

Can Israel Be De-Zionized?

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STOCKHOLM — The Israeli nation, or the major part of it, is rapidly integrating into a world where technology and economy create an ever-greater interdependency between peoples and societies. It is also a world that in one way or the other is characterized by an increasing ethnic and cultural pluralism. The ideal of national-ethnic separation as a response to ethnic-national conflict is losing its moral and political clout. The armed conflicts of the late 1990's have amply demonstrated the brutal face of exclusionary nationalism and the moral imperative to prevent the re-division of societies along ethnic lines.

In Kosovo the international community (or a substantial part of it) actually waged a moral war in defense of the multiethnic society as an ideal. The European Union is in fact rapidly becoming such a society, further weakening the traditional links between culture, ethnicity and nation-state. In the United States, the multi-ethnic society par preference, the apparent weakening of a common national credo has widened the scope for ethnic strife, but also for new forms of pluralism.

The multitude of modern human existence no longer allows for societies based on exclusionary visions of ethnic or cultural homogeneity. No decent or truly democratic society can pit the will of the majority against the basic rights of a minority, or the power of the state against the basic rights of the individual. Democracy is becoming a precarious balancing act between increasingly transnational principles of justice and the political desires of culturally embedded national opinions. In the homogenizing nation-state, justice and majority rule could for some time be perceived as one and the same. In the pluralizing societies of our times, they no longer can. Particular cultural, religious or ethnic demands must eventually conform with and connect to larger systems of justice. The options for radical separatist or nationalist venues are shrinking.

Israel has so far been a strongly homogenizing nation-state,

not only trying hard to create and organize a common national identity, but also attempting to fuse it with the state itself. It has thus been a society with strong inclusionary mechanisms, wishing to make one people out of many, and at the same time a society with strong exclusionary mechanisms, wishing to keep out or keep down those who did not fit into the Zionist narrative of a Jewish nation. The definitions of whom belonged and who did not, permeated the institutions of the state and sustained a basic division between its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens.

In this regard very little has changed. Israel still remains a state that explicitly adheres to the ideal of an ethnically or culturally or religiously defined state (depending how you choose to define "Jewish") and more or less openly shuns the ideal of ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism. Furthermore, it is a state that continues to define itself as the national home of millions of people who are not its citizens, while reducing to the status of "national minority" millions of people who are both its citizens and its residents (present or involuntarily absent). Or as the Iraqi-born Israeli scholar

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Nissim Rejwan puts it in a perceptive study on "Israel's place in the Middle East": "[A]ny ethnically designated state must perforce identify itself with those of its citizens who have the same ethnic designation." This particular ethnic designation thus perforce also becomes a

nationality, to which a non-Jewish outsider can aspire only by converting to the Jewish religion, but to which any person born to a Jewish mother automatically belongs.

This fuzzy merger of nationality, ethnicity and religion is still at the heart of the Jewish State and effectively prevents it from becoming a state for all its citizens. It also prevents it from tackling the mounting challenge of its own inherent ethnic, religious and cultural pluralism. The idea that the State of Israel embodies a worldwide Jewish nationality is also affecting a large number of non-Israeli Jews who might have another idea about who they are. From being citizens

and nationals of France or Sweden or the United States, they are redefined as Jewish “nationals” and potential citizens of the Jewish State.

Comparisons between Israel-Palestine and other contemporary regions of ethnic and national complexity, concluding that Israel must conform to the same ideals of non-ethnic nationhood that the Western democracies have imposed on Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, are invalidated with reference to the specific history of the Jewish people and the circumstances under which the state was created and still lives. Moral arguments for the disconnection of ethnicity from nationhood that seem justified in other parts of the world somehow lose their moral justification in the Israeli context. The image of an Israeli-Jewish nation permanently besieged by anti-Semitic enemies from the outside and fifth columns from the inside has served as an effective moral counterweight and as a strong ethnic adhesive. This has also had the effect of blurring the distinction between the arguably illegitimate negation of the State of Israel as such, irrespective of its fundamental laws and principles, and a legitimate criticism of these very principles. The idea of decoupling the Israeli State from its “Jewishness,” to separate ethnicity from nationality, is still considered a *de facto* negation of the State as such. Not only is a party that in such a way proposes to “de-Zionize” the state by peaceful legal means banned from Israel’s parliamentary elections, but also the speaker of the Knesset may still block any bill with such an intention. Still, current events are relentlessly hammering away at the idea that ethnicity can and should be the foundation of nationality. Or that a state can and should be defined by other principles (or serve other purposes) than those set forth by its own citizens. Not even the Jewish-Israeli case, with its undoubtedly specific characteristics, can in the long run withstand the ideological impact of global interdependence and individualized human rights. The former is rapidly changing Israel from a self-contained and inwardly looking society to an outward-looking, buoyant and competitive player on the global economic scene. The latter is effectively undermining the old Zionist institutions of collective identity and creating new room in Israeli society to a multitude of cultural and individual expressions.

