

Notes from Israel

The fear is invisible

Polls say 75% of Israelis would be willing to accept a peace agreement if one were to be presented. This is not a contradiction, it's just Israelis are sure it will never happen.

by Manuela Dviri

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who have heard an air raid siren in their lives and those who haven't a clue what it sounds like. A few days ago, I was absentmindedly watching an old TV documentary on the Second World War when the scene of an air raid appeared on screen, complete with sirens, followed shortly afterwards by a bombing.

I had actually been thinking about something else. I have no memories of that war apart from the stories I've been told by my parents. I knew full well I was watching an old, faded television clip, yet I felt so close to the people who ran in terror from the siren's unremitting and urgent scream I personally identified with each and every one of them. And I was frightened. We're all familiar with the rumble of thunder, the blare of the trumpet, the howl of the wolf, but there is no specific word to describe the unmistakable wail, the moan, the supplication and the inherent impotence in the sound of a siren. The siren that announces a bomb is on its way and there's nothing you can do about it. At best you can seek shelter, if you have time.

Living in Tel Aviv, I've not heard many air raid sirens (a lot less than other people living elsewhere, in places I won't be naming here), but I remember them all, every single one. And then the bomb falling. At that moment you stop being

yourself. At that moment you are overcome with rage against the invisible enemies entering your home, violating your space and trying to kill you. You are gripped by a savage, instinctive, animal-like fear (in fact animals too are very frightened by sirens). You are overcome by an equally primitive thirst for vengeance against those who are trying not only to kill you, but also your children, your grandchildren, your loved ones.

An Italian friend came to see me in Tel Aviv recently, even though his parents, friends, relatives and even his travel agent had tried to dissuade him, tempting him with more agreeable locations like the Maldives.

It was a bright sunny day, almost hot, and the city seemed like the happiest, most carefree place in the world.

"It seems impossible to imagine that only two months ago this country was in the middle of a conflict with the Palestinians in Gaza. It seems so calm and peaceful, so utterly *normal*", he told me.

"The fear", I replied, "is invisible".

You don't see it or feel it because people are ashamed of it. Our fear is the fear of any kind of change. Fear of the Palestinians and fear of what the government could do to the Palestinians. Fear of the Iranians and fear of what the government is planning against the Iranians. Fear of isolation and at the same time a yearning for isolation. Fear of

Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Fear of what is happening in Syria, of what has happened in Egypt and what will happen in the Arab world in general, as well as in nearby Turkey. Fear of how things are going in the United States.

It is by using that fear, by exploiting it and feeding it, that a government like the one led by Likud party Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can continue to prosper. The angry reaction against the UN's decision to grant Palestine non-member observer status was born out of this fear. After all, rationally speaking, what did we have to lose by being the first to recognise the legitimacy of the decision? Nothing, we would only have gained by it.

And why antagonise the whole world by building new colonies immediately afterwards?

I assume that my contemplations will be published *after* the Israeli general election on 22 January, but I'll risk a prediction nonetheless: Prime Minister Netanyahu will be re-elected.

His election posters show a serious photo of him accompanied by the slogan: "A strong man for a strong country!". I'm sure if you peel away that poster you'd find many others underneath, both old and new. Like those for the 1996 election, for example – held shortly after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing fanatic – which claimed "Peres and Arafat are a dangerous combination" (and Shimon Peres went on to lose the election). In 1999 the Likud party urged the people to vote for "Netanyahu, a strong leader for the Israeli people" and in 2006 it warned against Ehud Olmert, saying "Ehud doesn't see the dangers!". I also remember the 2009 watchword –



“Fearless!” – used by the Jewish Home party.

But do the fearless and the strong constantly feel the need to reiterate the fact? To convince themselves it is so?

Bombarded by decades of disturbing messages – from “Remember what Amalek did to you” to reminders of the Holocaust and past wars – and crushed by a profound feeling of self-pity, the majority of Israelis now appear to be fatalistically resigned to cutting the Gordian knot with a sword instead of unravelling it with politics. The latter is certainly a longer, more arduous route, even more complicated than war, but it is no doubt a better option. This has been proven by the peace deals signed with Jordan and Egypt, which continue to endure in spite of two intifadas, several wars, the Arab Spring in general and Tahrir Square in particular. Israelis even seem willing to admit they can only put their trust in the predominant military

might of Zahal, the Israeli army, and that in all likelihood they will go on living in an endless limbo, where peace is not an option, as if this were our only fate. Opinion polls actually reveal the opposite: 75% of Israelis would be willing to accept a peace agreement, if one were to be presented.

This is not a contradiction, it’s just that Israelis are positive that day will never come.

Nevertheless, there is still the dream that sooner or later the young generation will produce a leader, male or female. Someone as creative in politics as Israelis often prove to be in fields such as high tech, television or mobile phone apps. Or a new, young Rabin, a brave former army officer with enough courage to choose the difficult path of peace after having personally experienced the hardships of war.

For the moment, the only faint political threat to Bibi (Benyamin Netanyahu’s

nickname) has come from statements made by Israel’s 90-year-old president, Shimon Peres, and , and from three women politicians, Shelly Yechimovich, Tzipi Livni and Zahava Gal-On.

As well as former journalist Yair Lapid.

Another possibility is Naftali Bennett, a young, brave, former army officer who has made a fortune in high tech and who recently entered politics. He seems perfect. The only problem is he belongs to the ‘Jewish Home’ party, which is far more right-wing than Netanyahu.

So the only thing left is to hope for a miracle. I’m doing just that. This morning I saw a red poster in front of my house that said: “Arabs and Israelis together for peace”.

Who knows who’s behind it – it wasn’t signed. To me, it seemed to be a message directed at all those who, despite their fear of air raid warnings and sirens, have absolutely no intention of giving up. **E**