

RELEASE IN PART B6

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THREATENED

David Remnick
 The New Yorker

Democracy is never fully achieved. At best, it's an ambition, a state of becoming. In America, it took generations for blacks, women, and gays and lesbians to win the rights of citizenship—rights that, in many instances, remain incomplete. (Various contenders for the Presidency are now competing to scale back such rights.) The twenty-first century began with a fraudulent Presidential election. And this is in the luckiest of nations. Elsewhere—in Russia, in Hungary, in Zimbabwe—the fragility of democratic aspiration is a brutal fact of history.

To revisit the Arab Spring, one year later, is to celebrate popular awakening but also to acknowledge the distance between the ecstasy of rebellion and the realization of democratic institutions. In Egypt, autocratic military officers vie for power with varying shades of Islamists. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad has responded to the demands of his people by slaughtering them, many hundreds each week. In the Persian Gulf, sultans and emirs stifle potential protest with petro hush money.

There is another state in the region that is embroiled in a crisis of democratic becoming. This is the State of Israel. For decades, its citizens—its Jewish ones, at least—have justifiably described their country as the only democracy in the Middle East. Although Israel as imagined by Theodor Herzl and built by the generation of David Ben-Gurion was never intended to be a replica of the Anglo-American model—its political culture, even now, is closer to that of the European social democracies—its structures of governance are points of pride. And yet, as an experiment in Jewish power, unique after two millennia of persecution and exile, Israel has reached an impasse. An intensifying conflict of values has put its democratic nature under tremendous stress. When the government speaks daily about the existential threat from Iran, and urges an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, it ignores the existential threat that looms within. Reactionary elements lurk in many democracies. Ask the Dutch, the British, the Austrians, the French. The Republican Party has flirted with several in this election cycle. But in Israel the threat is especially acute. And the concern comes not only from its most persistent critics. The former Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert have both warned of a descent into apartheid, xenophobia, and isolation.

The political corrosion begins, of course, with the occupation of the Palestinian territories—the subjugation of Palestinian men, women, and children—that has lasted for forty-five years. Peter Beinart, in a forthcoming and passionately argued polemic, "The Crisis of Zionism," is just the latest critic to point out that a profoundly anti-democratic, even racist, political culture has become endemic among much of the Jewish population in the West Bank, and jeopardizes Israel proper. The explosion

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of settlements, encouraged and subsidized by both Labor and Likud governments, has led to a large and established ethnocracy that thinks of itself as a permanent frontier. In 1980, twelve thousand Jews lived in the West Bank, “east of democracy,” Beinart writes; now they number more than three hundred thousand, and include Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s wildly xenophobic Foreign Minister. Lieberman has advocated the execution of Arab members of parliament who dare to meet with leaders of Hamas. His McCarthyite allies call for citizens to swear loyalty oaths to the Jewish state; for restrictions on human-rights organizations, like the New Israel Fund; and for laws constricting freedom of expression.

Herzl envisioned a pluralist Zionism in which rabbis would enjoy “no privileged voice in the state.” These days, emboldened fundamentalists flaunt an increasingly aggressive medievalism. There are sickening reports of ultra-Orthodox men spitting on schoolgirls whose attire they consider insufficiently demure, and demanding that women sit at the back of public buses. Elyakim Levanon, the chief rabbi of the Elon Moreh settlement, near Nablus, says that Orthodox soldiers should prefer to face a “firing squad” rather than sit through events at which women sing, and has forbidden women to run for public office, because “the husband presents the family’s opinion.” Dov Lior, the head of an important West Bank rabbinical council, has called Baruch Goldstein—who, in 1994, machine-gunned twenty-nine Palestinians at the Cave of the Patriarchs, in Hebron—“holier than all the martyrs of the Holocaust.” Lior endorsed a book that discussed when it is right and proper to murder an Arab, and he and a group of kindred rabbis issued a proclamation proscribing Jews from selling or renting land to non-Jews. Men like Lieberman, Levanon, and Lior are scarcely embittered figures on the irrelevant margins: a hard-right base—the settlers, the ultra-Orthodox, Shas, the National Religious Party—is indispensable to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s governing coalition.

A visitor to Tel Aviv and other freethinking precincts might overlook the reactionary currents in the country, but poll after poll reveals that many younger Israelis are losing touch with the liberal, democratic principles of the state. Many of them did their military duty in the Occupied Territories; some learned to despise the Occupation they saw firsthand, but others learned to accept the official narratives justifying what they were made to do.

Last year, a poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute found that fifty-one per cent of Israelis believed that people “should be prohibited from harshly criticizing the State of Israel in public.” Netanyahu encourages the notion that any such criticism is the work of enemies. Even the country’s staunchest ally, the United States, is not above suspicion. The current Administration has cooperated with Israeli intelligence to an unprecedented extent and has led a crippling sanctions effort against Iran, yet Netanyahu, who visits Washington this week, has shown imperious disdain for Barack Obama. In fact, the President is a philo-Semite, whose earliest political supporters were Chicago Jews: Abner Mikva, Newton and Martha Minow, Bettylu Saltzman, David Axelrod. He was close to a rabbi on the South Side, the late Arnold Jacob Wolf. But to Netanyahu these men and women are the wrong kind of Jew. Wolf, for example, had worked for Abraham Joshua Heschel, the rabbi most closely associated with the civil-rights movement and other social-justice causes. Wolf brought Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak in his synagogue, marched in Selma, and, in 1973, helped found Breira (Alternative), one of the first American Jewish groups to endorse a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu has distaste for such associations; his gestures toward Palestinian statehood are less than halfhearted. (After he spoke of giving Palestinians their own state, his father, the right-wing historian Benzion Netanyahu, shrewdly observed, “He supports it under conditions that they will never accept.”) To Netanyahu, the proper kind of ally is exemplified by AIPAC and Sheldon Adelson—the longtime casino tycoon and recent bankroller of Newt Gingrich—who owns a newspaper in Israel devoted to supporting him. Netanyahu knows that young American Jews are split, with the growing Orthodox community solidly in his corner, and the less observant and secular majority—a majority that is increasingly assimilated and uninterested in Jewish learning—losing their attachment to Israel. The Prime Minister clearly feels that the fervor of the few offers him more than the disillusion and drift of the many.

“The dream of a Jewish and democratic state cannot be fulfilled with permanent occupation,” Obama has said. Netanyahu and many of his supporters believe otherwise; too often, they consider the tenets of liberal democracy to be negotiable in a game of coalition politics. Such short-term expedience cannot but exact a long-term price: this dream—and the process of democratic becoming—may be painfully, even fatally, deferred. ♦