

## *Impressions of Israel*

by Don Milligan

**A**fter a two-week holiday in Israel in January 2012, I'm now a world-class expert on the politics, cultural mores, and anxieties of Israeli society, able to pontificate at length on all things Israeli . . . . The absurdity of this proposition is self-evident, until I reflect on the suspicion that no matter how long I stayed in the country it would always remain the home of fathomless contradictions, a bottomless pit of anxiety, bad faith, and inarticulate distress.

I walked for days and many miles throughout Tel Aviv, from the north-south highway, Ayalon Route 20, to the sea, and from Ramat Aviv Gimel in the north, down to Shapira in the south, and across to Old Jaffa. What I discovered was a truly marvellous Jewish city, a city in which an old Christian Englishman,<sup>1</sup> who could speak none of the city's languages, read none of its signs, nor make head-nor-tail of its bus routes, was able to roam, safely at will, without the slightest unease or tension from the most bourgeois districts to the most dismal run-down neighbourhoods.

Tel Aviv is an unequivocally residential city. People live on all the main thoroughfares and in side streets lined with apartment blocks from one end to the other. Consequently, there are children, young people, old people, and everybody else in between, living in multi-generational communities throughout. This certainly seems to have strengthened the atmosphere of civility, which reigns supreme. It means that in neighbourhoods packed with workless black refugees from the horn of Africa, in Arab areas scarred by the malign neglect of the Jewish state, a

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<sup>1</sup> I am not a believing Christian, but it struck me that if I lived in the North of Ireland I would be a Roman Catholic, whether I observed or believed in Catholicism or not – I'm ethnically a Catholic. Just like the Muslims of Bosnia or the Jews of anywhere else are ethnically identified by their religion whether or not they keep the faith. As an Englishman living in 'God's little acre' I tend to forget that there are circumstances in which I'd be discriminated against, or murdered, regardless of the degree to which I observed, or believed in Roman Catholic hocus-pocus, simply because I was raised in a community with a specific ethno-religious character.

stranger can walk freely without the caution and sense of readiness demanded by forays into the poorer parts of Manchester, Salford, or London.

Infirm elderly Jewish ladies are often accompanied by Filipino maids, who help them get through their days, no doubt well regulated by the immigration authorities; ‘help’ secured at bargain prices. Black men sweep the streets. I’m sure that there must be a White road sweeper or two, but they were elsewhere whenever I was about. In any event, Tel Aviv is certainly one of the cleanest cities that I’ve ever been in. It is litterless except in the small areas where the population is largely Arab and the municipality’s priorities do not seem to run.

I was struck with wonder at the almost miraculous achievements of those who built this state, those who raised Hebrew from the dead, and lifted the shekel from the pages of the *Book of Genesis* into the currency of everyday life. In Tel Aviv they created in the teeth of wholesale Turkish deportations, Arab pogroms, and British repression, a vibrant modern city, in which during the thirties and forties of the last century the Jewish survivors of a veritable tsunami of killings, literally waded ashore to reclaim their humanity and build a new life.

The evidence of this is plain on every side. From the names of streets, boulevards, and parks, from the plaques and strangely inconspicuous monuments, from the city’s quiet domestic thirties’ architecture, rendered in heavily patched cement, to the older streets of Neveh Tzedek or Florentin, built as the Jews beginning to crowd into Palestine during the early years of the last century felt the need to free themselves of the Arab hostilities of Jaffa by building a new European city on the sand dunes to the north and east of the ancient city from which Jonah had set sail. Now, the cityscape is scattered with bold commercial towers, banks, big companies, hotels and shopping malls, all staking their claim for attention, along with one or two high rise ritzy apartment blocks.

Interestingly, I saw no bronze men on horseback, no heroes on granite pedestals; no obelisks or marble arches. Tel Aviv is not Vienna, London, or Paris – it is not even Dublin; admirable rebels have no monuments here. The city’s first mayor, Meir Dizengoff, does bestride a rather modest horse half way up Rothschild Boulevard, but the war memorial in the same vicinity, lacks the monumental grandeur of London’s Cenotaph.

