



## Dan Hannan: Why Israel is the second-most successful former British colony

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Israel isn't just a better place to live than most neighboring states. It is a better place to live *as an Arab*.

Suppose you were given a choice before birth. You could be born into a median-income Muslim household in Algeria, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Syria or Yemen. You wouldn't hesitate long, would you?

Last week, as the Jewish state celebrated its seventieth birthday, scores of columnists drew attention to its achievements — which are, indeed, dazzling. Israel is, by the standards of its region, a uniquely free, democratic, open and wealthy society. As Marian Tupy of the Cato Institute notes: “Average income per capita dwarfs those in the neighboring countries, allowing for superior social outcomes, including higher life expectancy, lower infant mortality, and universal provision of drinking water and electricity. Israelis are better educated, own more computers, and have more access to the Internet.”

Some people in these neighboring countries resent the comparison. They point out that, whereas the United States backs Israel to the hilt on grounds that it is “the only democracy in the Middle East”, it applies a very different standard to Arab states, where it has sponsored some abominable military strongmen over the years.

Look, they say, at the free pass that the State Department gives to Egypt's Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, who imprisons journalists, guns down unarmed protesters, cozies up to Vladimir Putin and allows the economy to be run as a racket by generals and their cronies. Dictatorships, they argue, tend by their nature to create closed, corrupt, crony economies.

For what it's worth, I think there is something in their argument. The West has indeed made some bad choices in the Middle East. A naturally enterprising and mercantile Islamic civilization

has become bitter and resentful. The British Muslim writer Ed Husain argues in a powerful new book, *The House of Islam*, that the deplorable hostility toward Israel that he has encountered in so many Arab states has its roots in a sense of collective humiliation that has been gnawing away at Arab intellectuals since Napoleon smashed his way into Egypt in 1798. This sense of wounded pride, of affronted “*karama*” (dignity), lies behind the apparently unreasonable choices that some Arabs make.

Why, for example, would you blow yourself up in order to target Israeli civilians who have done you no wrong — especially when your family is likely to be punished in consequence? Why would you lob missiles ineffectively across the border from Gaza when each one attracts retaliation that *is* effective? These are not acts driven by logic, Husain argues. Rather, they are an attempt to salvage *karama* through sacrifice.

Yet such parallels make Israel’s successes the more impressive. There are reasons for political failure in many post-Ottoman countries but, when it comes to tough breaks, Israel is in a league of its own. The Jewish state was attacked within hours of its birth by the combined armies of five vastly larger neighbors. It has been in a condition of semi-permanent conflict ever since, forced to divert resources and manpower to national defense. Many of its neighbors refuse to trade with it or allow its citizens to enter their territory. Yet it has become one of the most innovative and prosperous places on earth.

Never mind the regional comparisons. Contrast Israel with other territories that acquired independence from Britain at around that time, such as Burma or Pakistan. They began with a similar political infrastructure, including the vast benefit of the common law. Yet none of them matches Israel’s record when it comes to multi-party democracy, an independent judiciary, secure property rights, free speech, pluralist media or readiness to punish corruption.

Most countries that became independent after World War Two implemented the idiotic statist doctrines that were then in fashion. But Israel has moved on from those, shifting — especially under Benjamin Netanyahu — from a kibbutz culture to a start-up culture.

What was the magic ingredient? Rough neighborhood, arid soil, difficult trade. We’re left with the obvious explanation. The people who settled Israel were unusually gifted and energetic (as migrants often are) and were driven (again, as migrants often are) by a dream of freedom.

The consequences of their drive and know-how have been extraordinary. Indeed, I can think of only one other former British possession that has thrived to the same extent. Its people, too, were driven by a dream of freedom, and they likewise drew on a common-law tradition of limited government.

Look around you, cousins. You’ve hit on the ultimate winning formula.