

Israel in 2023: The Nation-State that Is Not, but Might Be

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Speeches and articles in Western media that consider the state of the “State of Israel” on the occasion of its 75 years of existence abound this year. Such reflections tend to laud the achievements of the Israeli people and spotlight the Israeli State as a flourishing and progressive beacon in the Middle East. They lament the current upheaval that results from the Israeli extreme right trying to make the country more autocratic and possibly more theocratic. In most cases, such pieces add that, regrettably, the Palestinian issue remains to be solved. But then go on to note that it has lost relevance. Finally, they finish on a positive note by stating Israel has all the means it takes to chart another 75 years of progress and only needs to get its act together. For European Commission president Von der Leyen it was sufficient to mention only Israel’s successes, while *The Economist* took a somewhat rounder view in its article “As Israel turns 75, its biggest threats now come from within.”¹ In general, such reflections maintain an upbeat view of Israeli achievements and prospects.

But they fail to grapple with the key question that hovers over Israel turning 75, namely what kind of nation-state it will become next. This is a difficult query to respond to given the country’s many social cleavages:

between secular and religious Jews, between left- and right-wing political convictions, and between the many different areas of origin of its inhabitants. Such complexity is furthermore interwoven with Palestinian identity and community, which have their own divisions. Viewed analytically, the core issue, arguably, is the shift that has taken place in the course of time from the concept of the “Judenstaat,” as outlined by Theodor Herzl, which featured a number of more cosmopolitan openings, to the reality of the present-day Israeli nation-state, which is Jewish-dominated.² The problem lies in the single word “nation.” While the “State” does not care too much about the origins of those that reside on its territory – as long as they are law abiding – the nation-state does. The term “nation” stipulates that (a) particular community(ies) inhabit the State and demands, as a consequence, a granular definition of the characteristics and boundaries of that community, in order to establish who is part of it and who is not.³

The State Makes the Nation

Israel offers a fairly straightforward case of the State making the nation, given that the global Jewish diaspora before 1947 formed a disparate religious-cultural community, but not a socio-political one. Dedicated and well organized groups, especially the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine), the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization created the Israeli State under the leadership of Ben Gurion (1948-

¹ See: <https://twitter.com/EUinIsrael/status/1651088583644594177> and *The Economist*, 27 April 2023, online: www.economist.com/leaders/2023/04/27/as-israel-turns-75-its-biggest-threats-now-come-from-within (both accessed 3 May 2023).

² Herzl left significant scope for a cosmopolitan society, for example by rejecting theocracy, allowing for multiple languages to be spoken and for equal rights to be granted to other population groups. See: HERZL, T., *Der Judenstaat*, 1896, online: www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/28865/pg28865-images.html (accessed 3 May 2023).

³ BAYLY, C.A., *The birth of the modern world: 1780-1914*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

1954 and 1955-1963) and others through a mix of land acquisition, migration, diplomacy, violence and war. Once it came into existence, the Israeli State became a magnet for Jewish diaspora populations scattered across the globe. Population growth through immigration was facilitated by shared religion and history. The act of migrating to Israel – Aliyah (literally: ascending) – combines the practicality of the State, in the form of the Law of Return (1950), with the ideology of religion, through the notion of the “ingathering of the exiles” (Deuteronomy 30: 3-5).⁴ The Israeli State was not initially inhabited by a well-defined socio-political community. Rather, it consisted of a range of quite different groups with various places of origin across the globe that shared historical and religious reference points. The process of integrating these groups, i.e. the development of the Israeli nation, occurred under the threat of violence, or during actual war, for decades. In other words, the making of the Israeli nation has been a top-down but deliberative process, implemented under great pressure.

The process of socialization that turned the Israeli State into a nation-state was, in significant part, one of militarization

This extended struggle for existence has had several effects on the sort of nation that emerged. To begin with, compulsory military service ensured that army culture played a large role in the process of socializing different individuals into a shared view of the threats facing the State and how to counter them. Values like aggressive and offensive behaviour, political shortsightedness and autonomous action emerged from this process.⁵ They were strengthened by the shared experience of actual combat and loss, which also entrenched in-group solidarity and the view of Israel as a safe harbour in a threatening Middle East that could only survive by force of arms. Such a perspective

foreclosed more imaginative solutions to the problem of conquering lands that were already settled. Finally, the existential threat and violence during the initial thirty years of Israel’s existence produced tight links between its military and political establishment. Nearly all top politicians and government officials served and fought in combat, many with distinction. These soldier-statesmen subsequently held positions from which they could strengthen the Israeli nation-state in accordance with the shared threat perception they had fought for, and the suffering they had experienced during war. In brief, the process of socialization that turned the Israeli State into a nation-state was, in significant part, one of militarization. Once existential threats to Israel abated after the Yom Kippur war of 1973, war-making and militarization continued regardless in the form of various interventions in Lebanon-initially against the PLO, not Beirut.

