REDEFINING ISRAELI NATIONAL IDENTITY:
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MILITARISM AND SETTLER-COLONIALISM

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Abstract. Israeli national identity is a widely debated topic, with existing studies emphasizing the significance of Zionism, Judaism, the Holocaust, liberal democracy, and Westernism as the primary components. However, the role of militarism and settler-colonialism in shaping Israeli national identity has been overlooked. This study aims to explore the influence of militarism and settler-colonialism on Israeli national identity. The research question is how these phenomena have contributed to the formation of Israeli national identity. The study initially discusses the position of Zionism, Judaism, the Holocaust, liberal democracy, and Westernism within the Israeli identity. Subsequently, it investigates the process of formation and manifestations of militarism and settler-colonialism within the Israeli identity. Secondary sources form the primary basis for this research.

Key words: Israeli national identity, Zionism, Judaism, Holocaust, liberal democracy, Westernism, militarism, settler-colonialism

Аңдатпа. Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігі кеңінен талқыланатын тақырып. Қазіргі зерттеулер Израиль ұлттық бірегейлігінің негізгі құрамдас бөліктері ретінде сионизмнің, иудаизмнің, Холокосттың, либерал демократияның және батысшылдықтың маңыздылығына баса назар аударған. Алайда милитаризм мен қоныстанушы-отаршылдықтың Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігін қалыптастырудағы рөлі назардан тыс қалды. Бұл зерттеу милитаризм мен қоныстанушы-отаршылдықтың Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігіне әсерін зерттеуге бағытталған. Зерттеу сұрағы мынадай: осы құбылыстар Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігінің қалыптасуына қалай ықпал етті? Зерттеу ең алдымен сионизмнің, иудаизмнің, Холокосттың, либерал демократияның және батысшылдықтың Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігіндегі орнын талқылайды. Содан кейін Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігіндегі милитаризм мен қоныстанушы-отаршылдықтың қалыптасу процесі мен көріністерін зерттейді. Қайталама дереккөздер бұл зерттеудің негізін құрайды.

Түйін сөздер: Израильдің ұлттық бірегейлігі, сионизм, иудаизм, Холокост, либерал демократия, батысшылдық, милитаризм, қоныстанушы-отаршылдық

Аннотация. Национальная идентичность Израиля является широко обсуждаемой темой, и существующие исследования подчеркивают значимость сионизма, иудаизма, Холокоста, либеральной демократии и западничества как основных компонентов. Однако роль милитаризма и поселенческого колониализма в формировании

израильской национальной идентичности остается недооцененной. Целью данного исследования является изучение влияния милитаризма и поселенческого колониализма на израильскую национальную идентичность. Исследовательский вопрос заключается в том, как эти явления способствовали формированию израильской национальной идентичности. Исследование начинается с обсуждения позиции сионизма, иудаизма, Холокоста, либеральной демократии и западничества в рамках израильской идентичности. Затем исследуется процесс формирования и проявления милитаризма и поселенческого колониализма в израильской идентичности. В основу исследования положены вторичные источники.

Ключевые слова: Израильская национальная идентичность, сионизм, иудаизм, Холокост, либеральная демократия, западничество, милитаризм, поселенческий колониализм

Introduction

Israeli national identity has been a subject of extensive debate and research, highlighting the significance of various components such as Zionism, Judaism, the Holocaust, liberal democracy, and Westernism. These elements have often been identified as the primary factors shaping Israeli national identity. However, one crucial aspect that has received limited attention is the role of militarism and settler-colonialism in the construction of Israeli national identity. This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the influence of militarism and settler-colonialism on the formation of Israeli national identity.

The complex nature of Israeli national identity is intricately intertwined with its historical, cultural, and political context. Zionism, the national movement for the establishment and preservation of a Jewish homeland, has played a central role in shaping the Israeli identity. It encompasses both the ideological and practical aspects of the Jewish national aspirations and has been a fundamental force in the establishment and development of the State of Israel. Similarly, Judaism, as the dominant religion of the Israeli population, holds significant importance in defining the collective identity of the nation.