The irreconcilable “pluralism” once associated with the Jewish-Arab divide is now supplemented by a growing pluralism within Israeli-Jewish society itself. The Jewish-Israeli recognition and the prospective creation of a Palestinian

state, and thus of a distinct Palestinian nationality, might eventually lead to a reevaluation and redefinition of Israeli plurality itself. The idea of a Jewish State expressing a particular Jewish nationality is thus not only challenged by its non-Jewish citizens but also by diverging and at times fiercely antagonistic expressions of Jewish-Israeli identity. The most decisive event in this development is undoubtedly the mental and physical demilitarization of the border between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Whatever the political merits and faults of the Oslo peace process, it has irreversibly changed the way in which Israel must relate to its non-Jewish population.

There is no longer an indefinite interregnum (awaiting Peace and Normality) to justify the exclusion of Israel’s Arabs from the fullest participation in the affairs of the State. There is also no longer any justification for waiting to confer Israeli nationality on the “Palestinian” Arabs who choose to be citizens of Israel rather than of a future Palestine. The demand for a democratic State based on

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individual, non-ethnic, citizenship rather than on a preordained nationality will become ever more intense as the Arabs of Israel face a clear choice of national allegiance. This will subsequently highlight the long-term impossibility of a “clean” solution to the conflicts of ethnic and cultural pluralism in the region. No matter how you partition the tiny territory between the Sea and the Jordan River, there will be “wrong” peoples on both sides of the border. Israel will continue to house a very large and fast growing Arab minority, not to mention a swelling number of non-Jewish immigrants and “guest-workers.”

A future Palestine might have to contend with a number of Jewish settlements that will not agree to be dismantled. The enlarged territory of Jerusalem is in fact a “labyrinth of ambiguity,” to borrow an apt phrase from the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* (Jan 12, 2000). When the municipal authorities belatedly discovered that the tiny Arab village of Birauna actually belonged to the city and set out to inspect their “new” subjects, they discovered that the only way to get to Birauna was to go via Beit Jalla, which is under exclusive Palestinian jurisdiction. In the refugee camp of Kalandia the municipal border actually crosses right through the camp, “so a camp school on one side of the road is actually located in Israel. Should a Palestinian walk his or her child to school, it means crossing borders.”

It is not hard to imagine hundreds of similar “border”

problems in any future scenario of ethnic-national separation, and the ensuing temptation to “straighten out” existing patterns of ethnic and national entanglement. This goes to show that any long-term solution of the Jewish-Arab conflict within the combined territories of Israel and Palestine (based on respect for individual human rights) must be founded on the acceptance of ethnic and national plurality.

The historical and psychological need for territorial separation cannot conceal the fact that such a separation can only be temporary, symbolic and illusory. As Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs cannot (and will not) be territorially separated within Israel proper, neither can they effectively be so within the larger area of Israel-Palestine. The future of both states thus depends on their ability to overcome ethnically based institutions and reinvent themselves as truly pluralistic societies with open and transparent borders. It is also hard to imagine a future Israel-Palestine not developing common institutions and close cooperation in a number of political and economic areas.



History is certainly not a rational process nor is it a progressive march towards a harmonious consummation. Perhaps is it not a process at all. Events and ideas combine and recombine in ever new and unpredictable patterns of individual and collective action. In unstable political settings like the Middle East, the potential for chaotic developments is high. Deep-rooted eschatological ideas and schemes of action remain powerful agents in this designated territory of messianic redemption. Strong national-religious myths and symbols can still trigger the most “irrational” events. The short and erratic rule of Ehud Barak, the breakdown of the Oslo process and the electoral landslide of Ariel Sharon may serve as a case in point. These events have seemingly given new credence to the old idea that Israel can “unilaterally” separate itself from its Palestinian neighbors, secure for itself the “safe” borders it needs, build for itself an impenetrable fence of security, and go it alone. This was in fact the ultimate vision of Ehud Barak, which in fact is very similar to the vision of Ariel Sharon, which in fact is the vision of an Israeli State with as many Jews as possible - and as few Palestinians.

