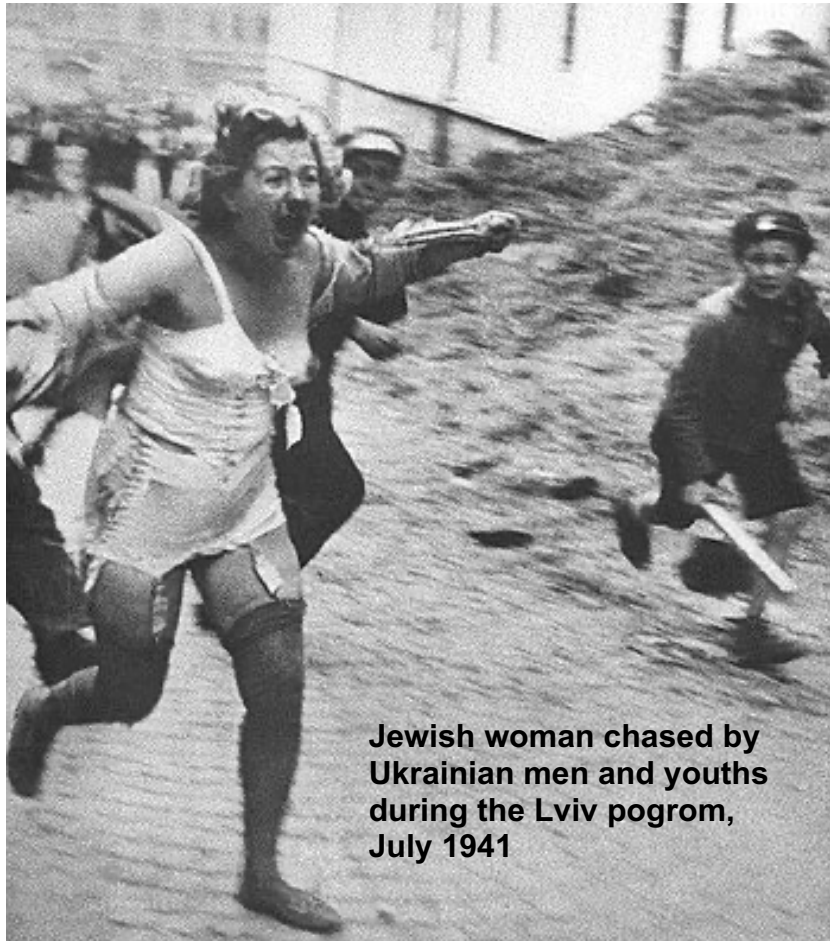


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## Israel's Predicament



Jewish woman chased by Ukrainian men and youths during the Lviv pogrom, July 1941

**IT IS NOT SURPRISING**, given the history of the last century, that Israelis fight tooth and nail to defend their lives and their state. They have been at war in the region with the Arabs since around 1920, when repeated murders and massacres of Jews led to the founding of Jewish civil and military institutions in Jaffa. From frail beginnings these organisations grew, piecemeal, into the Jewish state formally declared in 1948.

This new state of Israel was the last synthetic entity to be founded in the region. Vast territories were

corralled, and carved up, by Britain and France to create Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Their borders were defined and agreed in Paris and London, and they became nominally independent in the late forties. So, Palestine and Jordan were founded within provinces of the Ottoman Empire in territory which had been occupied by the British since 1917. When the British pulled out of Palestine in 1948, Israel declared its independence.

This meant that the ethnic community of Palestinian Arabs, found themselves, stateless, scattered throughout Israel and Jordan. During the foundation of their state the Zionists had ethnically cleansed several hundred thousand Palestinians, driving them into Jordanian controlled territory in Jerusalem and the West Bank, a situation which remained unchanged until the Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel's annexation of Jerusalem, and the occupation of the West Bank, began.

None of this was exceptional, the founding of modern Turkey, Poland, Czechoslovakia (now Czechia and Slovakia), Pakistan, and India, were accompanied by 'population transfers' of tens of millions of people, so the Zionist action in driving out eight hundred thousand Palestinians from Israel was par for the course in state formation during the twentieth century. There was nothing unique or exceptional about the actions of the Jewish forces in Israel's War of Independence in 1948.

However, in founding an ethno-religious state for Jews, the Zionists gave themselves a very particular set of problems. The Zionists of the time were broadly left-wing or socialistic in their outlook and wanted to embed the universal values of democracy – civil and economic equality – within their new state. The problem was they had founded a state not simply *of* the Jews, but *by* and *for* the Jews. Jews inevitably had a privileged status in Israel which condemned the remaining Palestinian Arabs within their borders to second-class citizenship.

