

Israel's false tautology

Israelis, Jews not the same

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PERSPECTIVE

Israeli leaders have begun to implement a plan they have long been preparing: Gaining complete control of the Land of Israel, "Eretz Yisrael" אֶרֶץ-יִשְׂרָאֵל, including Gaza and the West Bank. I won't detail here the early political and military milestones in the project, except to note that Israel's expropriation of Arab land has been well documented by UN agencies, Palestinian and other scholars, and human rights organizations. That history includes seizures following wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 and settlement activity up until the present. In the last few weeks alone, there has been a major expansion of "wildcat settlement outposts" in the West Bank, according to an investigation by the Israeli group Peace Now, as reported in The New York Times.

On December 25, 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israeli Knesset member Shani Danon that he was developing a plan to facilitate the "voluntary" transfer of Gazans to other countries. "Our problem," he said, "is finding countries that are ready to absorb [them] and we are working on it." A few days later, Finance Minister Bezale Smotrich said: "The solution in Gaza requires...encouraging voluntary migration and full security control including the renewal of [Jewish] settlement." If Netanyahu, Smotrich, and others accomplish their goal of ridding Gaza of Gazans and extending the Jewish state "from the river to the sea," it will be the bloody culmination of Theodore Herzl's dream of a Heimstätte (a homeland) for the Jews in all of Palestine; it will also be a second nakba (catastrophe) for the Palestinians.



Members of the Jewish Voice for Peace and the If Not Now movement, two Jewish activist groups, stage a rally on October 18, 2023, in Washington, D.C., to call for a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war. **ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES**



Israeli border police stop Arab women in the Old City of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) on October 3, 2023. **CHAIM GOLDBERG/FLASH90**



Israeli Arab girls look for passing cars to hand out Muslim prayer books in the main street of the Arab town of Taibe, central Israel, in January 2014. **ARIEL SCHALIT/AP**

The false tautology

The cabinet of Israel has for decades argued that "Eretz Yisrael" — the total territory of historic Palestine — should be the homeland of Jews alone. That was implicit from the nation's founding but became explicit with the passage in 2018 of the "Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People." The chairman of the committee that drafted the bill and shepherded it through the Knesset, Amir Ohana stated: "This is the law of all laws. It is the most important law in the history of the State of Israel, which says that everyone has human rights, but national rights in Israel belong only to the Jewish people. That is the founding principle on which the state was established." Though the bill was watered down somewhat from its original version, "it still permitted," according to the Israeli Attorney General's office, "harming a person be-

cause of his nationality or religion. That is blatant discrimination." The law also affirms the right of diasporic Jews to emigrate (aliya — עלייה) to Israel, but not Arabs or Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, or elsewhere, even if they are related to Israeli Arabs. Preservation of the Jewish right of return is essential to maintaining Israel's appeal to American and other diasporic Jews. The US has nearly as many Jews — just under 6 million — as Israel, together comprising 3/4 of the global population. By making them de facto Israelis, the right of return expands Eretz Yisrael far beyond existing boundaries and implicates the diaspora in Israeli policy. The underlying ideology of Palestinian exclusion and Jewish inclusion is expressed by the following, implicit (and false) tautology: All (true) Israelis are Jews; all Jews are Israelis.

Of course, not all Israelis are Jews. 21% are Arabs (Palestinian, Druze, Christians, Circassian, and others), denied full recognition in accord with Israel's Basic Law. If you consider the wider region to which Netanyahu's far-right coalition lays claim, including Gaza and the West Bank, the population is divided roughly 50/50 between Jews and non-Jews — the latter mostly Sunni Muslims. (Recent demographic analysis suggests that Jews are now a minority in Israel and the occupied or administered territories.) Neither are "all Jews Israeli." The Right of Return is an invitation, not a mandate, and only about 3,000 Americans per year accept it. In fact, more than twice as many Israeli Jews migrate to the US every year, as American Jews to Israel. In the last few weeks, opposition to the war among young Democratic voters has moved the Biden administration away

from unstinting support for the war and toward a policy of de-escalation, though far too slowly to protect the Palestinian population of Gaza. What's needed now is for American liberals and progressives — Jewish and non-Jewish, but especially Jewish — to demand that continued US support for Israel be conditioned upon an end to the killing, and rapid commencement of negotiations for a long-term peace, along the lines of either a two-state or one-state solution. The slogans for that mass movement have already been deployed by courageous students and faculty, union workers, anti-war activists, and progressive Democrats in the US House of Representatives; They are: "Not in My Name," "Never Again, Anywhere," and "Peace Now."

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Israeli refuseniks picking jail over the Gaza war

He's a baby-faced 18-year-old with a heart full of idealism. When Tel Aviv teen Tal Mitnick refused to enlist in the Israeli army, he was put on trial: on December 26, 2023, he was taken to military prison to serve a 30-day sentence. Standing alone in a country on a determined war footing is an agonising decision. But, speaking at Tel Hashomer, a base near the Gaza fence in central Israel, Mitnick staunchly defended his decision, Al Jazeera reported. "I believe that slaughter cannot solve slaughter," he said. "Violence won't solve violence. And that is why I refuse." The statement appeared on the X account of Mesarvot, a support network connecting "refuseniks" in a campaign against the Israeli

occupation of Palestinian territories. In an earlier interview posted on the account, Mitnick laid out his universalist stance on the conflict. The solution, he said, would not come from corrupt politicians in Israel or from Hamas. "It will come from us, the sons and daughters of the two nations," he said. Friends came out in support of Mitnick, holding placards with phrases like: "You cannot build heaven with blood," "An eye for an eye and we all go blind," and "There is no military solution." Military service is mandatory for most Jewish Israelis, viewed as a rite of passage. In the country's highly militarised society, so-called refuseniks risk being labelled traitors.



A group of students, including Tal Mitnick (C), hold protest signs at the Tel Hashomer military base in central Israel. Mitnick was sentenced to 30 days in a military prison for refusing to serve in the Israel Defense Forces. **MESARVOT**