The Holocaust, with its profound impact on Jewish history and collective memory, has also played a crucial role in shaping Israeli national identity. The collective trauma and remembrance of the Holocaust have influenced the national psyche, engendering a strong sense of historical victimhood, resilience, and determination to ensure the survival and security of the Jewish people.

Furthermore, the principles of liberal democracy and Westernism have been integral to the Israeli national identity. The democratic ideals and institutions that underpin Israeli society are often regarded as essential elements of the nation's self-perception and its commitment to democratic governance, individual freedoms, and the rule of law. The connection to Western values, cultural heritage, and alliances has also contributed to the formation of Israeli national identity, positioning the country within a broader international context.

While these components have received significant attention in previous research, the role of militarism and settler-colonialism in shaping Israeli national identity has been relatively neglected. Militarism, characterized by the strong influence of the military establishment and a robust defense apparatus, has been intrinsic to Israel's national identity and security concerns. The ongoing conflicts and security challenges faced by Israel have deeply influenced the collective consciousness and shaped the nation's self-perception as a militarized state.

Settler-colonialism, particularly in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the establishment of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, has also played a pivotal role in shaping Israeli national identity. The territorial disputes, the colonization of land, and the complex dynamics between Israelis and Palestinians have generated a distinct sense of identity, rooted in the occupation and the contested narratives of historical and religious connection to the land.

This study seeks to delve into the influence of militarism and settler-colonialism on the formation of Israeli national identity. By examining their historical development, manifestations, and interplay with other components of Israeli identity, a comprehensive understanding of their impact on national consciousness and identity construction can be achieved. Through an analysis of secondary sources, including scholarly works, historical documents, and relevant literature, this research aims to shed light on the often-overlooked aspects of Israeli national identity and contribute to the broader discourse on national identity formation.

Zionism

Zionism is a nationalist movement that emerged in response to the rise of antisemitism at the end of the 19th century (Rotenstreich, 2007; Vital, 1990). Despite attempts at secularization and assimilation, secular and assimilated Jews in the 20th century still experienced feelings of exclusion and rejection (Rabkin, 2014). These sentiments, combined with the occurrence of antisemitic events, led a group of Jews to form the Zionist movement, based on the belief that the establishment of a Jewish state was essential for ensuring the safety of Jews. The Zionist movement, which originated in Central Europe as a response to the persecution and suffering of Jews, played a decisive role in the creation of the state of Israel. Its objective was to construct a modern, secular, and "normal" Jewish State following Western ideals (Hazony, 2001). However, the realization of this goal posed several challenges that the Zionists had yet to overcome. These challenges included: 1) uniting Jews worldwide under a secular collective identity, 2) developing a common language, 3) facilitating Jewish immigration to Palestine, and 4) attaining political and economic dominance in the "old new land" (Rabkin, 2014, p. 27).

These goals of Zionism, which were not fully achieved during the Palestine Mandate period, persisted following the establishment of the state of Israel. David Ben-Gurion, the first and founding Prime Minister of Israel, endeavored to unite Jews from around the world under a singular identity within the framework of Zionist ideology (Kimmerling, 1989; Peleg, 1998). Ben-Gurion sought to build a "normal" nation by bringing together Jews who had immigrated to Israel from diverse backgrounds under a shared identity. The notion of normalization was one of the two fundamental pillars of the Zionist movement, and it found expression in Ben-Gurion's foreign policy through the concept of a "nation like all nations." When Israel was established, Ben-Gurion aimed to integrate the country into the international community as a "normal" State on par with others. However, this effort for integration faced significant challenges, with Israel finding itself surrounded and isolated by hostile Arab states. In the 1990s, under Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the concept of normalization regained prominence in Israeli foreign policy (Sucharov, 2005, pp. 49-50; Waxman, 2006, p. 121).

