

# Zionism Remains a Freedom Struggle



WHEN THE UNITED NATIONS was founded in 1945, it had just 51 member states. Today, there are 193. Most of the new states were born from the twin processes of decolonization and so-called national-liberation struggles.

Among the first was Israel.

The subsequent trajectory of most of the decolonized countries has not been a happy one. From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, their politics have been marked by despotism, anarchy, or civil war; their economies by kleptocracy, mismanagement, and destitution; their social dynamics by ethnic strife, religious fanaticism, and the oppression of women. They are countries from which people flee: more than a million refugees from Burma; 2.6 million from Afghanistan; 3.4 million from Zimbabwe. They are countries in which people die: an estimated 2 million civilians in the Biafran war of 1967–1970; as many as 3 million in the Bangladesh genocide of 1971; at least 1.5 million in Cambodia's killing fields between

1975 and 1979; some 800,000 in the Rwandan genocide of 1994; another 5.4 million in the Second Congo War of 1998–2003.

Israel, too, has been scarred by sectarian and ethnic strife, from the early days of the Yishuv to the intercommunal riots of 2021. This is a fact its critics often pretend is unique, and uniquely awful, when it has mainly been the tragic norm throughout the world.

Yet in other respects, the Jewish state has been the remarkable exception: nearly the only postcolonial state that has flourished in independence. Israel regularly ranks as one of the world's happiest countries, behind Australia but ahead of the United States. Nearly 500,000 Jews have made aliyah in the past 20 years alone. Gross domestic product per capita exceeds that of Britain and France. Its economic base is geared toward future-oriented technologies. It is an anchor of regional security on which its neighbors depend: Jordan for Israel's water; Egypt for Israel's reconnaissance capabilities; Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States for the tools it brings in the fight against Iran. And it has managed to do all this while maintaining, however imperfectly, democratic institutions, the rule of law, and an ability to live with its partisan and religious differences.

That Israel is a decolonized nation, liberated from imperialism just as surely as Kenya or Indonesia was, is a fact that lies buried in most conversations about the Jewish state. But it matters. It is a reminder of how normal Israel's problems are given the circumstances into which it was born, and of how remarkable its achievements have been, when viewed in the correct historical context. And it is a testament to what Zionism is: an attempt to unshackle Jews not just from foreign rule but also from foreign ideas.

Let's explore these points in turn.



Students of 20th-century decolonization agree on one thing: It was a mess.

The partition that would divide India from Pakistan, the border

drawn on five weeks' notice by an English civil servant named Cyril Radcliffe—a man who had never so much as visited the subcontinent—resulted in a death toll estimated at up to 2 million people, as well as the forced displacement of another 14 million. The European scramble out of Africa and Asia created a slew of nations whose new borders rarely corresponded to ethnic, sectarian, or tribal lines, leading to decades of oppression and violent conflict.

Israel emerged from the same shambolic process. Promises were made in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 only to be withdrawn in the White Paper of 1939. Policies such as the wartime restrictions on Jewish immigration were capricious and cruel. The partition plan proposed for Mandatory Palestine was unworkable. The borders foisted on the proposed Jewish state were indefensible. Inevitably, the result was violent and chaotic. Whatever view one takes of the birth of Israel, its rights and wrongs, it was of a piece with the tragic circumstances of its era.

Most postcolonial states have spent decades trying to work their way out of this kind of rubble. Just as Israel has never fully settled territorial claims with all of its neighbors, neither has Pakistan with India (over Jammu and Kashmir), or Cyprus with Turkey (over northern Cyprus), or Armenia with Azerbaijan (over Nagorno-Karabakh), or Morocco with the so-called Sahrawi Republic (over Western Sahara), or Georgia with Russia (over Abkhazia and South Ossetia), or, most recently, Russia with Ukraine (over Ukraine itself).

A complete list would be much longer, but this one already provides a sense of just how unexceptional the Israeli–Arab conflict really is. Equally unexceptional have been the reasons why it has persisted for so long. Wherever ethnic groups are locked into conflict, the competition for power tends to be zero-sum. Sectarian strife is especially difficult to resolve because it involves value systems that are self-justifying, nonrational, and prone to fanaticism. Borders are hard to agree on when they involve not just land and resources, but also memory and meaning.

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There is also a profound tension between the claims of collective identity and those of personal liberty. Americans may think of the words “independence” and “liberty” as indissoluble, if not interchangeable. But there has never been any guarantee of the former leading to the latter.

Look closely at the history of decolonization and it is mostly a story of foreign imperialism giving way to local tyranny. Jomo Kenyatta helped free Kenya from British rule only to preside as a tyrant until his death. The same goes for the revolutionaries who defeated the French in Algeria. Each supposed liberator left his people with even fewer civil rights, legal protections, and economic freedoms in their independent states than they had enjoyed under colonial rule.

