

THESIS

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ISRAELI NATIONAL
IDENTITY SINCE THE END THE 19TH CENTURY TILL TODAY**

LEITMANN BEATRIX LAURA

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The purpose of this research is to analyze and to describe development of the Israeli national identity in the last 120 years. The research summarizes the aspects of the Israeli national identity by examining the political, social as well as economic circumstance of this period.

The research is based on secondary as well as primary resources found in various archives (The Zionist Archives in Jerusalem) in Israel. I have also visited some museums (Ben Gurion House, Israel Museum) and several research institutes in order to have an in-depth understanding of the subject and of the historical events and people behind fateful decisions. I have also conducted personal interviews with people born in Palestine or who came to Israel after its establishment. During the research I met many Israelis (Jews, Arabs and Christians) who enabled me to understand better view of their identity.

The research is based on collective methodology, a sort of historiography presenting Israeli and other international scholars who conducted researches on this subject. Due to the big quantity of the researches, I focused mainly on historians and sociologists, who dealt with the development of the Israeli national identity and its changes throughout the decades. As the research examined a long period made it extremely difficult to relate to all the historical events that influenced the evolution of the Israeli national identity. Therefore I emphasized significant historical events that changed the national identity of the new born nation. There are six chapters built up chronologically, describing the history of the Israelis since the end of the 19th century till today.

In the first chapter I have concluded theories that deal with the development and the evolution of national identity in general. The chapter includes the works of Israeli, Hungarian and other international scholars, such as Anthony D. Smith, Miroslav Hroch, Benedict Anderson and the Hungarian Bibó István and Szűcs Jenő. These theories represent two main streams, while on the one hand there is the instrumental point of view, which claims that the national identity developed due to the process of modernization. On the other hand, other scholars claim that national identity is a result of ancient feelings and tradition. Smith and Hroch used the Jewish national identity as their example in their research.

This chapter includes a historical background about the development of nations Eastern and Western Europe, while in the latest area, nations evolved

throughout a half a millennium and the state borders became permanent since the end of the Middle Ages. At the same time in Eastern Europe states did not play a significant role in nation building due to their political instability, yet language, mythology and written history proved to be very important factors in this process.

The second chapter deals with the historical and social background of Zionism. At the end of the 19th century various national movements have been established in Eastern Europe and this made the Jewish intelligentsia look for a national home in order to solve the Jewish question. Zionism was born in Odessa (Russian Empire) where the Jews had a very flourishing community life yet they also experienced the worse pogroms that were coordinated by the rulers of the Empire. These circumstances strengthened among the Zionists the need to establish a new national home in Palestine.

The main purpose of Zionism was to establish a Jewish state and to gather the Jewish Diaspora. Zionism several approaches as to how to reach this aim and even today these stream influence the Israeli internal political discourse. Herzl is considered as the one who established political Zionism and the first one who dreamed of the creation of the state of Israel. His diplomatic efforts were solid proof to his belief of to recreate the ancient-new state of the Jews. Many were against his approach, especially the socialist Zionists who thought that the establishment of the old-new state would be possible only if people would emigrate to Palestine, work the fields and purchase the land from the locals and finally would create a society where everyone would be equal. Even those who represented political Zionism, like Jabotinsky, disagreed with Herzl's diplomacy and demanded the return of the Jews to Palestine more actively. They had a militant and aggressive approach towards the native Arabs and towards the representatives of the British Mandate. The third approach is represented by Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzburg) who was the spiritual and religious voice of Zionism. He claimed that the new national home of the Jews should become the spiritual centre of Judaism therefore the new Hebrews should continue Judaism, yet they should also liberalize it. By the middle of the 20th century Zionism reached one of its main purposes, i.e., the establishment of the State of Israel and till today it aims to gather the Jews of the Diaspora.

