Breaking Away from the Israeli Model

By Brad Brooks-Rubin[1]

"Americans understand now what Israelis have felt for years."[2] In the days following 11 September 2001, it became quite common to hear statements like this one made by Moshe Fox of the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC to a group of students in West Virginia just weeks after the 9/11 attacks. It was also common to hear that the US government would need to begin to use the measures and methods long employed by the Israeli government to combat terror.

Not long after Fox's speech, another Israeli warned of the consequences of following his country's model. Historian Tom Segev, writing in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, provided fascinating insight into the immediate post-9/11 American scene.[3] Although he understood the flag-waving and the jingoism he was seeing on display in those first weeks – of which he had seen plenty in Israel – Segev warned of the consequences of truly following the Israeli model. "The Israeli experience," he wrote, "clearly shows that torture and other limitations on civil liberties have not made that country safer; they have made it more oppressive. We Israelis have also learned that curbs on civil liberties rarely turn out to be temporary, even if intended to be: They are all too easily introduced but very difficult to get rid of."

In other words, Segev warned that, by following the Israeli path, Americans would come to understand not only the Israeli feelings of terror and insecurity, but also the Israeli sense of living in an increasingly oppressive society acting in an increasingly undemocratic manner.

Now, as we near the fifth anniversary of 9/11, even a casual reading of an American newspaper lends eerie credibility to that warning. The following topics, covered in the last few days of May 2006, could indeed be taken from either Israeli or American newspapers: Discussions of a militarized border and wall to protect the citizenry; torture of suspected enemies by the military and other security agencies; reports of reprisal killings by soldiers against innocent civilians of an occupied population; and the decay of the social services network in the wake of increased military, intelligence and other "security" spending.

Fittingly, then, the American coverage of the Israeli Supreme Court's decision in the family unification case – a matter that cuts as precisely and painfully across the security/civil rights divide as any issue in either country – in two of the leading dailies in the US was led by security-related headlines. The articles in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*' on the decision were entitled, respectively, "Israel Kills Islamic Jihad Leader in Arrest Attempt"[4] and "Israel Raids West Bank Towns, Killing 6."[5] Despite their headlines, both articles actually devoted most of their text to discussions of the Court's decision in the family unification case. Yet it appears that, even in journalism, security policies and actions must dominate.

Now, at least in the context of Israel, the media has long portrayed the situation thus: security over all else. However, following 9/11, as Segev warned, security has become the policy and media talisman in the US that it has been in Israel for decades.

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[2] John Shelton & Josh Jones, "Embassy Minister Speaks on Middle East at Marshall U.," The Parthenon (Oct. 23, 2001).
[3] Tom Segev, "Modern Parallels Between U.S., Israel," The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, p. B4 (Nov. 28, 2001).
[4] Scott Wilson, "Israel Kills Islamic Jihad Leader in Arrest Attempt," The Washington Post, p. A10 (May 15, 2006).
[5] Greg Myre, "Israel Raids West Bank Towns, Killing 6," The New York Times, p. 3 (May 15, 2006).

Moreover, just as in Israel, the most critical aspect of security as a lasting policy goal or as a news item in the US is its absence, its intangibility, its pursuit. For, as long as the people believe that security is absent and that they are unsafe – or at least may be unsafe tomorrow – then the government is likely to remain relatively unchecked in its stated pursuit of policies that it can somehow couch in security terms. How else to explain the family unification policy, where both the State's rationale for the policy and the judicial decision reviewing the policy were rooted so much more in fear than fact?

On the one hand, as an American who has watched his society shift to the Israeli model, I admit to understanding the instinct to develop and support decisions like the one delivered in the family unification case. My family lives in the Washington, DC area; we spend nearly all of our days within eights miles of the White House. Therefore, if I am told that separating American citizens from their spouses and children will keep me, my family, and my colleagues safe, I am likely to at least stop to consider whether it may be justifiable. Many other Americans, I believe, would have a similar initial instinct.

However, the lesson to be drawn from the family unification decision, indeed from the overall security-based policies and actions of the Israeli and US governments, must be that the time has come to move beyond that initial instinct, beyond decisions rooted in fear rather than fact. Ultimately, none of the justices of the Israeli or US Supreme Courts, none of the members of the Knesset or Congress, and neither the Prime Minister nor the President can ever prove the existence of actual, tangible, lasting security. No words, no amount of weaponry, no administrative policy can ever tell me with more than a minimal degree of certainty that my family and I will be secure on any given day.

What these officials can tell me, however, is that in exchange for an intangible and uncertain intimation of security, my rights and the rights of my fellow citizens will be trampled upon. Families will be torn apart. People will be tortured. Civil society will be fractured and impoverished. And I, so they tell me, must live with that.

Of course, it is inevitably the government that the people turn to for blame, for answers and for reassurance when terrorists strike and insecurity becomes tragically tangible. Perhaps that tendency is also part of the problem. Segev warned that, once the government begins down the path of eroding civil liberties, it is hard to turn back. One of the reasons may be that we, the people, do not do enough to challenge the government, to put our own sandbags out to halt the erosion of our civil rights, or to demand responsibility from those who act in the name of security. Perhaps the fifth anniversary of 9/11 will remind all of us that governmental policies in the vein of the ban on family unification law do not make us secure. What we should also be reminded of, however, is that it is up to us – each and every one of us, not just a handful of activists and lawyers – to take a stand and demand that we finally break away from the Israeli model.