The Jewish state might easily have succumbed to the same dynamics. In David Ben-Gurion, it had a charismatic founding father who could have sought a dictatorial path. The prominent role of the military in Israeli life, along with the constant threat of invasion, has given generals a position in politics that elsewhere is the stuff of coups and juntas. And the country has always felt the tension between the claims of identity and freedom. It lies at the heart of controversies such as the 2018 nation-state law, the egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, marriage laws, and the exemption of Israeli Arabs from military service.

Yet Israel's commitment to democratic and liberal values for its citizens has been resilient and profound. Why?



Part of the explanation is rooted in Jewish history and text. In Genesis, the usual hierarchical expectations of patriarchal authority passing from father to firstborn are repeatedly overturned—in the story of Ishmael and Isaac, and then of Jacob and Esau, and again with Joseph and his brothers. Merit (or divine favor), not primogeniture, determines one's fitness to lead. In Exodus, the Jewish story explicitly becomes a freedom struggle. And while Jewish antiquity had its kings and dynasties, there was also a pronounced current of mistrust for unjust authoritarian rule, foreign or domestic.

Then there is the history of the Diaspora. Shlomo Avineri has observed that a paradox of Jewish politics in exile is that the absence of Jewish sovereignty, combined with the exclusion of Jews from Gentile society, led to a remarkable degree of self-governance within Jewish communal life. Rabbis were frequently elected, not appointed by distant ecclesiastical authorities. Taxes were collected and spent by communal officials who met in representative councils. Rules were developed to curb nepotism and other self-dealing practices. The depredations of the Gentile sovereign served as a constant reminder of the evils of absolute power, while also cultivating an instinct for political dissent.

Hovering above this was a spiritual dimension. For many persecuted religious and ethnic minorities, the experience of oppression begets two distinct emotions: the desire to belong, or to avenge.

For many Diaspora Jews, by contrast, the desire is to get going. *Next year in Jerusalem*, a phrase that dates to the 15th century C.E., if not earlier, is the wish for a home that is elsewhere: a home that is remembered, imagined, envisioned; a home that nevertheless, astonishingly, exists. To yearn for Jerusalem is the idealization of a place. To yearn for Jerusalem *next year* is the placement of an ideal. Together, the two aspects of this yearning conjoin geographic destination with moral aspiration. Jerusalem, the city, may be sacked or

rebuilt, evacuated or recovered. Jerusalem, the metaphor, is always sought, and always there.

A culture of yearning can lead to different kinds of politics, including the utopian and the revolutionary. But the flip side of yearning is dissatisfaction, and the most natural politics of dissatisfaction is democracy. Everyone has a gripe, a dream, and a voice. These were the politics that so many of the early Zionists brought with them from their shtetls. Avineri notes:

When a few members of a pioneering group decided to establish what eventually became the first kibbutz, the only way known to them to do this was to have a meeting, vote on the structure proposed, elect a secretary and a committee.... And when they eventually disagreed, and some wanted slightly different institutions and arrangements, these dissidents went to the other side of the hill and established their second kibbutz. That is why we have Degania Aleph and Degania Beth.

A society typified by constant disagreement, breaking with consensus and going your own way, creating tribes within a tribe, is sometimes seen both as a Jewish peculiarity and one of Israel's crippling faults, the source of its social polarization and political paralysis. But it is Israel's defining strength. Consider a few contrasts:

- The notion that someone like Gamal Abdel Nasser or, more recently, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, would install himself as a president-for-life may have been sadly predictable given the pharaonic nature of Egyptian politics. The idea that anything similar could happen in Israel—despite the stature of a Ben-Gurion or the ambitions of a Netanyahu—is preposterous in a political culture that prizes arguments and upstarts.
- In many postcolonial states, rulers held on to power by dispensing favors to their tribal group while discriminating against

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their tribal foes. In Israel, the nature of the state as an ingathering of exiles has meant constant evolution with each fresh wave of immigration, beginning with the early pioneers from Eastern Europe, to the next wave of escapees and survivors from western Europe, to Mizrahi and Ethiopian refugees, to the Anglos who came after the Six-Day War and the Russians who came after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and thence to Argentinians, French, and now Ukrainians. Each wave of immigrants has brought with it a new outlook, and new votes, requiring the rest of the country to adjust and evolve.

