

What Herzl Meant by Zionism and Why Israel is a Pluralistic Democracy

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (August 2021)



Old City, George Chemeche, 1967

Herzl and most of the other founding fathers of Zionism did not subscribe to the idea of a 'Jewish state' for all Jews solely representing a distinct Jewish nationality, but an eventual state of, by, and for those Jews who, for whatever

reasons did not or could not assimilate or whom the nations among whom they lived would not allow it. He expressed his confidence that those heroic Jews who willed it so, would get and deserve their state, while those who rejected it would have an alternative—assimilation or a continued existence as 'Jewry,' a community living largely according to centuries old traditions in a ghetto like existence of choice.

To continue to speak of Israel as the homeland of the "Jewish nation" and conflate it with Jews everywhere does not accord with reality. It does not correspond to the facts. The highest representatives of their nations in the role of Argentina's former Foreign Minister, Hector Timmerman (a "Jew") and the former "Jewish" American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, both carried out policies detrimental to the State of Israel in order to advance the policies of the states in which they are citizens and whose interests they are sworn to advance. At the same time, as in the past, Israel will remain the primary address for those Jews for whom their heritage however interpreted would be protected and transmitted from generation to generation.

In 2018, Israel passed a controversial new "nation-state law" (by a small majority of 62-55, 2 abstentions) in the Knesset proclaiming that "*the right to exercise national self-determination*" in Israel is "*unique to the Jewish people,*" mandating that the state "*will labor to encourage and promote its establishment and development*" is nothing more than the original goal of the Balfour Declaration to provide a Jewish National Home. It was not necessary to spell these goals out during the previous 70 years of Israel's existence as a nation but It has given a weapon to anti-Semites. They seek condemnations of Israel as if it were ignoring its commitment to treat all citizens equally, one that Israel has ensured much better than many nations in Europe following the promises made at the end of World War I to protect their minorities. Prior to this law, Israel's attempts at

integration of its religious and ethnic minorities should have deserved honest recognition and praise, as has been documented and provided by many Arab-Israelis who occupy positions of prestige, influence, ministerial posts and have had the courage to speak the truth (see five biographical sketches below).

For some American Jews, Israel has become an embarrassment, one that threatens their self-image as profoundly liberal and understanding of others' grievances. For them, the Israelis, as fellow Jews, living amidst the cauldron of a strident, militant, exclusivist Islam and the legacy of repeated Arab nation-state failures, should alone shoulder the burden and responsibility of giving up much of their sovereignty for the delusion and illusion of rescuing the "Palestinians" and thus, helping to ensure what they believe will be a "peaceful world order" although their parents and grandparents overwhelmingly celebrated and many rejoiced at the rebirth of Israel in 1948, regarding it mystically as partial compensation for the Holocaust. A future based on the criteria of language and territory alone and a state with equal rights and obligations for all citizens may be unachievable but it remains the vision Herzl and other Zionists held as the most desirable goal for all its citizens in harmony with the accepted views of democratic states. It would still ensure its Jewish heritage and traditions just as the largely Catholic identity of Poland or Italy without any religious tests based on *halacha* (Jewish religious law).

In 1998, the Israeli Supreme Court reached a unanimous decision (endorsed by the two modern Orthodox judges who were members at the time) that the wholesale exemptions from conscription granted to ultra-Orthodox males "*Creates a deep rift in Israeli society and a growing sense of inequality. The current situation has created an entire population that is not integrated into the labor market and is increasingly dependent on state stipends.*" Efraim Halevy, 78, served as head of

Israeli Mossad under three prime ministers and negotiated the peace treaty with late King Hussein of Jordan in 1994. Yet, even such a pillar of the Israeli defense establishment and spokesman for the official Zionist ideology of the State proclaiming it as the "Homeland of the Jewish People", publicly noted with dismay how Jewish Orthodoxy has moved to the extremes in Israel. He speculated that with the continued growth of non-Zionist Orthodox communities, Zionists could conceivably become a minority in Israel even without the Arabs. Speaking at a military academy meeting commemorating fallen soldiers and said

We have today a situation in Israel in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis do not have a personal status in the country. They are not recognized technically as Jews... When they want to marry, they have no way to marry and have to go outside the country. Their Jewish identity is not recognized by the state. These are very serious problems, because in the end this could be a major split inside Israeli society.

Those who doubted the ability of "the Jews," to defend their homeland, still regarded in 1948 by most of the world as a religious community, also doubted the survivability of Israel as a nation to defeat more powerful and numerous enemies on the field of battle over the course of four more wars, absorb massive immigration increasing its population many fold, creating a powerful productive economy and achieving outstanding successes in the fields of science, medicine, technology, and agriculture all the while integrating a diverse population through the medium of the Modern Hebrew language, a modern education, economy and culture.

