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PERSPECTIVES
ON TERRORISM

Examining Ideology, Asymmetry, and Ethnonationalism in the 2023 Israel-Gaza Crisis

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Abstract: This research note provides an in-depth analysis of the complex interplay between Zionism, Jewish identity, power dynamics, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It traces the emergence of Zionism in the late 19th century, examining how early Zionist ideology aligned with prevalent nationalist and colonial ideologies while also encompassing diverse strands that challenged exclusionary perspectives. The analysis explores the contested notion of Jewish racial "whiteness", probing how Zionist aspirations intersected with racial paradigms and hierarchies. It also analyses how class divisions and capitalist development have impacted Zionist goals. The study draws on the current 2023 Israel-Gaza crisis to demonstrate how exclusionary ethnoreligious nationalism still takes precedence over ethical considerations for some in Israel, yet also highlights Israeli efforts across the spectrum to find just resolutions. Overall, the analysis emphasises the need for new frameworks that affirm the equal dignity of all involved while understanding the diversity of voices within Israel regarding this enduringly complex topic.

Keywords: Zionism, Jewish identity, power dynamics, Israeli-Gaza crisis, ethnoreligious nationalism

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Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has persisted for over a century, with roots tracing back to the rise of Zionism in the late 19th century. This analysis aims to provide a nuanced assessment of the complex interplay between Zionism, Jewish identity, whiteness, and power dynamics. It analyses how early Zionist ideology aligned itself with prevalent nationalist and colonial ideologies during its emergence. It also explores the diversity of Zionist thought, including strands that pushed back against exclusionary nationalism. The article examines the contested notion of Jewish whiteness, both within Israel and the diaspora, probing how Zionist goals of building a refuge intersected with prevailing racial paradigms. Additionally, it looks at how class divisions and capitalist development have shaped the priorities and policies of successive Israeli governments. Most pertinently, this piece uses the current 2023 Israel-Gaza crisis in response to the 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel to demonstrate how exclusionary ethnoreligious nationalism can still take precedence over ethical considerations for some factions of Israeli society. However, it also highlights efforts by Israelis across the political spectrum to achieve a just resolution to the conflict. Overall, this analysis emphasises the need for new frameworks that affirm the humanity and dignity of all groups involved while remaining cognisant of the diversity of perspectives within Israel. The aim is to further nuanced discourse on this enduringly complex topic.

The Origins of Zionism

Throughout the course of history, spanning from ancient Israel to the Roman era and medieval Europe, Jewish communities have encountered complex undercurrents while existing as a minority population within diverse cultural contexts. The recurring occurrences of anti-Semitism, persecution, marginalisation, and exclusion have had a profound influence on the way Jewish individuals perceive and construct their own identities. The period of Enlightenment and the subsequent Jewish emancipation sparked weighty discourses regarding the preservation of a distinct Jewish identity as opposed to the process of acculturation or assimilation into the prevailing society.

Zionism is a nationalist movement that emerged in the late 19th century,[1] led by figures such as Theodor Herzl, who advocated for establishing a Jewish homeland and state in Palestine. Core tenets of Zionism include the belief that Jews constitute a nation deserving of self-determination and that a Jewish state would provide refuge from antisemitism. Zionism blended nationalist ideology with the longstanding Jewish religious and cultural ties to the land of Israel, though it also included secular strands. Early Zionists like Herzl and Chaim Weizmann promoted Jewish immigration and settlement in Palestine while seeking international legitimacy for Jewish national aspirations, helping obtain the 1917 Balfour Declaration expressing British support. Socialist Zionists like Nachman Syrkin fused socialist ideas with Zionist goals of building an egalitarian Jewish state. Religious Zionists saw Zionist aims as fulfilling Biblical prophecy regarding the Jewish return to Zion. David Ben-Gurion led the mainstream Zionist movement in the 1930s and 1940s, overseeing Israel's establishment in 1948 as a Jewish-majority state and haven. While diverse, core Zionist figures promoted the nationalist project of re-establishing a Jewish homeland and safe haven in the land of Israel.

