

Ethnocracy

Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The book in your hand offers the concept of *ethnocracy* as a most appropriate account for the development of Zionist society and regime in Israel/Palestine. Ethnocratic regimes promote the expansion of the dominant group in contested territory and its domination of power structures while maintaining a democratic facade.¹ Ethnocracy manifests in the Israeli case with the long-term Zionist strategy of Judaizing the homeland—constructed during the last century as the Land of Israel, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The very same territory is also perceived by most Palestinians as their rightful historical homeland, invaded and seized by Jews. The development of ethnic relations in Israel/Palestine has been fundamentally shaped by the material, territorial, political, and cultural aspects of the Judaization dynamic and by the various forms of resistance to that project.

Let us begin the long journey taken by this book with a telling incident. In February of 2002, several light planes were sent, for the first time ever, by the Israeli government to spray twelve thousand dunams of crops with poisonous chemicals. This act repeated itself in October of 2002, April of 2003, and April of 2004. The destroyed fields had been cultivated for years by Bedouin Arabs in the Negev (Nagab) region near the city of Beer-Sheva on land they claim as their own. The minister responsible for land management, Avigdor Lieberman, claimed on that day: "We must stop their illegal invasion into state land by all means possible; the Bedouins have no regard for our laws; in the process we are losing the last resources of state lands; one of my main missions is to return power to the Land Authority in dealing with the non-Jewish threat to our lands. At the same time, we must settle the land by building new communal settlements and family farms. If we don't do this, we shall lose the Negev forever."²

With expressions such as "our" land, "our" law, and "their" invasion, Lieberman's words expose a forceful separation of Arab and Jewish citizens used to demarcate the limits of identity and the rights of Arabs in the Jewish state. This was echoed in May of 2003 by Ehud Olmert, the new minister responsible for planning who was trying to promote a new plan to concentrate rural Bedouins into seven urban centers. Olmert responded to charges of ignoring the wishes of the local community by stating: "We

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plan to talk to the Bedouins, but I assume they will object to our plan from the outset. Still, we shall not be afraid to implement our decisions. . . . If we depend on Bedouin consent, it will never come. . . . The government will implement the plan, either peacefully or by force."⁷³

The two ministers failed to explain why the state used such violence and never attempted to resolve the issue by negotiation, cooperation, or legal means. Further, they overlooked the ramifications of this unprecedented brutal attack: a growing sense of alienation among Bedouin Arabs, once a community keen to integrate into Israeli society.

As a response, and in an open challenge to the ministers and the state, the chief holders of the disputed land, the al-Touri tribe, built a small village on the site, with some forty shacks, tents, herds of cattle, and communal facilities. During 2002 and 2003, the site was demolished and forcibly evacuated by the Israeli police three times, resulting in clashes with the locals and scores of arrests.

This brutal incident is but the last in a long string of ethnocentric planning measures aimed against Palestinian Arabs in general, and the Negrev Bedouin Arabs in particular, as detailed on these pages. In the late 1940s the Bedouins were concentrated in a small and barren area of southern Israel and were placed under military rule. During the 1960s, military rule was replaced by a plan to urbanize the (previously seminomadic) Bedouins. The state planned to move them into seven towns and clear the rest of the land for Jewish settlement and military purposes. However, a large number of Bedouins refused to be forcibly urbanized, as such a move would force them to relinquish their land claims and seriously jeopardize their traditions and culture. They remained on the land, in what is termed "spontaneous settlement" or "dispersal." The Bedouins were subsequently declared by the state to be "invaders"—"illegally" occupying their ancestors' land—and their villages (or the shanty towns) classified as "unrecognized." For the last three decades the state has attempted to coerce their migration into the towns using a range of pressure tactics, including widespread demolition of housing, denial of most social services, and refusal to build physical infrastructure or initiate plans for the village. Given this, the bitter words of Hassan Abu-Quider, a Bedouin activist who addressed in 1998 a meeting with the then chairperson of the Jewish Agency, Avraham Burg, echo loudly: "Only in one instance shall we, the Bedouin Arabs, get our full and equal rights in the Jewish State: only if miraculously we'll stop occupying, needing, or using any land. Then we shall receive what we truly deserve—full air rights. . . ."⁷⁴

