



Redefining the "Jewish" in the Jewish state

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States defined as religious or ethnic are almost always injurious to human rights, and injurious to the moral integrity of either religious or cultural traditions. Citizens who do not belong to the designated official religion or culture have customarily been mistreated in history. This is true of Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Hindu states.

But the fact is that Israel has been defined as religious or ethnic, and this will not change any time soon. Therefore, a new social contract is required in order to negotiate the circumstances under which an extremely diverse population of Jews and non-Jews can coexist in both safety and equality.

An earnest process of negotiation and compromise would include some of everyone's interests and needs, but is particularly essential for enabling a rule of law that will be adhered to by the vast majority of the citizens. This is essential for Israel and any other state's peaceful future in the region.

Although Israel has been built on stories of persecution, self-defence and survival, victim stories are not a sustainable foundation for a democratic state. A stable and mature state can only emerge from a social contract that is visionary, based on the present and future, not a dark past.

A social contract between individuals and communities who are diverse must be sufficiently neutral to entice and maintain a full embrace of all citizens. This is the best recipe for nonviolence, equality, diversity and prosperity. In this environment, enforceable anti-discrimination laws become doable instead of a utopian dream.

There are profound psychological and historical reasons why so many Jews embrace a "Jewish state", and why the majority of Israeli Jews hold



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tenaciously to that definition. Similarly, religion is a bedrock of Arab societies. With some polls suggesting that as many as 31 percent of Palestinians identify themselves first as Muslims, we must face the reality that as in Israel, religion is also a central component of Palestinian identity.

Expressions and interpretations of religion have historically depended on whether a given society is at war or living in a climate of safety. Probably, the lack of a just settlement between Jews and Arabs is the most important factor which drives militant and destructive expressions of the Jewish part of an Israeli identity, and the Muslim aspect of Palestinian identity. As long as there is no social contract between Jews and Arabs inside Israel, and between Jews and their Palestinian neighbours, we can expect a downward spiral of religious extremism on both sides.

In order to steer the religious or ethnic character of Israeli and Palestinian societies in a more benign direction they must reach a comprehensive settlement.

The overwhelming evidence from the nineteenth century is that, despite over a thousand years of vicious persecution in Europe, even the Zionists—who were the most nationalist group of Jews at the time—were themselves divided over a "Jewish" state. Many, such as Ahad Ha'Am, a beloved founder of modern Zionism, believed in a benign national home emphasising the positive virtues of Hebrew cultural revival, not the negative exclusion of others.

This positive and benign approach to Jewishness means that you can honour Jewish history without denying Palestinian history; in fact you can even embrace it. You can ensure the rights of persecuted Jews to have a safe haven in Israel, enshrine them in a constitution, without trying to eradicate the identity, culture or civil rights of Palestinians. There is precedent in Zionist history, in other words, for moving cultural and national identities in more benign directions.

In the absence of final political settlements on the horizon, it is essential that citizens, NGOs, social entrepreneurs and businesses, not sit back passively and wait for leaders to forge a new reality. We as third parties should facilitate in whatever way we can, ever expanding social networks which are committed to a more benign definition of the Jewish aspect of a Jewish state and the Arab or Islamic aspect of a future Palestinian state.

A Jewish state, for example, can be Jewish because Jewish history and culture are taught, and Hebrew is honoured, but not because Jews are privileged in every job sector, or are given exclusive rights over security. A Jewish state can embrace Jewish refugees, without excluding other victims of persecution. It can embrace many cultures while ensuring the continued honouring of Jewish history and the Jews' ancient connection to the land.

A proud Jewish state, for example, could embrace its ancient prophets who stood for social justice, love of strangers, hospitality and humility. If this were a prominent feature of its national character, it would not exclude the identity of non-Jewish citizens who can embrace those values through their own heritage.

The Jews as the now dominant group in Israel need to begin a broad-based debate to forge a new definition of the "Jewish" in their conception of a Jewish state. Doing this in earnest, together with Palestinian fellow travellers, may be the best way to build trust and a new social contract.

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