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## **Israel's Slide Towards Racism and Theocracy**



**THE LONG HOLOCAUST** began following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March 1881 and ended 65 years later during the collapse of the Third Reich and the Kielce pogrom in Poland in July 1946. During the bloody years of the 'long holocaust' Christian communities throughout Russia, Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States repeatedly engaged in terrorising and murdering their Jewish neighbours. At its most intense in the years 1941 to 1944, German soldiers and police engaged in the murder of millions, ably aided and abetted by local nationalists of one kind or another. This finally ended the progressive dream of Jewish emancipation that throughout most of the nineteenth century had inspired Jewish communities in their fight for civil equality.

In opposition, Zionists had argued since 1882 in the work of Leon Pinsker and others, that the Jewish people needed their own country and would never be

safe without their own state. This was a minority opinion, unpopular amongst most Jews who clung steadfastly to the idea of equality for their communities, in law and in fact, within the nation states of Europe. By 1946, as a consequence of the relentless murders in Eastern Europe, and the tsunami of killings orchestrated by the Nazis, this dream was in tatters.

Zionists in Mandate Palestine had established a presumptive state in Jaffa in 1920, which twenty-eight years later became fully-fledged with the declaration of Israel's independence in May 1948.

War with Arab invaders began almost immediately and resulted in the planned ethnic cleansing of large numbers of Palestinians by Jews from the land of Israel. It is here that the conundrum of Israel begins. In the late forties and early fifties Zionism was largely left wing and socialistic in its aspirations. However, in establishing an ethno-religious state for the Jews, the Zionists and the Jewish majority in Israel embarked upon a process which was, from the outset, seriously flawed.

The progressive Zionists of the time believed in universal rights and equality for all regardless of race, religion, or creed. However, they had established a state which was both *for* the Jews, and *of* the Jews. Inescapably, Jews had privileged rights of entry and settlement in the new country, and privileges arising from their role in its establishment and defence; privileges regarding where they could live, and also determining who could buy or rent land, apartments and houses. The remaining Arabs, in theory, had equal rights, they could vote and their representatives could sit in Israel's parliament, the Knesset. However, the subordinate position of Palestinian Arabs was built in from the get-go. Israel was a state founded for and by Jews, and their preeminent position regarding citizenship and all associated rights, could not be gainsaid.

Matters were made considerably worse following the war of 1967 in which the Kingdom of

Jordan lost control of the West Bank of the river Jordan, and Israel found itself in occupation of the territory, designated in Biblical terms as *Judea and Samaria*, together with a significant population of Palestinian Arabs who were not Israeli citizens, but who had to be policed and controlled by the Israel Defence Force.

Many difficulties have arisen, because although Palestinian Arabs of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), and of Gaza are culturally, racially, and linguistically, indistinguishable from those in Israel, the right to move freely in and out of Israel, to intermarry, and settle, is heavily restricted. This creates a permanent tension within the Arab population of the region. They cannot escape from their subordinate position vis-à-vis Jews who face few restrictions regarding movement and settlement.

Ultra-orthodox jews have made matters considerably worse over the years by founding armed settlements throughout Judea and Samaria, displacing Palestinian farms and villages, uprooting olive trees, taking control of wells, and other water sources. Their clear intention is to displace the Arab population of the West Bank in its entirety.

Conflicts that result from the placing of these Jewish settlements amidst Arab communities inevitably aggravates strife between Jews and Arabs, and draws in the Israel Defence Force on the side of the ultra-orthodox settlers. Consequently, the full armed force of the Israeli state is routinely deployed against the Arabs, who have found that they cannot win either in the courts or in armed confrontations: Jewish settlers always prevail.

The result has been, year after year, decade after decade, Arabs killing Jewish men, women and children in random bombings, shootings, and knifings of people on buses, on the streets, in their homes. Every Arab terrorist crime is then followed by furious revenge attacks by the Israel Defence Force in which Arab men, women, and children, are slaughtered, and

Palestinian homes are demolished in acts of collective punishment by the authorities.

Palestinian leaders and political institutions have perpetuated this situation by maintaining the fiction that their population are largely refugees. They insist that their refugee status derives from the fact that they are the descendants of those Arabs driven out of Israel during the invasion and war of 1948 – seventy-five years ago. They insist that these ‘refugees’, now living in Gaza, Lebanon, Egypt, and the West Bank, should have the right to return to their ancestral homes in Israel.