The recent spraying of Bedouin fields with poison, however, marks a new stage in the state's attempts to control the Bedouins' land use. It sent shockwaves among southern Bedouin Arabs, who began a campaign to convince public opinion of their rightful claims to the land in question

and the persistent discrimination against their community. Yet the active public debate, in talk shows, public demonstrations, and political speeches, never addressed the following key points:

- Bedouin Arabs in the Beer-Sheva region are formally full citizens of the state of Israel; why should their use of state land be considered an invasion, while their fellow Jewish citizens are encouraged to come and use the same land?
- Lieberman is an immigrant who arrived from the former Soviet Union; how acceptable is a situation in which an immigrant evicts indigenous groups who have lived on the land for generations?
- Lieberman is a West Bank settler; that is, he embodies Israel's breach of a series of international conventions and norms that prohibit the transfer of populations into occupied areas and the confiscation of occupied lands; indeed, Lieberman, according to international law, is an invader himself.

These observations, made from a critical southern perspective, are rarely discussed in Israeli public discourse. They illustrate the contradictions and tensions embedded in the regime ruling over Israel/Palestine, termed in this book "a settling ethnocracy." This is a regime premised on a main project of ethnonational *expansion* and control and on a parallel self-representation of the system as democratic. However, the three observations challenge the very basic tenets of a modern democratic regime. They exhibit the structural elevation of Jewish over Arab citizens; the privileging of Jewish diasporas (and hence immigrants) over local Arab citizens; and the blurring of state borders, which allows West Bank Jewish settlements to continue to form a (*de facto*) part of Israel, while their immediate Palestinian neighbors remain disenfranchised.

Indeed, issues of land, borders, immigration, settlement, development, and political conflict make up the main materials of this book. The struggles over these elements have created the tensions, confrontations, dramas, tragedies, and constant oscillation between hope and despair so prevalent in Israel/Palestine. The book will attempt to shed further light on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict by providing a new framework for analysis—the ethnocentric regime—and by presenting one of the only accounts of the conflicts that focuses on the nexus of space, ethnicity, and power.

The need for the new approach is twofold. First, on a general conceptual level, past accounts, models, and interpretations of the making of Israeli society and the Zionist-Palestinian conflict have generally fallen short. By and large, past works did not provide sufficiently rigorous accounts and hence failed to delineate the main forces at work or to predict the course of evolving events. Second, there has been a conspicuous lack of conceptual and

critical work by geographers on the shaping of Israel/Palestine, although the geographical perspective offers illuminating insights. This critique is elaborated throughout the chapters that follow.

The analysis presented in this book is guided by a critical, materialist perspective, which emphasizes the interdependence of geographical, economic, cultural, and political processes. The emphasis is on political geography and political economy as key pillars of shaping ethnic relations and politics. The approach draws inspiration from neo-Gramscian perspectives (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hall 1992; Lusitck 1993), from related critical approaches (see Lefebvre 1991; Said 1992; LM. Young 2002), and from critical analysis in the social sciences, mainly in geography, political science, and urban studies (see Friedman 2002; Harvey 2001; Marcuse and Van Kempen 2000; Samadard 2000; Sibley 1995).

My own approach stresses the reciprocity of material, cultural, and political forces, and it attempts to deconstruct dominant categories, discourses, and historical accounts. On this basis, it attempts to propose new conceptualizations, aimed at both offering more revealing and accurate accounts of societal processes and laying the foundation for new consciousness and praxis. In this way, the analysis I offer is not merely aimed at outlining a de-structive critique. It rather derives from my empathy for both Jewish and Palestinian peoples and personal participation in many attempts to rebuild a just and sustainable polity in Israel/Palestine.

The topics discussed in the book are relevant to a wide spectrum of scholarly fields. Indeed, this is the intention of the interdisciplinary approach adopted here. Beyond geography and urban studies already mentioned, the book also converses with and seeks to contribute to several ongoing debates in the literature, most notably dealing with

- nationalism and ethnic relations;
- political regimes, political stability, and the nature of democracy;
- settler societies and (post)colonial studies; and, of course
- Israel, Palestine, and Arab-Jewish relations in the Middle East.

The Argument and Its Contribution

The main theoretical contribution of this book combines two dimensions: the development of a critical ethnocentric theory and the integration of geography as a key factor in the analysis of social, economic, and political relations. This approach posits that ethnicization constitutes the main force shaping ethnocentric regimes, putting in train a set of typical societal processes. These typically manifest in the territorial, political, economic, legal, and cultural spheres of society.

