

Book Review

Gregg Carlstrom

How Long Will Israel Survive? The Threat From Within

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 260 pp.

A recently published study has asserted that every fourth child born in Germany today is the offspring of immigrants who arrived during recent decades. Another study has asserted that within twenty years there will not be enough water flowing in the Nile to provide for the needs of Egypt's growing population and that this will occur even before Ethiopia has completed construction of its Renaissance Dam, which is likely to reduce even further the amount of water flowing through the tributaries of the Nile on their way to Egypt.

Despite the clearly portentous character of these changes, however, no one has published or even suggested publishing a book devoted to the question of whether Germany or Egypt will survive. Nor has such a question been raised in regard to the Gulf States or even Qatar where the author of the book under review worked as a reporter for the *Al Jazeera English* news network. In contrast, the question of whether Israel will survive for a long time has gained popularity, and even legitimacy, among journalists and publicists who have been feeding off it and have sought to find an answer to this conundrum for a generation already.

Jews in general have an obsessive preoccupation with the question of Israel's survival which probably stems from that particularly "Jewish anxiety" that has affected many Jewish Israelis and is the result of the trauma of their age-long exile and, more recently, the Holocaust. It is a concern of which some Jews find difficult to rid themselves, as anyone studying the country – whether resident or visitor – cannot fail to miss.

On the other hand, some people's preoccupation with the question of Israel's survival derives itself from an entirely different source which has to do with their doubts about, or even denial of, Israel's right to exist at all. This negative attitude stems from the perception of the Jewish state as being a foreign (that is, non-indigenous) entity in the region in which it first came into being or, even worse, as a colony of foreign settlers planted in the heart of the Arab world by the imperialist western powers. On the basis of this premise they then make the argument that Israel's fate, like the fates of other colonial political entities around the world, is that it will ultimately disappear and be wiped off the map.

This approach is characteristic of the approach adopted by writers and researchers on the political left and is, for example, popular in Britain where there are those who view Britain's role in publishing the Balfour Declaration and in the establishment of a national home for the Jewish People in Palestine during the British Mandate period as a kind of original sin committed by the British Empire which must be atoned for in order to placate the descendants of the Arab residents of the country who later became known as the Palestinians. Indeed, all of Europe is suffused with a sense of contrition about their imperialistic sins and some have found no better way to repent and cleanse themselves of their guilt than to strike out at Israel (and often at the Jews in general as in days past).

It is interesting to note that this attitude, or way of thinking, echoes arguments raised by Arab publicists during the 1950s and 1960s. At that time many in the Arab world believed that Israel was a state that lacked legitimacy and, more importantly, roots in the region, whose disappearance or, perhaps, liquidation was the inevitable dictate of history and merely a question of time. This pattern of thinking was the subject of Professor Yehoshafat Harkabi's book, *The Position of the Palestinians in the Israel-Arab Conflict and Their National Covenant* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1968 [Hebrew]; New York: New York University, 1970).

The title of Gregg Carlstrom's book, *How Long Will Israel Survive?*, was undoubtedly chosen to arouse interest and promote sales but, beyond responding to that provocative question, the main aim of the present essay is to review the book's content. In this regard, it turns out that it is not literary criticism that is

called for but rather a press review since the book is merely an edited and expanded collection of journalistic articles that cover recent events in Israel as viewed by the author who worked as a journalist in Israel for *The Economist*.

Carlstrom has a journalistic writing style that is biting and penetrating as well as crisp and fluent and Israel has provided him with a most fascinating story. A popular Hebrew maxim says, “the visitor sees every fault”, and, although there is certainly some value in the insights offered by foreign journalists covering Israel, it must also be noted that there is much that a foreign observer passing through will probably not comprehend for there are complex issues in Israel’s story that require a type of investigation that is much deeper than journalistic coverage can provide. The latter, by its very nature, is current and transient and lacks sufficient patience to stop, linger and look more deeply into its subject. Its target audience is the next day’s newspaper reader and not necessarily the reader who aspires to look ahead to the following year or two, not to mention the next decade and more.

The State of Israel emerged from an almost impossible starting point. Its Jewish population was a gathering of immigrants from all over the world, most from countries without any democratic legacy where the Jews were persecuted minorities and subsequently totally lacked any tradition of how to run a state. In the course of just a few years the nascent state’s population doubled, placing an additional heavy burden on its economy, which was weak, backward in many ways, and lacking in any significant natural resources. In addition, the new state had to face the need to defend itself and very challenging security issues.

By the time Israel celebrated its seventieth year of independence, however, it had become economically flourishing and prosperous, militarily powerful, and socially dynamic with a high standard of living and one of the best health and education systems in the world. It serves as a model of inspiration for innovation and as a leader in many fields of endeavor such as computer technology and cybernetics.

Together with all this, Israel is still a Jewish and democratic state both demographically and its conduct. What is the secret of its success? What motivates

it and the people living in it? These are important questions and the answers to them would probably dispel the concerns expressed in Gregg Carlstrom's book about Israel's chances of survival.

How Long Will Israel Survive? The Threat From Within does not, however, deal with the weighty issues noted above. Rather, it provides a journalistic review of Israeli politics and its main figures during the Benjamin ("Bibi") Netanyahu years, and especially the period approaching the Knesset elections of March 2015, which led to Netanyahu's unexpected, albeit not sweeping nor decisive, victory over his rivals. The book deals with these matters by discussing the various political issues on Israel's agenda, emphasizing the rivalry between Israel's politically left and right wings and the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These include such issues as the case of the soldier Elor Azaria, the story of the Amona settlement and incidents involving the radical right-wing "Price Tag" (*Tag Mehir*) organization, the 2014 Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, the question of Israel's Arab minority, the Jewish settlers, the Ultra-Orthodox Jews and, of course, Bibi's wife, Sara Netanyahu – a favorite target of journalists. This book thus seeks to survey some of the challenges facing Israeli society that in essence resemble some of the challenges being confronted by many of the states of Europe and elsewhere such as: How does a state preserve its national identity in the face of dynamic social and demographic changes and sharp fluctuations? How does a society preserve democracy in conditions of sharp social, religious, economic and other conflicts within itself? And so on.

