S'pore can tap its potential as a social hub to build broader unity

By **PROFESSOR SHAUL MISHAL**[1]

This paper was written after I spent five months in 2019 in Singapore as a Visiting Professor at Yale-NUS College. My thoughts and observations on Singapore in comparison with Israel are based on meetings with officials from the Singapore Government, students, faculty and members of Yale-NUS, as well as citizens I met occasionally in public places. This paper will focus on a comparison between Israel and Singapore and insights about social cohesion and the role of the state in both countries. The comparison is based on my four-dimension model derived from a relational-conceptual framework between Vision, geopolitical context (Space), Agenda, and Resources (VSAR model) (Mishal, forthcoming).

In essence, this comparison reveals that both countries share a similar grand vision of nation-building based on an ultimate desire for self-determination, independence, social cohesion, and prosperity. While Israel and Singapore are powerful countries with strong, state-run institutions, they demonstrate some social weaknesses. Both are witnessing communal fragmentation and ethnic cleavage.

While Israel enjoys solid support from the Jewish diaspora, especially in the United States, Singapore struggles with intra-country solidarity without a strong socio-cultural pillar. It grapples with domestic social fragility because the state, rather than deeper cultural traditions of common destinies and national-level religious affiliations to communities, is what unites its society.

---

[1] with assistance from Yale-NUS students Arjun Jayaraman and Li Jing Yin, Joel.

This paper proposes some considerations that aim to narrow social fragility in Singapore by encouraging open dialogue and the construction of a deeper Singaporean cultural tradition. It is separated into four parts: The first will focus on the geopolitical context of Singapore and Israel; the second analyses the visions of both countries and how they are intimately linked to these geopolitical constraints; the third part examines the resources used by both countries that further their inability to propagate these visions; while the fourth will discuss future trends in the relationship between state power and ethnic communities in Singapore.

1. Geopolitical Context (Space)

The space that Singapore occupies in South-east Asia is similar to that occupied by Israel in the Middle East. While Israel, since its establishment in 1948, has lived in a state of prolonged political and military conflict with Arab states and their Muslim communities, Singapore has developed a successful strategy of peaceful exchange and dialogue with its neighbours. Indeed, both Singapore and Israel are surrounded by countries that are antithetical to their *raison d'être*. Johnson et al (2009) find that "Israel faces more immediate and serious threats to its security. It is small, both in terms of land mass and population, relative to its adversaries. It shares borders with openly hostile states and is situated among a number of countries that refuse to acknowledge it as a state". Israel is centrally located in a region known as the Fertile Crescent, and shares its borders with four Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, in addition to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Singapore is similarly located as a multi-racial and multi-religious society in the midst of Muslim-majority states. Former Indonesian President B.J. Habibie infamously remarked that Singapore was a "little red dot" in a sea of "green" - the 265 million people of Indonesia and 33 million of Malaysia (Borsuk and Chua, 1998); therefore, in geopolitical terms, Israel and Singapore are not so different.

Yet, the way that Israel and Singapore manage their relationships with those in their immediate vicinity is vastly different. While Israel constantly engages in bitter military clashes with Arab states and Muslim communities, Singapore has developed a successful strategy of peaceful exchange and dialogue with its neighbours.

From the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948 to the Suez War of 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Israel has been constantly engaged in a territorial push and pull with neighbouring countries that have been eager to defeat it or eradicate it as a state. The

animosity between Jews and Muslims is thrown into sharp relief, particularly when analysing the Yom Kippur War. Among other considerations, Arab states chose Yom Kippur to attack Israel because they assumed Jews would be celebrating a dearly-cherished religious holiday, and hoped to catch the country off-guard.

In contrast, Singapore enjoys friendly relations with its neighbours on a bilateral and multilateral basis, and is a multi-racial and multi-religious society; the region is also enmeshed within the frameworks of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Singapore was a founding member along with Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand. The very inclusion of Singapore among two of its largest probable enemies – Malaysia and Indonesia – in the foundation of an institution created for the express purpose of dialogue and discussion in the immediate aftermath of Konfrontasi[2] is evidence to suggest that the Republic has developed a far more amicable stance towards neighbours which are unlike it.