In 1947, when Stalin was convinced that the Zionists would evict the British from Palestine, the Party Line turned about face. Following Soviet recognition and aid to Israel in 1948-49, both the Daily Worker and the Yiddish language

communist daily in the U.S. *Freiheit* (Freedom) outdid one another to explain the new party line in that... "Palestine had become an important settlement of 600,000 souls, having developed a common national economy, a growing national culture and the first elements of Palestinian Jewish statehood and self-government." A 1947 CP-USA resolution entitled "Work Among the Jewish Masses" berated the Party's previous stand and proclaimed that "Jewish Marxists have not always displayed a positive attitude to the rights and interests of the Jewish People, to the special needs and problems of our own American Jewish national group and to the interests and rights of the Jewish Community in Palestine."

Israel's "legitimacy" can not therefore be weighed in the balance with regard to how much "injustice" was done to the Palestinian Arabs. The lack of such an independent political state is entirely of their own doing as is the maintenance now of three separate entities—Gaza, the West Bank and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Like other struggles between the Germans and their neighbors—Poles, Czechs, French, and Danes, the final borders determined for all time the political framework of coexistence and not by appeals to the past and debates about who suffered a greater injustice.

The prospect for the future is that the growing facility of a flourishing and prosperous society based on fundamental equality of rights AND obligations for all citizens to use Hebrew by both the Arab and Orthodox sectors contributes to a greater sense of a shared identity of common citizenship. Israel is younger than such veteran colonial states as Argentina, the United States, Australia, or Uruguay where a sense of common nationhood was established through generations of effort unifying immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, Israel is a much more mature modern state than countries such as the Central African Republic, Angola, Sudan, Madagascar, Chad, Belize and East Timor and probably several dozen others that lack any clear

historical continuity or sense of nationhood. They were created amidst conflicts between native indigenous peoples and migrants, rival tribes, wars, great power colonial interests and imposed languages.

A recent best-seller, *"The Last Israelis"* by Noah Beck, sets a scenario aboard an Israeli nuclear submarine with a "mixed" crew of 35 sailors, three of whom are a Christian Arab, a Druze and a Vietnamese-Israeli "gay," all responding loyally to the call of a common unabashed patriotic sentiment to defend their homeland and give very plausible reasons for doing so. They portray a growing sense of Israeli civil society that is more powerful than differences of origin, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation just as Americans of diverse ethnic, racial and religious origins do. This work of fiction has already described the reality of the children of hundreds of "temporary" foreign workers who have lived in Israel for many years, are not Jewish but speak Hebrew fluently, strongly emotionally identify with Israel and seek to serve in the IDF but who are threatened with deportation because they have no status as permanent residents.

Why the growing extremism of many Arabs in Israel? Many observers familiar with the Israeli scene are convinced that the extreme views of the elected Arab Knesset members are a true measure of the community's rejection of any accommodation of living peacefully and harmoniously with the Jewish majority. To do so, as if this sentiment is based on free will is a common error in the mistaken misunderstanding of Arab culture and the realities of Middle Eastern politics afflicts most of the so called "pundits" and reporters working in the field for major news gathering agencies. The unrelenting hostility of Muslim Arab Knesset members does not give sufficient recognition to the "facts of life" that have characterized the political culture in the region of the Muslim Middle East embracing Arabs, Iranians and Turks. This is the reality of no real political parties, no real

elections, no free press or independent judiciary—hence the expression “The Arab Street,” i.e., the opinion shaped by the inability to confront the power of intimidation exercised by the prevailing majority and conventional wisdom.

It is indeed telling that among Christians and Druze, there has been much more substantial integration as they are not subject to the same degree of intimidation. All Israeli Muslims have substantial close family relations living in the areas subject to a maximum pressured of intimidation if they do not toe the line—in Gaza, the “West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The failure of the media to understand this makes much of media coverage during the recent conflicts in Gaza, inter-Arab conflicts and its compulsive-obsessive condemnations of Israel is the major fault of their news coverage.

A brief look at the profiles of five leading figures in the “minority” communities conclusively demonstrate that Israel is NOT an apartheid or exclusivist state. It has won much of their support.



1. Foremost among these today is George Deek (*above, Left*), a Christian Arab from Jaffa and Israel’s current ambassador in Azerbaijan, one of the most important diplomatic posts in the Israeli foreign service; Deek was Israel’s former vice-ambassador to Norway who addressed a gathering hosted by the Norwegian group “With Israel for Peace” in Oslo in October, 2014. His speech was called “*the best speech an Israeli diplomat ever delivered*” and made waves for many people who

had no idea that Israel has had several prominent non-Jews in its diplomatic corps. In 2018, he was appointed Israel's ambassador to Azerbaijan, one of the most important positions in the Israeli Foreign Ministry. (see NER, December, 2014). George Deek in front of Azerbaijani flag.

