

Giving Israel Its Due

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By any reasonable measure, Israel faces daunting challenges. Not least is explaining to an often hostile world the country's remarkable achievements and enduring promise.

The challenges can seem overwhelming. Under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiated by the Obama administration last year, Iran—which has pledged to destroy the Jewish state, and continues to develop its ballistic missile program and support jihadism throughout the Middle East—is on course to acquire a nuclear weapon in the next decade, or sooner, if it brazenly defies its international obligations, as it has in the past.

The Arab states that surround Israel are roiled by poverty, sectarianism, and, since the uprisings of 2011, religious war pitting Sunni Islamists against Iran-backed Shiite Islamists. Both Sunni and Shiite Islamists wage war, also, against Arab liberals, democrats, and secularists, as well as against Israel.

Between Shiite Islamist Hezbollah headquartered in southern Lebanon on its northern border and Sunni Islamist Hamas operating out of the Gaza Strip to the immediate southwest, 150,000 rockets and missiles imperil Israel. All of Israel's major populations centers are within range of Hezbollah's missiles.

Now in its second decade, the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, which obscenely depicts Israel as a racist and apartheid state, has made considerable inroads in European diplomatic circles and on American campuses.

On the domestic front, Israel confronts a number of urgent tasks. Jerusalem must reform the nation's political system—especially a parliament that is perennially hostage to small parochial parties—to improve accountability, transparency, and efficiency. A not insignificant portion of the population lives in poverty and must be provided with greater opportunity. Israel must better incorporate its minority of Arab citizens in the country's everyday life. And it must undertake aggressive measures to encourage its minority of ultra-Orthodox Jews to shoulder more of the burdens of maintaining liberal democracy in Israel.

Bridging foreign and domestic affairs, Israel needs to take bold and painful steps, consistent with its security requirements, to reduce its control over some 2.7 million Palestinians living in the West Bank. No doubt the approximately 400,000 Israelis living beyond the Green Line—which separated Israel from territories under Jordan's control from 1949 until the June 1967 Six Day War, when Israel, in defending itself, seized them from Jordan—complicate the picture. However, the fundamental impediment to the forging of the onerous mutual compromises necessary to the creation of a Palestinian state that is willing and able to live side by side with Israel remains the Palestinian Authority's refusal to accept Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state.

The daily reporting from the region makes matters worse by burying Israel's accomplishments under an avalanche of bad news, one-sided dispatches, and false accusations. Fair-minded accounts that present the Israeli side are hard to come by in the Western media.

In *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, Daniel Gordis, an American-born Israeli, gives Israel its due. Senior vice president and Koret distinguished fellow at Shalem College in Jerusalem, Gordis gracefully tells Israel's improbable tale. He traces the country's origins to the Jewish people's traditional religious longings to return to their ancient homeland and to the grim political necessities Jews faced in late-19th- and early-20th-century Europe. He chronicles Zionism's heroic building against all odds of a Jewish and democratic state. And he captures the clamorous freedom, cultural effervescence, and economic prosperity that mark Israel today.

Approaching its 69th birthday, Israel is, as Gordis writes, “a complex and dynamic place.” It is rich with sacred sites and provides a home for a variety of ultra-Orthodox Jews, who constitute about 15% of its Jewish population. At the same time, cafés, bars, and restaurants abound. It boasts a rich literary culture in an ancient language, Hebrew, that until a little more than a century ago was largely confined to sacred texts and worship. Music, theater, and dance thrive. And Israel has become a hub of high-tech expertise and innovation.

Israel's Jewish citizens, about 75% of approximately 8.5 million, come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds: "per capita Israel has absorbed more immigrants than any country in the world," states Gordis. Members of Israel's Arab minority, representing just over 20% of the country's citizenry, enjoy, like all citizens, full civil and political rights: they are lawyers and doctors, skilled laborers and professors, entrepreneurs and executives; they serve in the Knesset and in the judiciary; and one sits on Israel's Supreme Court.

A small country slightly larger than the state of New Jersey, Israel fields the strongest fighting force in the Middle East; sustains the most dynamic economy in the region; and is the only state in its neighborhood where Jews, Christians, and Muslims can speak freely and worship or not as they wish.

You would have to have been a dreamer or a visionary to imagine such possibilities in Zionism's early days. By the end of the 19th century, the Jewish people's deep-rooted sense that they had been living in exile since the Romans destroyed the Jewish state in 70 AD had greatly weakened among Europe's increasingly secular and assimilated Jews. Indeed, there was nothing backward-looking about the 37-year-old Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl, who in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland, convened the First Zionist Congress. Thoroughly modern and completely assimilated, Herzl was dismayed by the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. He summoned Jews to leave Europe behind geographically, gather together, and construct a state—he contemplated a variety of locations—informed by European notions of nationhood, freedom, and democracy.

Herzl's emphatically political Zionism launched a revolution that was also moral and spiritual, because the creation of a Jewish state depended on the cultivation of a "new Jew." Political Zionism sought to make Jews responsible for themselves by banishing religion. It strove to emancipate Jews from the dusty tomes and enfeebling traditions of their parents; to fashion Jews capable of draining swamps, making deserts bloom, erecting cities, and establishing political institutions; and to imbue Jews with the strength and courage to take up arms to defend their nation.