As noted above, Carlstrom writes biting and penetrating reviews of the type that Israelis who remain loyal to the *Ha'aretz* newspaper can read every day. Criticism of the political system is a national pastime in Israel engaged in by people of every point of view on the political spectrum. Like them, Carlstrom also exposes many of the system's flaws and failures clearly and sharply. Anyone who seeks to write about Israel's political history in the future will probably return to a book such as this, which provides a penetrating, although clearly slanted, glimpse into Israel's situation at this point in time. However, it is doubtful that the book has much to offer beyond this which is, perhaps its greatest defect for anyone trying to

understand Israel in a serious way.

A good example of the problem is to be found right in the concluding lines of the book. Here the author relies upon a quote from the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt whose writings once upon a time gained some notoriety. Arendt was a fierce critic of Zionism, like some others of her generation who had survived the Holocaust and found a warm home in the United States where they could continue to relate to their being Jewish as a merely technical or theoretical matter. Carlstrom (p. 235) cites the following prediction by Arendt:

Arendt predicted that a small Jewish state, surrounded by hostile Arab neighbors, would inevitably become warlike, “absorbed with physical self-defense” – unrecognizable to her American Jewish readers: “Under such circumstances [...] the Palestinians Jews would degenerate into one of those small warrior tribes about whose possibilities and importance history has amply informed us since the days of Sparta. Their relations with world Jewry would become problematical, since their defense interests might clash at any moment with those of other countries where large numbers of Jews lived. Palestine Jewry would eventually separate itself from the larger body of world Jewry and in its isolation develop into an entirely new people. Thus it becomes plain that at this moment and under present circumstances a Jewish state can only be erected at the price of the Jewish homeland”.

In response to this we note the interesting fact that, in the seventieth year of its existence, the State of Israel has become the home of over half of the world’s Jews, compared to only about 5% when the state was established, and some experts are even predicting that the day will soon come when the overwhelming majority of the world’s Jews will live in Israel. One of the implications of this forecast is that Jewish life in the Diaspora seems to have lost its vitality, certainly from the demographic point of view. True, Israel is still faced with the challenges of serving as a light to the nations and as a spiritual center for world Jewry, but in

many fields the state has already begun to fulfill these missions.

And so we reach the end of Carlstrom's book, where he sums up his survey of Israeli politics during the second half of the first decade of the 21st century thus (p. 236):

The title of the book is a question: How long will Israel survive? I have no definitive answer. Nobody does. But the status quo is unsustainable. In a few decades, one-third of Israelis will be haredim, a group that mostly lives in poverty and contributes little to the national economy. More than half the country will not serve in the army, that longtime melting pot. Similarly, if trends continue, a solid majority of Israeli Jews will view Judaism as more important than democracy. Racism and nationalism are increasing, despite the tremendous improvement in Israel's physical security. And the long-serving prime minister, instead of trying to address these long-term concerns, is busy trying to quash the few remaining bastions of dissent. This, most of all, is the tragedy of the Netanyahu era. While the West is having similar arguments about identity and democracy, the choices are clear. Obama was a cosmopolitan liberal; Trump is a nationalist with authoritarian tendencies. Voters in Germany have a stark choice between Angela Merkel and the populist, Euroskeptic AfD. But the man who rules Israel, and the man who wants to replace him, look almost identical. They encourage the anti-democratic tendencies of the right for short-term political reasons but they don't go far enough to appease the right. They ignore the left – justifiably so, because it has utterly failed to articulate a vision for how Israelis can overcome their differences and forge a new identity. And so they create a space for the ideologues, the sectarians and the extremists, who are eagerly working to undo the delicate social contract that has held the country together since its creation.

Since the author's forecasts about the future are based mainly on his personal perceptions, feelings and points of view, only events as they unfold will reveal

the degree to which he is correct. However, we can say at the outset that it is very doubtful that this book unlocks the secret of Israel or especially the secret of Israeli society or, especially, the secret of the cohesiveness of Israeli society. The Israeli people, despite their country's many problems, view Israel as their home, to which there is no alternative, and they see "Israeliness" (the meaning of which remains to be clarified) as the cultural environment in which they wish to live. Furthermore, it should be noted that the young State of Israel has already changed its character several times. From the *Yishuv* of the time of the British Mandate (that is, the body of Jewish residents in the pre-state Land of Israel) the country transformed itself rapidly into a state and society dominated by new immigrants; the cultural and other dominance of the kibbutzim was eventually replaced by new centers of power; the historically dominant Mapai party gave way to the heirs of Herut; the orchard and the orange as symbols of Israel have yielded to the computer and cybernetics; and so on.

One more observation in regard to this book is called for. It was published by Oxford University Press in collaboration with Hurst Publishers. The question thus arises: What prompted Oxford U. P. – whose label in the past was highly respected as a guarantor of quality scholarship – to publish such a work, which is merely an expanded journalistic survey of Israel? One must conclude that although the university publishing houses were once upon a time brand names that expressed quality, this is no longer so for at least some of them. Rather, they appear to be motivated by purely commercial considerations and are thus prepared to publish works that, although their genuine scholarship is questionable, will hopefully sell numerous copies at airport bookstores where travelers are simply looking for readable books with catchy titles for their long flights.

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