The third chapter analyses the establishment of the Jewish settlement (Jeshuv) and describes the evolvement of the first Israeli generation born in Palestine (Erez Israel). This generation represented the dream come true of the founding fathers and

they were the "ultimate" new Hebrew (Zabar). During the existence of the Jeshuv several immigrations arrived and all of them had a different ideological background. The first immigration (aliya) founded the first Hebrew settlements and started the use of the new Hebrew language. The second and the third aliya's had socialistic ideals therefore they were the first to establish the well-known kibbutz settlements, socialist political parties, the first workers' union (Histadrut) as well as other social organizations. The fourth and fifth aliya's were of middle class background (originated from Poland and other Middle Eastern countries). Their main contribution to the Jeshuv can be seen in the development of the main cities of Israel (Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem) as well as in the establishment of privately owned businesses. The generation of the first Israelis (the Palmach generation) has grown up till 1948 that participated in the Independence War in 1948 and thus became more attached to the land of Israel. Even though they represented the courageous and fearless Zabar, the founding fathers were truly disappointed due to their lack of entrepreneurship and disabilities of leadership.

The fourth chapter describes the process of the establishment of the new state, focusing on those historical, political, social and economic circumstances that shaped the formation of the new nation. The political and social organizations founded during the Jeshuv have transferred their authority to the new state, though some of them, like the Jewish Agency (Sochnut) resisted the transformation process as its leadership believed that the purpose of Zionism has yet to be reached, i.e., the gathering of the exiles in Israel. During the 1950's Israel had to cope with major economic problems due to the enormous number of new immigrants that arrived and needed the help of the new and inexperienced state. In addition the security situation did not improve as Israeli settlements near the Jordanian and Egyptian boarder were daily attacked.

Only in the beginning of the sixties Israel has known some economic and social improvement, which resulted in another period of crisis a few months before the Six Day War. The state of mind of most Israelis was extremely bad especially due to the economic and security situation which caused most people a great deal of fear from the possibility of another war. As a result of the Six Day War, due the occupation of East Jerusalem (the Western Wall) the West-bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Height, that included sites that were very important to Judaism, the Israelis were in a state of euphoria. This state of mind has unfortunately caused a certain degree of "blindness" even among experienced political and military

leaders. They could not see the coming danger, i.e., the breakout of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Due to the victory in the Six Day War the Israeli national identity has gone through a major transformation that strengthened the religious and right wing circles, who felt that by the occupation of these territories the conception of Great Israel is attainable. During this period not only the nationalists has gained support but the circle of intellectuals as well who were influenced by the "winds" of western civilization (Americanization) that caused the disappearance of collective ideals and instead strengthened the principles of individualism and liberalism. The Israeli society became more liberal, the gaps between several social strata began to disappear and a new generation grew up on these ideas. The differences between the Ashkenazi and Sephardim (Mizrachi) circles began to fade away, especially due to intermarriages. Those who opposed the occupation of the territories and believed in the peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict were still considered a minority, but throughout the seventies their circle has also grown immensely as people realized that these occupied territories do not necessarily bring security to Israel. This claim was unfortunately proven by the results of the Yom Kippur War that was a significant turning point in the Israeli society. People were totally disillusioned from their political and military leadership and if up till then they have treated them as "saint cows" the consequences and the mismanagement of this war caused a major break in public confidence. Consequently this was one of the reasons for the breakdown of Mapai's 30 years of dominancy and in the long run it brought to the political turnover (mahapach) during the elections of 1977 that resulted in the victory of the right wing Herut party (alias Likud).

In the eighties the Israeli national identity has undergone some significant changes especially after the beginning of the first Lebanese War (1982-2000) that continued 18 years and became to be known the Israeli Vietnam. The majority of the society has seen this war as unnecessary for Israel's security, therefore opposition has grown throughout the years. This has caused the gap between the peace supporters (Shalom Achsav) and the right-wing nationalists to widen further thus making the divided society even more unstable and vulnerable to further political shocks. This shock came with the appearance of Rabbi Kahana in the Israeli political life who jeopardized the delicate rule of democracy in Israel with his approach towards democracy. During the elections in 1984 his slogan was the change of the regime and the need for a stronger and militant leadership that will "teach" the Arabs a lesson.