These "new Jews"—farmers and soldiers, philosophers and poets, truck drivers and plumbers, shop owners and labor union officials—overcame massive obstacles. When the first wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the land of Palestine in the late 19th century, it had been two millennia since Hebrew had functioned as a living language. As successive waves of Jewish immigration brought agriculture and commerce to Palestine, Arab residents grew hostile: the 1929 Arab riots in Palestine probably mark the beginning of the wars between Arabs and Jews over the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. In 1917 the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, which proclaimed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," but in the 1930s Britain imposed quotas on Jewish immigration. In the dark days of World War II—as Hitler ramped up the operation of Nazi gas chambers and crematoria—London closed the gates of Palestine to Jews.

On May 15, 1948, the British mandate in Palestine ended. On that day, the Jews of Palestine—who had been fending off attacks from local Arab militias since the United Nations voted in November 1947 to divide Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab State—declared its independence and five Arab armies invaded the new country with the intent of destroying it. One percent of the Jewish population of Israel died in the War of Independence, which concluded in 1949 with the signing of armistice agreements that yielded a state considerably larger and more defensible than outlined in the 1947 UN partition plan.

Since that astonishing victory, Israel has fought two major wars in which its very existence was at stake—the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. It has also conducted a number of lesser operations including the Sinai campaign of 1956, the War of Attrition over the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1970; the 1982 Operation Peace for the Galilee, or the first Lebanon War; and the Second Lebanon War in 2006. And over the last eight years, the Israel Defense Force has been compelled to enter the Gaza Strip three times to combat mortars, rockets, and missiles fired by Hamas in double violation of the international laws of war—Hamas both unlawfully targeted Israeli civilians and civilian infrastructure and unlawfully operated from within Palestinian civilian areas. Beyond the wars and military operations, the Israeli civilian population has, from the Fedayeen attacks of the 1950s to the suicide bombers and knife-wielding children of today, lived under constant threat of Palestinian terror.

Despite the hardships, the heartbreaks, and the never-finished work of domestic reform and national defense, Israel has not only prevailed but grown and prospered.

Both Israel's Arab sector and its ultra-Orthodox sector are undergoing a slow but steady "Israelization" driven by forces internal to each and by government policy. Arab-Israeli university students increasingly speak Hebrew without a detectable accent and polls show ordinary Arab citizens to be significantly more moderate and at home in Israel than Arab political leaders. Prime Minister Netanyahu released a short [video](#) in July in which he apologized for his crude remarks during the March 2015 election about Arabs "going to the polls in droves," and his current government has approved legislation to strengthen public safety in Arab communities, to build thousands of units of public housing in Arab towns and cities, and to equip the rising generation of Arab-Israelis to participate in the high-tech sector. Meanwhile the ultra-Orthodox have largely set aside Yiddish as their everyday tongue in favor of Hebrew; their young men are volunteering in greater numbers for the military; and a growing number of young ultra-Orthodox men and women are pursuing university study.

Over the last century, Jewish residents of Palestine and then Israeli citizens have planted over 250 million trees, and Israel has become a world leader in desalination and irrigation. A booming wine industry and large offshore gas fields contribute to the diversification of Israel's economy.

Israel has not only forged a mighty military but also a moral one. In 2015, Richard Kemp, a retired British army colonel who was part of “a group of 11 senior military officers from seven nations investigating” Israel’s conduct in its 2014 military operation in the Gaza Strip against Hamas, stated, “None of us is aware of any army that takes such extensive measures as did the IDF last summer to protect the lives of the civilian population.”

In addition, Israel has become an international leader in humanitarian aid. “Menachem Begin’s first act as Prime Minister in 1977,” writes Gordis, “was to instruct an Israeli vessel to save dozens of Vietnamese boat people floating hopelessly and without drinking water on the open seas, after ships from other countries had ignored them.” Today the Israeli NGO [IsraAid](#) helps people in crisis around the world, and has played a major role in providing care for Middle East refugees who have made the hazardous trip to Europe.

Israel is also home, writes Gordis, to a “spiritual renewal.” Rebelling against the Zionist rebellion against Jewish faith, a sizeable number of Israelis raised outside of the orthodox world—prominent among them former Knesset member Dr. Ruth Calderon—are seeking to recover the riches within the Jewish tradition without renouncing their devotion to modernity or their commitment to Jewish self-government.

Finally, Gordis reminds us, “Some one hundred countries have been created since World War II (mostly as a result of the collapse of empires), and Israel is one of the very few that began as a democracy and have continued to function as a democracy without interruption.”

Israel is the freest, most democratic, and most pluralistic country in the Middle East. Its ledger compares favorably to that of fellow liberal democracies around the world, few of which confront the perils that encircle the Jewish state. No small part of Israel’s task in fortifying freedom and democracy at home consists in more effectively telling its inspiring story.