Consequently, the book's main empirical claim is that the process of *Judaizing Israel/Palestine*, with its associated dislocations, struggles, and

contradictions, forms a major spine around which ethnic relations have evolved in that land. This applies first and foremost to relations between Jews and Palestinians but also to the location and changing position of groups such as Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, orthodox and "secular" Jews, recent "Russian" and Ethiopian immigrants, Bedouin Arabs, Druze Arabs, and immigrant workers. As elaborated in the book's chapters, the Judaization project has advanced in many spheres, most notably in the territorial pursuits of Zionism, as well as in the grip of the Jewish religion on Israeli public life. But Judaization has also profoundly affected the role of armed forces, the ethnic logic in the flow of capital and the location of development, the establishment of a legal system, the shaping of public culture and gender relations, and the conduct of politics. The argument continues by tracing the various consequences of the ethnicization-Judaization project and by delineating the process of "creeping apartheid" that is increasingly evident in the governance of Israel/Palestine and has recently turned further into concrete reality with the unilateral construction of a massive separation barrier (wall or fence) in the West Bank.⁵

Importantly, the book does not attempt to advance a single, reductionist explanation. Rather it seeks to highlight the power of ethnicization (that is, Judaization) among other powerful forces at work in the shaping of Israel/Palestine. These include, but are not limited to, the impact of foreign powers, especially the United States; the role of religion in the Middle East; changing Arab political orientations; the fluctuation of Palestinian violence; and the gradual transformation of the Israeli economy, first toward a state-controlled mixed market and later toward globalizing neoliberalism. However, while avoiding unidimensional reductionism, it is still possible to claim that the Judaization project has, and continues to be, a most powerful and dynamic factor in shaping the space, wealth, and political power in Israel/Palestine.

The book was researched and written from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. During the former period some of the concepts presented here were published, offering critical interpretations of the forces shaping Israel/Palestine. These often ran against the grain of mainstream scholarship, resulting in some fierce debates on topics such as the nature of the Israeli regime (see Ghanem et al. 1998; Gavison 1998; Shafrir and Peled 1998, 2002; Smooha 1998, 2002), the linkages between the Zionist project and the marginalized position of the Mizrahim in Israel (Yiftachel 1998b), the association between territorial and socioeconomic process (Sharkansky 1997), and the inherent problems of the Oslo peace process (Yiftachel 2001b, 2004).

The dramatic events of the 2000-3 period brought many of these processes into sharp relief. These included the failed peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, the eruption of the al-Aqsa *intifada* (uprising) in the Palestinian occupied territories, the October Events of 2000 in Israel, the continuing liberalization of the Israeli economy, and subsequent

transformations of ethnic and social relations. This set of new circumstances presented a unique opportunity to revisit the scholarly debates of the 1990s against the unfolding reality.

While portions of these debates are sprinkled on the pages of this book (especially in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9), it is worth highlighting here that—by and large—the recent events have validated the ethnocentric approach. At the same time, they undermined many of the opposing arguments held by mainstream scholars, on several grounds. First, the unstable nature of the Israeli ethnocentric regime became highly conspicuous. The area under Israeli control became characterized once again by cycles of violent oppression, countermobilization, and widespread terror against Israeli civilians, repeated economic crises, and growing socioeconomic gaps. Within the Green Line, the conflict between the Palestinian Arab minority and the Jewish state entered a new stage of renewed state repression and deepening mutual mistrust.

Israel also suffered governmental instability, with five prime ministers serving in office and four election campaigns taking place during the last eight years (since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin). These events and processes, in one way or another, are linked to key ethnocentric dynamics, namely, Israeli attempts to continue the Judaization of Israel/Palestine, and the continuing manipulation of public policy and resources by the dominant ethnoclasses, with the effect of deepening ethnic disparities and conflict.

It also became clear during the 2000–3 period that the entire area under Israeli control—that is, Israel/Palestine between river and sea—should be analyzed as one political-geographic unit. Moreover, the Palestinian and Jewish diasporas—both with concrete claims on this land—must also be taken into account in the analysis of the forces shaping Israel/Palestine. The common scholarly and political attempts to portray the existence of Israel proper within the Green Line, which is “Jewish and democratic,” are hence both analytically flawed and politically deceiving.

