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Zionism in Crisis

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Zionism is in crisis. Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip settlements in August 2005 exposed deep fissures within Israeli society and politics. But Israel's unilateral disengagement and the preceding decade's peacemaking did not create the crisis; rather, it exposed a smoldering problem. In fact, the differences between the opponents and proponents of the withdrawal are deep because of the depth of the debate. While the crisis is not new, it has only absorbed the Israeli mainstream as it has moved from the margins of society into the center of the Israeli political map.

Until now Zionism has been a remarkable achievement, noted not only for its success in establishing a thriving, free society but also for defending without foreign forces its independence from multiple invasions. Israel stands among only a few post-colonial nations—the United States is another—as a success.

But the divisions in Israeli society now are becoming so evident that they threaten to overpower that which still unifies the majority of Israelis. Israelis now advocate diametrically opposite policies and confront each other with a passion usually absent from normal domestic discourse. The various segments of Israeli society differ not only in their belief over peace and security but also in their views on religion, ethics, democracy, and patriotism.

Battle of the Flags

The depth of tension over withdrawal manifested itself in the battle of the flags on the streets of Israel. During the May 11, 2005 Independence Day celebrations, many Israeli Jews—ironically from more nationalist segments of society—chose not only to wave Israel's blue and white flags but orange ones as well. By choosing the color of the Gaza municipal government, they sought to express both opposition to the Gaza withdrawal and solidarity with Gaza's nearly 9,000 Jewish settlers.

The orange camp is the religious-nationalist camp in Israel, including not only the Gaza settlers but also their supporters in West Bank towns and various Israeli cities. After the orange campaign began to sway

public opinion, the proponents of withdrawal responded with a blue and white campaign, rallying around the Israeli flag.

The orange camp felt a greater sense of urgency and viewed itself in a rearguard attempt to save its vision of Israel; the blue camp, composed principally of the Israeli Left, was less comfortable with nationalism. Moreover, it found itself in the awkward position of having to defend Ariel Sharon, a Likud prime minister often demonized in leftist circles. As Israelis staked out positions with flags draped from balconies and fabric tied to car antennas, orange dominated the blue. The battle of flags reflected a schism between two parts of Israeli society that, until the planned withdrawal from Gaza, had coexisted. The schism is not new—it actually predates Israel's independence—but its open expression is.

The Souls of Zionism

From its founding over a century ago, Zionism represented to its adherents a method for the Jewish people to redeem their soul from the dispersal and dereliction in which they existed. Two camps soon formed inside the movement: socialist left-wing Zionism and right-wing classical-liberal Zionism. Both have now come to believe the other endangers the essence of what Zionism is supposed to be.

Left-wing Israelis believe the settlements exemplify an immoral occupation of another people and a messianic extremism that has become the major impediment to peace between Israel and its neighbors. The Left emerged from the nineteenth century idea, embodied by the Labor Zionist thinker Aharon David Gordon, who himself echoed Leo Tolstoy's secular agrarian ideas, that the Jewish people's return to the land of Israel would allow them to physically work the soil in Israel.[1] Jewish labor would redeem Jewish souls by building a secular, communal, and agrarian spirit. By the early twentieth century, newer socialist ideas from Germany and the idea of creating a Jewish industrial proletariat crept in to join the agrarian version of a secular Labor Zionism. For the Left, then, creating an entirely Jewish labor force to work on the soil or in the factories within part of the land of Israel was more important than the Jewish nation's regaining control over the whole land of Israel, as defined through its religion—especially if the latter meant mixing a Jewish labor force with Arabs. These ideological foundations defined the Left's mythologizing of the kibbutzim—agrarian communes—with uniquely Jewish labor.

In contrast, the ideological core of the settler movement believes that building settlements is both a Zionist imperative and a religious commandment. The orange-waving religious, nationalist camp in Israel is anchored to a core of followers of the late Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine. A proponent of Zionism, Kook argued that religion was essential to the Zionist enterprise. Kook believed in an affinity between the land of Israel and the Jewish religion. The Jewish people, he claimed, would be redeemed and fulfill their divine purpose only through reuniting the religion with the land of Israel.

Though Kook died before Israel's founding, his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982), adjusted his father's abstract ideas to Israeli political realities. His pragmatic-spiritual approach to Orthodox Judaism's relationship with the secular state of Israel focused on how the religious segment of Israeli society could advance the Zionist enterprise. A 1967 speech he gave before the Six-Day war became a rallying cry for the religious-Zionist camp. In tears, the rabbi complained, "My homeland is divided. Where is our Hebron? Are we forgetting about it? And where is our Nablus? Are we forgetting about it? And where is our Jericho? Are we forgetting about it?"[2]

Impact of the 1967 War

Kook's words took on an air of prophecy when Israeli forces wrested the West Bank from Jordanian control and placed the territory under Jewish control for the first time in two millennia. His speech marked a major turning point for religious Zionism, which began to define itself in maximal territorial terms.