Judaism

While the aspiration of Zionism to establish a secular Israeli identity has encountered challenges, the significance of religion in Israeli identity has grown

in recent years (Kimmerling, 2001). However, the role of Judaism in shaping Israeli identity has been influenced by the relationship between the state and religion. Unlike Western-style states that advocate for the separation of church and state, the establishment of the State of Israel did not adhere to this principle. In other words, while European states opposed the involvement of religion in politics, Zionism gave rise to a politicized and institutionalized Jewish religion that influenced Israel's path towards secularism (Levy, 2011). Consequently, the state-religion relationship has remained a topic of ongoing discussion in Israel (Cohen & Susser, 2000; Shafir & Peled, 2002).

Judaism, as a religion, has presented a challenge in reconciling ethnic Jewish identity with Israeli identity in Israel. While the Declaration of Independence emphasizes Israel as a Jewish state, it also aimed to assimilate Jews from diverse cultural backgrounds under the Israeli identity (Kimmerling, 1989; Peleg, 1998). However, the State of Israel has not officially recognized an Israeli identity, as doing so would entail including the Arab minority within this identity. To circumvent this issue and preserve a "pure" Jewish identity and secularism, the state turned to Judaism. Consequently, Judaism played a role in delineating the boundary between Jews and non-Jews in Israel, while also enabling the state to present itself as "Jewish and democratic" (Ram, 2008).

Since the Jewish religion possesses a diasporic nature, the Zionist movement initially aimed to exclude religious elements from its nationalist project. However, the Jewish religious Zionist movement still played a role in advancing its political objectives. Baruch Kimmerling identified five contributions of the Jewish religion to the Zionist movement. Firstly, it provided a means for Jewish religious Zionists to designate the land (Zion), resolving the issue of nation-land relations. Secondly, religious symbols were utilized to create symbols representing the Zionist movement. Thirdly, the Jewish religion contributed to ideological and cultural distinctions that unified Jews under the Zionist collective. Fourthly, the social boundaries of the Zionist collective were delineated in relation to the Jewish religion. Lastly, within the context of the Arab-Jewish conflict, the Jewish religion served as the primary mechanism for legitimizing the Jewish collective as a political entity in the Middle East (Kimmerling, 2008, p. 87). Ahmad Ashkar, who examines the relationship between Zionism and the Jewish religion, also highlights commonalities between the Zionist movement and Judaism (Ashkar, 2015). However, the importance of Judaism in Israeli identity diminished until the 1967 war. Following the war, Judaism gained significant prominence, taking on a new meaning. Being Jewish now implied not being Arab. Consequently, a new amalgamation of Israel (Israeliness) and Judaism emerged as a "civil religion." In this transformed Judaism or Religious Zionism, land and nation became primary principles of emphasis, while God and religious beliefs assumed a secondary position (Ram, 2008).

Liberal Democracy and Westernism

Besides being a Jewish state, Israel also prides itself on being a democratic state. Israel has often referred to itself as "the only democracy in the Middle East" (Sheffer, 1996). While Israel does not follow the traditional model of a Western democracy based on the separation of church and state, its modernist characteristics and liberal democratic practices necessitate the state's adherence to the principle of separation (Levy, 2011, p. 93). Despite its location in the Middle East, Israel is, in essence, a Western-style state. The Zionist founders of Israel and the majority of Jewish

immigrants who arrived in Palestine were secular Jews from Eastern and Central Europe. They sought to establish a Western society in Palestine, encompassing social, political, cultural, and economic aspects (Tal, 2011). Consequently, the components of liberal democracy and Westernism assume significant roles in shaping Israeli national identity.