Enter the Palestinians

From the perspective of creating and safeguarding the Israeli State, Palestinians have been merely tangentially relevant because they only posed an existential threat in the early phase of the first Arab Israeli war (1947-1948). Beyond this period, existential threats came from the various Arab armies that sought to conquer Israel in 1948, 1967 and 1973. Yet, from the perspective of developing the Israeli nation-state, Palestinians have been central. This is because Israel never managed to depopulate the areas it conquered from their existing populations, despite efforts to the contrary, and because Palestinians have continued to resist.⁶ Long-term securitization of the Palestinian issue is the logical corollary of the militarized aspects of Israel’s nation-state building process, which in turn resulted from decades of warfare.

The Palestinians that stayed within the boundaries of the initial Israeli State of 1948 became citizens after having lived under military rule until 1966. Today, they are second class citizens as per an array of discriminatory laws and practices, as well as the 2018 nation-

⁴ The “Old Testament” has comparable religious significance in the Jewish and Christian faiths with the caveat that it is simply a “Testament” in the former, since the Jewish faith confers no status on the “New Testament.” The Jewish faith also has several other religious sources on par with the “Old Testament,” which were codified centuries later.

⁵ VARDI, Gil-li, “An army like no other: The origins of the IDF’s military culture.” in: MANSOOR, P. and W. MURRAY (eds.), *The culture of military organizations*, Cambridge: CUP, 2019.

⁶ MORRIS, B., *Righteous victims: A history of the Zionist-Arab conflict, 1881-2001*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001; VARDI (2019), *op.cit.*

state law.⁷ They have been incorporated into the Israeli *State* and reluctantly included in the Israeli *nation-state*, but with important limitations. The Palestinians that remained in East Jerusalem after 1967 acquired permanent residency subject to strict conditions and are closely monitored, with non-abidance leading to expulsion. This group is only reluctantly incorporated into the Israeli *State*, but with important limitations, and excluded from the Israeli *nation-state*. The Palestinians that live in Gaza and the West Bank have essentially been subject to direct Israeli military rule since 1967. They are excluded from both the Israeli *State* and *nation-state*. Even the Oslo Accords (1993 and 1995) only gave the Palestinian Authority control over 18% of the West Bank and Gaza (the latter area came under control of Hamas in 2006). It is clear that the overarching strategic objective has been to limit the Israeli nation to Jews as much as possible, while expanding the territory of the Israeli State when feasible. This makes Israel a late follower of European nationalist-colonial practices in which native populations were incorporated into the *State* on a limited basis and largely excluded from the *nation-state*.

But the process of building a nation-state out of Israeli Jews has not been without its problems either, as manifested, for example, by racial discrimination against Ethiopian Jews, or by the growing tensions between secular and religious Jews over their rights and duties to the State, as well as over the kind of society Israel should become.⁸ Surveying the total of these developments suggests that the process of developing the Israeli nation-state remains an unfinished and contested business. It has ambiguously addressed the Palestinian issue, not quite managing to strip Israeli Arabs and East Jerusalemites of all their rights, but not truly incorporating them either, only to be confronted today by an internal question of identity that the Israeli (extreme-)right has put on the table. Ultimately, this question is about the characteristics and boundaries of the Israeli Jewish community: who is in and who is out? Viewed through this lens it is obvious that the proposed judicial reforms are not

an aim in themselves, but merely a method to remove a key barrier to ultra-nationalist and religious right-wing majoritarian rule. Once removed, such a majority will be able to shape society according to its ideological preferences with greater ease. Given that Israeli politics and electoral preferences have been trending to the right for the past decade, various Israeli minorities are at risk of seeing their rights abrogated at some point.

The Relevance of Today's Protests for the Future of Israel

From the perspective of building a nation-state, the true relevance of the recent protests in Israel against judicial reform lies in the possibility they create to reopen the definition of the in-group and out-group that make up the Israeli nation-state. If Israeli protesters can discern the parallels between their rights being in a tight spot – a result of the threat of (partial) exclusion from the in-group – and those of the Palestinians having been in a tight spot for decades, a new coalition of Israelis and Palestinians might emerge that can push for a more cosmopolitan society based on multiple identities and equal political as well as human rights. Establishing such a feat also requires Palestinians to overcome their legacy of grievances and reach out to Israeli protesters with a genuine willingness to join forces, rather than shrug off demonstrations within Israel as an internal power struggle of their colonizer.

This will be a difficult linkage to forge given the Israeli government's plans to hamstring anti-occupation CSOs like Yesh Din and B'tselem, the Palestinian Authority's repressive rule and the low-level global salience of the Palestinian issue at the moment. But the confronting realization of being caught in a mutually destructive cycle of violence – more physical in its manifestation for one side and more moral for the other –, so clearly described in David Grossman's novel *Yellow Wind* of 1988, or in Colum McCann's recent book *Apeirogon*, suggests it remains possible.

⁷ LINTL, P. and WOLFRUM, S., *Israel's Nation-State Law*, Berlin: SWP, 2018; www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7771 (accessed 3 May 2023).

⁸ See for example: CHEHATA, H., "Israel: promised land for Jews ... as long as they're not black?" *Race & Class*, 53(4), 67-77, 2012.