2.   Grand Vision and State Agenda

A country's grand vision can be considered its ultimate mission, or an end goal that cannot be compromised. To that end, Israel and Singapore work towards four inviolable and sacrosanct goals: Independence, self- determination, social cohesion, and prosperity. Singapore manifests these principles in the creation of a strong state apparatus that emphasises firm central control. This is manifested in the siege mentality created by the founding government of Singapore, led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Noting that Singapore had a no natural resources, a tiny land mass, and lacked strategic depth, the Government turned to human ingenuity to tackle the existential problems that threatened Singaporeans' ability to develop political stability and a decent economic existence.

The result, however, was an overarching spirit of fear and insecurity. Nevertheless, this brought positive long-term results. Senior Fellow Peter Ho noted in 2017 that "Singapore, without natural resources, had been able to provide a good life for its people through good governance, and to create jobs through pragmatic policies aimed at bringing in foreign investment" (Ho, 2017). Singapore has thus succeeded in continuing to fulfil large components of its grand vision. Israel holds such values dear as well. Its 1948 Declaration of Independence

---

[2]Konfrontasi, translated literally to "confrontation", was a period of military belligerence between Indonesia and the then-Malaysian Federation, which included Singapore. It was a foreign policy stance mooted by its then-President Sukarno, who was disenchanted by the formation of the Malaysian Federation.

expressly asserted the "natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State" (People's Council, 1948). The strong Israeli state system, coupled with support from the Jewish diaspora, is a strong and durable social pillar. The Jewish-American community bears testimony to this. For instance, the United Jewish Appeal in America (UJA) campaigned and donated large sums to Israel since independence. In 1951, Israel managed to leverage its socio-ethnic organic solidarity with the Jewish diaspora to gain more financial aid through the Israel Bond programme (Matlow, 2016).

Interestingly, Dan Lainer Vos' (2013) Sinew of a Nation skillfully captures how diaspora Jews are not merely investing or donating to Israel, but are actually essential to its nation-building. He further claimed that donating to Israel joined diaspora Jews with those living in Israel. In other words, financial assistance from the Jewish diaspora provides more than just economic relief to Israel - it is a symbol of the Jewish diaspora binding itself to the social fabric of the Jewish community in Israel, thus transcending national borders. This forms the foundation of Israel's social pillar that is tied to its nation-building independence - a resource that Singapore jarringly lacks.

3. Resources

There are two noteworthy points when considering Singapore's story of political and economic development: (i) The Government has been at the centre of this development, given its close involvement with policies that have led to the country's prosperity; and (ii) these existential priorities far outweighed the creation of a sustainable and deep Singaporean culture that can draw multiple generations of Singaporeans together. While the Pioneer and Merdeka Generations remember the days of Independence and the attitudes associated with it, the current, younger generations – known colloquially as Millennials and Generation Z – may not completely relate to that struggle, given their inability to empathise and localise themselves within it. Hence, many youths have labelled the Government's efforts at national identity building and emphasis on the solidarity of Singaporeans as a way of promoting their political legitimacy via mere statecraft, or publicity.

This is indeed worrying, given that President Halimah Yacob herself noted that social cohesion in Singapore is already fragile (Tham, 2019). Further generational fracturing may prove lethal to Singapore's precarious harmony.

Singapore manages its international relations well; there is perhaps a need to look inwards now. The Republic does attempt to build a national culture and national heritage by engaging in the use of symbolic resources marshalled by a strong state. Israel focuses on symbolic resources and a hidden social pillar – its strong affiliation to the American Jewish community, as well as close military and social relations with the United States. In Singapore, cultural education starts in primary school, with social studies lessons, coupled with school-based programmes celebrating multi-racialism and multiculturalism. This is seen most clearly during Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, and Deepavali celebrations in schools. Of particular note is the celebration of Racial Harmony Day[3], during which students are encouraged to wear the clothing[4] of their or other ethnicities so they can better understand the diverse practices and cultures in Singapore. However, this learning may be superficial, and may not translate into broader unity among younger Singaporeans.