Simultaneously, the advent of racial science[2] and the rise of ethnicity-based nationalism during the 19th century influenced Zionist perspectives on the Jewish people as a unified nation deserving of political self-determination. The Zionist ideology reflected prevailing ethnic nationalist paradigms during that period, with its vision of creating a Jewish national homeland by bringing together exiled members of the diaspora. The rejection of the diaspora experience can be seen as a manifestation of Zionism's objective to promote a redefined Jewish identity that is free from perceived vulnerabilities that have been developed over centuries of living without a homeland.[3] From this perspective, we can perceive the intricate integration of Zionism within the wider ideological trends of its time. While drawing inspiration from the prevailing nationalist models of the 19th century, Zionism also exhibited unique ideological characteristics that shaped its expression of Jewish collective identity. The primary factor at play was the process of secularising Jewish identity within the dominant Zionist movements, which led to conflicts with traditional religious understandings of Jewish nationhood.

Despite its apparent rejection of diasporic divisions, Zionism gave rise to internal Jewish ethnic hierarchies. The main ethnic divisions among Jews are the Ashkenazim, who trace their ancestry to Europe, and the Sephardim, who originated in Spain and Portugal before later settling across the Middle East and North Africa after expulsion in 1492. In the early 20th century, Ashkenazi Jews were the dominant force within Zionism, while Sephardic Jews held traditional cultural influence in the Middle East. The predominantly Ashkenazi Zionist pioneers put forth visions for the new Jewish state that placed heavy emphasis on importing European high culture and Hebrew language while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of long-established indigenous Jewish communities across the Levant who traced their roots back to ancient Judea.[4] The notion of the dominant influence of the Sephardic Jewish community was perceived by the Ashkenazi Zionists to contribute to a hegemonic power structure at odds with their staunchly Eurocentric cultural outlook, which intersected with the racial hierarchies and orientalist perspectives prevalent in Europe during this era.[5] This led to cultural tensions as Zionist state-building marginalised Levantine Jewish heritage. Consequently, by redefining Jewishness as a contemporary ethnic nationality, Zionism simultaneously perpetuated specific characteristics associated with diasporic identity. The selective integration of modern ideologies highlights the complex nature of Zionist formulations of Jewish peoplehood.

The Concept of Whiteness in Israel and Across the Diaspora

The contested nature of the Zionist movement in Mandate Palestine and Israel is evident through the immigration of Zionists, who principally originated from Eastern Europe. This immigration posed challenges to the European colonial notion of a "civilising mission," known as the "white man's burden".[6] The Zionist immigrants did not neatly fit the colonial construct that positioned Western Europeans as superior bearers of culture who had a duty to civilise inferior peoples. While some strands of Zionism implicitly or explicitly linked Jewish racial identity or whiteness to European ideals and values, the Zionists were not comprising the ruling colonial power in Mandate Palestine. Their immigration and nationalist goals disrupted the existing colonial order and power dynamics. Therefore, the influx of Zionist immigrants and their aims challenged the European colonial idea that Western powers had the right and duty to rule over and "civilise" supposedly inferior native peoples like Palestinian Arabs. The Zionists pursued

their own nationalist goals that did not align with the governing British colonial administration. During its nation-building process, Israel consciously adopted Western discourses of modernity, technology, and liberal democracy as indicators of advancement and developmental supremacy. In order to understand this absorption of colonial racial hierarchies, it is important to consider the complex historical position of Judaism in navigating white privilege and occasional racialisation. Though claiming Jewish proximity to whiteness when expedient, Zionism also relied on Orientalist dichotomies that valued Ashkenazi over Sephardic/Mizrahi identity. As such, the situational flexibility of Zionist claims to whiteness shifted based on circumstances and proved an ideological foundation for present-day tensions rooted in ethnicity and racialisation. Overall, analysis of Zionist constructions of Jewish racial identity elucidates Israel's fraught balancing act: seeking Western liberal legitimacy while maintaining a Jewish ethnoreligious character, though built in part on now-outdated racial frameworks.

Internal ethnic stratification, in which Ashkenazi Jews held dominance, impacted other non-European Jews within this Zionist project[7]. The hierarchical structure has had negative consequences for Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and Palestinian communities, in terms of cultural marginalisation and socioeconomic exclusion. The amalgamation of Eurocentrism and Ashkenazi hegemony within Zionism resulted in 'Jewish whiteness', which reinforced disparities. An analysis of the relationship between Zionism and whiteness provides an understanding of conflicts related to ethnicity, privilege, marginalisation, and power within Israel. When examining the Jewish diaspora, there are similarities and differences in the Zionism-whiteness relationship. In contrast to Israel's challenges, diasporic communities grappled with assimilation, acculturation, and minoritisation. Identification with Zionism increased in order to preserve Jewish distinctiveness against pressures to assimilate into white-dominant environments, particularly in the United States. Diasporic Zionism was a strategic approach to preserving Jewish identity abroad.

