Israel at 60: A time for celebration and introspection
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The Nation
Published on May 14, 2008

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November 2007 seminar in Israel.

Israel, which celebrates the 60th anniversary of its independence today, may be a small country represented by a tiny speck on the world map. But the area that makes up the modern-day Jewish state has been a subject of contention in the Middle East for centuries as the land is considered sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

By any standard, Israel, for all its painful history and continuing precarious existence, has a lot to feel good about itself. As a society, Israel is the only truly functioning democracy in the Middle East with a vibrant economy driven by world-class hi-tech industries.

The country, originally carved out of an area known until 1948 as the Jewish section of Palestine under the British Mandate and subsequently expanded through military conquest, is considered the rightful ancestral homeland of the Jews; a fact disputed by all of its mostly Arab neighbours who have waged several wars trying to destroy it.

For much of their 4,000-year history, Jewish people had been scattered around the world and subjected to persecution and massacres, yet they saw no point in re-establishing their own nation state. The Holocaust, in which six million Jews, or almost the entire European Jewry, were systematically murdered by German Nazis during World War II, convinced Jews everywhere that they needed a secure homeland for their own protection.

It used to be that Israel was seen as little David struggling against a mighty Goliath when it faced down the much bigger, better-equipped Arab armies in the war of independence and subsequent armed conflicts. The 1967 war changed everything after Israel took preemptive action and defeated an Egypt-led coalition of Arab armies, including Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, in just six days.

Since then, Israel has established a virtually unchallenged military supremacy in the region and become an occupying force in captured territories, much of which has been returned in exchange for peace with Egypt and Jordan. A stronger Israel that is not only fully capable of defending itself but also of occupying other country's and people's territories has brought about a role reversal.

Fairly or unfairly, Israel is being seen more as an oppressor than victim in the court of world opinion - now that it has managed to prevent suicide bombings by Palestinian militants, who had terrorised Israelis since 1994, by erecting controversial concrete barriers and wire fencing to physically separate Israel from Palestinian communities.

The security structure, which is being completed, adds to the daily suffering and humiliation of the Palestinian population caused by numerous checkpoints within the occupied West Bank that severely restrict people's movements. Not to mention military action against Palestinian militants that sometimes results in civilian casualties.
All this is in the name of national security and the protection of Israelis - while the world is happy to learn that Israeli citizens are no longer blown up in buses, in restaurants or at weddings by Palestinian terrorists, who continue to try to kill and maim as many Israelis as possible, but have mostly failed to penetrate Israel's security grid. In all of 2007, only one suicide bombing took place in Israel and another one since the beginning of this year, compared to dozens of such attacks in previous years.

Most people's perception of Israel is formed by their daily consumption of international news, which continues to give prominence to the Middle East conflict, of which the Jewish state is one of the key players. But Israel has always been held up and judged against the highest standards of behaviour partly because it is a democracy and partly because it is militarily stronger than its mostly hostile neighbours.

Unsurprisingly, Israel does not always live up to those high standards. There have been injustices, disproportionate military responses that caused unnecessary loss of life, among other things.

For the average person sitting in front of their TV with daily news reports about the Israeli-Palestinian situation, it appears that Israel, for all its military might, would do better to simply hand over the occupied territories and make peace with the Palestinians and live side by side with the Palestinian state in security.

But most people have no idea how small Israel really is. At about 20,000 square kilometres it is roughly the size of Chiang Mai province, and therefore has very little room to manoeuvre and defend itself. A case in point is Israel's disengagement from Gaza that fell under Hamas control; southern Israel has since been subjected to frequent rocket attacks.

It doesn't help that Palestinians, despite being prodded by Western countries, which provide most of the humanitarian aid that Palestinians in Gaza and West Bank live on, have failed to build a semblance of a civil society based on the rule of law. Incitement of hatred against Israel continues to be the mainstay of Palestinian society. Peace processes have come and gone and another one is still ongoing; it all boils down to a handful of difficult and fundamental questions that Israelis and Palestinians must work out for peace to prevail.

These include the future of Jerusalem, compensation for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees displaced by wars, demarcation of a final border between Israel and a future Palestinian state. This may entail swapping territory controlled by Israeli settlers in the West Bank with similar amount of Palestinian land.

It may be true that a more secure, prosperous and confident Israel can maintain the status quo and continue to shut Palestinians out with security barriers and fencing or frustrating them with military checkpoints, and wait out for more worthy partners to take part in peace negotiations to come along.

But Israel can certainly do more to create conducive conditions to reduce historical distrust and hostility. Let us not forget that the joyous occasion of the birth of Israel is regarded by Palestinians driven out of their communities as the Great Catastrophe.

The 60th anniversary of Israel should be an occasion for celebration and a time for introspection.