This togetherness is not the same as that which older generations speak of: They tend to reminisce fondly of days when people across age groups and races gathered in communal spaces, bonded by the struggle of Independence. Furthermore, in a state where economic development and prosperity is a key priority and meritocracy is oft-quoted as the route to success, Singaporeans believe that success is tied to monetary wealth, and that failure is a moral failing tied to the inability to work hard, rather than the lack of access to opportunities to succeed.

These problems may be exacerbated in future, further deepening social cleavages, especially given erratic and unpredictable global events that may further slow domestic economic growth and affect the livelihood of Singaporeans. This is also a concern shared by the 4th Generation leadership of Singapore[5].

Unlike Israel, Singapore lacks a deep historical tradition and national or religious affiliations to communities outside the country that share common destinies. The younger generation, for example, is more concerned than others about inequality within the country - a concept that

---

[3] Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, and Deepavali are cultural festivals celebrated by the Chinese, Muslim, and Hindu communities in Singapore, respectively. They are also viewed as opportunities for those who do not celebrate those festivals to understand more about them.

[4] Racial Harmony Day is a non-religious celebration instituted by the Ministry of Education in 1997 to remember the 1964 racial riots

[5] The 4th Generation leadership is the collective term for a group of younger ministers who are currently being groomed to lead the Singaporean Government. Its members include Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing; the former is slated to become Singapore's next Prime Minister.

divides more than it unites. One cannot escape the possibility that this may lead in the future to insecurity that threatens the social fabric.

Singapore is heavily dependent on the global economy, and dramatic developments and the repeated occurrence of crisis events around the world may hurt its economic success, increasing its peoples' sense of insecurity. The Singapore Government may thus not be able to stand on its economic prowess alone. The betterment of Singapore may require thinking in social terms.

4. Future Trends

Since a society that defines itself primarily by economic success places its identity in the hands of a global economy that is unpredictable and subject to the fate and actions of other countries, Singapore may need a more enduring strategy to narrow its social cleavages over time. Assuming that Singapore, as a state, cannot survive without a cultural tradition, this weakness may be solved by considering its relative advantages.

Singapore's value proposition lies in the "hub" phenomenon. Given its strategic location in the Straits of Malacca and in South-east Asia, Singapore has always positioned itself as a key stop for entrepôt trade, given that it connects the Indian littoral to the South China Sea. This has expanded post-Independence, via its position as a neutral arbiter in great power relations, as well as its deference to international law, making it a hub for mediation, oil refining, finance, and biotechnology.

Singapore has the potential to develop as a social hub, in addition to being a strong economic one, as a result of its uniqueness as a city state. Socially, Singapore is a web of ethnic communities. Communal consciousness dominates the social scene, and it plays a significant role in daily life, cultural habits, social customs, cuisine, family relations and social status.

Often, observations on geopolitics and state systems follow reality in categorical thinking amid the contradictions between state and communal, non-state actors. We propose a communal mode of thinking, which focuses on a range of possibilities and scope of opportunities that transcend correlations, which shape political conduct. Treating ethnic communities as discrete analytical units provides some distinct advantages: First, it allows for a semi-autonomous, non-categorical articulation of non-state ethnic entities; second, it enables tracking of dynamic shifts and rapid changes that occur within communal actors; third, it contributes to a better

understanding of the diverse challenges facing states in an era where power is shifting to multinational and non-state communal actors.

But state perspective falls short in answering the dynamism of ethnic multiplicity. This, in part, is a result of the political order that gave rise to strong modern state systems over non-state ethnic communities. The state-driven approach that views communal entities as the negation of itself encourages taking to the high ground of grand visions and timeless beliefs, rather than sticking to the middle-ground of pragmatic, narrow and situational visions.