Until his death, Kook led the struggle to prevent territorial compromise for peace. After the Six-Day war, he argued that it was a religious obligation for Israel to defend acquired lands.[3] Land could not be conceded to the Arabs because it was given to the Jews by God. Accordingly, there were no Arab territories in Eretz Yisrael; no part of the land of Israel could be given to non-Jewish control. Although Kook had deep respect for the Jewish state and its institutions, he argued that Jews were obliged to object to decisions to evacuate settlements. Kook took his own words to heart in 1974 when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's first government decided to evacuate an illegal settlement at Sebastia, a biblical site near Nablus in the West Bank. Kook participated in the settlers' attempt to prevent evacuation, declaring to soldiers that "just as you will not be able to force me to eat pork, so you will not be able to evacuate me from here." [4] Nevertheless, after one of the Israeli generals present in Sebastia spoke with him, Kook left without violence.

The settlers who opposed the withdrawal from Gaza are Kook's disciples. Like the rabbi, they view the State of Israel as the embodiment of both religious and Zionist dreams. The land of Israel, they believe, was miraculously returned to Jewish ownership and, therefore, they have a religious obligation to settle it.

Who "Owns" Israel?

But the debate over Zionism's soul is compounded by a more recent argument over who "owns" the Jewish state: those who carried the load in establishing it, or those who now bear the burden in defending it.

The Left believes it was the secular, Labor-Zionist movement that pioneered the land, built the industry, and fought to defend the land that became the state in 1948. A number of Israeli communities—including Sephardi Jews, religious, secular nationalists—are accepted as Israelis but suffer the lack of a claim of ownership since they either came late or were seen to have contributed little to the state's establishment. It has been a broad trend among those communities—many of which now represent majorities in all of Israel's establishments, including the military officer corps and elite units—to assert their claim to ownership of the Zionist enterprise as well.

Similarly, the Left has considered the national-religious camp's contribution a footnote in this effort. For years, religious Zionists lived with an inferiority complex vis-à-vis secular Zionism.[5] Even they admitted that secular Zionists were the pioneers who built the state, established the kibbutzim, and defended the homeland when religious Zionists were less civic-oriented, confining themselves to yeshiva (religious school) study. Indeed, the core of Israel's defense establishment in its first half-century came from the kibbutzim.

But since 1967, a dramatic transformation occurred. The secular camp lost its Zionist vigor, became increasingly internationalist, and focused on the moral dilemmas resulting from the occupation of Palestinian areas. The left-oriented Zionists believe holding onto the land demands of them a burden to continue the war to fulfill the dreams of the religious Zionist camp rather than make the peace that allows them to become a "normal" and accepted nation.

Religious Zionists replaced the Left's waning nationalism. Today, more than half of Israel's officer corps is comprised of modern Orthodox soldiers.[6] They, and no longer the kibbutzim, bear the lion-share of Israel's defense.

Moreover, by building settlements, religious Zionists now have also "pioneered" the land and therein staked a claim to their share of the Zionist enterprise. And it was not just any land; in building the settlements, religious Zionists reestablished a modern Jewish presence in some of Judaism's holiest places such as around the tomb of the patriarchs in Hebron and in Nablus (Shechem), the site where God confirmed his promise to Abraham for the land of Israel. They did so in the service of Israeli governments on both the left and right, which provided financial incentives and used them to define and secure Israel's borders.[7]

But unlike settlers moved by economics, the religious-nationalists remained in their homes when Palestinian terrorists attacked them and their children. They chose to stay, often at an enormous personal price.[8] First, left-wing Israelis and later Sharon spurned their sacrifices. Their sense of betrayal and ideological crisis is great.

As the religious-Zionist camp struggled to stop the withdrawal, its actions were more than just an attempt to keep a specific territory under Jewish control. It was a struggle for what they see as the essence of the Zionist enterprise, the forefront of which they believed they were defining, defending, and pioneering. Just as they were about to join or supplant the Labor-Zionist dominated family of "ownership" over Israel, the land they had redeemed and the personal sacrifices they had made were nullified—and with it, their claim to ownership over the Zionist enterprise. They once again face being, as they were earlier in the state, outsiders.