- Elsewhere, too, elites tend to come from particular social backgrounds and educational upbringings. In India, for instance, Jawaharlal Nehru attended Cambridge, his daughter Indira Gandhi attended Oxford, her son Rajiv Gandhi went to Cambridge, and each served as prime minister. In Israel, the early generation of elites tended to be left-wing secular Jews from the kibbutzim, who rose in the army and civil service: Think of Golda Meir and Ariel Sharon. Then came the right-of-center secular Jews from cities, who rose in business and politics: Think of Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu. Now more observant Jews, epitomized by Naftali Bennett, are rising to the fore.

The broader point is that Zionism, and the state it created, was a bottom-up enterprise, more horizontal than vertical in its communal and religious life, often fractious but, for the same reason, mobile and dynamic. As a result, it was able to escape national-liberation movements' typical fate of falling into tyranny, or collapsing into chaos, or ossifying into a social order rigged by an entrenched elite. Zionism squared the national-liberation circle: It liberated a people *as a people* while honoring the promise of liberating them as individuals as well.

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The argument that Zionism is a freedom struggle runs up against an obvious objection: What about the Palestinians? This is a serious objection, though not in the intellectually unserious way that Israel's most acidic critics usually mean.

What is unserious? The allegation that Israel is a white, racist, illegitimate, colonialist, "apartheid" regime. Jews are not "white" to start with, and even by the invidious racial categorizations of Israel's critics, it's worth noting that a plurality of Israel's *Jewish* population is of Middle Eastern descent. A state whose right to exist was affirmed in one of the UN's first resolutions may be many things, but it is not illegitimate. A nation whose ties to a land are millennia-old and continuous is not colonialist, particularly when the territories it is supposedly colonizing were acquired in wars it did not seek and include land it has repeatedly tried to give back.

Regarding apartheid, even hardened critics of Israel generally acknowledge there is no such thing for Israel's Arab citizens. As with other minorities around the world, they have experienced serious discrimination. Yet they are nonetheless members of the Israeli Knesset, the Cabinet, the Supreme Court, the medical and academic establishment, the legal profession, and so on.

The more insistent charge is that, because of policies like

checkpoints and security walls and the refusal to allow Palestinians to vote in Israeli elections, Israel practices apartheid against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. But most of these security restrictions came about because, in wave after bloody wave, terrorists continually capitalized on the inadequacy of security measures *to kill Jews*.

As for the argument that Palestinians experience apartheid because they don't get a say in Israeli politics, the entire point of the 1993 Oslo Accords was to provide Palestinians with a *separate* polity in the form of the Palestinian Authority. The principal reason that Palestinians don't get a vote is that, fearing democracy, Palestinian leaders in both the West Bank and Gaza have effectively banned elections. And the principal reason that Palestinians don't live in a state of their own, democratic or otherwise, is that Palestinian leaders have repeatedly rejected one. As Esawi Frej, Israel's first Arab-Muslim Cabinet member, recently wrote, "Israel has many problems that must be solved, both within the Green Line and especially the Occupied Territories, but Israel is not an apartheid state."

If these are the unserious objections, what is the serious one? It's that Zionism cannot be true to its calling as a freedom struggle for Jews if that entails exercising a substantial degree of control over another people without their consent.

The reasons why this control is currently being exercised may be defensible and necessary. Israel cannot be expected to agree to the immediate creation of a Palestinian state if Israelis have good reasons to fear that ending the occupation is a prelude to ending Israel itself. To adapt Justice Robert Jackson's famous line about the Constitution, a peace deal cannot be a suicide pact.

Still, it should be said: There needs to be a horizon.

A horizon is neither a deadline nor a *démarche*. It's a goal that is years if not decades away. It is based on an idea: in this case, the idea that the fulfillment of Zionism as a freedom struggle requires a recognized border that preserves the political viability of Jews as

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a people neither above nor below, but fundamentally *apart*. And it's an idea that requires patience: both the patience to hold fast to the idea when circumstances make it seem unnecessary or irrelevant, and the patience not to hurry it when circumstances make it premature and dangerous.

The most effective way to advance that idea isn't through international diplomacy or political decision-making. It's through Zionist dialogue—there being no point in discussing the Zionist future with people who don't want a future for Zionism. It's by asking, first, in an aspirational sense, what Israelis want for the next 50 or 100 years, and whether that includes a perpetual "Palestinian problem"; second, in a prudential sense, how to get there without doing Israel grave injury along the way. There is no reaching the long term without surviving the short.



We come to the final point: Zionism as liberation from foreign ideas.

Seen at a distance, Zionism is just the Jewish branch of the global phenomenon known as nationalism. In many senses it is. But Zionism isn't mere Jewish nationalism, given that Jewishness isn't merely a national or ethnic identity; it is also a religious and moral one. And the goal of Zionism isn't merely to give Jews "a

place *among* the nations” (per the title of Benjamin Netanyahu’s 1993 book). It’s to make Israel a light unto the nations.