Nonetheless, categorising diasporic Jewish whiteness as definitive was debated due to Jews' uncertain position within racial frameworks. Some perceived Jewish association with whiteness or reactionary ideologies as departing from inter-ethnic unity. Perceiving Jews as having a dual loyalty to Jewish and national identities, and also to Zionism contributed to beliefs that their position in the diaspora was unsustainable. Debates arose regarding the clear categorization of Jews as "white" due to their ambiguous status in racial classifications. Some individuals believed that Jews aligned themselves with whiteness or conservative politics, thereby undermining solidarity between ethnic groups. The perception that Jews had loyalty to both their Jewish identity and national identity (e.g., American, British, etc.), as well as loyalty to the Zionist project, led some to believe the position of Jews in the diaspora outside of Israel was untenable. These "identities", therefore, refer to Jews' dual identities as both Jews and members of their host nation, and the "position" refers to the place and status of Jews within the diaspora, outside of a Jewish homeland.

Ideology, Zionism, Social Class, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

As the process of Zionist nation-building took place[8] during the period of British colonial rule in Palestine, where it combined capitalist development with an imbalanced colonial dynamic, Zionist entities strategically utilised the burgeoning principles of liberal nationalism and self-determination discourses in order to promote their political aspirations for sovereignty. However, Zionist identification also facilitated a degree of acceptance and integration, reducing pressure for Jews to conceal their ethnic and religious identity in order to assimilate. This highlights Zionism's dual and somewhat contradictory nature: on the one hand, advocating for the integration of Jews within European society through shared identification with nationalism and civilizational values, yet on the other hand, reaffirming Jewish uniqueness and difference by promoting emigration to a distinctly Jewish homeland.

Class had an impact on the alignment of Zionist ideologies, as Zionist leaders frequently originated from bourgeois backgrounds strongly associated with capitalist development.[9] This bourgeois background led Zionist ideologies to emphasise capitalist goals like building infrastructure and settlements, hold paternalistic views towards Jewish workers they sought to "modernise,", and align with imperial powers for top-down nationalist projects rather than grassroots approaches. The bourgeois origins of many Zionist leaders impacted Zionist ideologies by prioritising capitalism, paternalism, and imperial alignment over socialist visions or empowering the existing Jewish Palestinian community in a bottom-up manner. Their class backgrounds shaped ideological development to focus on capitalist nation-building in alignment with imperial powers, rather than working-class solidarity or anti-colonial approaches.

The emergence of tensions among anti-Zionist Jewish leftist movements, primarily located in working-class communities, revealed divisions based on ideology and social class. Examining the historical intersections among race, ethnicity, nationality, and class within the development of Zionism provides a crucial context for understanding the complex and shifting interpretations of Jewish identity that emerged. This legacy has significant ramifications for Israeli society and politics today. Specifically, the early privileging of secular Ashkenazi Jews over more traditional Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews influenced lasting socioeconomic stratification and tensions within Israel. It also affected Israel's conception of its relationship to the Arab world, informing policies that marginalised Palestinian nationalism and claims in ways that sowed seeds for today's conflict. The fluid positionalities of Jewish racial identity reinforced exclusionary tendencies. The ideological foundations of early Zionism can provide insight into understanding some currents of nationalism today that promote uncompromising responses to Hamas and Arab militant groups, often instead of pursuing political solutions. Despite the existence of more nuanced perspectives, some of the rhetoric used to justify current policies occasionally echoes similar conceptualizations of identity and power from earlier Zionist ideologies. By examining these ideological origins, we may find opportunities to reflect on the complex roots of nationalism and identity politics in order to work towards resolving contemporary conflicts through open-minded political engagement.