Ironically, this battle was fought over Gaza, which is considered a part of biblical Israel but remains of relatively less religious significance than other Jewish sites in the West Bank or Jerusalem.[9] But Gaza sets the agenda for further withdrawals as Israel seeks to determine its permanent borders. The religious Right fears that the Gaza pullout could be followed by withdrawals from West Bank towns such as Hebron, the second holiest place in Judaism after Jerusalem. The struggle for Gaza had to be staged, they believed, if Hebron were to be saved.

Fissures in the Religious-Nationalist Camp

The withdrawal also exposed divisions within the orange camp—and not just between the mainstream and the more extreme and violent minority, such as the followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. Rather, there was significant discord within the majority regarding the legitimate means of struggle against the withdrawal. Most in this camp supported civil disobedience and opposed violence against the police and armed forces.

The champions of disobedience changed tactics several times as a series of their nonviolent measures, including wearing orange stars and blocking intersections and entrances to schools in metropolitan Tel Aviv, offended the public opinion they sought to influence to oppose disengagement.[10] But the most difficult question then facing the religious-national camp was not over tactics but how to balance religious duty and national obligation. Religious-national officers and soldiers faced a clear quandary: should they carry out their commanders' orders to evacuate the settlements in Gaza despite what they see as God's commands and their rabbis' calls to oppose evacuation?

The spiritual leader of the religious-Zionist camp, former Ashkenazi chief rabbi Avraham Shapira, called on soldiers to disobey orders to evacuate Gaza, even at risk of death or imprisonment.[11] However, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, head of the Ateret Kohanim Yeshiva and the rabbi of a large section of the Beit El settlement, argued that civil disobedience was legitimate but that soldiers had to follow their commanders' orders or else the Israeli army could collapse.[12] Yet the rabbi of Beit El, Zalman Melamed, joined with

Shapira in objecting to the order for withdrawal, claiming that if Kook were alive, he, too, would have called on the soldiers to object.[13]

The rabbis' call for objection caused over 20,000 modern-Orthodox Israel Defense Forces soldiers to announce that they would not follow orders to evacuate and would choose prison instead. This, in turn, led the new Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, Dan Halutz, to threaten that he would shut all the religious-Zionist hesder yeshivas, where students combine religious study with military service.[14]

The religious-national camp's attempt to bring about a change in public opinion turned out to be somewhat successful. In the final two months, their campaign reduced support for the disengagement from approximately two-thirds of Israelis to about 50 percent.[15] Except when their actions caused a backlash—such as when they poured oil and nails on the Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem highway—they were slowly gaining empathy from larger segments of Israeli society. But the orange camp did not make inroads on either the Israeli Left or in the Sharon government, which remain opposed to their positions.

The Secular Religion of the Israeli New Left

Wearing blue T-shirts and waving blue flags were those Israelis who believe that Israel can no longer exist without permanent borders. This group consists of both right-wing backers of Sharon and the Left. Sharon's supporters believe that withdrawal is necessary to separate from the Palestinians and reduce the demographic threat to Israel of a growing Palestinian population in Gaza. Right-wing proponents of withdrawal have maintained a low profile; they were a decided minority of the proponents of disengagement.

The loudest voices in the withdrawal camp belonged to those in the Left who view the occupation as corroding and demoralizing Israeli society.[16] For them, saving the Zionist enterprise means leaving Gaza and Hebron. Many believe the withdrawal will normalize Jewish existence and cement Israel as a Western society that lives in peace with its neighbors.

This camp realizes that Israel faces a dangerous and painful amputation but believes surgery is necessary to save the body, the Zionist enterprise itself. One extreme faction looked forward to the surgery with glee. For them, the disengagement offered not only an opportunity to end the occupation but also a chance to limit the influence of Jewish religion and nationalism on the national psyche and turn Israel into a modern, secular, post-nationalist society.[17]

Since the 1970s—but even more so since the Oslo accords—Israel's Left has adopted peace as its *raison d'être*. But since the assassination of Rabin in 1995, peace became less an ideology and more a form of post-national identity. Peace gives an identity and a moral code to a camp that found itself in conflict with two of the key components of Israeli identity: the land of Israel and the Jewish religion.

For many in this group, Israeli identity is defined in terms of a language, culture, and a code of behavior. They view themselves as democratic, humanistic, and tolerant—beyond outdated notions of nationalism and religion. They believe that what they consider the ongoing, immoral Israeli occupation is the only factor that prevents Israel from becoming welcomed into the Western family of nations.

The evacuation of Gaza revived the blue camp, demoralized since the failure of Oslo and the fall of Ehud Barak's government. Most of its members supported disengagement despite a distaste for Sharon because his plan moved Israel a step closer to ending the occupation and establishing, in their belief, peaceful coexistence with the Palestinian Authority.

