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# Israel: A Revolutionary Miracle in Palestine — The Rise of Israel: A History of a Revolutionary State—Israel and Its Army: From Cohesion to Confusion

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## REVIEW ESSAY

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### ISRAEL: A REVOLUTIONARY MIRACLE IN PALESTINE

*Mackubin Thomas Owens*

Adelman, Jonathan. *The Rise of Israel: A History of a Revolutionary State*. London: Routledge, 2008. 269pp. \$37.95

Cohen, Stuart A. *Israel and Its Army: From Cohesion to Confusion*. London: Routledge, 2008. 210pp. \$39.95

For much of the world, Israel remains a controversial, indeed reviled, state. It has been described as a “racist, colonialist” nation; the subagent of American or Western imperialism; a “stepchild” of the Holocaust or the Jewish Diaspora; the “brutalizer of Arabs”; and an intransigent enemy of regional peace in the Middle East. However, as Jonathan Adelman shows in *The Rise of Israel*, there are serious shortcomings in all these descriptions of the Jewish state.

Adelman does more than merely debunk the negative stereotypes of Israel arising from the “Arab victimization narrative” and post-Zionism. In this interesting and informative book he argues that the creation and survival of the Jewish state constitutes something of a miracle. The fact is that over the past several centuries, only some 5 percent of the four thousand peoples (“na-

tions”) of the world have achieved statehood. Most have done so because they had large populations constituting demographic majorities within given regions, populations that possessed a common culture, language, history, and religion. Accordingly, they were able to predominate in single areas for many centuries. The Jews who created the State of Israel lacked these normal attributes of statehood. So how did Israel come into being, and why did it flourish against all odds?

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One of the strengths of this work is its treatment of Israel in a comparative context. Some of the most telling questions that Adelman seeks to answer are these: Why was it that among all the minorities of the Ottoman Empire (the Palestinian Jews, Lebanese Christians, Armenians, and Kurds), only the Jews were able to obtain a powerful state, when the others seemed better situated in 1917? Why did a state besieged by powerful and numerous enemies avoid becoming an authoritarian, militarist society, such as Prussia or Sparta?

The fact is that if in 1900, 1917, or 1942 it had been predicted that Israel would emerge as a first-world regional power, the idea would have been laughed to scorn. Even in 1948, after Israel had achieved its independence, the CIA predicted that the Jewish state would not survive for more than two years. Indeed as late as 1967 and 1973 (when, on the third day of the Yom Kippur War, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan had expressed his fear that “the Third Temple is falling”), Israel’s survival was not assured.

Adelman reminds the contemporary reader that the Jews had to overcome immense obstacles to establish and maintain the State of Israel. The Jews themselves were a weak and disempowered people, dispersed over the face of the earth. For the most part, they did not possess anything resembling a martial tradition. They faced numerous, powerful, and determined enemies: the great powers (tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and even the British Empire, from 1937 to 1949); the Arab states; strong transnational religious movements (the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, Islam); international organizations, especially the United Nations after 1951; most of the third world after 1967; and, most potently, global anti-Semitism.

However, not all obstacles to the creation and survival of Israel were external. Many arose from among the Jews themselves. Indeed, Zionism—the movement calling for a return of the Jewish people to Palestine—was not universally accepted among Jews. Even Zionism itself suffered from internal divisions.

Nonetheless, Israel survived and flourished. Adelman attributes this outcome to several factors. The first of these was a unique socialist revolution. Because of the conditions facing the Jews during the mandate period and the early years of independence, Israel was able to avoid the radical, violent, and repressive nature of central state–socialist revolutions such as those that took place in Russia and China. However, a second revolution also took place in Israel, beginning in the 1990s, this one capitalist. The impact of this second revolution is illustrated by the astounding fact that oil-poor Israel, with only 2 percent of the population of the oil-rich Arab-Persian Middle East, accounts for 33 percent of the richest people in the region.

Other factors contributing to the survival of Israel include the greatness of such Israeli leaders as David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, and the Jewish will to survive, reinforced by the Holocaust and the proclaimed intention of the Arab states to drive Israel into the sea. The democratic nature of Israel was a blessing, especially since the Arabs sided time and again with authoritarian, repressive, and ultimately losing powers, from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union. Ultimately, argues Adelman, Israel came into existence and flourished “because of the creativity, drive and determination of the Jews” themselves.

One of the anomalies that Adelman points out is the fact that the small State of Israel, surrounded by enemies bent on its destruction, has remained a vibrant democracy rather than devolving into an authoritarian or militaristic polity. Much of the answer is to be found in the role of a key institution within Israel, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which is the topic of Stuart A. Cohen’s *Israel and Its Army*.

Civil-military relations in Israel differ greatly from those in the United States. For Americans, the preferred relationship between civilian policy makers and the uniformed military is what the late Samuel Huntington called “objective control” of the military. In this arrangement—an ideal type that is rarely attained in practice—civilian authorities grant the professional officer corps autonomy in the realm of military affairs, in return for which the professional military remains politically neutral and voluntarily subordinate to civilian control.

Even allowing for the fact that U.S. civil-military relations rarely correspond to Huntington’s ideal type, Israel’s civil-military boundaries are far more porous than those in the United States; the IDF has played parts in education, nation building, and land settlement. The traditional role of the IDF has been more central to Israeli life than that of the U.S. military to American life in general.

The creation of a national army from preindependence military arms like Haganah and Palmach was, like the creation of Israel itself, something of a miracle. To begin with, there was no Jewish military tradition upon which first the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) and later Israel could draw, at least since biblical times. In addition, many of those who had to be absorbed and acculturated by the IDF were illiterate immigrants with nothing like military experience. Nonetheless, the IDF prevailed in the War of Independence and gained a reputation for near invincibility in 1967. Its reputation was tarnished a bit in 1973, when it suffered a serious strategic surprise, but the IDF recovered the initiative and once again prevailed.

Cohen traces the decline of Israel’s love affair with the IDF, the reputation of which reached its nadir in the summer of 2006 in the wake of the Second Lebanon War against Hezbollah. That war revealed many deficiencies in the IDF;

however, these problems had become apparent long before that conflict. Cohen attributes them to the changing operational landscape—the shift from state-on-state warfare to irregular conflict, such as the intifada; an overreliance on technology, a mistake the U.S. military also made during the 1990s; and, most significantly, societal changes within Israel, the post-Zionist version of “the routinization of charisma,” in which “unquestioning commitment to ideals that in the past seemed sublime gives way to frustration with the ordinariness of the new order, which therefore itself becomes the butt of critical inquiry.”

After offering a no-holds-barred critique of the IDF, Cohen ends on a note of optimism. While problems are likely to persist, he believes, reforms make it likely that the IDF can correct their deficiencies. That is a good thing, because the threats that Israel faces are not likely to disappear soon.