Accordingly, events and processes taking place in most parts of Israel/Palestine are interlinked, resembling what Fortuqali termed a decade ago “implicate relations” (Fortuqali 1993), whereby neighboring entities develop and change in constant interaction, becoming “enveloped” through a process of mutually dependent development. Today, the interdependence of processes across Israel/Palestine persists, despite the historically significant attempts by the Rabin, Barak, and Sharon governments to recave an exclusive Israeli political territory, leading to a repartition of Palestine.

On the ground, however, Israel has deepened its occupation of Palestinian territories, more than doubling the size of Jewish settlements since the signing of the Oslo agreement, while placing severe restrictions on Palestinian development and mobility. This has made more conspicuous the preferential treatment of Jews and the coerced geographical mixture of privileged Jews and the disenfranchised. Indeed, as mentioned above,

Israel created—with its own hands—a system of creeping apartheid, most obvious and brutal in the West Bank and Gaza, but—as with the earlier Bedouin example—now diffusing into other parts of Israel.

The recent “disengagement” from the Gaza Strip may appear as a dramatic change of policy, in which Israel has willingly evacuated, for the first time, Jewish settlements from the “holy” Jewish homeland (the Land of Israel). However, during the same period, Israel continued to settle Jews in the West Bank by expanding most settlements, and accelerated the construction of the separation barrier which effectively annexes to Israel nearly 10 percent of the West Bank and large parts of East Jerusalem.

As argued in Chapter 3, Zionism has entered a new phase, by restraining its expansionist pulse from external or peripheral frontiers. Instead, Israel prefers to consolidate territorial gains by further Judaizing areas with a substantial Jewish presence, while ridding itself of the responsibility for densely populated Palestinian areas and isolated Jewish settlements. Despite the important precedent of evacuating the Gaza settlements, the emerging political geography, at least in the foreseeable future, is characterized by violent Jewish domination, strict separation, and ethnic inequality—all in line with the concept of creeping apartheid.

This is a logical, though not inevitable, extension of an expansive ethnocentric regime. As predicted by the ethnocentric interpretation, the evolving political geography of Israel/Palestine has continued to constitute a major factor in shaping and reshaping politics and social relations.

The Book

The book will substantiate the above claims by developing the ethnocentric argument in three main directions. In Part I, it will elaborate on the conceptual architecture and language (Chapter 1); on theoretical foundations of ethnocentric regimes (Chapter 2); and on their ability to construct and maintain the myth of the ethnonational homeland as a fundamental mobilizing force (Chapter 3). In Part II, the book will outline in some detail the history, geography, and politics of the ethnocentric regime in Israel/Palestine, focusing on the development and territorialization of Zionist and Palestinian nationalisms (Chapter 4); the debate over Israeli democracy (Chapter 5); the making of the Israeli ethnocentric regime (Chapter 6); the land system (Chapter 7); and the cultural construction of the Zionist homeland (Chapter 8).

In Part III, the book will provide more focused empirical accounts of particular communities and places, beginning with the development of fractured regionalism among Palestinian Arabs in Israel (Chapter 9); the making of an ethnocentric metropolitan area around the city of Beer-Sheva (Chapter 10); and the emergence of a peripheral Mizrahi ethnoclass in Jewish development towns (Chapters 11 and 12). In the fourth and final

part, the book will provide a look into the future, outlining an alternative plan for a binational and multicultural Jerusalem/al-Quds capital region (Chapter 13) and ending with a discussion about the need to create a demos as a foundation for a stable and prosperous political community in Israel/Palestine.

Finally, it should be stressed that the analysis of this book, while presenting a broad spatial-political perspective, does not claim to be comprehensive. Several central aspects of ethnocentric societies are underanalyzed in the preceding chapters, including gender relations, the link between ethnicity and militarism, the repercussions of globalization, liberalization, and the interrelations between cities, urbanization, and ethnocentric regimes. In addition, the analysis of Israeli society does not accord due space to several large and influential communities such as Haredi Jews and immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. These aspects are vital to the development of the ethnocentric model and to the understanding of Israel/Palestine. Hence, they present future research directions for the author of this book and hopefully for others.

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