It is true that Ehud Barak seemed more prepared than Ariel Sharon to exchange land for “an end to the conflict,”

but it is also true that he endeavored to expand and strengthen the Jewish settlements on occupied land, in order to make the “Jewish” territory larger. It is true that Ehud Barak seemed more prepared to accept a Palestinian mini-State (including certain quarters of Jerusalem), but it is also true that he never envisaged the Palestinian State as an equal partner in the region, or the border between them as open and transparent. He entertained in fact far-reaching plans to build an advanced high-tech fence along the future borderline in order to separate effectively the two populations from each other. It is true that Ehud Barak strove for an Israel that would be both Jewish and democratic, but it is also true that he did not utter a word of regret when Israeli police in September 2000 shot and killed thirteen of his own (non-Jewish) co-citizens. It is also true that in Ehud Barak’s vision of Israel the Palestinians remain a problem, not necessarily because they are a threat to State’s security, but because they are a threat to its “Jewishness.” It is for this reason also true that Ehud Barak did not lift a finger to deal with what the former Israeli chief of the security police, Ami Ayalon, has characterized as “Jewish democracy with apartheid.”

The historical difference between the visions of Barak and Sharon has thus largely been about the means and not about the goal. Barak wanted to rule over as few Palestinians as possible by separating the Jewish society from a future Palestinian. Separation was more important to him than continued occupation. The Jews of Israel would no longer be burdened with the necessity to suppress another people, having to worry about its political ambitions and birth rates, having to suffer from the conscientious conflict between democracy and Jewishness. In the world of Ariel Sharon Jewish territory is more important than democracy, colonization more important than separation. In the extreme version of Sharon’s ideology, “transfer” of the Palestinian population is still an option, but in that ideological mainstream to which Sharon now purports to belong, continued Jewish-Israeli rule over the Palestinian population is a necessary and sufficient condition for the survival of the Jewish state.

In spite of the rhetorical difference between the two strategies, they nevertheless come together in the vision of an Israel where the Palestinians no longer constitute a “problem,” whether by as far as possible separating from them, or by as much as necessary suppressing them. The latter strategy has since long come to road’s end, whether Ariel Sharon

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realizes it or not. Continued occupation is not only politically impossible but also militarily. Perhaps less evident is the fact that Barak's strategy has also collapsed. The vision of a final separation from the Palestinians, of a "Jewish" democracy without apartheid, finally came to an end with the killing of thirteen Arab-Israeli citizens by the Israeli police. And by the resounding official silence that followed.

Nevertheless, certain events irreversibly change the prospects for certain ideas. The idea that Israel must go it alone, that it must remain a fortress among eternal enemies is rapidly losing its force and credibility. The prospect of a permanent peace settlement with the Arab world, the ongoing "Orientalization" of the Israeli polity itself, the recognition of a Palestinian nation and its claims to parts of the "promised land," have all clearly limited the political latitude for ethnically self-contained ideas and actions — on both sides. The religious-nationalist Zionist zeal of the 80's and the early 90's is waning in the face of yet another territorial-ideological border closing.

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Another manifestation of this process is the ongoing academic "post-Zionist" reevaluation of Israel's political and ideological past, a group of "new historians" (as well as other academics and intellectuals) hammering away at the tenets of Zionist founding mythology. Israel is thus facing the continuous weakening of its ideological foundations and the growing need to reformulate basic tenets of its polity.

Can the vision of a "Jewish" State be reconciled with the vision of a non-ethnic Israeli nationality? Can the "artificial and baseless opposition between Arab and Jewish Nationalities" (being propagated from both sides) give way to the true variety of the Middle Eastern scene? No matter how we delineate its nations, "the Middle East seems destined to continue to accommodate a rich mosaic of cultures, languages

and religious groups: Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians and Israelis; Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds and Armenians; Muslims, Jews, Christians and Druse." As former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban remarked long ago, "the destiny of this region lies in a pluralistic interaction of Asia, Europe, Africa; of Judaism, Christianity and Islam." And as Nissim Rejwan logically concludes: "In a pluralistic Middle East — where Asia, Europe and Africa, Judaism, Christianity and Islam interact freely — the Israelis too, will be called upon to cease viewing their country in exclusively Jewish terms."

The Oslo process started with the right end in mind — by the mutual recognition of the two peoples of the region — but ended in the unrealistic and destructive concept of their ultimate separation from each other.

Notwithstanding the physical impossibility to separate two peoples, who are so deeply intertwined in each other's lives and territories, the dream of Jewish democracy without apartheid can never be achieved by means of demographic dominance. The insistence on demographic dominance will only produce "Jewish democracy with apartheid." The demographic trends are in this respect unequivocal. Already within five years the Palestinians will constitute the majority population within the combined region of Israel-Palestine. Within Israel proper (the prewar borders of 1967) their share of the population will grow from 18 to 25 percent by the year 2020. By the year 2050 the Jewish majority of Israel proper will have been reduced to a narrow 60 percent.

The time has thus arrived for wholly new visions of how the long-term existence of an independent Jewish polity within the region of Israel-Palestine shall be secured and developed. These must be visions built on the true challenge of transnational partnership and power sharing, not on the false dream of separation and dominance. Israel's most crucial choices still lay ahead.



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