The interconnection among Zionism, Jewish identity, and social class also carries significant

implications for Israel's protracted conflict with the Palestinians and helps us consider the implications of this for the Israeli response to Hamas today. The dispossession and exclusion of Palestinians during and after the establishment of Israel can be attributed to the ethnonationalist principles that underpinned mainstream Zionism. The process of nation-building in Israel involved the utilisation of religious nationalist discourses and symbols to strengthen the Jewish population, sometimes resulting in the marginalisation of non-Jewish communities.[10] These ideological currents persist in exerting influence on the politics of Israel, which encompasses the ongoing tensions with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Hamas originated from preceding Islamist movements that garnered support within economically disadvantaged Palestinian refugee camps subsequent to the 1948 Nakba. The ideological foundations and internal tensions within Zionism significantly shaped the conditions enabling the later emergence of Hamas. Specifically, the privileging of secular European Jewish identity led to the marginalisation of Levantine Jews and Palestinian Arabs, fuelling grievances. Early Zionist goals of ensuring a Jewish majority informed policies limiting Palestinian land and nationalism. Meanwhile, socioeconomic disparities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews mirrored Palestinian hardships.

Historic conceptions of Jewish racial identity also contributed to unyielding perspectives in responding to Palestinian militancy. In the past, some Zionist leaders believed that Jewish identity was tied to racial attributes[11] or a sense of Jewish peoplehood as separate from others. Although racial science has been discredited, remnants of these inflexible notions of identity may continue to impede nuanced political engagement today. By understanding how past views hardened into intransigent stances, we may uncover opportunities for greater openness and dialogue moving forward. There are always multiple perspectives, but examining the roots of identity politics can enlighten situations where compromise seems elusive on either side of a conflict. Together, these currents of exclusion and competing nationalism stemming from Zionist ideological origins contributed to conditions conducive to the rise of Hamas. Israeli leaders have frequently used the confrontation with Hamas, specifically its rocket attacks and tunnel networks, to mobilise Jewish citizens around militarised Zionist conceptions of nationhood.[12]

Critical scholars contend[13] that these discourses exploit Jewish historical anxieties as a means to rationalise the utilisation of extensive asymmetric violence in Gaza, as well as the implementation of the Gaza blockade today. According to their argument, the Zionist inclination to mitigate perceived threats takes precedence over humanitarian concerns for Palestinians. Furthermore, the prevailing influence of Israel's privileged Ashkenazi capitalist class reinforces military-economic strategies that marginalise both Mizrahi Jews and Palestinian citizens.[14]

Beyond Ethnoreligious Nationalism

The ongoing increase in violence between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip presents a thought-provoking example that demonstrates the ideological forces and power previously discussed. According to data from the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza, over 14,000 Palestinians have died in Gaza as a result of Israeli bombing as of 22 November 2023. The deaths include at least 6,000 children, while hundreds more remain unaccounted for beneath the rubble. Some view[15] these civilian casualties as connected to particular strands of Jewish nationalism and

militarism that historically contained elements of racial bias. However, the situation stems from deeply complex historical and current tensions between multiple perspectives. The suffering and loss of human life on all sides of this conflict are profoundly distressing. The government led by Prime Minister Netanyahu rationalises its military airstrikes as a crucial measure to cease the rocket assaults conducted by Hamas, which pose a threat to the safety and well-being of Israelis, as well as in response to the killing of 1,200[16] persons in Israel including civilians (majority), army, police, and others by Hamas fighters on 7 October.

The prolonged period of occupation and blockade in Gaza has resulted in the impoverishment of its predominantly Palestinian inhabitants, creating favourable conditions for the rise of Hamas.[17] The threat has been exploited by Israel's far right leaders in order to generate anti-Palestinian sentiment and strengthen their domestic backing, utilising ethnonationalist narratives that portray Jewish victimisation.[18] The use of excessive force by Israel can be attributed to its significant military advantage, which is further bolstered by its alliances with global superpowers.[19] Moreover, the aforementioned racial and class hierarchies contribute to the pervasive dehumanisation of Palestinians within Israeli society, thereby providing a rationale for the occurrence of significant civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip. Israeli propaganda extensively utilises ethnocentric tropes, which privilege Jewish Israeli perspectives[20] and humanity while minimising that of Palestinians. Many of Israel's claims about activities in Gaza hospitals and by Hamas during its bombing campaign have ostensibly proven false or misleading upon closer inspection.[21]

In conjunction with lobbying efforts in support of Israel, this phenomenon distorts the manner in which the media presents, and policy responses are formulated in relation to, the crisis. The outcome manifests as a disparity in narratives and power, facilitating the prolonged establishment of occupation, blockade, and recurring instances of mass violence. The current crisis serves as a manifestation of the prioritisation of Jewish nationalism and systemic inequality over ethical considerations regarding the well-being and dignity of the Palestinian population. Although the growing international criticism of Israel may serve as a constraint on its actions, it is crucial to carefully consider Zionism's numerous historical effects to reach a fair and equitable resolution.

