

"Chronicle of a Suicide Foretold: The Case of Israel"

The state of Israel proclaimed its independence at midnight on May 15, 1948. The United Nations had voted to establish two states in what had been Palestine under British rule. The city of Jerusalem was supposed to be an international zone under U.N. jurisdiction. The U.N. resolution had wide support, and specifically that of the United States and the Soviet Union. The Arab states all voted against it.

In the sixty years of its existence, the state of Israel has depended for its survival and expansion on an overall strategy that combined three elements: macho militarism, geopolitical alliances, and public relations. The macho militarism (what current Prime Minister Ehud Olmert calls the "iron fist") was made possible by the nationalist fervor of Jewish Israelis, and eventually (although not initially) by the very strong support of Jewish communities elsewhere in the world.

Geopolitically, Israel first forged an alliance with the Soviet Union (which was brief but crucial), then with France (which lasted a longer time and allowed Israel to become a nuclear power), and finally (and most importantly) with the United States. These allies, who were also patrons, offered most importantly military support through the provision of weapons. But they also offered diplomatic/political support, and in the case of the United States considerable economic support.

The public relations was aimed at obtaining sympathetic support from a wide swath of world public opinion, based in the early years on a portrait of Israel as a pioneering David against a retrograde Goliath, and in the last forty years on guilt and compassion over the massive Nazi extermination of European Jewry during the Second World War.

All these elements of Israeli strategy worked well from 1948 to the 1980s. Indeed, they were increasingly more effective. But somewhere in the 1980s, the use of each of the three tactics began to be counterproductive. Israel has now entered into a phase of the precipitate decline of its strategy. It may be too late for Israel to pursue any alternative strategy, in which case it will have committed geopolitical suicide. Let us trace how the three elements in the strategy interacted, first during the successful upward swing, then during the slow decline of Israel's power.

For the first twenty-five years of its existence, Israel engaged in four wars with Arab states. The first was the 1948-1949 war to establish the Jewish state. The Israeli declaration of an independent state was not matched by a Palestinian declaration to establish a state. Rather, a number of Arab governments declared war on Israel. Israel was initially in military difficulty. However, the Israeli military were far better trained than those of the Arab countries, with the exception of Transjordan. And, crucially, they obtained arms from Czechoslovakia, acting as the agent of the Soviet Union.

By the time of the truce in 1949, the discipline of the Israeli forces combined with the Czech arms enabled the Israelis to win considerable territory not included in the partition proposals of the United Nations, including west Jerusalem. The other areas were incorporated by the surrounding Arab states. A large number of Palestinian Arabs left or were forced to leave areas under the control of the Israelis and became refugees in neighboring Arab countries, where their descendants still largely live today. The land they had owned was taken by Jewish

Israelis.

The Soviet Union soon dropped Israel. This was probably primarily because its leaders quickly became afraid of the impact of the creation of the state on the attitudes of Soviet Jewry, who seemed overly enthusiastic and hence potentially subversive from Stalin's point of view. Israel in turn dropped any sympathy for the socialist camp in the Cold War, and made clear its fervent desire to be considered a full-fledged member of the Western world, politically and culturally.

France at this time was faced with national liberation movements in its three North African colonies, and saw in Israel a useful ally. This was especially true after the Algerians launched their war of independence in 1954. France began to help Israel arm itself. In particular, France, which was developing its own nuclear weapons (against U.S. wishes), helped Israel do the same. In 1956, Israel joined France and Great Britain in a war against Egypt. Unfortunately for Israel, this war was launched against U.S. opposition, and the United States forced all three powers to end it.

After Algeria became independent in 1962, France lost interest in the Israeli connection, which now interfered with its attempts to renew closer relations with the three now independent North African states. It was at this point that the United States and Israel turned to each other to forge close links. In 1967, war broke out again between Egypt and Israel, and other Arab states joined Egypt. In this so-called Six Day War, the United States for the first time gave military weapons to Israel.

The 1967 Israeli victory changed the basic situation in many respects. Israel had won the war handily, occupying all those parts of the British mandate of Palestine that it had occupied before, plus Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Syria's Golan Heights. Juridically, there was now a state of Israel plus Israel's occupied territories. Israel began a policy of establishing

Jewish settlements in the occupied territories.

The Israeli victory transformed the attitude of world Jewry, which now overcame whatever reservations it had had about the creation of the state of Israel. They took great pride in its accomplishments and began to undertake major political campaigns in the United States and western Europe to secure political support for Israel. The image of a pioneering Israel with emphasis on the virtues of the kibbutz was abandoned in favor of an emphasis on the Holocaust as the basic justification for world support of Israel.

In 1973, the Arab states sought to redress the military situation in the so-called Yom Kippur war. This time again, Israel won the war, with U.S. arms support. The 1973 war marked the end of the central role of the Arab states. Israel could continue to try to get recognition from Arab states, and it did succeed eventually with both Egypt and Jordan, but it was now too late for this to be a way to secure Israel's existence.

As of this point, there emerged a serious Palestinian Arab political movement, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was now the key opponent of Israel, the one with whom Israel needed to come to terms. For a long time, Israel refused to deal with the PLO and its leader Yasser Arafat, preferring the iron fist. And at first, it was militarily successful.

The limits of the iron fist policy were made evident by the first *intifada*, a spontaneous

uprising of Palestinian Arabs inside the occupied territories, which began in 1987 and lasted six years. The basic achievement of the *intifada* was twofold. It forced the Israelis and the United States to talk to the PLO, a long process that led to the so-called Oslo Accords of 1993, which provided for the creation of the Palestinian Authority in part of the occupied territories.

The Oslo Accords in the long run were geopolitically less important than the impact of the *intifada* on world public opinion. For the first time, the David-Goliath image began to be inverted. For the first time, there began to be serious support in the Western world for the so-called two-state solution. For the first time, there began to be serious criticism of Israel's iron fist and its practices vis-à-vis the Arab Palestinians. Had Israel been serious about a two-state solution based on the so-called Green Line - the line of division at the end of the 1948-1949 war - it probably would have achieved a settlement.

Israel however was always one step behind. When it could have negotiated with Nasser, it wouldn't. When it could have negotiated with Arafat, it wouldn't. When Arafat died and was succeeded by the ineffectual Mahmoud Abbas, the more militant Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006. Israel refused to talk to Hamas.

Now, Israel has invaded Gaza, seeking to destroy Hamas. If it succeeds, what organization will come next? If, as is more probable, it fails to destroy Hamas, is a two-state solution now possible? Both Palestinian and world public opinion is moving towards the one-state solution. And this is of course the end of the Zionist project.

The three-element strategy of Israel is decomposing. The iron fist no longer succeeds, much as it didn't for George Bush in Iraq. Will the United States link remain firm? I doubt it. And will world public opinion continue to look sympathetically on Israel? It seems not. Can Israel now switch to an alternative strategy, of negotiating with the militant representatives of the Arab Palestinians, as an integral constituent of the Middle East, and not as an outpost of Europe? It seems quite late for that, quite possibly too late. Hence, the chronicle of a suicide foretold.

by Immanuel Wallerstein