

A growing backlash: Israel Picks Identity Over Democracy. More Nations May Follow.

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Amid a moment of national euphoria, Israel's founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, emerged from retirement in July 1967 to warn Israelis they had sown the seeds of self-destruction.

Israel had just won a stunning military victory against its neighbors, elating Israelis with a sense that the grand experiment of a Jewish state might really work.

But Ben-Gurion [insisted](#) that Israel give up the territories it had conquered. If it did not, he said, occupation would distort the young state, which had been founded to protect not just the Jewish people but their ideals of democracy and pluralism.

Now, a half century and one year later, Israel has [formally declared](#) the right of national self-determination, once envisioned to include all within its borders, as “unique to the Jewish people.”

Above all, the law may be a choice between two visions of Israel that have come into growing tension. American diplomats have long issued a version of Ben-Gurion's warning: If Israel did not make peace with the Palestinians, they said, it would have to choose between its dual identities as a Jewish state and democratic one.

Though Israel's circumstances may be unique, its sense of facing a looming decision about its national identity is not. There is a growing backlash to the idea that countries should privilege democracy over all else. That movement, driven by perceptions of physical and demographic insecurity, insists that, now, identity will come first.

A Global Contradiction

The modern era endowed countries with two rights, supposedly unassailable, that turned out to exist in tension. The right of national self-determination envisioned states as unified collectives; one nation for one people. And the right of democracy prescribed equal participation for all, including in defining the nation's character.

Idealistic world leaders who set out those rights a century ago imagined countries that would be internally homogeneous and static. But reality has proved messier. Borders do not perfectly align with populations. People move. Identities shift or evolve. What then?

Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories sharpened questions over how to democratically incorporate the non-Jews within this avowedly Jewish nation — an identity that early Israeli leaders, remembering the Holocaust, felt bound to protect — just as countries around the world faced their own challenges over balancing identity and democracy.

Civil rights movements challenged countries to broaden national identities long associated with whiteness. The end of colonialism saw mass migration of non-Europeans to Europe; within former colonies, conflicts erupted over who belonged and did not.

The democratic world arrived, in the 1960s, at an informal consensus: If the requirements of democracy and national identity clash, the first should prevail. That didn't mean abandoning national identity, but it did mean softening how it was understood and maintained.

France, for example, still calls itself the nation of the French, but that term has grown fuzzier to better include all within its borders. It's a work-in-process and remains controversial, but the trajectory is clear.

In the 1960s, France nearly [descended into civil war](#) in part over whether Algerians could fully join the white, secular democracy. This week, the country is [debating](#) how best to refer to soccer players of African origin so as to honor both their heritage and their French status.

Democracy Over Identity?

Such transitions have been seen as essential to democracy's survival.

In a [landmark study](#) of democracy's growth in Eastern Europe, the political scientist Sherrill Stroschein found that countries that formally defined themselves by their ethnic majority — Slovakia for Slovaks, Romania for Romanians — had, in practice, de-emphasized those identities.

Dr. Stroschein chronicled one community in Ukraine where ethnic Hungarians field Hungarian political parties, attend Hungarian religious services, even operate on Hungarian time zones (the clocks of their ethnic Ukrainian neighbors run one hour ahead). The dueling time zones might cause a little friction, but Dr. Stroschein found that where Europeans tolerate these compromises about their once-sacrosanct identities, stable democracies emerge.

Ethnic nationalism still tempts Europeans. But democracy has taken hold where nationalist attitudes have cooled. This global shift has been glacially slow but unidirectional enough that, among democracies, the exceptions stick out.

The historian Tony Judt, in a [controversial 2003 essay](#), called Israel's mission to maintain a firmly Jewish identity "an anachronism." The country's vision of itself as by and for a single demographic group, he wrote, "is rooted in another time and place," a stubborn holdout amid "a world that has moved on."

But Mr. Judt may have overstated, as historians [often did](#) in those days, the decline of the national idea. Israel may not have been an anachronism at all, but a precursor of things to come.

Fear and Backlash

Old ideas of nationhood can have a powerful pull. The way that human beings think about group identity — as an extension of ourselves, particularly in moments of crisis — can make us see safety in conformity, and danger in diversity or tolerance.

Nothing triggers those feelings like terrorism or demographic change.

Jewish Israelis experienced both in the early and mid-2000s — about a decade before similar fears

would provoke nationalist backlashes in much of the Western world.

A wave of horrific violence known as the Second Intifada, which killed far more Palestinians than Israelis, included shocking terrorist attacks in previously safe Israeli enclaves.

At the same time, Palestinian and Arab Israeli birthrates left Jewish Israelis feeling at demographic risk. In truth, Jewish birthrates [are high](#) and Muslim birthrates [declining](#), but the fear of being outnumbered remains.

Research has [repeatedly found](#) that terrorist attacks increase support, among the targeted community, for right-wing politics. [One study](#) found that even the perceived threat of an attack shifted Israeli voters toward right-wing parties. Tellingly, this favored a specific subset of right-wing parties — the nationalists.

[A study](#) of Israelis led by Daphna Canetti-Nisim, a political psychologist at the University of Maryland, found that exposure to terrorism changes much more than party preference.

When people believe they may be attacked merely for who they are, they hold more closely to their identity. Their sense of community narrows: only those who look like them are to be tolerated. They grow more supportive of policies to restrict or control minorities, the research found, and less supportive of pluralism or democracy.

At the same time, when a majority demographic group believes it could become a minority, members of that group often become [less supportive](#) of democracy, preferring a strong ruler and harsh social controls, according to [scholarly research](#) on democratic decline.

Jewish Israelis have changed how they see their country's identity. In polls, they once expressed optimism that it could be both Jewish and democratic. But in the past decade, according to polling by the [Israel Democracy Institute](#), that has become a minority position. Large subsets say the country must be either Jewish first or democratic first.

Those who say Israel should be Jewish first overwhelmingly belong to the political right, which pushed through this week's national self-determination law. But even those who say democracy should prevail express support for some caveats. In 2014, most Jews said that "crucial national decisions" — like, say, self-determination — should be left to the Jewish majority.

The quality of Israeli democracy has been declining steadily since the early 2000s, according to a well-regarded index known as [V-Dem](#) that tracks countries across a host of metrics. In the mid-1990s, it scored alongside present-day South Korea and Jamaica. Today, it is seen as on par with African democracies such as Namibia and Senegal and well below Tunisia, the Middle East's highest-scored democracy.

A Global Backlash

Israelis are less alone than they once were in questioning the half-century-old consensus that democracy should prevail over national identity.

In Europe, an influx of migrants and refugees, along with terrorist attacks, have transformed public attitudes. Europeans have grown [more nationalistic](#), more politically extreme and less welcoming of outsiders. And much as in Israel, hard-line attitudes have continued to grow even as the threats have

waned, with terrorism and migration both declining.

In the United States, fear of migration and terrorism coincides, [among a subset of white voters](#), with support for harsh policies against minorities and for a strong leader who can impose control.

Some countries, like Hungary, have overtly embraced an old-style national identity, with leaders championing the ethnic origins of the state, warning darkly of foreigners and curtailing basic rights.

Israel is not Hungary, which faces no equivalent to the Palestinian conflict. But they have arrived at a similar ideological destination. Viktor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister, has grown close to Israel's leaders, visiting them in Jerusalem last week.

Democracy's growth has stalled globally. Though the causes for this are not fully known, the trend is marked, in part, by once-healthy democracies rolling backward. Conventional wisdom holds that this is because of mismanagement or the self-interest of leaders. But maybe this is wrong.

Forced to choose between putting democracy or identity first, people may not always pick democracy.

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