This crisis came in addition to a major economic process of hyperinflation that made a lot of people poor and helpless. By the end of the eighties the first Palestinian uprising broke out by the end of 1987 and came as a surprise to the Israeli society. This event caused a lot of Israelis to "wake up" to the political reality of their existence and to realize that the occupied territories have become a "tumor" of the society. In addition the social and political agenda had to deal almost on a daily basis with issues concerning religion and Jewish national identity that emphasized the differences between the secular and religious cleavages of the society. Since 1967 the religious forces gained a lot of power in society and in politics thus the issue of Judaism became extremely important. Although the number of intermarriages has grown immensely and the society has gone through a process of liberalization, the gap between the seculars and the religious as well as between Ashkenazi and Sephardim was still too wide to overcome.

The last chapter of this research deals with the peace process and the large immigration waves from former USSR. During the last two decades the Israeli society had to cope with a lot of changes. As a result of the peace process the world has opened up to the Israelis, the government began to liberalize the economy in order to become successful in a globalizing world and last but not least it suddenly brought the nearest neighbors closer with various possibilities for cooperation and collaboration. The peace process also had its negative consequences, as the gap between nationalist circles and the peace supporters became wider and both were determined to influence the government with their agenda. The most unfortunate result of these changes was the assassination of PM Itzhak Rabin in November 1995 by a nationalist right wing extremist (Igal Amir). This event had devastating consequences as it truly shocked the Israeli society.

The national identity of the Israelis was shaken by the large number of immigrants who came from former USSR and had little or no relation to Judaism or to the Israeli culture. Both the Israelis and the "Russians" preferred not to interrelate with each other thus creating cultural ghettos that can be found among the Ethiopian immigrants as well as the foreign workers as well. During the 1990's the daily terror attacks made people feel less secure. This brought to the growth of nationalistic and militant approach thus bringing the Likud into political power, now headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. Due to his political mistakes his government was short lived, thus in the upcoming elections the peace supporters headed by the Maarach (Labor

party) gained power. PM Ehud Barak managed to pull out the army from Lebanon (2000) thus ending an almost 20 years of occupation that resulted in the death of hundreds of soldiers, yet in September 2000 the second Palestinian uprising (Al Aqsa Intifada) broke out, this time actively supported by Israeli Arabs. This uprising has definitely made its imprints on society thus disillusioning even those who believed in a peaceful settlement of the conflict. As a result of the intensified conflict the government of Barak was voted down and this brought back the Likud to government, yet this time headed by a war veteran hero, Ariel Sharon. Throughout these years of terror the militant approach gained tremendous support and most of the society stood by Sharon's harsh policy against Palestinian terror. In spite of his harsh policy, terror could not be overcome. It reached new climaxes as during the summer of 2006 when PM Olmert decided to wage war against the Hezbollah in Lebanon and against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The second Lebanese War (as it is named in Israel) was a significant disappointment for the Israeli society. Paradoxically this disillusionment of the people in their political and especially military leadership united the Israeli society despite its diversity.

The above mentioned chapters tried to present the reader various approaches available on the analysis of the Israeli national identity. The research proved that this issue is very complex therefore one cannot grant unambiguous answers to questions concerning the national identity of people. The assumption that there is an Israeli national identity has been proven, yet it is not a one-sided identity but one which is divided into several sub-identities, yet still can be differentiated from the one of the Jewish Diaspora. There are certain aspects that make someone Israeli, i.e., the military service, their devotion to the Israeli scenery, the enormous solidarity shown by Israelis in Israel and abroad, the fact that they live in a multicultural society and the importance of having vast community. The permanent state of war and terror was a unifying source for this nation that is still seeking to reach a better and safer future for the coming generations. It took almost 120 years to form a new nation of Israelis who live in their own state only for the last 59 years.