now crudely attempt to sanitize as a "Third Intifada."

Under authoritative international law, the deliberate killing and wounding of noncombatants is never "freedom fighting." Never. In pertinent law, this behavior is incontestably murder. Nothing more.

For nation-states, as for individuals, fear and reality can go together naturally. With such an apparently odd fusion in "mind," Israel should soon begin to imagine itself, assertively, but also as the ingathered post-Holocaust Jewish community, as entirely mortal – as mortal, in essence, as any individual human being. Then, and perhaps only then, Israel's leaders could more effectively implement the specific political and military policies needed to effectively secure their beleaguered state from further terrorist escalations, and, ultimately, from prospectively irreversible capitulations.

At first, this cheerless advice may resonate as very strange counsel. After all, one would normally insist, death fear, by definition, any death fear, is corrosive and even cowardly. Why, then, should Israel embrace cowering weakness as a deliberate national policy?

There is a good answer, but it will require an antecedent willingness to think seriously. Sometimes, truth may emerge through irony and paradox. Plainly, no sane analyst would ever suggest any encouragement of Israeli weakness or cowardice as policy.

Still, certain reassuring intimations of a collective immortality, that is, hints routinely encouraged by a fawning policy architecture of contrived hopes

and false dawns, could unwittingly discourage Israel from taking needed steps toward a durable safety. On the other hand, admitting that the state, just like the many discrete individuals who comprise it, could actually disappear, might set the stage for a more disciplined and possibly indispensable sort of national strategic thinking.

In world politics, certain national expectations are pretty much universal. As with most of its enemies, Israel conveniently imagines for itself, a national life everlasting. And why not? After all, unlike the country's many lascivious foes, both external and internal, Israel does not see its path toward immortality, either individual or collective, via the "sacred" murder of "unbelievers." Instead of war and terror, which still remain the unambiguously preferred Arab/Islamic way of interacting with despised "others," Jerusalem sees Jewish country survival as the end product of several vital and more-or-less overlapping factors. These factors include (but here, in no particular order of preference), divine protection; well-reasoned diplomatic settlements; and/or prudent military planning.

Singly or collectively, there is nothing inherently wrong with harboring a collective faith in such particular sources of national and personal safety. Still, even this faith ought never be allowed to displace a prior and primary awareness of conceivable national impermanence. Like Borges' condemned man, Israel, going forward, would do better to recall the potentially considerable benefits of "imagining the worst." In the absence of such a painful and difficult recollection, Israeli strategic planners could easily overlook certain distinctly vital and irreplaceable requirements of national survival.

In every recognizable way, Israel remains different from its multiple adversaries. An evident asymmetry of purpose may place the Jewish State at a moral and legal advantage, but also, at the same time, at a detectable strategic disadvantage. While Israel's enemies, especially Iran, manifest some of their own "positive" hopes for immortality by openly contemplating the mass slaughter of Jews (religiously, the Jihadi nexus between these positive hopes, and ritualistic slaughter, is often codified, fixed, and compelling, for both Sunni and Shia elements), Israel's leaders display their own country's hopes for survival with periodical acquiescence to conspicuously relentless foes. These regrettable forms of futile surrender include the incremental and unreciprocated desertion of vital lands, and the too-frequent release of jailed Arab

terrorists, also in equally unreciprocated gestures of Israeli “good will.”

In the end, Israel’s search for “good will” will prove to have been a distressingly vain, indecent, and too-costly display of largesse. Israel, after all, a country smaller than America’s Lake Michigan, remains the only state in world politics that is expressly singled out for theologically and doctrinally-based slaughter. Moreover, this existential predicament, undiminished by jurisprudential expectations of the 1948 Genocide Convention, is not likely to change anytime soon. Consider, in this regard, that U.S. President Barack Obama went ahead with the recent Vienna Pact on Iran, despite that Agreement’s express violation of both the 1968 Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and the Genocide Convention.

There is a very important and corollary question to raise at this point. Israelis must finally inquire, after a notably brief and evidently fragile interlude of statehood: Shall a tragic Jewish wandering begin all over again? It is a terrible, but also unavoidable, query.

However unwittingly, by stubbornly denying its own collective mortality, Israel may effectively prepare to hand its sworn enemies master keys to the Promised Land.

Exeunt Omnes?

This cannot be allowed to happen. For Israel, part of the blame for past error must lie with its long-term and unquestioned acceptance of the sterile American security paradigm. Significantly, in spite of its persistent permutations, mutations, and still-ongoing re-configurations, the easily captivating American ethos of “positive thinking” has generally been flush with suffocating strategic error. By finally rejecting such a long-patronizing ethos, and by being spurred on, instead, by newly encouraged imaginations of national disaster, the People of Israel could begin to move toward a far more thoughtful and secure defense posture.

The alternative, that is, to proceed with a deceptively “positive” collective ethos, could prove much more injurious. Philosophically, of course, such continuance could also make a mockery of Borges’ deducible literary insights, and his most deeply hidden truths. Nonetheless, Israel ought not to be concerned with incurring any purely philosophical costs, and, to be sure, its leaders

would never have any such apprehensions.

In the end, the plainly counter-intuitive argument for cultivated imaginations of disaster is not a plea for Israeli pessimism as such, but rather a purposefully “last call” for facing up to worst-case survival scenarios. Because such an ironic courage could represent the “hopeful” start of a more promisingly gainful national security posture for Israel, it ought never be dismissed out of hand. Not by any means.

L'chaim! (“To life”)

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