State Violence Through the Lens of State-Sanctioned Terrorism

Critical scholars argue that the military operations conducted by Israel against Palestinians, including the ongoing bombardment of Gaza, can be understood as a manifestation of state-sanctioned terrorism that is deeply rooted in Zionist ideology. It is contended that the Israeli state's against Palestinian civilians exhibits[22] a resemblance to non-state terrorism in terms of its systemic, disproportionate, and indiscriminate characteristics[23] operations in Gaza throughout the years and presently, serve the purpose of instilling fear and exerting pressure on the populace as a means of achieving certain objectives.' operations in Gaza throughout the years and presently, serve the purpose of instilling fear and exerting pressure on the populace as a means of achieving certain objectives.

The presence of embedded power asymmetry allows for the unilateral application of force, irrespective of the capabilities of Palestinian militants. Hamas' status as both a terrorist group and an elected government actor in a mandated piece of land versus its own nation-state creates more complexities for the resolution of the current conflict. The consequences of civilian casualties, injuries, displacement, and extensive infrastructure damage effectively achieve the objectives of state-sanctioned terrorism, which involve instilling fear and hopelessness, despite being labelled as counter-terrorism efforts.[24] Just as radical Islamist ideology provides an ideological foundation that helps drive groups like Hamas to extremism, certain strands of Zionist ideology similarly provide an ideological foundation that can help enable and legitimise racial extremism and violence among fringe elements in Israel. In other words, a parallel exists between how core tenets of radical Islamism fuel Hamas' terrorist actions, and how certain principles of Zionism can help lend legitimacy to the extremist racism and violence of Israeli Jewish hate groups, even if they do not directly advocate for it. The comparison suggests that problematic currents within dominant Zionist ideology indirectly provide fertile ground for the emergence of ultra-nationalist Jewish racism among extremist fringes, much like radical Islamist thought more directly spurs Hamas. The imperative to establish demographic dominance and maintain the existence of a Jewish state, as advocated by the Zionist movement, is reflected in security doctrines that consistently diminish the value of Palestinian lives.[25]

The phenomenon of Palestinian dispossession and exclusion is often portrayed as a regrettable, yet unavoidable, consequence of the pursuit of Jewish self-determination. The emphasis on employing superior military power to suppress Palestinian militant groups like Hamas, as observed in the current situation in Gaza, stems from Zionist principles prioritizing Jewish security and dominance. However, this heavy-handed militarism also disproportionately impacts broader Palestinian resistance movements and the pursuit of Palestinian sovereignty and statehood, going beyond suppressing terror. The emphasis on employing superior military power to suppress Palestinian resistance, as observed in the current situation in Gaza, is a direct consequence of the foundational principles of Zionism.[26]

Concluding Thoughts

This analysis explores the multi-faceted intersections between Zionism, Jewish identity, racialisation, and power dynamics reveals the complexities involved in understanding and evaluating the ideological foundations and evolution of Zionism and its legacy in Israel. It demonstrates that Zionism encompassed diverse ideological currents, sometimes perpetuating marginalisation while also asserting liberation. Zionism's nation-building aligned with colonialism while proclaiming anticolonial ideals. It reinforced ethnic identity yet also introduced internal hierarchies. The current Israel-Gaza crisis exemplifies how exclusionary nationalism and structural inequality have taken precedence over ethical considerations, enabling extensive violence against Palestinians. However, acknowledging Zionism's diverse legacies is vital for justice, and amplifying marginalised Jewish and Palestinian voices can promote greater equity. Jewish identity has involved diverse expressions beyond Zionist paradigms, and affirming Palestinians' equal humanity and dignity remains essential for peaceful coexistence.

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About

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