

OPINION and ANALYSIS

Vol 7, Number 7: 8 August 2011

**A selection of some of the more challenging and thought-provoking
local and international writings on the Middle East**

<http://www.sazionfed.co.za>

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Israel's Identity Crisis

Yonatan Touval, New York Times, July 29, 2011

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/30/opinion/30iht-edtouval30.html>

Since taking office more than two years ago, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly pressed the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a “Jewish state.” In his speech before the U.S. Congress in May, Netanyahu even made this demand the linchpin of any future peace deal, promising “a far-reaching compromise” if only the Palestinian leader were to publicly declare “I will accept a Jewish state.”

Regrettably, the Obama administration has bought into Netanyahu's idea and is currently working behind the scenes to press key allies to adopt a formula that would call on Israel and the Palestinians to resume negotiations on the basis of the 1967 lines and — for the first time in Mideast peacemaking — spell out international expectations that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

Much has been said about why the Palestinians refuse to extend Israel such recognition — certainly at this stage of the negotiations. But ironically, Israelis may well be the first to demur at such a definition of their state, or at least to be confused by it. For it is far from clear to anyone, not least Israel's own Jewish citizens, what Netanyahu's demand actually means.

Historically, the modern Zionist movement has sought to transform the term “Jewish” into a distinctly national category. But it has not fully succeeded. If it had, “Jewish” might have signified today a member of a national community — in the manner, say, that “French” refers to a national of France or “Polish” that of Poland.

And yet in much of the world “Jewish” today remains a fuzzy term whose precise meaning depends on context. “Jewish” can stand for a religious attribute, an ethical or spiritual one. It can mean an ethnic group or cultural tradition. For some Jews, especially in pre-emancipation Europe, Jewishness was felt to be a destiny. In certain milieus in the U.S. today, “Jewish” primarily defines a genre of humor.

In fact, only in Israel does the term “Jewish” refer to one's nationality, although the source of authority lies outside the exclusive purview of the state. Indeed, even as Israel proclaims to be the nation-state of the Jewish people, it has no legal definition for the term “Jewish” other than a religious one: It is rabbis who determine for the Israeli state who is a Jew.

This failure to forge a coherently national definition of the term “Jewish” dates back to the inception of the Zionist movement. Since in order to forge the Jewish people into a nation it was necessary to bind them to a single territory and decide upon a collective language — territory and language being understood as two key features of nationality in the 19th century — Zionism grappled with various choices for both. These included Uganda and Argentina as possible territories, while German was the language of preference of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement.

And yet, despite the secularist impulses of mainstream Zionism, the territory ultimately chosen was the biblical Land of Israel and the language that of the Bible. And while the choice of territory may have made pragmatic sense at the time (that of language less so), the emergence of the Zionist movement could not help heightening rather than attenuating the religious underpinnings of the Jewish nation.

These are among the fundamental reasons why the character of the Israeli state remains a highly contested issue within Israel itself. What makes Israel “Jewish”? Is sovereignty over biblical lands essential to Israel’s Jewish self-identity (as the settler movement argues)? Is Israel the state of the Jews living in Israel or also of those living elsewhere in the world? (Netanyahu concluded his speech to Congress by stating “I speak on behalf of the Jewish people and the Jewish state.”) Does Israel’s “Jewishness” preclude it from being the state of all its citizens, even the non-Jewish ones?

The debate inside Israel over these issues is passionate and ongoing. It prevents Israel from articulating a coherent definition of its own identity, let alone one that is accepted and recognized by the majority of its citizens, most of whom are secular and liberal by any Western standard.

Rather than asking the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, therefore, Israel has its own job cut out for itself. And while it is tempting to pass on the burden to others, it remains Israel’s duty — first and foremost to itself — to discover what it means when it says it is Jewish, and to make sure that such a definition be accepted, and recognized, by its own citizens.

Once it does so, Israel might be able to make a more coherent request to its neighbors — or more likely, feel secure enough in its own identity to move on.

Is Israel a Democracy?

Moshe Dann, Ynet News, 4 August 2011

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4104485,00.html>

"No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land."

Written 800 years ago in the Magna Carta, this is one of primary foundations of every democratic country.

This week, Israeli security officials handed administrative orders to the heads of four families and eight students from Yitzhar, prohibiting them from living in Judea and Samaria for up to a year, or else they go to prison. As the area of Judea and Samaria is under military administration, authorities avoided normal legal procedures. No charges were filed, there were no indictments, no possibility of judicial review or appeal and no possibility of defending themselves in court.