The origins of these elements can be traced back to the ideas put forth by the founding fathers of the Zionist movement. Theodor Herzl, widely regarded as the main proponent of political Zionism, advocated for the establishment of a modern, secular, and democratic Jewish state in his seminal work, "The Jewish State" (Herzl, 1988). Furthermore, Herzl envisioned a Jewish state that would align with the Western model. He emphasized the importance of establishing relations with all Western states to ensure the survival of the Jewish state (Herzl, 1988, p. 96). Similarly, David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the State of Israel, espoused the doctrine of statism, which aimed to safeguard Westernism. Ben-Gurion believed that embracing Western values was essential for the preservation of the Yishuv (Jewish settlement) and, later, the state of Israel in the "hostile" Middle East. He argued that only a Jewish state modeled after the Western style stood a chance of overcoming the existential challenges it faced (Tal, 2011, p. 353).

Although Israeli Jews exhibit a democratic factionalism in terms of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, Israel continues to be recognized as a Jewish state that imposes limitations on the rights and freedoms of its Arab citizens. The passage of the "Nation State Law" in the Israeli Parliament on July 19, 2018, solidified the official status of Israel as a Jewish state (Lis & Landau, 2018). This law, which raised numerous concerns regarding the status of Arabic in Israel and the settlements in the West Bank, has posed a challenge to Israel's assertion of being the "sole democratic country in the Middle East."

Jewish History and the Holocaust

The role of Jewish history holds significant importance in the construction of Israeli state identity. Rather than merely shaping a Jewish historical identity, it serves to establish the legitimacy of the State of Israel. In Israel, the past, present, and future intertwine, and collective memory is viewed objectively. History has emerged as a potent force not only in domestic affairs but also in foreign relations within the state (Kimmerling, 2001; Schilling, 2015). The findings of a study conducted in 1974 indicate that 85% of Israeli students perceive the State of Israel as a continuation of Jewish history. A follow-up study conducted a decade later revealed that 79% of participants still held the same perspective (Schilling, 2015, p. 34). Although these findings highlight the success of Zionist historiography in establishing continuity between the State of Israel and Jewish history, inventing an "Israeli narrative" that would bridge the past and future to provide a collective identity for Jews worldwide was no easy task for Zionists during the early years of the state (Kimmerling, 1989).

The contribution of Zionist historians has played a crucial role in shaping Jewish history in alignment with Zionist ideology. Among these historians, the significance of Ben-Zion Dinur, who served as Israel's Minister of Education from 1951 to 1955, is particularly noteworthy (Ram, 1995). During Dinur's presidency, Zionist historiography divided Jewish history prior to the establishment of the State of Israel into periods of activity and heroism, as well as periods of inactivity and meekness. The two heroic periods encompassed the time before 135 AD, which concluded with the Jewish revolt against the Romans, and after 1880, when Zionist

settlements in Palestine began. On the other hand, the interim period of nearly two thousand years, which included the Holocaust and symbolized passivity and submissiveness, was deemed necessary to be erased from collective memory. The construction of Israel's identity relied on the positive perception of these heroic periods (Zerubavel, 1995, p. 18). The Zionist interpretation of Jewish history has disavowed the privileged relationship between God and humanity, transforming Jews into victims of historical injustices (Rabkin, 2014, p. 168).

The significance of Jewish history in shaping Israeli identity cannot be denied. However, the recognition of traumatic events within Jewish history that have affected all Jews holds great importance. The Holocaust, which occurred just prior to the establishment of the State of Israel and resulted in the sacrifice of six million Jews, stands as a uniquely traumatic event in Jewish history, perhaps even in human history. The Holocaust serves as a shared traumatic experience among all Jews, regardless of their background, be it Ashkenazi, Sephardic, devout, or secular, and it unites them under a collective identity. Initially silenced in the early years of the state, the Holocaust emerged as a "new civil religion" in Israel following the Eichmann Case (1961–1962) (Liebman et al., 1983). Consequently, the narrative of the Holocaust has become one of the most influential factors in Israel's relations with the rest of the world. Particularly in the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict, this phenomenon has drawn increasing attention and has led to criticism that the Holocaust is being exploited to legitimize Israel's actions.

