

75 years old is a dangerous age

• By SHALOM SALOMON WALD

A few weeks ago, when speaking of Israel's 75th anniversary, President Isaac Herzog worried whether the state would reach 80 years. The precedents, he said, were not encouraging. Of the two Jewish states of antiquity, one split into two parts that never reunited, and the other lost its independence.

The "united monarchy" of Saul, David and Solomon is said to have lasted not much longer than 100 years; the Hasmonean dynasty ruled in real independence from 140 to 63 BCE when Pompey occupied Jerusalem – 77 years. Both were ruined not by foreign enemies but by domestic infighting, comparable to the events of today.

Seventy to 80 years, plus or minus two or three, has universally been considered the lifespan of three generations. Their sequence is thought to follow a regular pattern. The first generation creates, the second maintains, and the third or fourth, destroys.

This model of thought can be found among historians and novelists. The Arab historian Ibn-Khaldun (1332-1406) postulated that civilizations are created by a first royal dynasty, maintained by a second and wrecked by a third. Thomas Mann's Nobel-prize-winning book, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), tells the story of a merchant family that rises to wealth and fame in one generation, preserves its position during the second, declines in the third, and collapses in the fourth.

Herzog's search for precedents in Jewish history encourages a search for parallels in contemporary world history. The 20th century saw the birth of many new nation-states. Among the most important were the Soviet Union (1922), the Turkish Republic (1923), the Republic of India (1947), the People's Republic of China (1949), and the State of Israel (1948). All five reached a historical turning point after approximately three generations. Two did

not cross successfully.

The USSR collapsed in 1991, after 69 years, and secular Turkey turned into an Islamic state in 2003, after 80 years, and continues to struggle. Two did traverse the turning point and are doing well. The secular Republic of India began to be transformed into a de facto Hindu state in 2014, after 67 years, and China reelected its ruling president in 2022 for an unlimited tenure – a break with China's most fundamental governance principle since Mao – 73 years after the People's Republic founding. And Israel slipped into its deepest political crisis during its 75th year. It is in the middle, between the two groups, and could go either way.

IS IT PURELY a coincidence that five different nation-states established in the 20th century amassed problems that culminated in crisis or transformation? That these transformations occurred or started 69, 80, 67, 73 or 75 years after the foundation of these states? Does this indicate an unwritten "three-generation" rule? A different mix of reasons explains these events, but three appear everywhere: governance and leadership, the economy, and internal cohesion.

The Soviets failed by all three criteria. Apart from incompetent leaders and economic stagnation, a key reason was the faster demographic growth of non-Russian speaking citizens many of whom, if not most, were indifferent or hostile to continued Russian rule. In the end, they constituted 40 or more percent of the Soviet population, more than the country's unity could accommodate.

India, by contrast, strengthened according to the same three criteria. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's quiet Hindu revolution ushered in one of the longest periods of stability in modern Indian history and increased the country's cohesion while the economy kept growing.

And China now has a leader whose power is more unlimited than that of



PRESIDENT ISAAC HERZOG addresses the 'Jerusalem Post' conference at the Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem, last week. Herzog says he is worried whether the state will reach 80 years. (Marc Israel Sellem/Jerusalem Post)

his three predecessors. The economy underpinning China's global status will soon be the world's largest. The national cohesion of the 95% Han majority appears to be stable.

Turkey demonstrates the dangers of a serious leadership problem. Islamization, when it started in 2003, was first welcomed by many Turks. They were alienated from the ruling secular elites. But when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan became erratic and dictatorial, he threatened both national cohesion and economic stability.

Christopher de Bellaigue, an accomplished Turkey expert, put it this way in the *New York Review of Books* (April 6): "As for the Turks, instead of having a retired prime minister whom history would have judged to be one of the ablest and most effective politicians of his gen-

eration, they are saddled with a forever president whose only trick is to present himself as the solution to crises of his own making." This will surely sound familiar to many Israelis because they have heard exactly the same about another controversial leader much closer to home.

SEVENTY TO 80 years have been a turning point for all. For Israel, 75 is the age of danger. Fear for the future of the state is legitimate, but so is hope. From the three core issues above, a few specific Israeli problems are most apparent:

Leadership: There is no legal time limit to an Israeli prime minister's hold on office. This explains many of his political and personal choices. They are meant to guarantee the longest possible rule. When this coincides with proposals to reduce

the power of the judiciary in favor of the executive branch, some fear that a door is opening to dictatorship or monarchy.

Turkey is a cautionary tale. A large proportion of the Israeli electorate is critical of the prime minister's overhaul initiative and believes that he has overstayed his welcome. Israel's top leader should be limited by law to a maximum term of eight or 10 years.

Economic power: Strategic power cannot be separated from economic power today. China is living proof. For Israel, economic power is its hi-tech and military innovation, which depend entirely on a hospitable international political, financial and export environment – and on advanced scientific and technological prowess at home. Diminishing one and/or the other could

jeopardize Israel's survival.

A part of the Israeli public and its political representatives ignore these links because they have other priorities. These are the sectors whose living standards will suffer most if the current turmoil is not resolved. Hopefully, understanding will grow.

National cohesion: In just over 20 years, the haredim will constitute more than 30% of Israel's population and Arabs will account for more than 20% – together more than the 40% of non-Russians who drove the USSR to extinction. Comparing anti-Zionist haredim to anti-Soviet Ukrainians, Lithuanians and other break-away nationalists may exceed far-fetched. What makes them comparable is their alienation from the nation-state in which they were or are living.

Most Arabs will work and will likely face no obligation to help defend the country. This is similar to the 18-20% Muslim population in India who are not regarded as a major threat to cohesion. Israel's national cohesion can be preserved if a minority of citizens, haredim, who demand exemption from laws governing the majority, does not exceed much more than 10%, which is the current situation.

Israel can cope. But it cannot cope with a population that comprises more than 30% that doesn't serve in the army. If haredi participation in the nation's economy and defense does not increase much faster than usual, Israel will likely lack the economic, scientific and military strength – and perhaps even the moral willpower – to confront the challenges it will have to face when it approaches its 100th birthday.

Public awareness of this danger is growing. Sooner or later it may coalesce into political action, or worse.

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