Palestinian Israelis could vote and sit in the Knesset, but in relation to rights of residence, house and land purchases, freedom of movement, military service, marriage to Palestinians from outside of Israel, and much else, they were without doubt second-class citizens. The Zionists papered over these problems by deciding against writing a constitution and satisfied themselves with a series of 'basic laws' with which they framed the rights and powers of the state and its citizens.

They promulgated the right of all Jews throughout the world to come and settle in Israel and automatically acquire Israeli citizenship. This right of 'return' was, of course, not granted to Palestinian Arabs, expelled from Israel during the war of 1948 who were denied the 'right of return' because their arrival would undermine the Jewish majority, and the Jewish character of the state.

So, the fundamental conundrum of Jewish statehood was established. How to remain a universal and democratic state while guaranteeing privileged citizenship to Jews. The inferior situation of Palestinian Arabs is the canker at the heart of the state, and is made more or less permanent by the animus of the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza who are in a continuous state of armed insurrection against the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

The nationalist aspirations of the Palestinians which arose during the 1960s have now given way to the Islamism of Hamas and Hezbollah, who are committed to driving the Jews out, destroying what they call "the Zionist Entity", and establishing an Islamic regime in its place.

Palestinian attacks on Jews have over the decades intensified, with the political effect of driving the centre of Israeli politics towards the hard right. The leftist and socialistic aspirations of the early Zionists are long forgotten as the revanchist and anti-Arab elements have come to the fore. Now there are even parties and ministers in the current government of Israel who seek to expand Jewish settlement on the

West Bank from the current 500,000 Jews to even greater numbers, requisitioning Palestinian land with the eventual aim of annexing to entire West Bank (the area the settlers refer to as Judea and Samaria), into the State of Israel.

The government of Benjamin Netanyahu has set the cat among the pigeons by including right-wing and religious parties in his government, and by seeking to control the Supreme Court and to politicise the appointment of the judges of the lower courts, by strengthening the role of members of parliament in the Knesset, in relation to the judiciary. This has caused some people to suggest that defending the judiciary from political interference is an elite project – that it is essentially anti-democratic in opposing parliamentary control of the judges.

The opposition to this point of view – the campaign to maintain the independence of the judiciary – has mobilised vast demonstrations and strikes against Netanyahu's government. The left, and many other elements of Israeli society, have been mobilised because they fear the consequences of Israel's religious parties being freed from judicial control and oversight. They fear renewed settler crackdowns on Palestinians, with land seizures, evictions, and the like, and the effect of further restrictions on secular and liberal Jews throughout the country.

For example, some religious authorities in Israel refuse to recognise certain Jews as Jews. They suggest that someone who claims to be a Jew because their grandfather was a Jew married to a gentile, is not a Jew. They insist that a Jew who is not orthodox, or converted to Judaism through the offices of liberal synagogues, and liberal rabbis, is not a Jew. There are Jewish right-wing parties who oppose the civil marriage of heterosexuals, and of course, of homosexuals. For them gays, like Palestinians, should have not have any rights at all in Israel.

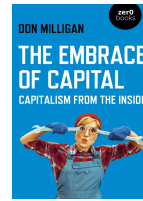
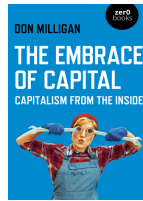
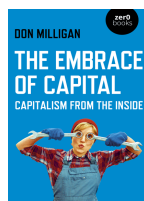
This religious intolerance often goes hand-in-hand with the messianic belief that Jews should

possess Judea and Samaria – the West Bank – in its entirety. This is a belief which corresponds to the secular view that Israel must annex the West Bank, and not simply occupy it, and that Arabs should not have the right to possess any land in ancient Israel. These ideas often feed and justify the racism increasingly displayed by the religious right throughout Israel.

Consequently, Jewish settlers on the West Bank maintain an entirely aggressive attitude to their Palestinian neighbours and repeatedly draw in the Israel Defence Force to defend them and their interests against the Arabs. This is the source of the continuous strife sought by the settlers to justify their messianic struggle to conquer of Judea and Samaria. To complete this sacred mission, they need the independence of Israel's Supreme Court, and the judiciary in general, to be abolished.

Netanyahu, and the religious political allies to his right, have paused their plans for a parliamentary takeover of the courts. They want to quieten down the protests. Simultaneously, the current Israeli and Palestinian provocations, and attacks, which reveal the need for the ferocious defence of Jews and their state, play continuously into Netanyahu's hands. The message is: give no quarter to the Arabs.

This reveals the predicament of Israel. As much as the demonstrations in defence of democracy and the independence of the judiciary reveal the progressive side of Israeli society, the commitment of the Jewish masses to democracy and equality for all rings hollow to twenty percent of the population – the country's Arab citizens, one in five of the population of Israel – who do not have equal rights. Until this is addressed and rectified there will be no peace within Israel.



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