

The Fragile Nature of the Israeli Society

This lecture series was inspired by my spending a year in Israel with my wife of 50 years as “foreign students” at Tel-Aviv University. Having been born and educated in Israel, a member of the first hi-tech generation, living in Canada for 42 years and returning for a year as a regular undergraduate student of IR sure makes for a unique perspective on life in Israel and of the Israeli society of today.

Mind you I admittedly had a privileged life style while in Israel. Living in a 300 Square foot apartment in the heart of Tel-Aviv and taking the bus to the University campus every morning and evening and travelling to the most fascinating destinations on weekends is not representative of “true” life in Israel. But it provides for an excellent and unique vantage point to observe Israelis young and old do their thing. That is what I did and that is what I plan to share with you in this lecture series.

This and future lectures are not designed to endorse, promote, criticize or defend but rather to INFORM. To allow you to understand so when you form or reinforce your attitudes towards Israel or when you read the media (which invariably shapes your opinion) you will hopefully be able to UNDERSTAND why things are the way they are in Israel.

The first Lecture in this series is titled “The fragile nature of the Israeli society” and indeed this is my most significant impression from my recent Israeli experience – So let’s begin.

I am still under the influence of his powerful message. In fact I consider it to be the most, sane, reasonable and honest account as to what plagues Israel today more than any other issue - the nature of civil society in Israel today and more specifically the deep divide and recently outright confrontation between the Orthodox and the Secular communities. I agree with Lapid when he says that this more than any other issue represents a clear and present danger to the Israeli society and for that matter the very existence of the state itself as a Jewish democratic nation.

Bit by bit though, overtime a number of “tribes” started to gather around this mainstream. The Ashkenazi Orthodox tribe and the Sephardic Orthodox tribe and the National Religious tribe and during the 50s there arrived the North African immigrants who became the “Periphery” tribe. In the 90s there arrived the Russian tribe followed by the Ethiopian tribe and each of these tribes had their own needs and demanded them of the mainstream. Some of them had religious demands others had political demands like the Nationalist Religious party that started the Settlement movement after the 1967 War, and of course economical demands by the Russian, Periphery and Ethiopian tribes. Together they took a bite out of the mainstream. Bit by bit all these tribes “infiltrated” the power base of the mainstream, first through the IDF then Academia, then Business and when the mainstream of Israel’s society attempted to protect its own interests, as every group is expected to do, you said: “you oppress us , you deprive us of our rights and we are not going to take it anymore” – and you were right because the mainstream did indeed do all of this.

The mainstream was no longer in the majority. By the end of the 70s there were more Sephardic Jews living in Israel than Ashkenazi. Since the 80s there are more people who define themselves as traditional or religious rather than seculars. Jerusalem is now a bigger city than Tel-Aviv. Yet the Right Conservative (Capitalistic) parties ruled Israel on and off since 1977 (for 34 out of the last 40 years). A poll taken in 1964 showed 56% of Israelis believed that the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is thus clear

that the balance of power between the mainstream and the “tribes” has been altered. The mainstream is no longer in the majority. Not numerically, not politically, not economically, not ideologically.

From now on I will also become a tribe and so it became a tribe. If you have to label this new tribe, name it the Middle Class tribe. The new tribe said to itself: “I don’t need the country to do business in a global market, I can go to Cyprus to get a civil marriage certificate and I am not going to try to defend democracy anymore. The other tribes are not or do not behave in a democratic way, so I am sick and tired of having one child in Bnei-Brak (Orthodox town) and one child in Um el Fachem (Israeli-Arab town) that I never met yet my tax dollars are financing them, and I am sick and tired of hearing that all this time all I did was oppressed you. If that is what I have been doing try to do it without me. I am going to do what everyone else is doing – look after myself.

Fundamental core values on which I was brought up such as tolerance, inclusiveness, free speech, open society and love of country that as mentioned me and my children insisted on instilling in my grandchildren for the ages. Where are they and what happened to them? I fail to believe that you can have a restful sleep at night without breaking into cold sweat in the face of the atrocious treatment of women in Israel, the return to extremism and fundamentalism within the Orthodox sector, the social injustice in the Israeli society and as of yesterday the most shocking of all violations the desecrations of the most sacred of Israeli institutions – the IDF. A heinous crime perpetrated by a criminal anti – Israeli mob with this term of endearment “The Youth of the Hills” or in Hebrew: “Noar Hagvaot”.

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 of 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.

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 decent, 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

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?