A celebration of Israel's progress

by Jack_Kemp

As I prepare to travel to Israel this June - my second mission for the American-Israeli Friendship League and the Israel Finance Ministry - I also will be participating in the celebration of the 60th anniversary of Israel's historic independence. Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinians are protesting what they call the "nakba," or the catastrophe, of Israel's birth.

Historically and politically, I agree with Winston Churchill, who said on March 29, 1929, in a tree-planting ceremony on Mount Scopus, the future site of Hebrew University, "The hope of your race for so many centuries will be gradually realized here, not only for your own good but for the good of all the world. But the non-Jewish inhabitants must not suffer. Every step you take should therefore be also for moral and material benefit of all Palestinians, Jew and Arab alike."

Obviously, that's the ideal. In reality, Israel has come a long way, and our hope is that the Palestinian authority can eventually overcome Arab hostility in order to reach a true modus vivendi in these ongoing talks.

While there are some positive steps being acknowledged and pursued by both sides of the dialogue regarding a two-state solution to Palestinian statehood, we must also pause to recognize what a miracle it is that 60 years ago this tiny democratic nation and Zionist dream ever survived its birth struggles.

On May 20, 1948, just six days after independence was declared on May 14, five Arab armies - Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon - unilaterally invaded Israel with advanced armies and weaponry against a ragtag army of Israelis.

From May 1948 throughout 1949, the fighting raged on relentlessly until an armistice was signed just a few months after the Israeli Defense Forces finally conquered and controlled Judaism's holiest city, Jerusalem.

There is far too much silence on this incredible accomplishment outside of the Jewish community, notwithstanding the president's trip to Israel on May 13 and 14 at the invitation of Shimon Peres for a gathering of world leaders.

To be historically accurate, instead of celebrating 60 years, we should be calling this the "3,000 plus 60" celebration, as the Jews were the original inhabitants of that ancient land and displaced by the Romans who were among the first colonial powers in decimating the Jewish population, thus leading to the Jewish Diaspora of these 3,000 years plus.

Worldwide Jewry never lost their identity with Israel, however, and prayed daily "next year in Jerusalem," even when incarcerated in Nazi death camps or the Soviet Gulag.

Having been to Israel often since my first trip in 1972 as a rookie member of Congress, I'm always amazed at the incredible progress, juxtaposed against the virulence of its enemies, many of whom would annihilate not only the state of Israel but Jews writ large.

It's equally hard to believe how much opposition there was 60 years ago this month to a Jewish homeland as the remnant of European Jewry, 6 million of whom were burned and gassed by the Nazis and incarcerated by the brutal despot Joseph Stalin.

One of my foreign policy heroes, Gen. George Marshall, tried to dissuade President Truman from recognizing the new state of Israel in 1948. He and his Arabist allies in the State Department thought it would erode our credibility throughout the whole world. On the contrary, Truman's support gave moral standing to our nation in keeping with our founding democratic ideals and shared values. Today, Israel is unambiguously our most loyal and steadfast strategic ally in that part of the world, notwithstanding our increasing trade, diplomatic, and strategic friends and allies in the Arabian Gulf.

I appreciate the perspective of former Israeli Ambassador to the United States Zalman Shoval, who recently wrote, "Israel's triumph should not be seen primarily in terms of victories over its enemies. Instead, it should be considered in light of its achievements. Without natural resources, without any substantial foreign aid during the first 20 years of its existence and in spite of its ongoing security concerns it has created a thriving economy. Israel is a leader in high technology, medicine and related fields, and is a major cultural center."

What about a Palestinian state, people ask. As I wrote several years ago, I believe the United States and Europe can help restore hope and pave the way for a new Palestinian leadership by making it unambiguously clear that we stand ready to provide a 21st century Marshall Plan of trade and aid for the Middle East the instant a peace agreement is signed and both sides are living in democratically elected homelands.

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