By steadfastly insisting that they are ‘refugees’ with the “right of return” they make clear their intention of destroying the state of Israel by submerging the Jewish population under a large majority of Muslim and Christian Arabs. Jews would be driven out and the Zionist state smashed. This is the objective of the Palestinian Authority, of Hamas, of Hezbollah, and any number of other Palestinian organisations. There is no room for compromise: “the Zionist entity” must be liquidated and replaced by an Arab, and largely Muslim state.

Over the decades this stalemate has occasioned a bewildering number of initiatives, peace plans, and a two-state proposition, in which the territory of the West Bank and Gaza would become a separate and sovereign Palestinian state. None of these initiatives have made any progress. The surrounding Arab nations, and Palestinian agencies and organisations, have in practice refused to guarantee the security of the state of Israel; they have steadfastly insisted on maintaining the right of descendants of Palestinian refugees to ‘return’ to their ancestral homes in Israel. They have, to all intents and purposes, refused to recognise the right of Israel and its Jewish citizens to exist.

Israel has over the years responded by breaking up the West Bank – Judea and Samaria – into zones, scarred with military roads, walls and fences, in which the writ of the IDF, the occupying

force, is law. Palestinians find themselves hemmed in an ever-diminishing space, punctuated by settlements of ultra-orthodox Jews, holding what must be regarded as racist views towards Arabs, and a Biblical belief that Jews are the sole possessors of the lands of Judea and Samaria.

The world of Tel Aviv, Israel's sophisticated metropolis, liberal, almost secular, chasing the tourist dollar with golden beaches and rainbow flags, is on a different planet when compared to the zealots of Jerusalem's Haredi neighbourhoods, and the proliferating ultra-orthodox settlements on the West Bank.

Now Israel's balancing act between the secular population, the ordinarily observant Jew, and the Haredi sticklers for Biblical authority in everyday life, is beginning to tilt towards zealotry, and racism towards Arabs, including challenging the right of Palestinians to live either in Israel or in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank).

The years of warfare and terrorist killings have driven Israeli public opinion steadily towards the right destroying the ideas and practice of progressive Zionism. This is because in an ethno-religious state there are no grounds for insisting upon universal values or rights which might undermine or conflict with the primary purpose of the state – the protection of Jews. Consequently, clause seven of the nation-state basic law of 2018 says:

The State views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value, and shall act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation.

This basic law is explicit:

The realization of the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish People.

There can be no doubt that Palestinian Arabs do not have equal rights in Israel. Despite their right to vote and to sit in the Knesset, their movement within the country, their access to land ownership, and house purchase, are closely circumscribed. This is because their cultural or political association with the Arabs under occupation on the West Bank, and those corralled within the Gaza strip, inevitably exposes them to suspicion regarding their loyalty to the Jewish State.

With the return of Benjamin Netanyahu in December 2022 to his sixth term of office the situation has become truly grim. The new coalition government has been formed with hard right religious parties, committed to increasing Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, strengthening the status of religious observance in everyday life, and undermining the independence of the judiciary by giving the power of simple majorities in the Knesset to determine the outcome of legal cases. This undermines the independence of the judiciary by putting politicians routinely in a position to challenge the rulings of judges.

These moves have been met with vast opposition demonstrations amongst liberal and secular Jews, and those fearing for the future of the country. However, the incursions of the IDF into Palestinian communities on the West Bank, the killings of Arab children, and the inevitable round of revenge murders and attacks upon Jewish civilians have, once again, created circumstances favourable for the Israeli right, enabling the government and military authorities to take draconian measures against Arab communities, exacting collective punishments involving the demolition of homes, and arbitrary arrests and detention.

The problems are intractable. The refusal of Palestinians to relinquish their status of 'refugees' and their continued insistence on making claims upon Israeli territory, are matched by the Zionist

nature of the state. We are confronted by two ethno-nationalities, Jewish and Palestinian, both claiming title to the same lands.

However, the Jewish slide towards religious particularism is likely to weaken the state and deprive it of many allies. The long love affair of the left in Europe and North America with Palestinian nationalism will be greatly strengthened if Netanyahu and his coalition partners retain the upper hand. Therefore, we must hope that the liberal masses amongst the Jewish population are able to head off the slide towards racism and theocracy.