The Debate and Israeli Democracy

The Left, which views itself as the embodiment of rationalism and of the movement of history, was caught off guard by the popular support generated by the orange camp.[18] In response, the blue camp counter-challenged the orange camp in the hopes of demonstrating that there was a silent majority of Israelis who supported disengagement. They believed they were fighting to have their voices heard in an Israel dominated by the voices of the Right.

Many of their arguments focused on the limits that a democratic society should place on those who, in the name of freedom of expression, attempt to destroy it. Leading commentators on the left evoked the image of Germany's Weimar Republic, which was unable to prevent the rise to power—through democratic means—of Hitler and the Nazi regime.[19] They believed that since the Israeli Knesset (parliament) had already approved the withdrawal plan, the campaign of the opponents of the withdrawal represented a real threat to democracy. That is why left-wing commentators supported tough steps to punish settlers. They backed the initiative of the attorney general's office to have courts declare settlers who encouraged their children to participate in demonstrations as abusive parents who could lose custody of their children.[20] That is also why they, normally the loudest proponents of civil rights in Israel, had chosen not to protest when several teenage settler girls, ages 12 to 18, were imprisoned without a trial for over a month because they participated in roadblocks.[21] Indeed, in an example of how emotional this issue had become, one prominent left-wing commentator, Yaron London, wrote an article in the leading Israeli daily *Yedi'ot Aharonot* entitled, "An Announcement to the Fascists in Orange," in which he threatened to take the law into his own hands and hit the "orange-wearing hooligans." [22]

The left-wing's analogies between Nazis and the Israeli Right, and their call for severe countermeasures to respond to the Right, opened yet another fissure in Israeli society. During the evacuation, the orange opposition was largely nonviolent. There were acts of civil disobedience, and some sixty-three Israeli soldiers resigned their commission, but there were only two high-profile showdowns.[23] In the first of those instances, the Israeli army and police forcibly evacuated a hotel along Gaza's coast occupied by some of the most extreme and armed elements. Nevertheless, no shots were fired. In the second, a mass march to Gaza that was stopped by the border at Kfar Maimon disbanded after a two-day standoff rather than confront the police violently.[24] During the march, the organizers used loudspeakers to warn the crowds that only peaceful means should be used. It worked: of the tens of thousands who marched, only a half dozen or so were arrested for minor scuffling.[25] Nevertheless, and despite the settlers' leadership's attempt to prevent the use of violence, some settlers used physical force against soldiers.[26]

Prior to the withdrawal, the harshness of response advocated by the Left to the settlers' largely nonviolent actions had led many on the right to argue that the Left seeks such measures not to protect debate and democracy but to crush a debate that they were beginning to lose.[27] The Left argued that their protests were similar to those of Martin Luther King in the 1960s: a campaign that was meant to challenge existing norms without overthrowing the democratic system. Accordingly, just as both sides maintained that they were saving Zionism from its destruction by the other camp, they also argued that they were trying to save Israeli democracy from the other's destructive intentions. The crisis in Israeli society has become so severe that even the boundaries of a democratic debate were no longer a matter of national consensus.

"Jews" Versus "Israelis"

The Israeli war of colors continues to be a battle over the essence of Israel and Zionism. Since the withdrawal took place as planned, the religious-national camp, which had been reenergized by its campaign, is asking itself what remains of its beliefs and on what basis it can continue to claim ownership of the Zionist enterprise. Some have called for the end of their alliance with secular Israel and are choosing to turn their attention to forging bridges into the ultra-Orthodox or Haredi community.[28] Others

are engaging in a process of soul-searching by seeking to determine why religious Zionism has failed to attract most Israelis.

But since the withdrawal, the terms of debate have changed. There is not only an argument over land and the occupation but also a cultural war between two parts of Israeli society: Israelis who believe that the Jewish state cannot exist without a strong connection to the Jewish religion, and Israelis who think that Israel must become a secular society. This culture war represents a schism between the secular "Israelis" and the religious "Jews," both of whom believe that they should determine the nature and character of the state.

The extent to which at the core of Israel's identity crisis is the uneasy relationship between Jewish nationalism and religion was evident during the 2005 Independence Day. During the holiday, the daily Ha'aretz newspaper asked various writers, artists, intellectuals, and rabbis to define Israeli identity. As a part of this project, the paper listed a dictionary of words and slang that reflect the essence of Israeli society. Dominating the list were terms that reflect pushy, impolite behavior. The list indicated the reality that many prominent Israelis define the essence of their national identity as no more than a mood or a code of behavior. Such an un-Jewish definition of Israeli identity reflects a typical Jewish paradox: the ongoing modern Jewish attempt to escape Jewish destiny, to define one's own identity—just as did the early Zionists who were building a secular Jewish state.

