

Mood Is Dark as Israel Marks 62nd Year as a Nation By [ETHAN BRONNER](#)

JERUSALEM — Every year, Israelis approach the joy of their Independence Day right after immersing themselves in a 24-hour period of grief for fallen soldiers. Before the fireworks burst across the skies Monday night to celebrate the country's 62nd birthday, the airwaves filled with anguished stories of servicemen and -women killed, the Kaddish prayer of mourning and speeches placing the deeply personal losses of a small country into the sweep of Jewish history. So there is nothing new or unusual about Israelis' marking their collective accomplishments with sorrow and concern. It happens all the time, especially among those on the political left who are angry that [Israel's](#) occupation of the [Palestinians](#) shows no sign of ending.

But there is something about the mood this year that feels darker than usual. It has a bipartisan quality to it. Both left and right are troubled, and both largely about the same things, especially the Iranian nuclear program combined with growing tensions with the Obama administration. "There is a confluence of two very worrying events," said Michael Freund, a rightist columnist for The Jerusalem Post in a telephone interview. "One is the Iranian threat, an existential threat. Add to that the fact that for the first time in recent memory there is a president in the White House who is not overly sensitive to the Jewish state and its interests. You put the two together and it will affect anyone's mood, even an optimist like me."

Haaretz, the newspaper that serves as the voice of the shrinking political left in this country, is in a truly depressed mood. Its [editorial on Monday](#) contended that Israel "is isolated globally and embroiled in a conflict with the superpower whose friendship and support are vital to its very existence." "It is devoid of any diplomatic plan aside from holding on to the territories and afraid of any movement," the editorial said. "It wallows in a sense of existential threat that has only grown with time. It seizes on every instance of anti-Semitism, whether real or imagined, as a pretext for continued apathy and passivity."

Independence Day here is a moment to take stock of the country's achievements. And the data are very positive. Per capita annual gross domestic product is nearly \$30,000, double that of Russia and close to that of Germany. Israeli citizens live on average more than 80 years, on a par with life expectancy in Norway. The number of murders per capita is a third of that of the United States. Israel's population has passed 7.5 million, more than nine times what it was at its birth in 1948, and is growing at 1.8 percent a year, a rate no other developed country approaches. But the worries are deep, and the sense of celebration this year is muted. Yoel Esteron, a political centrist who is publisher and editor of a daily business paper, [Calcalist](#), wrote an essay for Independence Day that praises the islands of high-tech excellence in Israel, but frets that they are surrounded by seas of underdevelopment. Israelis in the country's business elite in and around Tel Aviv, he wrote, are

increasingly focused on personal wealth accumulation and have lost sight of a collective pursuit of anything bigger. “I have talked to many people in recent days, not only in preparation for that column but generally, and they say, ‘You know, I am worried,’ ” he said by telephone. “There is a kind of malaise, a sense among businessmen that the national future is not promising, and that feeling seems to exist for those on the right as well as the left.” A [new BBC poll](#) of how people around the world regard other countries puts Israel among those least favorably viewed, including Iran, North Korea and Pakistan. Israelis are profoundly worried — and profoundly divided — about their isolation. The left blames the government for a failure to withdraw from the West Bank, remove Jewish settlements and agree to share Jerusalem with the Palestinians. The right blames Palestinian and Arab intransigence and Western gutlessness, and says Jews have always been resented, so concessions will change nothing.

One thing both left and right have come to believe is that the government’s difficulties with the Obama administration are likely to prove central to the country’s fate in the coming year, especially if Iran gets closer to making a nuclear weapon. The Jerusalem Post, the voice of the right-leaning English-speaking immigrants here, titled its Monday editorial “[62, Under a U.S. Cloud](#)” and fretted that the Obama administration “has diverged from the tone of previous administrations on the status of Jerusalem, and it has damagingly publicly questioned fundamental aspects of our alliance.” It added that Washington needed to understand that “Israel is still resented and rejected by most of the Arab world, not because of this or that policy, or this or that territorial presence, but because of the very fact of our existence here.”

Ari Shavit, a centrist intellectual who writes for Haaretz, agrees that much of the problem lies with Israel’s enemies. But in a [plaintive column](#) addressed to Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) on Monday, he said the issue was not whom to blame, but how to save the country. Unlike most writers at Haaretz, Mr. Shavit has written positively about Mr. Netanyahu and other rightist leaders. He noted in his column that after the election here a year ago, he entered Mr. Netanyahu’s office and received a hug. Now, he wrote, Mr. Netanyahu faces a truly existential set of choices that he cannot avoid. The world, he said, has an unforgiving view of Israel no longer affected by the Holocaust, and Mr. Netanyahu has to take radical action. “What shapes the world’s perception of Israel today is not the crematoria, but the checkpoints,” he wrote. “Not the trains, but the settlements.” He said that Israel must again become an inalienable part of the West, adding that “the West is not prepared to accept Israel as an occupying state.”

He said he believed that this was what many Israelis would like to tell their prime minister on Independence Day. Whether or not he is right, and whether or not his prescription is widely shared here, his sense of alarm echoed in nearly every conversation here in recent days.

