Jerusalem Conflict: Identity Theft On Top Of Everything Else

As many previous colleagues have discovered, writing about Israel is a thankless task best avoided, especially by a self-hating Jew. Before people even read a given article, they have made up their own minds about Israel and cross-checked their views against others they hold to see if they are ideologically sound, i.e., politically correct. Then the information presented is processed to fit whatever views people already hold, and it is well-nigh impossible to convey what might actually be happening in the real world.

In many places, readers also have to look over their shoulders. What is the Israeli lobby in a certain place going to think or say if they take any notice of your opinion, as they surely will? If you knew who your friends were before you thought this or that, will you have the same friends afterwards, and will they want you?

However the recent Jerusalem protests, still on-going but beneath the global news radar, have raised a general issue which cuts across nationality and statehood. Few will be surprised by how they have been presented. But why do we accept such a presentation as the norm?

Israel was founded to give a homeland to people who had a certain identity, even if their actual nationalities or backgrounds were widely different. It endures because that identity has a right to exist, to live in peace and to make its own decision on its own development.
This identity is recognised by all, whatever their views on the State of Israel or whether it should be there or take the form it does. So why is it that everyone is queuing up to deny Israelis the very thing – identity – which forms the basis of their proffered nation state, or opposition to their so called state?

Israel is damned if it does and damned if it doesn’t, and must always live with this fact. But is there any point in continuing to deny its residents basic humanity, using the same old tricks which led to Israel being established in the first place?

Flags in False Colours

In any conflict situation, such as that Israel lives in perpetually, everyone tries to categorise the sides. Not simply those involved do this, but outsiders who want to know who to cheer for and who to oppose – or simply want to help, and therefore want an understanding of the people they are dealing with.

Sometimes these categorisations are merely ethnic or national – all Serbs or Cubans are supposed to believe this, and all Croats or Americans must believe that. But very often political opinion is used as a means of drawing distinction – these are the “right”, those are the “left”, or variations thereon.

Those who identify themselves as Israeli, or Jewish, or Friends of Israel, come from all shades of opinion. They have demonstrated this throughout the history of the country, where government has swung between left and right wing blocs comprised of parties of widely differing persuasions – for example, Israel once had two Liberal parties, whose views were closer to one another than to those of any other party, but one was part of the Likud bloc and the other part of the Labour Alignment.

Yet the protestors in Jerusalem—and by extension those who are closer to their side than to those they are protesting against, are routinely described as “right-wing”. Yes, some of them are, and yes, such actions attract, and are often organised by, political groups who are comfortable with that label. But is everyone on that side of the argument “right-wing”? Really?

Arab media outlets are predictably fond of using this term. Many of these outlets are highly professional, often more so than their mainstream media counterparts in the Western world. Yet even the rightly respected Aljazeera is jumping on this bandwagon to express its own position rather than tell us what is happening.

It is common for newly independent countries, however they obtained their independence, hook or crook, to descend into civil war soon afterwards. This because people who were part of the independence movement, bound together by a common cause, find that with that cause gone, the differences in their opinions become more important, but dissent means dissent with the new system, not between partners in the same political system.

This process demonstrates what is going on in Jerusalem. Israelis are not hitching themselves to the star of far right groups they are unlikely to vote for. They are simply expressing their identity – and whether we like it or not, and agree with it or not, this is always going to happen in a place founded to encourage just that.

The US has fought many wars, and started many others, to protect us all from Communism, which it would have eradicated long before if it had directed those same energies at Communist states. What they were actually fighting against wasn’t Communism, but localism – people who felt they belonged to a particular group of the population wanted better lives, a very American thing to want, and this merely happened to coincide with the Communist aim of overthrowing a US-supported government, even though the Communist solution was not one most of the population wanted.

Ho Chi Minh was held up as a repressive Communist when the US was engaged in the Vietnam War. In many respects this view was justified. But Ho also fought against colonial rule by the Japanese and French, and famously paraphrased the US Declaration of Independence as the basis of his reasons for opposing Imperial Japan. Ho may have thought independent Vietnam should be Communist, but independence was the point, and most of his countrymen, of all political persuasions, agreed with him.

So why does everyone who recognises a national or ethnic identity have to be right-wing, left-wing or anything else? Why can’t identity be enough? Because if you have a certain persuasion, you can only have certain friends – and therefore can only be listened to for as long as those friends are tolerated by those with the most power.