Although the Nazis never occupied Israel (Palestine), the memory of the Holocaust occupies a central place in Israeli identity (Wistrich, 1997, p. 16). For Israelis, the Holocaust represents a collective memory that encapsulates the culmination of persecution and violence inflicted upon Jews throughout history by various nations and peoples, driven by consistent antisemitic practices. As the most horrifying event in Jewish history, the Holocaust, which systematically claimed the lives of six million Jews, stands as the ultimate manifestation of anti-Semitism. What sets the Holocaust apart from previous antisemitic acts is its genocidal nature, aimed at the mass extermination of Jews. Given its magnitude and recent occurrence, the Holocaust holds significant weight in the construction of national and state identity, serving as a profound national trauma. It is the dominant shared collective memory that shapes Israeli national identity, functioning almost as a "civil religion" that permeates all facets of society. In Israel, there is not a single day where the Holocaust is not remembered or referenced. As described by Amos Elon, "The Holocaust remains the primary trauma of Israeli society … The trauma of the Holocaust leaves an indelible mark on the national psychology, public life, the conduct of foreign affairs, politics, education, literature, and art" (Elon, 1971, pp. 198-199).

Militarism and Settler-Colonialism

Israel's enduring conflict with its neighboring countries has bestowed significant importance upon the military within Israeli society and politics. Consequently, the relationship between the civilian and military spheres has become a crucial topic of discussion in Israel. While some studies emphasize the civilian control over the military and the dominant role of the civilian sector in decision-making, others argue that civilian control is limited, and the military encroaches upon political, economic, social, and cultural realms. Therefore, four approaches to civil–military relations in Israel have emerged: traditional, critical, new critical, and security network (Sheffer & Barak, 2010).

Traditional approaches have predominantly examined the institutional and official aspects of civil-military relations in Israel, perceiving the civil and military spheres as distinct sub-systems. According to these approaches, the civilian sector in Israel possesses supervisory authority over the military domain. Furthermore, they consider the two sectors as homogeneous and autonomous entities that operate independently from one another (Horowitz & Lissak, 1989). Although critical approaches have built upon traditional approaches, they have undertaken a critical examination of civil–military relations in Israel, focusing on social, political, cultural, and ideological dimensions. They also diverge from traditional approaches by characterizing the civil and military sub-systems as heterogeneous. According to these perspectives, the security domain exhibits greater interference in the civilian sector compared to other domains. However, proponents of both approaches refrain from defining Israel as a militarist state and instead describe it as a "nation in arms," akin to Western democracies (Barak & Sheffer, 2010).

Representatives of the new critical approach, rooted in the postmodernist tradition of social sciences, attribute significant importance to the cultural dimension of civil-military relations in Israel. In contrast to the previous two approaches, the new critical approach rejects the paradigm of civil-military relations and highlights Israel's incomplete process of state formation, which hampers the discussion of civil and military spheres. These approaches argue that the lack of defined borders for Israel because of the 1967 war has deeply influenced civil-military relations and the state formation process. However, these perspectives do not treat the civil and military domains as separate entities. According to them, the civilian space in Israel either barely exists or lacks significant power. Therefore, the new critical approaches find it more appropriate to define Israel as a "garrison state" or "praetorian state," infused with a militaristic ethos, rather than labeling it as a "nation-army" state (Goldberg, 2006).

The security network approach suggests that security officials within the Israeli security field actively engage in activities by intervening in all civilian domains. From this perspective, the civil-military relationship in Israel differs from that of other democratic countries. According to this approach, the influence of the civilian sphere on the military sphere in Israel is minimal, while military values exert significant influence by permeating civilian areas. Consequently, the Western "ideal types" of civil-military relations are deemed unsuitable for Israel. In Israel, the civilian sphere is weaker than the military or security sphere. While the security network approach acknowledges the relative weakness of the civilian space, as proposed by the new critical approaches, it does not entirely overlook the impact of the civilian sphere on other areas within the civil space. According to this approach, the civil-military relationship in Israel operates within the framework they define as the "security network." The Israeli security network comprises actors from security and defense institutions as well as civilian actors who share common values, interests, and goals, ultimately shaping the decision-making process (Sheffer & Barak, 2010).

