



Zionism at a Crossroad

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Recent years, and especially the past three, have witnessed the emergence of new Zionist voices that directly challenge the established Zionist ethos that largely dominated Israeli and Jewish societies and institutions for decades. To move forward, it is vital to understand, articulate, and discuss these alternative views of Zionism that threaten to transform the Zionist ethos, vision and mission.

In its formative years, Zionism sought to unite the quest for Jewish national sovereignty with a firm commitment to the ethical values rooted in Jewish history. This aspiration was evident in the State of Israel's foundational promise to be built on "freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel," as stipulated in The Declaration of Independence; and the invocation of the Holocaust's horrors, never to be repeated again. These articulations were a testament to a vision both ethical and humanistic. Such principles were meant, among other arguments, to persuade the world of Herzl's vision for a Jewish National Home in Palestine, "secured under public law."

Nearly a century later, profound historical transformations demand that we revisit how Zionism's core ideals fair in present day Israel. Two central issues stand out as crucial in shaping what Zionism means today: Israeli-Palestinian Relations, and Israeli Democracy.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

At the founding of the State of Israel, the prospect of controlling the lives of millions of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza was virtually unimaginable. With the exception of the settlement movement and its adherents, the mainstream Zionist movement and Israeli governments largely refrained from overtly confronting and deciding the challenges of Palestinian presence, Occupation, and national aspirations as those were to be resolved through a two-state solution. The Occupation was asserted as a stretch of temporary measures until a long-lasting solution could be diplomatically achieved. This approach dominated the Zionist conversation for six decades until the current regime introduced the concept of "managing the conflict" rather than seeking to resolve it. This shift, disguised as a practical-pragmatic response to the reality was actually an ideological one, serving as a prelude to what we are seeing in the last three years.

Over the last three years we have seen a drastic shift from “managing the conflict” approach to Israel’s current leadership’s efforts to annex Palestinian territories, conquer and settle Gaza, and displace Palestinians. These voices cite Zionist ideology and motivation, and thus demand serious reflection through a Zionist lens. They demand that we ask some crucial questions: Does Zionism now endorse the continued control of Palestinian lands and people? Or does it remain committed to a solution that acknowledges Palestinian national rights? If the former, how can this stance align with the ethos of “freedom, justice and peace”? If the latter, and the spirit of the Declaration of Independence endures, how should Zionism address the Palestinian question? What, then, is the new Zionist vision?

Democracy

From the first Zionist Congresses and throughout the era of the pre-State Yishuv, a profound commitment to democracy has been central to the Zionist project. Yet recent government actions—especially the so-called “Judicial Revolution” unfolding at great speed over the last three years—cast doubt on the robustness of Israeli democracy. This shift from substantive democracy to a more procedural or technical form opens the door to theocracy or ethocracy, particularly as it concerns Palestinians. Once more, the Zionist movement must clarify its stance: Is robust, substantive democracy a core element of Zionism? or should the anti-democratic version proposed by Israel’s current government be embraced?

These two issues create rupture at the core of Israeli and Jewish societies. Alongside other urgent issues such as the fate of hostages, the end of the war, and the enlistment of Haredim into military service—these may seem like internal Israeli concerns. Yet in truth, they reflect a deep ideological struggle over the vision, mission, and meaning of Zionism itself. At stake is a choice between the formerly established Zionism which held on to humanistic, liberal interpretations of Jewish peoplehood and nationhood; and a more nationalistic, ethnocentric, theocratic Zionist perspective (as seen in the National Law).

It is important to understand that the current ideological disagreements we see are also not internal Zionist debates, typical of the movement’s historically pluralistic nature. Some of the changes we are witnessing have the potential to fundamentally transform the meaning of Zionism and establish a new Zionist paradigm. In other words, rather than proposing internal ideological changes, they undercut Zionism’s core tenants and offer a different Zionism under the same name.

So far, the Zionist movement around the world has been primarily preoccupied with defending Israel and addressing attacks on its legitimacy, especially since the onset of the current war and the atrocities perpetrated against Israeli citizens on October 7th 2023. Now, it must turn inward to examine its own vision and mission, and what they have come to mean. The habit of linking the legitimacy of Zionism or Israel with unwavering support for Israeli government decisions is, in fact, a disservice to both. For the sake of the Jewish future, the Zionist movement must reinterpret its purpose and direction. It needs to re-articulate what Zionism stands for in 2025. This ideological reckoning will not be easy, but the cost of ignoring today's challenges will be far greater.

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