Does Israel Have a Future? A Consideration of Threats to Israel’s Existence

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Israel is one of the only countries whose very existence is routinely called into question. Some of the threats it faces are “hard” in that they would bring about the physical destruction of the state. Conquest by its Arab neighbors or an Iranian nuclear strike fall into this category. Other threats are “soft” meaning that they would end Israel’s existence as a Jewish democracy without the destruction of the state or its population. These threats include the replacing of Israeli democracy with a theocracy or exchanging Israel’s Jewish identity for a binational state. Whatever the danger, it is clear that Israel’s future, unlike virtually any other state, cannot be taken for granted.

Regarding “hard” threats, the news for Israel is mixed. On the one hand, conquest in conventional war by its Arab neighbors and Iran is all but impossible. Israel is stronger than any combination of its real and potential foes. Moreover, Israel has nuclear weapons, which provide it with a “life insurance policy,” so that its adversaries know they cannot destroy Israel without bringing about their own destruction. On the other hand, the threat of nuclear annihilation cannot be discounted. Iran is close to having a nuclear weapons capability and other Middle Eastern states (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt) may follow. Especially given its small size and concentrated population, only a handful of nuclear weapons would suffice to destroy Israel.
Threats to Israel’s existence that do not involve military force are even more pressing. It is noteworthy that almost all the countries that perished in modern times have done so not as a result of forcible conquest, but peaceful transformation (think of the Soviet Union, East Germany, Czechoslovakia). So too might it be with Israel. On the left, it is asserted that Israel is not a true liberal democracy so long as it privileges one group over all others. The Law of Return, celebration of Jewish holidays, the restriction of military service to Jews (with few exceptions) are just some examples of the priority given to Israel’s Jewish citizens. The solution offered by some as a binational state holds out the hope of creating a true liberal democracy in Israel, but only at the cost of its Jewish identity.

Threats from the right in Israel are even more pressing. The combination of religious Jews and the settler movement are increasingly pushing Israel in a theocratic direction. The ultra-Orthodox already make up ten percent of the population, a share that will only grow in time. Settlements continue to proliferate on the West Bank, many beyond the security barrier. Neither group is known for its adherence to democratic principles. A related problem concerns Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, where some 400,000 Jewish Israelis already live. If the West Bank is formally annexed, Israel will have now or will soon have a majority Arab population in a Jewish state. It would then be put in a position of choosing whether to give the Arabs the right to vote thus ending its Jewish status, or denying them this basic right, thus ending its democratic status. Either way, Israel as Jewish democracy would be finished.
A final set of threats come from the efforts of the international community to delegitimize Israel. Some of these efforts come from international organizations such as the United Nations where fully three quarters of General Assembly resolutions that criticize a country, condemn Israel. The growing influence of the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) movement aims to isolate and punish Israel and, according to some, seeks its eventual elimination. NGO’s such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International routinely hold Israel to a standard that is not applied to other states. Delegitimization efforts have also been mounted in the United States where college campuses are especially vociferous in their criticism of Israel. Bipartisan support of Israel by America, which used to be taken as a given is no longer so. One poll showed that while 80% of Republicans back Israel, only 23% of Democrats do. While delegitimization efforts in themselves will not destroy Israel, they create an atmosphere in which talk may lead to action, ultimately calling Israel’s fate into question.

In sum, the future of Israel as a Jewish democracy is uncertain. My talk will go over each of these threats, link them with lessons from the deaths of Ancient Israel and modern state death, and then propose what Israel, the United States and the world community should do to address them.