

The Greatest Threat

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As seen previously in this space, until recently the state of Israel has enjoyed relatively stable relations with its various neighbors (see "Israel's New Crisis," *Forerunner*, July-August 2011). However, with the unrest that has swept through the Middle East and North Africa since the "Arab Spring," noteworthy changes have occurred throughout Israel's periphery, causing it to reassess threats to its security from all directions.

To the south in Egypt, there is a struggle for power between the ruling military regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. The peace treaty between Israel and Egypt has been a cornerstone of national security for Israel, and the Egyptian military is interested in keeping it intact. But as the Muslim Brotherhood continues to gain clout, Israel is considering the possibility of a hostile southern neighbor once again.

As the al-Assad regime in Syria continues to disintegrate, and the possibility arises of it being replaced by Sunni Islamists, Israel is growing concerned about how events will play out. Up to this point, Israel has supported al-Assad, preferring to deal with a leader more rational than the Sunni Islamists who make up the majority of Syria. However, Syria has become the new battleground in the proxy war between the West and Iran. If the regime survives, Iran—dedicated to Israel's destruction—will have a solid swath of influence from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean; if al-Assad falls, his replacement will be something much more hostile to Israel.

While Israel is not yet under direct military threat, the shifts in geopolitics throughout the region are putting increased pressure on the tiny Jewish state. Israeli leaders are closely watching these threats, as well as recent foreign policy changes in Jordan and Turkey and the ever-present Palestinian *intifada*. However, the greatest threat to Israel is off the radar of most.

The modern state of Israel is largely made up of descendants of the ancient kingdom of Judah, which consisted of the southern tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (known collectively as Jews). After being warned repeatedly by God through various prophets to return to Him, the southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonian empire and taken into captivity. The Judean captivity in Babylon lasted for seventy years (as foretold by Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10), after which the Jews were allowed to return to the Promised Land and rebuild the Temple.

Before her conquest by Babylon, Judah was a hotbed of apostasy, and the sins of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking were particularly grievous to God. The kingdom was a multicultural society, more interested in the peoples and cultures around them than the true religion of the Creator God. There was great wealth but also great oppression. Rather than turning to and relying on their God, the nation sought security through political alliances and treaties. In every way imaginable, Judah forgot Him—and He scattered them as a result (Jeremiah 18:15-17). The greatest threat to Judah was not the Babylonian, Assyrian, or Egyptian empires but in forgetting the God who had established them in the Land of Promise and who determined whether they rose or fell.

There are significant parallels with the modern state of Israel. Though God's hand can be seen in its founding in 1948 (and survival during subsequent wars), it gives every appearance of treading the

same path as its ancient predecessor. Israel today, rather than relying on God, depends on treaties with its neighbors and support from powerful patrons for security.

While there is not the same temptation today to follow Ashtoreth, Molech, or the Baals, the majority of its citizens also do not follow God. According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2010, 42% of Israeli Jews identified themselves as secular, and a further 25% claimed to be "non-religious traditionalists." A 2007 poll by the Israeli Democracy Institute found that a mere 27% of Israeli Jews say that they keep the Sabbath, and 53% said they do not keep it at all. An estimated 10,000 Messianic Jews, as well as over 160,000 professing Christians live in Israel, but they face determined (and occasionally physical) opposition to any promotion of the Son of God because many religious Jews view it as incitement to idolatry.

Secularism is a religion vacuum; something will fill the void. It should not be surprising, then, that absent moral underpinnings, some of the same sins of ancient Judah are manifest. For example, a 2009 poll of Israelis by AngusReidGlobal found that 61% believed that homosexuals should be allowed to "marry"—one of the highest percentages in the world. Tel Aviv hosts one of the world's largest "pride parades" every year, and in 2009, the *Calgary Herald* named the city one of "the world's most gay-friendly places."

As with the ancient kingdom of Judah, the state of Israel faces many threats. History shows that, when the Israelites were faithful to God, they were strong politically and militarily, but when they forsook Him, He caused them to be subjugated. Though millennia have passed between the days of the kingdom of Judah and the present, the same immutable laws are in effect. Israel today is not facing the same military threats as ancient Judah, but the threat it should be most concerned about is the one that caused the decimation and captivity of its forbears: forgetting God.