However, this absence of sculptural bombast cannot be taken at face value. A short visit to the New Central Bus Station starkly reveals the Spartan character of the state and society. There, in what must be one of the worst bus stations in the world, crowded, neglected, dirty, one is confronted with milling crowds of teenagers in loose military fatigues, girls manhandling sacks as big as themselves, and lads shouldering rather large serious-looking guns. All normal in countries practising universal military service you might think. But, in Israel, the girls are conscripted alongside the lads, many of whom go on leave with their guns. Consequently, eighteen and nineteen-year-old boys can be seen choosing ice cream, sitting in bars and restaurants, or simply walking about the streets with battle rifles, carrying the latest sights, or sub-machine guns slung casually across their backs. These heavily armed kids do not swagger; they are more likely to be bored than boastful. Most of them seem well mannered, and looked good to this old homosexual, but in the stained concrete labyrinth of Tel Aviv's bus station the abnormality of the situation is pointed up by the large red signs in English pointing one to "Shelter" – these are the points to which one would briskly make one's way in the event of rocket or aerial attacks by the Arabs on the Jews.

Tel Aviv is a city always potentially at war, in a country, which has never been at peace. This reality is never far from the surface. These slightly-built lads, and the girls overtopped by their luggage, are real soldiers who might find themselves in battle at any moment, or working in military communications, or intelligence, or a host of ancillary operations in a real war in which the survival of the state, of their own lives, and those of their families, are at stake. This is ordinary. The abnormality is normal. This strikes me, but it is of little or no interest to those sitting with me in McDonald's gazing out in the bovine way one does when munching on a burger.

On Lilienblum, a world away from the proletarian hubbub of Lewinsky, little girls of ten or twelve year's of age run messages for Mum, or simply mess about in the dark winter streets, while gay men greet each other in pavement cafés and elderly Jewish men garner charitable donations from passers-by. It's a heavily armed, peaceful 'alternative' scene, attractive, prosperous, and easy-going. This is the premier Jewish city of the Jewish state. It arose on the principle of separation from the Arabs, and rests

entirely upon the principle of Arab exclusion. Consequently, peace is simply not on offer.

This dismal reality becomes much more apparent fifty minutes drive to the east in Jerusalem, an ancient city in the possession of the State of Israel, with a very old section still surrounded by imposing Ottoman walls, pierced at intervals by enormous stone gateways. The walled city is divided into quarters between Christians, Arabs, and Jews, but in reality it is a largely Arab city except for the Jewish Quarter. (The Jewish Quarter was entirely destroyed and looted by Arabs in 1948, the synagogues were dynamited, and the rabbis and their people forced out.) The Jewish quarter has some fine new buildings, but for the most part Jerusalem's old city is an enchanting warren of narrow old streets and covered markets. It is a bustling place in which Arabs live and work and in which people from Arab East Jerusalem come to shop for fruit, vegetables, spices, cheap clothes and all manner of electrical and household goods. Of course, there are racks of t-shirts punning in English, and mounds of tourist junk on all sides, but for all that it is an authentic old town.

To the West of the old city is modern Jerusalem, with some impressive twentieth century buildings – survivors from the British occupation of the city. This is a busy modern Jewish city; it is the State of Israel's capital, it is where the Knesset sits in its formidable building, a kind of ersatz Parthenon symbolic of both the parliament and state's democratic credentials. Here, in the modern city there are plush hotels, shops, and restaurants, elegant modern trams, and well regulated bus services. There is even a gay bar, unmarked and unnamed, down a scruffy back street, to be sure, but it is there nevertheless. There are no embassies, of course, they are all in Tel Aviv – this is because few, if any, other countries recognise the legitimacy of the State of Israel's occupation of Jerusalem. I stayed in an old Arab house near Shivtei Yisra'el close to the district of Me'a She'arim. This neighbourhood is dominated by the multiplicity of ultra orthodox Jewish sects, collectively known as Haredim – literally, those who tremble before the Lord.

The Haredim population of Israel is growing rapidly; they are hostile to the free presence of women in public spaces, and resolutely opposed to women having any independent role in public life. These deeply reactionary people are on a collision course with the State of Israel – there were riots when I was in

the country and bizarre television footage of embattled police attempting to subdue crowds of irate black-hatted men defending their claims to complete autonomy from the state and their right to discriminate against women and girls.

Despite the truly awful religious and ethnic tension Jerusalem is a ravishing city, from the Mount of Olives, and from the roof of the Roman Catholic Austrian Hospice (at station IV of the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa), the city is magnificent. The sombre stony terraces of the Jewish cemetery beyond the city walls, the golden cupolas of Russian churches, the spires and towers of the Armenians, and the bulk of the Church of the Dormitian, where Mary, the Queen of Heaven, sleeps in perpetuity. The place is a charnel house of competing death cults all paradoxically offering life eternal, all equipped with a multiplicity of tombs, sacred rocks, and highly significant spots upon which a number of entirely improbable events are said to have occurred. For proprietorial possession of these sites Jews, Christians of different stripes, and Muslims of all kinds, are prepared periodically, to fight and even murder each other.