2. Emil Habibi (*above, Center*) in whose honor Israel issued a postage stamp honoring him as the longest serving prominent Arab member of the Knesset representing the Communist Party, helped steer the Communist Party towards recognition of the 1947 partition plan. Born in Haifa, his family had originally belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem but Emil was involved in disputes with the church and converted to Anglicanism. He worked in an oil refinery, and reminded his Communist supporters during his career that he was a true member of the "working class." Later he was a radio announcer and was a talented author in both Arabic and Hebrew, and was awarded the Israeli prize for Arabic literature. In 1972, he resigned from the Knesset in order to write his first novel: *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*. It quickly was recognized as a witty classic in modern Arabic literature, depicting the life of an Israeli Arab Palestinian, employing black humor and satire. In 1990, Habibi received the Al-Quds Prize from the PLO, generally regarded by many as Israel's mortal enemy and in 1992, he received the Israel Prize for Arabic literature. His defense in accepting both prizes reflected his non-dogmatic approach to his belief in coexistence. Habibi replied to his accusers on both sides, "*A dialogue of prizes is better than a dialogue of stones and bullets.*"

3. Many observers have noted in the past five years a trend for Christian Arabs to seek deeper integration into Israeli society. Under the leadership of Greek Orthodox priest from Haifa, Gabriel Naddaf (*above, Right, with Netanyahu*), the minor political party United Allies, advocates Christian enlistment in the Israel Defense Forces and a more distinct

social separation of Christians from Muslims. This new attitude is founded largely by the perception by many, that only in Israel is the Christian population growing, due to natural increase and no state persecution, regarding the entire Middle East, except Lebanon, where Christianity had its origin long before the appearance of Islam and has been rapidly on the decline. In addition, increasing numbers of Christian leaders and community members are pointing to Muslim violence as a threat to their way of life in Arab majority cities and towns. He argues that Israel is the only country where Christian communities have been able to thrive in the Middle East. In 2016, he was selected to light a torch at the Israel Independence Day ceremony on Mount Herzl, honoring him for his commitment and achievements in fostering civil society and promoting brotherhood.



4. Bishara Shlayan (*above, Left*), The older generation of Israeli Arabs who have grown up in Israel is represented by 58-year-old Bishara Shlayan, the founder of a new political party that initially appealed to the desire of many in the Christian Arab community to participate as fully equal citizens of the State of Israel, bearing all the obligations of Jewish citizens rather than following the other Arab parties that continually claim special exemptions, dispensations and privileges. This has been the state of affairs whereby the Muslim Arab political leadership has long regarded the Christian community as subservient and over which they had the power to ostracize and blackmail, threatening “dire consequences,” and intimidation. Shlayan has held a

unique post for a member of the Arab community that once was considered off limits to any Arab applicant—captain of an Israeli commercial vessel in the “Zim” National Maritime line. The party was formed in 2013 and initially called *Ihud Bnei haBrit* (United Allies), playing on the dual meaning of the Hebrew word “Brit”, (Covenant in English). In Hebrew, the New Testament is called *HaBrit Hehadasha*. Before the establishment of the political party, Bishara had energetically campaigned to increased recruitment of young Christian men into the armed forces. (see NER, December, 2019). Just as the father had to insist on serving his county in what was considered a post reserved only for Jews, Bishara’s son, demanded from the authorities to be allowed to serve in the Navy, a service branch considered a particularly security-sensitive one and the preserve of Jews only. Almost all Arabs who had done military service in the armed forces were previously limited to special infantry units known as the Sword Battalion, consisting entirely of Druze, Circassian, or Bedouin trackers (see New English Review July, 2015, The IDF Sword Battalion).

5. Lucy Aharish (*above, Right*), Without a doubt, the most unusual member of the Arab minority and a voice for reason and moderation as well as equal rights and integration of women within the larger society is both a woman and a Muslim. She is Lucy Aharish (born in 1981), an Arab-Israeli news anchor, reporter, television host and actress. She was the first Muslim Arab news presenter on mainstream Hebrew-language Israeli television. As of 2018, Aharish serves as a news anchor and was previously a morning anchor on a current-affairs show. Aharish was born in Dimona, to a Muslim-Arab family. Her parents were originally from the city of Nazareth and she is the youngest of three daughters. Growing up, she was the only Arab student at her school. While at university, she drifted toward observing Islam devoutly but eventually distanced herself from it. After graduating from Hebrew University, she studied journalism at the Koteret school in

Tel Aviv and then interned in Germany. Upon returning from Germany, she moved to Tel Aviv. Following a two-week stint as an Arab affairs reporter for Yedioth Ahronoth in 2007, she became the first Arab to present the news on mainstream Israeli television when she was hired by Israeli television.

In April 2015, Aharish was one of twelve Israeli personalities chosen to light torches in the official ceremony kicking off Israel's 67th Independence Day celebrations, a year before Gabriel Naddaf. In March 2020, she married Jewish-Israeli actor Tsahi HaLevi in a private ceremony on October 10, 2018, after several years of a relationship that was kept secret until then for fear of harassment. Their marriage led to a public controversy, with critics among both Arabs and Jews criticizing the marriage as "assimilation," while others and many Knesset members, including government officials, congratulated the couple.

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