The predominant question with which Israelis from across the political spectrum must now grapple is whether Israel can continue to exist as a Zionist state without some connection to Judaism. Prominent thinkers on the left, such as writer Amos Oz, claim that not only should Israel become secular but that this is also the only way to turn it into a modern and moral society. In a sweeping attack on the settlers and their religious observance, he wrote that "to be a free people means each person is entitled to choose which parts of Jewish tradition are important to him, and which to leave behind. It means to have the freedom to run our country according to our free will, rather than rabbinic dictates."^[29] In response, writer Naomi Regan, who is sympathetic to the settlers, wrote that Israel cannot be divided into "us" and "them," or into "Israelis" versus "Jews." "Only in the world of fanatic left-wingers, such as Amos Oz, the nation is divided," she wrote. The lives of both parts of the nation are too intertwined, she continued. Everyone serves in the same army, and there are too many points of contact between religious and secular Israelis to speak about a split in the nation, she argued.^[30]

Disengagement has proven to be a defining moment for Israeli society, not just vis-à-vis future relations with the Palestinians but also regarding the actual nature of the Jewish-Israeli state. The debate has transcended questions of territory; it has been an argument over Israeli identity and the essence of Zionism. The dispute has touched the nerve of Israeli society: the relationship between Zionism and Judaism, between nationalism and religion. The tension over Gaza is a proxy for a deeper argument over who Israelis are and what they want to be. Like many democracies that fought violent civil wars, Israel at fifty-seven is struggling—so far not violently—to define its soul.

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[1] Hershel Edelheit, *History of Zionism: A Handbook and Dictionary* (Boulder: Westview, 2000) pp. 66-7.

[2] Avraham Levi Melamed, "Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook—A Biographical Overview," accessed Oct. 6, 2005.

[3] Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), p. 271.

[4] "Zvi Yehuda Kook," Wikipedia, accessed Sept. 20, 20005.
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[5] Aviezer Ravitsky, "The Future of the Jewish Settler Movement, Post-Disengagement," presentation to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., June 24, 2005.

[6] The New York Sun, Jan. 4, 2005.

[7] Mitchell Bard, "Facts about Settlements," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed Oct. 6, 2005.

[8] See, for example, Israeli Ministry of Education, "Target Israeli Children: The Cohen Family of Kfar Darom," accessed Oct. 6, 2005.

[9] Telephone conversation with Rabbi Pesach Lerner, Aug. 4, 2005.

[10] For an article reflecting the negative reactions toward the settlement movement's disobedience campaign, see Guy Ronen, "Intifadat Hakvishim," Ynet (Yedi'ot Aharonot online, Tel Aviv), May 16, 2005.

[11] United Press International, Apr. 1, 2005.

[12] Ynet, Feb. 23, 2005.

[13] Ynet, May 16, 2005.

[14] Ynet, June 28, 2005.

[15] The Christian Science Monitor, June 13, 2005.

[16] See, for example, Tom Segev, "The Orphans of Sinjil," Ha'aretz (Tel Aviv), Aug. 28, 2005.

[17] Amos Oz, "Free at Last," Ynet News (English edition), Aug. 21, 2005.

[18] Nachum Barnea, "Katom BeKnock-Out," Ynet, June 27, 2005.

[19] Rachel Dolev, "Behamrada Kemo Behamrada," Ynet, July 6, 2005.

[20] Ynet, July 6, 2005. For a right-wing criticism of this initiative see Uri Orbach, "Kvish Patuach, Yeled Sagour," Ynet, June 17, 2005.

[21] Orbach, "Kvish Patuach, Yeled Sagour," Ynet, June 17, 2005.

[22] Yaron London, "Hoda'a Lafashistim BeKatom," Ynet, June 23, 2005.

[23] Ha'aretz, Sept. 7, 2005.

[24] The Jewish Week (New York), July 22, 2005.

[25] Ynet, July 21, 2005.

[26] The Washington Post, Aug. 19, 2005.

[27] See, for instance, Emuna Alon, "Kat Sonei Mitnachalim," Ynet, July 1, 2005; Yael Mishali, "Nireh Otchem, Smolanim," Ynet, May 17, 2005.

[28] Ha'aretz, weekend edition, July 22, 2005.

[29] Oz, "Free at Last."

[30] Naomi Regan, "Ein Anachnu VeEin Hem," Ynet, Aug. 25, 2005.