
Jeane Kirkpatrick

On one of my more recent trips to Israel, I dined with a group of individuals primarily on the political Left, including some members of the Israeli foreign policy establishment. By the end of the evening, I had a clear sense of their vision of the destiny of international politics: They dreamt of a Middle East without boundaries. They did not seek a federal state in the Middle East, because federal states have borders. Instead, they adhered to the words of a song that was quite popular in Israel a couple of years ago which spoke of a world without borders. Perhaps more important, these people spoke of the end of Israel as an explicitly Jewish state.

Their vision of both the Middle East and Israel struck me as hopelessly naïve, if not anachronistic. As human beings, we exist in our particularities. What matters most to us, as Edmund Burke noted, are the “little platoons” in which we lead our lives—not a vague, abstract universalism “stripped,” in Burke’s words again, “of every relation,” standing “in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.” Nevertheless, the Israelis I dined with that evening, and many others on the Left, whom I have seen on other occasions, regard it as desirable and possible to eliminate, to the maximum extent feasible, Israel’s particular characteristics. They believe this can be done, moreover, at no cost to Israeli security.

An important distinction should be drawn between nationalism and national identity; there is a difference between opposing virulent nationalism and opposing national identities. Identifications are surely a defining characteristic of individuals and groups as well as nations. National identifications are among the most basic of identifications. We exist as Americans, French, Israelis, Jordanians—or else as people without a country, or a “homeland.”

Indeed, the notion that national identity is retrograde has been one of the persistent perspectives of the European Left, part of the historical legacy of the Marxists in our times. The Marxists looked forward to a time when nationalism would be submerged in the Brotherhood of Man. During World War I, Lenin and his contemporaries expected the workers of the world to refuse to fight for their countries, because they understood themselves as part of the international revolutionary movement. The revolutionaries were therefore shocked when workers in Germany, France and Britain reacted as Germans, French and Britons rather than as “workers of the world.”

The equation of nationalism with prejudice was widespread in Europe before Hitler, perhaps especially among Jews. In general, the assimilationists believed nationalism to be symptomatic of a less enlightened political culture. The assimilationist movement in Central Europe was so strong that a good many persons born of Jewish heritage were raised without a sense of

Jewish identity. Good friends of mine in college and professional mentors exemplified this view. The assimilationists viewed Jewish identity and nationalism as atavistic and unenlightened.

By confusing the difference between national identity and nationalism, the leftist non-nationalists came to associate national identity with prejudice, and bred a desire to eliminate both. This anti-national sentiment, shared by assimilationist Jews in Europe at the time, aided Nazism, the horror of which brought a new sense of religious solidarity to world Jewry.

As United States Ambassador to the United Nations, I saw no evidence that national identifications were growing weaker. Indeed, national sentiments often dominated debate at the UN. I had no sense there that the world was engaged in an irrevocable process of transcending or limiting identifications of nations, religion or culture. Simply put, my experience at the UN confirmed my belief that national identity is an irreducible fact of modern history and of our times.

What is most surprising about the Israelis whom I referred to earlier is that none of Israel's neighbors even remotely share their hopes or aspirations. Israel guarantees full civil and political rights to its Arab citizens. One need simply contrast these guarantees to Yasser Arafat's drive to make the area of the West Bank governed by the Palestinian Authority *Judenrein*. The Palestinian Authority demands that Jews leave the territories immediately; some even speak of driving the Jews out—not out of Israel, of course, since they do not use the word “Israel.” At the UN, I would hear ambassadors describe Israel as a Judeo-Christian dagger, a Crusader remnant, in the heart of Arab civilization. When employing such terms, it is clear that for them, “burning half the Jews in Palestine”—as Saddam Hussein put it before his invasion of Kuwait—means ridding the area of Western civilization. This anti-Israel, anti-Western intolerance is what spurred Islamic extremists to cut down Anwar Sadat.

In the face of such brutal intolerance, Israel remains the only pluralistic democracy in the Arab world. Approximately one million Arab citizens live in Israel today. Just a few weeks ago, Prime Minister Netanyahu reminded

me that in the last general election, the Jewish population, the Jewish electorate, voted overwhelmingly, over fifty-five percent, for Likud, while a full ninety-five percent of Arabs voted for Labor. It was probably the most marked difference between the Jewish electorate and the Arab electorate in the history of Israel, the sort of electoral expression which can only take place in a vibrant, pluralistic democracy.

Israeli pluralism is entirely consistent with the Anglo-American classical liberal tradition. The major liberal thinkers who have written about pluralism do not identify it with universalism. Pluralist democracy does not seek to engender the abstract universalism that Burke warned against, in which all individual identity is lost; rather, pluralist democracy encourages different groups to respect one another, while each maintains its identity. This, I believe, is what Golda Meir and David Ben-Gurion sought to affirm at the time of the founding of the State of Israel. They and other founders of the State of Israel did not express hostility toward Arab peoples and regions. Quite the contrary: They looked toward a new Israeli identity—not one built on the negation of Arab identity or requiring the extirpation of that identity.

Rather than falling prey to abstract universalism or a belief in the inevitable decline of the nation-state, Israel and the Middle East could better benefit from courageous, decisive political leadership, which affirms Israel's permanent presence in the area. But decisive leadership in Israel will not suffice, given the political instability and violence of Middle Eastern regimes. I came to know Menachem Begin rather well, so much so that he would invite my husband and me to come to see him even when he became reclusive after the death of his wife. In one of those conversations, he shared his thoughts on the sacrifices Israel made, and that he had made on Israel's behalf, for the sake of peace. Relinquishing the Sinai Peninsula in the Camp David accords was a high price for Israel, Begin emphasized. The Sinai represented security for Israel from its most powerful historic adversary, Egypt. Moreover, it represented a huge investment of money—over \$13 billion—as well as a realistic prospect of self-sufficiency for Israel. Nevertheless, at the

time, Begin felt that giving up Sinai was a sacrifice worth making because, he believed, it would have brought peace to Israel, real peace. Begin also expected that the Galilee campaign would bring real peace with Lebanon, but Sadat's assassination and the assassination of Lebanese president Bashir Gemayel nearly ended those hopes.

Israel's history is a history of the search for peace with neighboring states—a peace in which all could develop and thrive. But that peace has eluded a series of strong, far-seeing leaders, most recently Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, as it eluded Menachem Begin. There is little reason to think that the universalists, who dream of a world without borders while living in a region of violence and instability, will fare any better.

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