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Jewish, democratic and independent

By G. STEINBERG
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Israeli society has demonstrated that Judaism and democracy are not only compatible, but have created a public arena as diverse and intense as any in the free world.

Yom Ha'atzmaut is a celebration of Israel's many accomplishments in 63 years. Despite formidable challenges – external and internal – and frequent predictions of imminent doom, Israel continues to be a dynamic society. The intense democracy allows for wide-open debate on how best to implement the restoration of Jewish sovereign equality, while ensuring human rights and free speech to all minorities.

Israeli society demonstrates that Jewish and democratic values are not only compatible, but have created a public arena as diverse and intense as any in the free world. Indeed, Israel's civil society includes thousands of organizations representing a broad spectrum of peoples, religions, and causes. As Israeli democracy has matured, the range of views reflected in civil society has grown, and previous elite ideological dominance has been broken.

Ironically, it is leaders of these elite groups on the Left of the political spectrum, led by the New Israel Fund and its allies, which are most vocal in falsely claiming threats to Israeli democracy. For many years, these organizations and their causes were considered sacrosanct, and immune from criticism.

Despite wrapping themselves in the mantle of liberalism, pluralism, and human rights, they promote a very illiberal and intolerant agenda, and seek to silence debate through false cries of "McCarthyism".

Large parts of what was once a Zionist Left have lent their names and their considerable resources to the widespread demonization campaign which seeks to dismantle the Jewish nation state. This anti-Zionist activism has further energized the fringe Right, and, as is often the case, the two extremes feed off each other. Anti-democratic "hill top youths" in unauthorized settlements attack the police and army that seek to enforce the law, while their Left-wing counterparts use violence to prevent construction of the anti-terror separation barrier.

In contrast, most Israelis reject both the ideological straight-jackets and shrill tactics of both the far Left and far Right, and understand the complexities of maintaining the Jewish democratic framework under very harsh conditions. This realist and centrist approach is reflected in election results (the main indicator of public views in a democratic society), as well as ubiquitous public opinion polls and an increasingly pluralistic media.

As citizens of an independent nation, Israelis naturally resent efforts of outside powers to manipulate their democratic processes through the funneling of large sums of money from foreign governments in order to

promote policies that were rejected in elections. Highly secretive European funding for far-Left NGOs that promote false claims of “war crimes” and the wider demonization of Israel led directly to the demands for funding transparency.

And while the recipients, including the New Israel Fund lobby, tried to use the “anti-democratic” label to prevent transparency and accountability – two essential ingredients in any democracy – a new Knesset law ensures transparency of foreign government funding of NGOs.

COINCIDING WITH the passing of this critical new law, efforts from the far Right fringe to use the Knesset as a vehicle to attack their Left-wing counterparts through a pseudo-investigation were defeated through the votes of centrist representatives from both the government and the opposition, further demonstrating the robustness of Israel democracy.

Having lost the effort to prevent such debate in the Knesset, political advocacy NGOs sought to blur the lines between political campaigning and university investigation. But when groups organize one-sided propagandistic events under the guise of academia – an all too common occurrence – this creates strong and entirely legitimate criticism.

This criticism is not McCarthyism; it is substantive disagreement and pluralism in action. Far Left academic ideologues, such as David Newman, from Ben Gurion University (an institution named after one of the pillars of Zionism), should not confuse the two.

The recent retraction of the false “war crimes” allegations by Judge Richard Goldstone, author of the UN’s infamous Goldstone Report on the Gaza conflict, demonstrate the benefit of such heated but respectful public criticism. After a lengthy and very public debate on the credibility of his report, which relied primarily on allegations by political advocacy NGOs, Judge Goldstone admitted that, “If I had known then what I know now, the Goldstone Report would have been a different document.”

The combination of Jewish and democratic values that characterize Israeli society were the catalysts for this important, if belated, correction.

So Israelis will take a well-deserved day off from worrying about the future to celebrate the achievements of the Zionist vision, including a thriving democracy, on Yom Ha’atzmaut. The critics on the ideological fringes are wrong – Israelis are rightly proud to celebrate the vibrant democracy that has fostered and sustains this environment.

The writer is president of Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor, a research institution that tracks NGOs in the Middle East, and professor of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University.

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