

MAZELTOV ISRAEL

All countries have imperfect records, both historically and in contemporary times. All at some point have been engaged in internal and external conflict and encountered enmity and violence. The State of Israel is no different in this respect, and has been the subject of continual hostility by some countries, and hostile groups, that refuse to recognize its existence and legitimacy.

It is therefore all the more important, at this moment commemorating the 68th anniversary of the creation of Israel, to acknowledge the extraordinary story and achievements of the miracle in the desert. In a Middle East, all too replete with failed states, dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, civil wars, terrorist groups, and intra-Muslim religious conflicts, Israel is the only democratic nation in the Middle East and the only economically developed and modernized one.

This often comes as a surprise since Israel is a small country, 8,500 square miles, almost the exact size of the great state of New Jersey, and in which 60 per cent of the land mass is the Negev desert. The width of the country can be crossed, if there is no traffic jam, in 90 minutes.

Equally surprising, Israel is one of the relatively small number of countries in the world with a flourishing multi party parliamentary system expressing almost all political points of view, universal suffrage, a free press and media, an independent judiciary often critical of the government, autonomous independent great universities and research centers, and numerous human rights groups.

Israel society is vibrant, diverse and productive. First, it should be universally acknowledged that though the State of Israel is relatively new, the relationship of the Jewish people to the land goes back at least 3,000 years. King David

established Jerusalem, which has been the site of two Jewish Temples, as the capital of Israel. This history belies the spin of the fallacious Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood, embraced by haters of Israel, that Jews are foreign occupiers or colonialists in the land native to their ancestors.

Indeed, the Israeli system has incorporated non-Jews. Unlike its neighboring countries, Israel has freedom of worship for all religious groups. Of the 8.4 million population, 75 per cent are Jews, 20 per cent are Arabs, mostly Sunni Muslims, and there are ten other minority religions. Christians constitute 2 per cent of the population, and are more religious than Israeli Jews.

The population is pluralistic and diverse, with variations of religious affiliations and political views, and with ethnic, cultural, color, and linguistic differences. The various aspects of diversity can be illustrated by a few examples. A Jewish Ethiopian became Miss Israel in 2013. Arabic is an official language. About half the lawyers in Israel are women.

The return of Jews to the area, whether described as the Holy Land, Palestine, or Israel, has led to transformation of barren land, planting of forests, irrigation of the soil, building of urban areas, and to economic development. OECD now rates Israel as the 35th largest economy in the world. In 2015 its GDP per capita was \$35,000.

In spite of international pressure and the bigoted BDS campaign spearheaded by Palestinian activists, Israel has not been isolated internationally. Israel is part of the global world, economically, technologically, and militarily. For a country of its size and population Israel has the most impressive record of technological initiatives as well being on the cutting edge of research in science, medicine, and agricultural innovations. For example, India has become a major purchaser of Israel's defense systems. China is investing in Israeli companies, especially start up companies.

Israel's credit ratings are high.

A recent example of the military integration is the decision of NATO on May 3, 2016. It upgraded relations with Israel, and invited Israel to establish a permanent mission in its headquarters at Brussels, thus joining together in the fight against terrorism, in intelligence gathering and in cyber technology development.

Today, Israel has the largest number of start up companies per capita, and the third largest for venture capital investments. The BDS bigots, in their animosity towards Israel and possible antisemitism, in their determination to boycott relations with Israel research units, are ignorant of the fact that it was the Israeli employees at Motorola in Israel who developed the original cell phone technology.

The country is a treasure for cultural connoisseurs and gourmets. After Tokyo and New York City, it has the largest number of sushi restaurants in a city, that of Tel Aviv, which is now also regarded as the gay capital of the world.

Interestingly, Starbucks failed in Israel that has what it regards as better local coffee. The country has pride not only in the large number of Nobel Prize winners, orchestras, museums, theaters, and dance groups, but also in its wineries, especially those in the Golan Heights. It has international superstars in Hip Hop, and in the Eurovision Song Contest.

It is a tragedy that the Arab countries, except Egypt and Jordan, surrounding Israel and the Palestinian neighbors have refused to recognize the benefits they would gain from cooperating with Israel, and reaching a peaceful resolution of existing differences. Instead, they have been counterproductive and reactionaries.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence states, "we extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness." Unfortunately, this

sentiment has not been reciprocated. Israel has survived the wars thrust upon it by hostile neighbors, but those wars did not lead to a Palestinian interest in peaceful negotiation of the difficult issues dividing the two sides, and need to be resolved. Many in the "international community" have focused on the Palestinian claims and proposed one sided resolutions concerning them. They fail to appreciate that at present there is no Palestinian partner with whom Israel can reach a peace agreement, a settlement that appeared possible in the Oslo accords of 1993, and the Israeli peace offers in 2000 and 2007.

Even well-meaning do-gooders have underestimated the extraordinary success of Israel and the value of Israeli contributions to the Middle East as well as to Western culture. They have often underestimated the Israeli need for secure and defensible borders to survive in a rough neighborhood is paramount. Almost 250 years ago the French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau told the Poles who were threatened by outside powers, "You are likely to be swallowed whole, hence you must take care to ensure you are not digested." Israel is acutely aware of the continuing threats to swallow it whole, but the international community needs to be continually reminded of it.