The violation of such basic civil rights by the Israeli government stems from unique "emergency laws" enacted during the British Mandate. The abuse of these laws, according to legal experts, including former High Court justices, violates legal principles and is contrary to the essence of democracy and a democratic country. That the Attorney General, Yehuda Weinstein, allows such actions is a stain on the reputation of the State of Israel.

The fundamental principle of law is fairness. The state cannot infringe an individual's right to live in freedom and dignity. If a person is deprived of his rights, the state has to explain why and give the individual the right to contest any accusations made against him in a fair and impartial forum.

Put simply, can citizens of a democratic country who are suspected of a non-serious, non-violent crime be severely punished without any charges being filed in court, without knowing why they are being punished, without seeing the evidence against them, without a fair and impartial trial, and without a chance to defend themselves?

Renewing the social contract

Susan Hattis Rolef, Jerusalem Post, 3 August 2011

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=232348>

Some ideas expressed by the demonstrators are naïve and even childish, but they have brought a breath of fresh air into this hot summer.

The tent demonstrations that popped up on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv and then spread to other parts of the country are an exciting development in the eyes of many of us, who have become pessimistic and a little cynical with age. At long last, the predominantly secular, social-liberal section of *Am Yisrael* – which carries more than its share of the country's security and economic burdens, and in recent years has been delegitimized by right-wing circles and accused by religious circles of immoral hedonism – is proudly raising its head.

The leaders of the demonstrations are neither hardcore politicians nor experienced social activists, and some of the ideas they have expressed with great enthusiasm are naïve and even childish, but they have brought a breath of fresh air into this hot summer.

One of the basic assumptions behind the demonstrations is that democratic society is

based on a tacit social contract between the state and its citizens, according to which, in return for the citizens abiding by the state's laws and agreeing to fulfill their duties to it (like paying taxes and serving in the armed forces), the state has an obligation to guarantee and actively promote individual and collective social security, social justice and effective forms of social solidarity. Besides direct assistance to the weaker parts of the population, the state is expected to ensure that its middle classes are able to obtain affordable housing and maintain a decent standard of living.

The problem is that our current prime minister believes market forces can supply most of the goods, and that the state's responsibility is mainly to create the background conditions that will encourage private entrepreneurs to do the job (for a profit). Privatization is the key word. In addition to the neo-liberals, the current government consists of sectorial parties that might believe in direct government action, but their main concern is for their own constituents, not society as a whole.

There is also an objective difficulty, which is that the financial cost of realizing the social contract in an optimal manner is enormous. In Israel, the problem is more acute than in other countries, due to the fact that around 25 percent of the state budget is earmarked for debt repayment and service (much of it related to the cost of the Yom Kippur War), and another 15% for defense. There is also a problem regarding the distribution of the money allocated for "Social Services," which is currently over 30% of the budget. True, much of this goes to pay salaries in the health and education services, but most of the demonstrators will tell you that in their opinion, the state is spending a disproportionate quantity of this money on projects that benefit the haredim and settlers, and that the predominantly secular middle classes are expected to foot the bill while receiving much less than their share of the benefits.

AGAINST THIS backdrop, what are the chances that beyond influencing the short-term national agenda, the current flood of demonstrations will lead to a real long-term change? Since the current government is committed to a neo-liberal economic agenda and is unlikely to diverge from it more than is absolutely necessary, and since the sectorial nature of most of the coalition members is a given, the real test will come at the next general elections, which will take place in one to two years.

The main question is whether the momentum of the demonstrations can last that long, or even beyond the summer vacation. Furthermore, even if it lasts, no general election in Israel was ever fought and won over social and economic issues. Even if the demonstrators are not made up exclusively of members of the so-called "peace camp," in the final reckoning, Israelis vote on the basis of their views regarding the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and not their socioeconomic inclinations. The fact that Israel confronts some very serious political issues connected with the UN recognition of a Palestinian state on the basis of the 1967 borders, and Israel's growing ostracism in the world, will ensure that the next elections will almost certainly focus once again on diplomacy and defense.

The question now is whether despite everything, *enough voters will let social and economic issues dictate the way they vote, and whether the parties that reject the neoliberal ideology will manage to convince those among the 35% of the population who stayed away from the polling stations in the past two general elections – and who care about social justice – to get off the fence.*

NOTE: The views expressed in certain articles are not necessarily those of the SAZF

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