Due to the gradual deterioration of the state's hegemonic status since the second part of the 20th century, it is impossible to continue ignoring the central role played by the emerging communal reality. Since state logic is inspired by an ultimate vision, identity plays a significant role in the public agenda and in its priorities. In contrast, common identity, according to the communal rationale, is in constant flux, shifting according to interests, contexts, and current developments. It is thus based more on a situational mode of thinking, rather than on ultimate goals and all-out vision. Such an approach also suggests an inverse relationship: Instead of starting with identity as a key explanation of political reality, we move to localisation and to the existing interests of a political actor. The localisation, as part of the shifting geopolitical environment, seems adequate to multiple identities and the simultaneous presence of states and communities. Rather than relying on the ultimate vision - such as "radical Islam wants to destroy Singapore, or Iran wants to destroy Israel" – which entails strict ordering and categorical patterns of analysis, the communal, middle-ground approach is inspired by a situational awareness which highlights its range of opportunities (Graubard, 1979; Ahmad, 2011; Ruppert, 2014).

Indeed, since the beginning of the modern nation-state era based on the Westphalian system, the world has been balanced between war and peace, multiplying economic agreements, and cultural exchanges. In the past few decades, however, such roles have stagnated to the extent that a significant level of interconnectedness has been reached, and this promiscuity has been toxic to sovereign functions. The main reason for this is "globalisation". Fundamentally, since distances are shorter, communication faster, and hybridity ubiquitous, the state's traditional roles of mediation have gradually lost their significance as its impact in such arenas declined. In other words, if the impact of the state is less significant, it is because different actors, such as cities and local communities, which do not operate on the same level, are getting increasingly powerful.

The decline of the state as a hegemonic power challenges the very foundations of concepts such as regime power, elite interests and state sovereignty (Korani and El-Mahdi, 2013). In this view, a clear hierarchical distinction could be made between the centre and periphery of power -

between "the haves and the have-nots" - the former determining the latter from top to bottom, in upper and lower classes, educated and uneducated people, professional and non-professional agents, white- and blue-collar workers. Due to the significant change in the balance of power between states and non-state ethnic entities, we can hardly speak of a functioning state hierarchy holding the state as a formidable, stable and suitable entity for all political situations.

In that sense, states' logic becomes improper when considered exclusively for the explanation of political reality. A new language and a new political environment are in the process of becoming diffused, fragmented and fluid in nature.

Singapore can narrow the discrepancy between being a strong state and having a fragile social structure by strengthening the power of the social pillar through direct engagement of Singaporean ethnic communities so that they may have a relative advantage over the state.

The international reputation that Singapore enjoys will probably help the state introduce initiatives that will enable it to rely on its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural reality. This may include efforts to focus on communal and religious issues that occupy the time and minds of ethnic communities across the board that the state system has so far failed to deal with effectively. Encouraging the Indian and the Mali communities to initiate forums for open dialogue with their mother ethnic communities on common issues related to relations between the young and the older generation, or the integration of young people into modern white collar professions, are some examples. These initiatives may result in communities playing a significant role in creating and advancing dialogue and cooperation based on common agendas, and paving the road for a better understanding between states in conflict.

Close dialogue and cooperation between the state and the communal leadership may contribute to a working formula based on a fruitful division of labour between them. We can convincingly argue that communities are at the heart of tomorrow's political system, turning nation-states into community-states. This dialogue may rely on an outsider third party as a proxy between both sides to enable close cooperation.

In terms of policy, one may think about social initiatives on critical religious and ethnic issues that states find difficult to deal with: Religious, cultural, ethnic, status disputes within and between states. Such issues are unsuitable for the institutional, formal and hierarchical nature of the state system to deal with effectively.

In the Singapore case, to bridge the discrepancy between the strong state and its fragile social structure, one may adopt a new mode of thinking based on the notion of a communal (city) state which is based on:

1. Encouraging ethnic communities to be agents of cross-border collaboration.

2. Greater political participation by communities.

3. Transforming state identities and national ideologies both from within and without.

4. Enabling communal activities for transnational ethnic and cultural diversities.

5. Using communities as a mechanism to smooth inter-state disputes.

The idea of turning communities into centres for dialogue and cooperation is at the heart of this rationale. Communities are dynamic, are not hierarchically nor vertically constructed, can adjust their vision to dynamic changes, and can reorganise their use of resources in order to maintain their status vis-a vis state power. Creating a model based on Singapore, a communal city-state changes the bargaining matrix for negotiating states, given the removal of the complexities of foreign policy. This model of communal city-state may create open dialogues on daily issues they share in common, encouraging a reality which will enable them to bypass prolonged interstate conflict, such as that between India and Pakistan, Iran and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, Qatar and the Saudis, Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and North African Arab countries. Cities such as Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Amman, Cairo, Damascus, Algiers, and Baghdad are good candidates for cooperation under suitable conditions.