As recent approaches have demonstrated, the military sphere in Israel holds significant influence over civilian domains and foreign policy. In fact, the role of military-security institutions in shaping Israeli foreign policy has consistently garnered attention (Tyler, 2012). The military also plays a vital role in Israeli identity. In examining the army's role in Israeli state identity and foreign policy, Sucharov has determined that Israel's identity as a "defensive-fighter" emerges from the interplay

between security ethics and military doctrine. According to Sucharov, Israeli security ethics lean towards a defensive posture, while Israeli army doctrine and tactics lean towards an offensive stance. This interplay between defensive objectives and offensive means is deeply ingrained in Israeli identity. Sucharov suggests that if both the objectives and means were defensive, Israel would perceive itself as a "defensive-victim" state, whereas if both were aggressive, Israel would perceive itself as an "aggressor-warrior" (Sucharov, 2005).

Israel's militaristic nature is evident in its policies towards Arab countries and occupied territories. The Israeli army and security institutions have played a significant role in the conflict with Arab countries and in carrying out settlement activities in the occupied territories. Israel is characterized as a settler-colonialist state that continually expands its borders through Jewish settlement policies. Since its establishment, Israel has lacked defined borders, with frequent changes resulting from wars with Arab states. The settler-colonialist nature of Zionism is a key element that shapes Israel's national identity. Particularly after the 1967 War, numerous Arab lands, notably Palestinian territories, were occupied. While the occupied Arab lands are utilized as an advantage for peace agreements in Israel's foreign policy, settlement policies continue in the Palestinian territories. (Shafir, 2002; Ram, 1995; Kimmerling, 1989). This characteristic is rooted in Zionism.

Zionism differs from anti-colonial African and Asian nationalist movements. African and Asian nationalisms were primarily focused on reclaiming their lands from foreign powers and asserting control over their own destinies. In contrast, for Zionism, the primary goal was the establishment of a homeland. Zionism aimed to bring together the dispersed Jewish people and build a nation in their ancestral lands (Jansen, 1971, pp. 12-13). Additionally, as noted by Godfrey H. Jansen, religion played a role in the Zionist national movement, creating a sense of alienation, while its colonial character and the desire to gain support from foreign powers set it apart from African and Asian nationalisms (Jansen, 1971, pp. 21-38, 80).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has sought to address the research gap surrounding the role of militarism and settler-colonialism in shaping Israeli national identity. While previous studies have extensively examined components such as Zionism, Judaism, the Holocaust, liberal democracy, and Westernism, the influence of militarism and settler-colonialism has received limited attention. By exploring the impact of these phenomena on Israeli national identity, this research has shed light on their significance and contribution to the formation of the Israeli collective identity.

Throughout the study, the position of Zionism, Judaism, the Holocaust, liberal democracy, and Westernism within Israeli national identity has been discussed, highlighting their importance in shaping the nation's collective consciousness. These components, rooted in historical, cultural, and political contexts, have played significant roles in defining Israeli identity and fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among its people.

Furthermore, this study has delved into the process of formation and manifestations of militarism and settler-colonialism within Israeli national identity. The examination of militarism has revealed its intrinsic connection to Israel's security concerns and the pervasive influence of the military establishment. The ongoing conflicts and security challenges faced by Israel have deeply affected the collective psyche, shaping the nation's self-perception as a militarized state.

Similarly, settler-colonialism, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the establishment of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, has played a pivotal role in shaping Israeli national identity. The territorial disputes, land colonization, and complex dynamics between Israelis and Palestinians have generated a distinct sense of identity rooted in the occupation and the contested narratives surrounding historical and religious connections to the land.

By relying on secondary sources, including scholarly works and relevant literature, this research has contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the influence of militarism and settler-colonialism on Israeli national identity. It has brought attention to the often-overlooked aspects of Israeli identity formation, offering insights into the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its broader implications for peace and stability in the region.

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