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30 April 2007
Turkish Journalists and Policy Analysts-April 2007

Looking at Israel from the Inside

The energy that the Jewish youths carried was incredible as they waited for Shabbat to begin while in front of the Wailing Wall. Arm in arm, they danced and sang and as the sun came down, they leapt toward the Wall in groups to pray. They exhibited joy and unity that amazed the people who watched them. According to Judaism, God created the Earth in six days and rested on the seventh which they [the crowd in front of the Wall] commemorated. This joy took place every Friday until Shabbat concluded one day later when people flocked downtown. I tried to understand how a society of people formerly disconnected and from different lands could become, once again, one nation and embody such a spirit of unity...

As Turkish journalists who participated on Project Interchange's organized trip to Israel in mid-April, we tried to find answers to this question on the seminar. The 'network' theory of Gidi Grinstein of the Re'ut Institute (Re'ut can be translated as the ability to see) was an eye opener in the quest to understand how the Jewish existence continued on for centuries and how it found an expression in Zionism to create the Jewish state. The main theme is in fact well known: a nation is exiled after the Roman invasion, but it is rooted in the Jewish religion and keeps its identity and traditions for centuries. At the same time, this is a kind of existence that created being 'the other' in different societies, and that also included making those societies 'others' [for the Jews]. It finds its most traumatic result with the Holocaust. For example, they think they cannot be both Germans and Jews. This situation leads Jews to unite under the same state where they will not be a minority. It was interesting to see our Jewish friends at the seminars to describe Zionism as the "attempt to normalize an abnormal existence".

However, I was most interested in the Israeli state's relation with religion. The father of Zionism, Theodore Herzl; the founder of Israel, Ben Gurion; and other leaders who make up the ideological spine [of the movement] were not religious. The state that they founded is in fact influenced by the times and is a left-leaning and secular state. However, they are not scared to put the Jewish religion in the center of this state. No matter what the repercussions are for today, they [the statesmen] are not scared to exempt the religious Jews from military service. In the middle of the circle are the religious Jews and their mission is to uphold the traditions that keep Jews together. The fathers of Zionism think that the Jews' existence as a nation will be stronger this way. There are ongoing discussions on the Jewish shari'a in Israel but nobody is screaming out loud that there is a reactionary threat. This shows that unlike in Turkey, there is a spirit of compromise in Israel.

The basis of Grinstein's theory is flexibility. The Zionism ideology that Israel rests on mixes the ideas of nationalism, religion, liberalism, democracy, [and] humanism. It is not an ideology of pure democracy, not an ideology of sole humanism. Grinstein says that "This is seen as a weakness of Israel. However, the truth is the opposite. Israel derives its power from this". According to him, if you exaggerate democracy, you lose Judaism, and if you exaggerate humanism, you lose land. In the same way, if you exaggerate religion, you lose liberalism...

The miracle that Zionism created for a landless people in Israel has many opposite views within it. And it is the name of a tragedy for the Palestinian people who seem to have lost the war for land. Thus, there is great benefit in looking at Israel not only from the point of the Palestinian problem, but also from the inside.