

Making Decisions in Israel

by Michael Curtis



On Monday March 6, 2017 President Donald Trump signed a revised executive order suspending his refugee program and entry into the U.S. from six countries. This suspension of entries for 120 days was explained as eliminating vulnerabilities that radical Islamic terrorists can and will exploit.

By coincidence on the same day, the Israeli Knesset by vote of 46 to 28 passed a bill allowing the government to refuse visas and entry to those who publicly call for or participate in boycotts, economic, cultural, or academic, of Israel or Israeli settlements. In similar fashion to the fear in the U.S. of terrorism, the government of Israel sees proposed boycotts as both a strategic threat and as expression of antisemitism. Interestingly, the actions in Israel and the U.S. took place on the anniversary of the terrorist attack in 1992 in Buenos Aires.

It is no accident that the U.S. and Israel are confronted by

similar issues, the international problems of Islamic terrorism, Iran and Syria, but also with internal problems such as the difficulty of and flaws in decision making, intense factional disputes, and the increasing number of leaks of security matters from official sources.

It is the beginning of political wisdom that leaders of sovereign countries must set policy in accordance with what they believe is beneficial for their nation. The Israeli fear is that the proponents of BDS, wanting to enter Israel, are not tourists but rather prone to incite trouble and act against the security of Israel. The BDS movement is the new front in the war against Israel and its right to exist.

In the U.S. the problem is one of potential terrorism. In Israel the problem is more complex. Two issues arise. One is the ongoing difficult one, political and moral, the degree to which a democratic government such as Israel's should tolerate non-violent political protest and dissent, and not discriminate against proponents of BDS? The other, political and tactical, is whether Israeli governmental actions should apply, as the new law states, to the disputed territories in the same way as to the area within the "Green Line."

Yet, the new law and Israeli policy in general, does not suggest "annexation" of the disputed areas. In spite of some political figures such as Tzipi Hotovely, the feminist ideological voice of Likud, believer in the Greater Israel, and deputy foreign minister, the official position regarding the 2.7 million Palestinians in the West Bank is separation, not absorption.

For Israel the problems are even more complicated because of political and military difficulties, especially in decision making on national security issues, as official reports, such as the one issued on February 28, 2017 by State Controller Joseph Shapira on the 2014 war in the Gaza, have indicated.

The context is all important. Israel is a highly developed country in spite of a lack of natural resources, surrounded by hostile peoples and countries. It has welcomed thousands of people from all over the world, embracing a long lost language and a national culture, built a strong military and nuclear capacity, developed a flourishing agriculture and advanced technology. The standard of living for its growing population, now 8.5 million including 1.5 million Arabs, has a GDP per capita of \$35,000, strong financial reserves, low inflation and unemployment of 4.5%. If there is anything akin to a melting pot it is the military, the IDF.

It has overcome the assaults of Arab armies, and lived with the general refusal, except by Egypt and Jordan, to recognize its existence and legitimacy. Though Israel the one democratic isle of stability in the Middle East it is faced by hostile forces, Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, eager to establish hegemony in the area. The threat from Iran is ominous for the U.S. as well as for Israel because of its increasingly aggressive behavior. In March 2017 it tested Russian made S-300 anti-missiles that hit their target: this advanced system can protect any attack on uranium facilities tending to develop nuclear facilities.

But Israel has not been able to overcome the acerbic political differences in the country. Every government since its creation has been a coalition one. In the current political setting of over 20 active parties, the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after bargaining to create a government with his own Likud Yisrael Beiteinu, and Hatnua, Yesh Atid, and Habayit Hayehudi, finished with a coalition and a majority of one.

It is not true, as it once was in British politics that "one" is enough. Israeli society is fractionized: left-right; Oriental-European; native-immigrant; center-periphery; laic 38%, National -religious 15%, Orthodox 25%; Arabs 25%, each with own identity and culture, educational system; newspapers, social network, and electoral weight. In the absence of a

single dominant party, every government has been a coalition.

As a consequence, political decision making is not easy, especially on the question of the desirability of settlements and whether they are an obstacle to peace. The problem has been compounded in recent years by an increasingly turbulent public political debate, with the Knesset becoming a spectacle.

Yet, Israel, even with its strong conflicting views on the destiny of the disputed territories is still a democratic country. It has no dominant ideology, one party system, or a political party capable of organizing masses against the established system, or integral nationalism, or cult of leader. Nor is it a police state police ignoring the rule of law. Nor has it been, in spite of existing differences, an oppressive control of Palestinians. Israeli policy since 1967 has not been based on conquest or deliberate imperialism, but on the need for security. It is nationalist, not fascist.

The basic problem is difficulty in decision making in political and military affairs. This has come to stark light in analyses of the Gaza Strip War, *Operation Protective Edge* in which 74 Israelis were killed. The Shapira Report of February 2017 indicates this in bald fashion. It points out Israel's lack of preparedness in realizing the threat of tunnels built by Hamas. It also deals with the issue that little or no attention was given to diplomatic and non-military solutions to the Gaza question.

Decision making on matters of national security has been flawed not only in the Gaza War but also because of the increased role of the defense establishment and the relative weakness of civilian institutions.

The security cabinet after March 2013 held no discussions about conditions in the Gaza Strip. The prime minister was not able to disclose everything to his cabinet. He mostly related

to a "kitchen cabinet" because of a fear of leaks in a cabinet largely composed of political rivals in the multi-party coalition. There was a governmental failure to present options, to the cabinet, and there was no real discussion over what to do in the security cabinet. The severity of the threat, from the Hamas tunnels was not adequately known, and there was no real discussions over them. There was inadequate appreciation that in the circumstances no complete victory was possible.

Israel must solve this serious governmental problem. President Trump cannot do anything about decision making in Israel but his policy in the Middle East must take into account that the terrorist Hamas is relentlessly engaged in killing Israelis. At the moment Hamas is building 15 new tunnels under the Gaza border with Israel. In March 2017 Hamas chose Yahya Sinwar, a hard liner as its new leader. With Hamas on the warpath, and Iran wanting a base in Syria, eager to fight Israel on the Golan Heights, and preparing to gain a foothold in Middle Eastern affairs, an entente cordial between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu is essential.