

# The Future of Israel As a Zionist State:

## A Debate

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Brief Analysis

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The Abandonment of the Zionism of Ben Gurion and Herzl by Mainstream Zionist Intellectuals The movement away from the concept of Israel as a Jewish state is spreading across the ideological spectrum and at times has had an effect on Israeli policy. Examples include:

- In 1994 a new code of ethics was adopted for the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) which in its explanation of the purposes for which the IDF fights excluded all references to the Jewish state, the Jewish people, and the land of Israel.
- The Law of Return, the law that Ben Gurion said gives a "bill of rights" to all Jews in the world, has been recently under fire. It has been termed one of the main racist aspects of the Jewish state that must be repealed if Israel is to ever have peace with its Arab citizens.
- Preeminent Zionist thinker and Hebrew University professor Eliezer Schweid is promoting the adoption of a universalistic Zionism applicable to Jews and non-Jews alike in Israel. He suggests adding a symbol to the Israeli flag that would represent the participation of the Arab minority (it is difficult to imagine a symbol other than the half-crescent moon that would serve this purpose) and changing the national anthem to reflect a more universalist interpretation of Zionism.

The Current Trend as Viewed through School Books History, especially that of the Zionist cause and state, is increasingly being taught from a very different perspective than that held by the generation of Israel's founders. Mainstream Israeli intellectual historians are disassociating themselves from the Zionist narrative.

For example, the Education Ministry's new twentieth-century history textbook for ninth-graders called *A World of Changes* was written by a team of leading Israeli academics, including Israel Bartal. In the previous ninth-grade textbook, 60 percent of the space was devoted to Zionism, Israel, and the Holocaust, while in the new book these topics are covered by less than 30 percent of the text. For example, the paragraphs on the Six-Day War say nothing about the closing of the Straits of Tiran and the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force; instead, students are told that the slide to war began in April 1967 when Israeli fighter planes shot down six Syrian planes.

The differences can be plainly seen from the pictures that accompany the text. Where once the 1947–1948 War of Independence was illustrated with a map displaying the Arab invasion of 1948, now the only map present in that section shows the flight of the Palestinians. Photographs of David Ben Gurion and the Jewish fighters have been replaced by Palestinian Arab refugees. Nor are there pictures of emaciated Holocaust victims digging their own graves. The full page picture of Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin walking to the Western Wall in 1967 in the newly liberated Old City of Jerusalem--an image once thought to be the pinnacle of modern Israeli history--is now replaced with a picture of an Israeli army half track marooned with a large Arabic banner overhead. This textbook is a powerful example of the movement away from traditional Zionist historiography.

According to Israeli Education Ministry official Moshe Zimmerman, the new school curriculum is based on an idea that the Jewish people and the state of Israel should no longer be the primary focus of history texts. Instead, this new curriculum creates a universalist view where the Jews are passive participants in history. Whereas the old history curriculum consisted of four years of Jewish history beginning in the sixth grade with the Bible and continuing through ninth grade with modern times, in the new curriculum that was first implemented in 1995, the biblical period is dropped and the students begin their study of history with the Greek city-state.

ISRAEL BARTAL

The New School Curriculum In Israel today, historical discourse is evolving. Because of the strength of Israeli society, the nation is able to thrive without having to resort to ready-made societal myths or inventions. Israel does not need to project a single image of the past because that image fits a certain political agenda.

The question of how to transmit history to students is a universal dilemma. It is impossible to have any one schoolbook represent all the diversity and complexity of the past. Educators want the students to know more about both the Jewish and global past and to expose them to ever-changing knowledge. Yet, at the same time, the educators are also confronted with the burden of shaping the curriculum so that students are not overburdened with information.

Many of the recent changes in Israeli school textbooks have nothing to do with a political agenda; rather, the concern has been how to select what should be included in the texts. There is no relationship between the political orientation of an Israeli government and the content of the school books published while it is in power. There is actually a wide selection of history textbooks, and each school may choose which ones it wants to use--a decision often made by the parents' committee at the school. Among all the history textbooks, nine are published by the Israeli Ministry of Education.

As an example of how curriculum changes across administrations, consider how the Bible is taught in Israeli schools. It has always been and continues to be studied extensively as a subject on its own. Until 1975, the Bible was not used as a text within the history curriculum, in part because of objections from the religiously observant about teaching the Bible as history. But from 1975 to 1995, the Bible was incorporated into the history curriculum, until the Education Ministry decided it was redundant to teach Bible both in the history curriculum and within a separate Bible curriculum.

Israeli Zionism and the Israeli 'Mainstream' Zionism is not and has never been a unified ideology; therefore, there is not one single Zionist narrative. The changes in Zionist historiography have meant more Jewishness and less of an Israel-centric attitude toward the Jewish community, as well as a fuller accounting of the experience of Oriental Jews in Israeli history in place of a Germano-centric historical mindset. The history of Israel should allow for more of a fusion of Zionist thought with universal Jewish history so as to allow Israel to continue to build on her strengths, diversity, and democracy. Another change in historiography has been a steering away from making torture and suffering the central themes in Jewish history. Jews have built their own society; they were not spending all their time responding to outside threats. Israel is a free, modern, liberated nation, and the historiography should reflect this.

Because of the diversity of Israeli society, no single ready-made definition exists for the so-called mainstream. Israeli society, like Zionism, consists of contrasting ideologies. And in any case, the use of history by politicians is a sensitive matter. Once they get too close to history, it ceases to be history and becomes politics.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Erika Reff.



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