The Via Dolorosa, the supposed route that Christ took from his judgement by Pontius Pilate, his flagellation at the hands of the soldiery, to his death on Calvary and the placing of his mortal remains in the tomb. This mythological nonsense conjured up during the thirteenth century has resulted in a well-defined route, which terminates at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is a fascinating place of ancient churches within churches in which Christians, Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Copts, and Latins, periodically battle it out with mops, brooms, and fists. It is here at the Sepulchre of Jesus that the holy flame of the Resurrection descends from Heaven every Easter and spontaneously lights a candle from which the faithful light their own candles by more regular non-miraculous means. Here, and everywhere else Christ is supposed to have been, there are coachloads of Orthodox Christians come from Russia to kiss altars, revered holy stones, and selected icons.

Above the city the vast ceremonial platform of the Temple Mount dominates the view. The site of the Jewish temple destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, now it is home to the great Al Aqsa Mosque, and the seventh century Masjid Qubbat As-Sakhrah. This lavishly decorated octagonal shrine, topped with a golden dome, marks the spot from which Mohammad rode up to

Heaven in the company of the Angel Gabriel for a prayer meeting with Moses, Abraham, and Jesus.

Below this Muslim eminence is the Western Wall, sacred to Jews; apparently it is a remnant of the original bastions, which supported the Temple built following the return of the Jews from their exile in Babylon. At the Wall there is a men's section and a smaller women's section. When I was there some ecstatic Haredim were singing and dancing as they carried their Torah Scrolls towards the Wall for what I could only imagine was a kind of spiritual refuelling. A large number of women standing on plastic chairs were leaning over the gender fence applauding, and cheering on the chaps, apparently endorsing their own subordination to this most patriarchal of cults in a city dominated by patriarchal cults.

We also saw the city scattered over its undulating hills from the top of the Mount of Olives. We'd gone up to see the Chapel of the Ascension built on the very spot from which Christ was wafted up to Heaven. And, having been stung for a Jewish 'blessing' on entering the Western Wall plaza by a bunch of Haredim, with great hats and splendid side locks, earlier in the day, we were determined not to be 'taken in' again by sacred freeloaders. So, at the entrance to the courtyard of the Chapel of the Ascension we boldly brushed past the gate keepers until we realised that the two poorly dressed Arabs equipped with a couple of white plastic chairs were indeed the official custodians of the Chapel, and were simply asking for the ten shekel entrance fee. The Chapel of the Ascension is an elegant, simple little round building, standing in the centre of a circular courtyard surrounded by high masonry walls.

It was well worth the perilous ascent of the Mount of Olives in a minibus that serves the Arab bus route to Et-Tur. Fortunately, it was a Mercedes bus, so despite its battered and cramped interior, it could career around sharp bends and take the 30° slopes with ease. Simply by taking this Arab bus we had left the thriving modern society created by the Jews in Israel into the second world disorder of Arab society. I got the impression that the standard of living had plunged as I moved across an invisible line. At Et-Tur at the top of the Mount of Olives large numbers of unemployed or underemployed Arab men and boys were in evidence, standing around chatting, idling away the day, houses

and other buildings, along with pavements and roadways, in a poor state of repair.

A similar scene was re-enacted at Bethlehem and at Acre. Whenever I entered predominantly Arab neighbourhoods, and went into the small Arab villages and towns at which we stopped, while driving, the poverty of the population was much in evidence. Ten year olds trying to sell packs of chewing gum, younger children simply begging, gypsy cabs touting for trade. These are impressions, I have no statistical evidence to offer, but I suspect that unemployment and poor levels of educational provision and attainment are widespread in a way, which for Jews would be considered extremely unusual. This general air of neglect and decay is underlined by the dilapidated state of buildings, and public utilities.