The point may seem flattering, but it isn’t always an easy one to accept. It imposes a set of moral burdens and expectations, many of them unfair. “Other nations when victorious on the battlefield dictate peace terms,” Eric Hoffer wrote in 1968. “But when Israel is victorious it must sue for peace. Everyone expects the Jews to be the only real Christians in the world.”

Hoffer was right: Israel continues to labor under what might be called a moral colonialism — typically coming from those who are loudest in denouncing the legacy of colonialism. The Jewish state is expected to conduct its battles with greater regard for the safety of its enemies than for that of its own people. It is expected to make diplomatic concessions that put the lives of its own citizens at serious risk. It is expected to strengthen its “democratic” character, but only if its democratic choices conform to progressive sensibilities. It is expected, when struck, to turn the other cheek.

These expectations aren’t wrong for holding Israel to high standards: Nobody should hold Israel to a higher standard than Zionists themselves. But they are wrong when they are based on ethical concepts inimical to Jewish traditions, ideals, and practical realities. Israel did not liberate itself politically from colonial masters merely to remain a captive of their ideas.

A Jewish state is not just a political and security concept. It is also a civilizational opportunity; a chance to rediscover, rearticulate, and redevelop a uniquely Jewish way of thinking, being, and doing in the world; a means of finding out how a culture that was both stunted and enriched in its long exile can, with the benefit of sovereignty, create a healthier model of human community. Are there ways of doing politics, Jewishly, that aren’t simply a facsimile of the way politics are done in other advanced democracies? Is there a way of managing differences in society, and of enriching the human experience in the modern state, that is not only distinctive but can also offer a model for other nations wrestling with similar dilemmas?

Three areas come to mind:

- Can the tension between identity and freedom, which elsewhere has led to so much conflict and repression, achieve a more sustainable and dynamic balance? The freedoms of modern liberal societies are almost limitless; these freedoms are especially precious to those with the inner resources to make the most of them. But they come at a cost: the disconnection of the individual from his community, the lack of a sense of personal purpose, the moral entropy that often goes with what Rudyard Kipling called the “Gods of the Market Place.” On the flip side, a powerful sense of identity, tradition, and place offers its own emotional and spiritual comforts. But it’s frequently stifling, most of all to the free spirits and free thinkers who usually move the world forward, and which Jewish civilization produces in such abundance.
- Can there be a model of religious-secular coexistence that is less frictional, less distanced, and more mutually enriching? Contrary to the hopes or expectations of some of the early Zionists, a Jewish state was never going to leave Judaism in the atavistic dust. And contrary to the beliefs or predictions of some of today’s religious Zionists or Haredim, the state of Israel cannot succeed without the cultural and economic dynamism of its secular side. Similar fantasies typify secular and religious expectations in other countries, not least the United States. Much of the challenge rests in finding ways to de-escalate secular-religious divisions at the legal level and engage the two sides in different layers of life — pedagogical, spiritual, and social.
- Can democratic states with large, and largely separate, cultural minorities find a middle path between bitter communal rivalry and complete assimilation? The intercommunal violence of



2021 was a loud alarm for many Israelis that not only have they neglected this challenge, but also—in legislation such as the 2018 nation-state law and the neglect of basic policing in Israeli-Arab communities—that they have moved in the wrong direction. On the other hand, the creation of last year’s extraordinarily broad coalition government, along with the signing of the Abraham Accords, gives reason to hope that there are hidden reserves of good will between Jews and Arabs, as well as opportunities to create a far more inclusive Israel than the one we have today.



An argument is sometimes made that the term “Zionism” no longer means much. In this reading, Zionism was a 19th- and 20th-century project to regain a secure and recognized Jewish homeland. It succeeded in 1948. Those who approve of the project have gotten on with it; those who don’t approve need to get over it. End of story.

But leaving aside the fact that this homeland is neither universally recognized nor truly secure, this view of Zionism sells its true meaning short.

*A struggle for freedom begins with a quest for a homeland—but it doesn’t end there.*

*A homeland isn’t truly free until it is self-governing—but self-governance doesn’t lead to freedom unless rulers are bound by law and the consent of the governed.*

*Democracy is the essential precondition for living a free life, but not the only condition—there is also the need for freedom from want and freedom from fear.*

*The blessings of a prosperous and secure state are not sufficient for freedom—there is also the need for moral, spiritual, and intellectual freedom, both at the individual and national level.*

*The pursuit of ever fuller forms of freedom is often a blessing—but*

*it becomes a curse when it diminishes or blocks the same pursuit by others.*

To say that Zionism *remains* a freedom struggle does not merely vindicate the distance it has traveled so far. It reminds us that the journey is far from over. \*