

The Great Satan & The Little Satan

My friend in Israel writes, “Israel is an imperfect democracy for the Jews, and an ethnocratic Jewish State for the Palestinians.... It is difficult to defend the claim that Israel is a democracy. A regime that allows only some of its subjects to take part in politics is not a democracy.”

As an advocate of civil rights, human rights and democracy, and as a proud Israel supporter, I take that criticism to heart. The complaint points not merely to a theoretical deficiency in a purportedly democratic system, but to a reality that profoundly and negatively impacts the lives of real people, subjects and subjugators alike. It points to a problem that constitutes a threat to Israel’s survival, and to Israel’s future as a good place to live.

My concerns are based in love and hopes for a better future, and as far as I know, that characterizes the mind-set of my friend in Israel. Yet the words by themselves could have come equally from the most rabid anti-Israel quarters. Is the aim to democratize, demonize or demoralize? Worrisome to me is that such critiques, lacking a broader perspective, lead some people to develop a thoroughly negative attitude toward Israel and turn away from Israel and the Jewish People. Also worrisome are those who ignore these fundamental problems.

Let’s leave aside the fact that West Bank Palestinian Arabs can vote in Palestinian Authority elections, supposedly for their embryonic government that will eventually subjugate them instead of Israel. Leave aside the 200,000 West Bank Palestinian Arab – Jerusalem residents – who have been invited to take Israeli citizenship but declined, that is, who could participate as citizens if they wanted to. Leave aside the fact that a large proportion of West Bank Palestinian Arabs have been very clear that they do not wish to be Israeli citizens, and do not want to participate in Israeli democracy. And leave aside the fact that this population has never had a greater degree of human or political rights, nor do most of their neighbors in the Arab world.

We can even leave aside the observation that the majority of people living on planet earth today have no more political rights or civil rights than the effectively stateless and unenfranchized West Bank Palestinian Arabs. In the end, there are close to a million adults who are

subjects of Israel but have no say in the Israeli political process. That condition is offensive to an American sensibility, where the objection to mere “taxation without representation” incited violent revolution against British tyranny. And it is utterly contrary to the ideals, and interests, of classical Zionism and traditional Judaism as we know it.

Israel advocates, as well as anti-Israel activists, share a certain obsession and focus on Israel, often ignoring the interests of others or broader perspectives. While there are actual people and groups who care about and advocate on behalf of the interests of Palestinian Arab people, it seems that much of the anti-Israel activity has other purposes and motives.

Consider an analogous situation in the United States today. This is without saying anything about the creation of the United States through the genocide against the Native Peoples, nor to say anything about the role of slavery in building America and creating pervasive and persistent problems. And this is to say nothing about the wars in progress or the current Administration or Congress and the sense of crises that many Americans across the political spectrum feel. The situation I point out is old, chronic and intensifying.

More than four million people live in US territories, such as Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands, of whom 98% are of racial or ethnic minorities, without the right to vote in US presidential or other national elections. They are subjects of the United States who lack the most essential power of participation in its democracy. While the history is very different, this is exactly the same condition that my Israeli friend complained about with respect to West Bank Palestinian Arabs.

Further: There are more than six million American adults who lack the right to vote in national or state elections, due to past felony convictions. While they may have “done their time,” this punishment continues. A felony conviction could be the result of being caught with a single joint of weed in 1969 – and after doing time, the ex-con can never vote again. Most other democracies have no such program of disenfranchisement. About 15% of the male adult African-American citizenry in this country lacks the right to vote. In Florida, 40%, and in Kentucky, 50% of adult

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African-American male citizens do not have a right to vote.

Together, more than 10 million American citizens are subjects of the federal government but lack the most basic political right, that of voting. This is before we take into account the gerrymandering that skews state and national elections (accounting for about a dozen seats in the US House of Representatives), and without considering the discrepancy in presidential voting power between low- and high-population states, which in some instances is a difference of over 300%. And this is without reference to the expiration, revocation and lack of enforcement of Voting Rights Act provisions that were originally designed to ensure voting rights, and without reference to new barriers to voting being promoted in some states – most of which are consciously and intentionally designed to prevent racial and ethnic minorities from voting.

This response to my Israeli friend is not a [whataboutism](#) – it is a whataboutmeism, and in my book, a crucial distinction.

Oddly, despite these fundamental and outrageous flaws in American democracy, people around the world – not so much Norwegians or Canadians – look to the United States as a beacon of democracy, security and opportunity. While focusing on the other serious problems of the United States, not just the issue described here, one might be tempted to use the Iranian regime’s epithet of “The Great Satan.” But in comparing these conditions to those in China, Russia, Ukraine, Nigeria, Mozambique, Turkey, Iran or Syria, America does not look like such a monster.

There is no comparing Israel and the United States – the West Bank is not an island 3,000 miles off Israel’s mainland – nor can we easily compare societies generally, as each has its own unique conditions and history. But Israel should be evaluated by the same standards as other countries, as well as by Israelis’ aspirations and our traditional Jewish ideals.

Several organizations use a set of objective measures of “democracy” or human rights compliance to compare countries around the world. Freedom House, The Economist, the World Economic Forum, all publish annual comparisons. We might measure the proportion of residents who can vote, the proportion of women (if any) in the legislature (if any), the independence of the judiciary, citizens’ access to courts. The Economist, a classical liberal British media company, using 60 indicators, offered the following “[Democracy Index](#),” a ranking of 167 countries,

North Korea	1.03
China	3.14
Russia	3.24
Egypt	3.31
Jordan	3.96
Mozambique	4.02
Moldova	6.01
Mexico	6.47
Israel	7.85
U.S.	7.98
Britain	8.36
Canada	9.15
Norway	9.93

on a scale of 0 (Authoritarian) to 10 (Full Democracy).

In this ranking, both Israel and the United States are deemed “flawed democracies.” Similar rankings of “democracy” and “freedom” by liberal and conservative organizations place Israel close to the United States. These almost-good scores might not mean much to the person

who has no access to medical care or clean water, no job or no right to vote. But the comparisons suggest that the belief held by some that Israel is a uniquely monstrous entity worthy of dissolution, or that American Jews should be particularly ashamed of our association with Israel, are not founded in objective, quantifiable reality, but rather are based on hate, prejudice and fantasy.

Sometimes visiting American Jews are shocked to see the conditions in the territories under Israeli military control, such as the regime in Hebron, and are disillusioned; such was reported recently in *Haaretz* concerning a senior Connecticut rabbi. Who knew? It has been that way more or less since 1968.

Israel has many wonderful, progressive institutions and practices, as well as some terrible ones. Before deciding to reject Israel, these Americans should learn more about the country they live in. That means seeing rural poverty in the south (and elsewhere), isolated Indian reservations, urban decay in Baltimore and Detroit. That means getting to know people who live in fear of the police, who are homeless, who have gone bankrupt due to medical conditions. While it is one thing to *experience* these circumstances and another to be *concerned* about them, it is yet another problem that many American have no idea of what goes on in their own country.

I reject the Iranian government’s characterization of Israel as “The Little Satan” and of the United States as “The Great Satan.” Many Israelis and friends are working to address the problems in Israeli society, just as Americans are trying to make this country better. It may be that due to its scale and reach, the United States is the greatest threat to world peace and human existence, but if you think *America* has problems, take a look at the rest of the world. As a great power, America offers vast potential for advancing or for destroying human civilization.

My response to my Israeli friend is, you think *you* have problems? Let’s compare notes.