Singapore is the ideal example for such an adventurous and innovative project. This initiative could see the creation of a unique system of dialogue that promotes greater understanding from the smallest religious units. For example, this programme could start by addressing differences and similarities between the various sects of Islam and Judaism: Sunnis, Shia, Orthodox Jews, reformists, and liberals. This could then expand to understanding different practices within religions, such as the multiple strands within Hinduism and Sikhism.

A further step could see the implementation of novel ideas such as appealing to the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, to coordinate and organise interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Jews aimed at discussing similarities and differences in their religions. Such a communal initiative, if successful, could become a forum through which messages between ethnic groups and religions can be exchanged, promoting a deeper dialogue between different the social sectors in Singapore. While the current discussion seems overly religious and risks alienating the non-religious segments of society, the success of such discussions could become a springboard for greater and more open conversation in society.

It also has the potential to move beyond the local context and use modes of discussion to facilitate dialogue between overseas communal leaders at the locus of conflict. This can make

Singapore a hub for negotiation, mediation, and inter-state dispute settlement. More importantly, it may provide an opportunity to facilitate open dialogue among the different ethnic or religious groups in an attempt to strengthen the Singaporean identity into one that is rooted in cultural history and commonality between communities, rather than dependent on external economic forces.

About The Author

Shaul Mishal is the Brian Mulroney Professor of Government at Tel Aviv University, Professor at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Visiting Professor at Yale-NUS, Visiting Professor and senior research fellow at the MacMillan Center for International and Area studies at Yale University, visiting scholar at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard and a Senior Fellow at the Harvard School of Public Health. He has authored or co-authored six books and numerous articles in subjects related to Arab and Islamic political cultures, political economy, Hamas and Palestinian politics. He obtained his Ph.D. in Political Science from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and completed Postdoctoral studies at Yale University. He can be reached at shaul.mishal@gmail.com

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad I (2011) The categorical revolution: Democratic uprising in the Middle East. Economic & Political Weekly 46(44-45): 30-35.

2. Borsuk, R., & Chua, R. (1998). Singapore Strains Relations with Indonesia's

President. Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from

https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB902170180588248000.

3.- Baubock Rainer, (2003), "Reinventing Urban Citizenship", Citizenship Studies, Issue 7, Volume 2, pp139-160.

4.Graubard SR (1979) The state, New York: W. W. Norton & Company Press.

5.Ho, P. (2017). IPS-Nathan Lectures. Singapore.

6.Johnson, D. E. (2009). Preparing and training for the full spectrum of military challenges insights from the experiences of China, France, the United Kingdom, India, and Israel. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

7.Lainer-Vos, D. (2013). Sinews of the nation: Constructing Irish and Zionist bonds in the United States. John Wiley & Sons.

8. Matlow, D. (2016). How Diaspora Jews Can Help Israel Today. Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA). Retrieved from https://cija.ca/how-diaspora-jews-can-help-israel-today/#

9. Shaul Mishal & Eliran Bar-El, "Communal Dimensions of the Arab Spring:

State and Non-State Logics in Current Middle East Politics", Mediterranean Politics, forthcoming

9. People's Council. (1948). "Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel." Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx

10.Ruppert ES (2014) Category. In: Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social.

In: Lury C and Wakeford N (eds). London: Routledge, pp:36-47.

11.Tham, Y.-C. (2019). Social cohesion is fragile, says President Halimah. The Straits Times. Retrieved from https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/social-cohesion-is-fragile-says-president-halimah.

12.Ruppert ES (2014) Category. In: Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social.

In: Lury C and Wakeford N (eds). London: Routledge, pp:36-47.

12.Tham, Y.-C. (2019). Social cohesion is fragile, says President Halimah. The Straits Times. Retrieved from https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/social-cohesion-is-fragile-says-president-halimah.