This would seem to be a fair reflection of the way in which the State of Israel views its Arab citizens. The Chief Educational Office of the Israel Defence Force explains the British distaste for Jews during the British Mandate occupation of Palestine from the fact that the Jews “sought to extend the cultural borders of Europe to the banks of the Jordan river” and in so doing destroy the oriental charm of the place.<sup>2</sup> Israel’s towns and cities certainly confirm this view – the vernacular architecture of the Arabs, their use of materials and structural forms appropriate to the climate, have given way, almost entirely to decidedly European apartment blocks, high rises, occasionally sprinkled here and there with houses topped with steeply sloping red tiled roofs, which would not look out of place in Southern Germany or Austria; they appear to be waiting for a good fall of European snow. Israel’s architectural choices are not the product of some Gulf State’s mad emulation of Hong Kong or Shanghai with glassy glitzy towers, but a rather staid, intensive assertion of Israel’s European identity, regardless of the large numbers of Jewish refugees who have entered the country from Africa, and the Arab countries since 1940.

Israel is a European country and has no place for Arabs. Between 1948 and 1966 the entire Arab population of Israel was subject to the martial law regulations dreamed up by the British when they were in charge. Things do not seem to have improved much since then. By and large, Israel’s Arab citizens are more or

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<sup>2</sup> Chief Educational Officer, Office of Information and Training, *Ha Haganah*, Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publishing House, 1985, p.40.

less invisible to the visitor – unless you go into specific Arab neighbourhoods, towns or villages – they are nowhere to be seen. The mainstream of Israeli society is Jewish – secular, religious, or Haredim – the Arab citizens appear to have no cultural or social presence despite being about a fifth of the population. Crossing the line into territories under military occupation brings this general invisibility into sharp relief. Here, the intentions of the State of Israel are explicit.

On our way to Bethlehem we crossed the line into occupied territory, we saw the vast concrete Wall and its related fences, and swept through the military checkpoints without difficulty, we didn't even need to show our passports, the young soldiers could tell at a glance, when the windows were wound down, that we were decent Europeans. From the bottom of the steps, which lead up to Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity we could see an enormous Jewish settlement shining across the valley quite unlike any of the ramshackle Palestinian hamlets which litter the hillsides. The hatred and resentment of the Arab guides, drivers, and beggars, gathered looking out at the stolen land was palpable.

In Acre, at the north of Haifa Bay, in the Western Galilee, almost on the Lebanese border, the line between Arabs and Jews is similarly distinct. A third of the population are Arabs and apart from a sprinkling of Christians the rest of the population is Jewish, largely haling from Russia. Most of the Arab population live in the ancient walled city gathered about the citadel of the Crusader Knights Hospitaller. There is also a fine mosque – the Jezzar Pasha Mosque – put up in the late eighteenth century by the Ottoman governor, known rather unnervingly as 'The Butcher'. There is also a large caravanserai, the Khan al-Umdan, a fine eighteenth century two-storied columned structure built around a large square. Despite being a 'world heritage site' and extensive and costly on-going restoration work on the fabulous twelfth century Crusader buildings and fortifications, the old town is very poor and neglected – by all accounts the proximity of the town to the Lebanon has damaged the tourist trade and the state appears to have done little to improve matters. In complete contrast the new largely Jewish town is a well constructed, if somewhat dull little place.

It does, however, have a smashing modern railway station and an excellent frequent service to Tel Aviv, an hour and a half

away. Seniors travel half price on Israel Railway, which I thought was remarkably decent of them! In the short trip to Tel Aviv the train was packed with young lads and their guns, young women soldiers with their enormous luggage, and a smattering of civilians, and of course, old folk like me, taking full advantage of the astonishingly cheap fares.

The Israelis are a smashing lot. By and large courteous and witty – though they can be disconcertingly direct. On many occasions I thought the person I was talking to really *had it in for me*, only to be greeted with an amused smile, the moment they had given me whatever it was I wanted. If on the other hand, they do not have what you want, they immediately make it clear that only somebody loose in the head could possibly want whatever it was – “Why do you want that?” they ask irrelevantly, and accompany what is clearly meant to be a rhetorical question, with gestures expressive of bewildered disbelief.

All the Jewish Israelis I spoke to, cab drivers, Zionist and peacenik academics, court interpreters, and barmen, had a lively sense of the contradictions in which they live. They are well aware that the State of Israel is in an impossible position, compounded by militant settlers in the occupied territories, by Haredim, by Hezbollah, by Hamas, by people who will loose a wave of bus bombings, random murders, and rockets if they once let their defensive guard drop. Despite many misgivings if one lived in Israel, one would value the strong arm of the Israel Defense Force and of all those lads with battle rifles and sub-machine guns. What became clearer to me is that Israelis are not a ‘colon’ or ‘planted’ colonial population, they cannot be expelled; they are not going anywhere.