Embraced to Death

Whether someone is right-wing, left-wing, moderate or radical is decided by who the speaker thinks their friends are,
or should be. Aljazeera is more likely to call the Jerusalem protestors “right-wing” than an Israeli outlet for its own political and commercial reasons. But while they are doing this, Israeli outlets are using the same terminology to describe opponents of the same new Israeli government which authorised the nationalist march.

If you are described as right- or left-wing it means you have particular friends who the speaker doesn’t like. These will be politicians, governments and whole races of people who the speaker feels are “other”. Within the speaker’s own spectrum, everyone is different and has an individual voice. Those on the other side are all the same, and all have something wrong with them which means like can always be compared with like.

During the Cold War the West was very fond of lumping all Communist countries together in one joke bag. China and the Soviet Union were never on the same side, and Yugoslavia broke with the Warsaw pact to pursue its own path. Yet whether a given country was allied with, or even talking to, either China or the Soviet Union they were all the same, whereas the United States always had a different identity to Western Europe, and each individual Western country was distinct from the other.

This is one purpose of claiming that identity has to have a political slant – giving you an excuse to attack particular people with any weapon. The other is the opposite – to develop a coalition of fellow travellers, until such time as it is no longer useful.

A number of Arab countries have had, or still have, governments of a supposedly socialist character – Syria, Egypt, Iraq. When seeking friends, they call upon those of the same political persuasion first of all, rather than other members of the Arab League, or any other international organisation they may belong to, where governments of a different complexion often hold sway.

Even today, this is used as a means of justifying alliances with greater powers of the same political slant – “we have to go running to Big Brother in Moscow/Beijing/Havana because they have the means to help their own, and there are many of us. Greater powers then use the same arguments in reverse – “We have to help our brethren to succeed in our own struggles, and they are natural allies, and therefore natural takers of our rules, because we say so”.

Consequently an expectation forms that if you see yourself a certain way, you have to support a particular set of friends and oppose a particular set of enemies. Yanukovych’s Ukraine again provides a good example of this – though Russia could understand it having relations with the EU, the same didn’t apply in reverse, because if Ukraine wanted to work with both sides it couldn’t be a democracy, in the Western understanding.

Many of these new friends would be natural rivals in any other time or context. A right-wing government in India is expected to be more anti-Pakistani than a left-wing one, and the same is true in reverse in Pakistan. Nevertheless, they can all serve a purpose for a particular time, and exploit the assumptions made about them for their own benefit until the international wind changes – an art which China, invited to buy up every Western country whilst remaining Communist.

But all of this is done at the expense of national identity, even if it is meant to enhance it. Who loses when that happens? Every country which needed to do this so to make friends, which can be easily discarded for not being right-wing, left-wing or moderate or radical enough when a new game comes to town.

There is an old saying, “Show me who your friends are, and I’ll show you who you are”. The next step of course is, “If you want to change your friends, this is what it makes you”. A leading politician can associate with kings and with crooks without anyone caring. But those beneath them have to be in one category or the other, exclusively – because they are somehow expected to earn the identity they already have by existing, and to jump through the required hoops to do so.

Only a Person Can Win

There will never be peace in the Middle East until identity is allowed to have its own face. Neither individuals nor states have to be always one collection of things and never another collection of things, and to wear the label which goes with that. If they could be what they are and talk about what was bothering them, we would all get somewhere.

Israel should be leading the way in this, as it is only there because its people share a deep common identity, not politics or friends or even religion, per se. With a new coalition now in power there, including Arab parties, and an imperative to heal the wounds created by the previous administration and its more exclusive composition, it can create a blueprint which will help its diverse neighbours solve their own problems, which are largely caused by being told they have to be this or that to be true believers in someone else’s view of Israel.
Herding people and countries into this and that camp, and then into others when the need arises, only debases those people and countries and empowers those who are herding them. The Jews have not torn off their yellow stars – quite the contrary, they wear them as red badges of pride, courage. whilst those who pinned them on reap the benefits of not having this identification.

When a politician gets into trouble, their supporters insist that they can be many things, and that there will always be those who call them every name under the sun. Some think they are too hard, some too soft, some too extreme, some not extreme enough. The higher you rise, the more it goes with the territory. But should only the biggest and best have the right to be seen this way?

Taking away identity throws people into the arms of modern day Pol Pots who want to dehumanise everyone so that only they can rule. Israel is the last place where such behaviour should be accepted. If only it actually did its job, even its greatest enemies would have much more to gain than lose by merely living.

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