It is common for supporters of the Palestinian Solidarity cause to talk about Israelis as if they were white Rhodesians, the English farmers in Kenya’s ‘White Highlands’, or the whites in Algeria before their expulsion in mid 1962 when more than one million people – ten per cent of Algeria’s population – fled to France. There is no parallel here with Israel or her Jewish population.

Israel was always a colonial endeavour, but it was a colonial venture of a special sort. It was established in the teeth of opposition, first, from the Ottoman Empire, and, secondly, from the British Empire. Both Empires pursued contradictory policies towards the Jews and towards Palestine, but neither of them

ultimately supported the migration of Jews into Palestine. The first Jewish settlements of the modern era began with the establishment of the Jewish farming community, Petah-Tikvah, in 1878. Others followed this in the 1880s, which sought to protect themselves from Bedouin brigands and other Arab robbers by hiring Bedouin watchmen and guards. Jewish migration intensified into Palestine during the first decade of the twentieth century under the stimulation of larger and larger pogroms against Jews in Imperial Russia. In 1907 a group of Jewish watchmen who believed in self-defence formed a security organisation, called Bar Giora, after one of the leaders of the Jewish revolt against the Romans in AD 66-70. In 1909 Bar Giora founded a public Jewish security organisation called Hashomer – The Watchmen. In 1920 these armed groups were organised into the Haganah and the construction of the Jewish state in Palestine began in earnest.

David Ben-Gurion did not simply ‘declare’ the independence of the State of Israel in 1948; it was already in *de facto* existence with considerable armed forces answerable to a dense matrix of Jewish civil and cultural institutions engaged in everything from education to construction. This state had come into existence during the course of bitter struggles in which the Jews were occasionally allied with the British colonial authorities, and at times their sworn enemies. At all times from 1920 onwards the Israelis were engaged in a war of attrition with the Arabs for possession of Palestine. The Jewish refugees came in, wave after wave, from Europe, Africa, and from the neighbouring Arab countries. Most arrived with what they stood up in, having been dispossessed – robbed blind – by the states driving them out. From Baghdad to Vilna, from Kiev to Casablanca and Cairo, in they came, through the twenties, thirties, and forties.

The Arabs of Palestine relying on their traditional, or semi-feudal notables, landlords, merchants, imams and intellectuals, and upon neighbouring Arab states, did not build a Palestinian State. The Jews built a state while the Arabs organised violent strikes, murderous anti-Jewish riots, and waited to be saved by external forces – Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. The result was that by 1948 they had nothing at all to match the web of Jewish communal institutions, nor the well-developed military formations of the Haganah and Palmach. The Jews had established themselves in Palestine as armed settlers, fleeing the

grotesque waves of murder and starvation to which they had been subjected throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first fifty years of the twentieth. They had nowhere else to go. Defeat was simply not an option.

And so it remains to this day. Defeat is not an option. Israelis, by and large, do not have anywhere else to go. The presence of a prosperous and influential diaspora Jewish population in the United States does not materially alter this reality. Israel, shot through with contradictions, seemingly incapable of doing anything other than batten down the hatches whenever trouble looms, is a real state which has matured over the last hundred years, in the service of a real society composed largely of Jews – secular, religious, orthodox, and Haredim – who all live and struggle together with the lively and fearful sense that things cannot simply go on the way that they are. If for no other reason, Haredim and the Arab couples, who are given to having six, seven, or eight, children, will in a comparatively short time, simply overwhelm the ordinarily religious and secular Jewish population – the population which the State of Israel largely depends upon for its coherence and continued existence.

So, my impression of Israel and Israelis is of a people and a country not easily given to panic. A place where polite and entirely peaceable young chaps saunter about shouldering battle rifles, and everybody believes in democracy, but not, of course, for those intrinsically unreliable elements of the population that might well harbour active sympathies for the enemies of the state. This is not exactly a schizophrenic condition, but it comes as close as any state or culture can to a pathology in which an entirely coherent and apparently healthy culture has arisen, self-defined, and self-created, upon the extirpation of the Arabs. Unlike apartheid era whites the Israelis do not need the Palestinians, the Jews have built an entire society predicated upon their absence – they'd get along just fine if the Arabs all simply crossed the Jordan.

I liked Israel, I loved Tel Aviv; I will definitely go again. I just hope that this truly wonderful people and really smashing country finds a way beyond their troubles to the emancipation of the Palestinians, upon which all their futures depends.