

# Who's Afraid of The Nation-State?

The idea of the nation-state is facing a decisive moment in its history, one which is of particular importance for the future of the Jewish state. Around the globe, the time of nations and national states is declared to have passed, and, it is said, the time has come for them to be supplanted by either sub-national bodies (reflecting diverse groups within the state) or supranational ones (such as the European Union). These new entities will not only assume many of the basic functions of government, but also seek the loyalty of citizens, at the expense of traditional national identities. While the sub-national and supranational approaches come from opposite directions (the first championed by the acolytes of post-modernism, the second by liberal idealists), the upshot of both is much the same: Rising criticism of the national idea, in both academic and popular discourse. A glance at almost any periodical, from scholarly journals to the daily tabloids, will come across some attack on nationalism, which is generally held to be synonymous with zealotry, backwardness, radicalism and violence.

Recent political experience, however, teaches that the absence of a compelling national idea can be enough to tear a state apart. The serious undermining of the public's identification with the state was a necessary precondition for the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as well as the continuing threat to Canadian unity, on the one hand, and the trivialization of the governments of European Union member states, on the other. True, the demise of Communism precipitated a revival of older, sub-Soviet nationalisms in Eastern Europe; yet many of these nationalisms are not what they used to be, and are readily disposed of when the prospect

---

of joining greater Europe beckons—as demonstrated by the efforts of Slovenia, Hungary and the Czech Republic to join the European Union.

Even nations whose identity was once beyond question suddenly find themselves—trying to find themselves. In Great Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair is attempting to reinvent Britishness, using the (asinine) idea of a “Cool Britannia” to parry assaults on the national idea from within (Scottish nationalism) and from without (European integrationism). The Russians, stripped of both Communism and the Soviet empire, are scrambling to redefine their national idea, with President Boris Yeltsin even appointing a state commission to figure out what Russia means. Other nations have chosen the opposite path: The Dutch, for instance, are jettisoning their national character (never that convincing to begin with) in order to become ever more “European.” Yet if the Netherlands has gone farther than other European nations in this regard, it is only due to its never having been a “nation-state” in any serious sense, being composed instead of a number of stronger local identities held together by a common crown. As for other European countries, though vestigial sentiments may slow their progress, most seem headed in the same direction.

These trends are of obvious relevance for the Jewish state. Israel’s is probably the oldest nationality in the world (one might argue that the concepts of nationalism and the nation-state are themselves of biblical origin), yet due to the exigencies of history, modern Israel’s national idea is still new and in some ways unformed. Basic questions such as the symbols of the Jewish state, the character of Israeli sovereignty and the connection to the land are still being debated.

At the same time, new voices are trying to halt that debate, opposing the very notion of a Jewish national identity. The express claim that Jewish national sovereignty “has turned out to be the biggest danger to Jewish cultural and moral existence” was advanced in the March 1998 issue of *Tikkun*, in a piece by the editor of the highbrow Israeli journal *Te’oria Uvikoret (Theory and Criticism)*—both publications respected intellectual voices in the United States and Israel. Only half a century has passed since

---

the world witnessed the horrifying consequences of Jewish disempowerment, yet this does not prevent the author of the article from claiming that Jewish military force is inherently evil: “Since the independence of the State of Israel, Jews have killed tens of thousands of non-Jews, and more Jews have been killed while serving in the Israeli army than the number of Jews who were killed by non-Jews throughout the world.” That the vast majority of the “non-Jews” who died perished in their attempts to destroy the Jewish people and their state, or that the Israeli soldiers died while defending their people from “non-Jewish” soldiers and terrorists, is, apparently, not important. Jews defending themselves by the use of force is *by definition* a negative phenomenon, and to uproot it we must remove its basic cause: The presence of a Jewish state. Not any particular aspect of that state, mind you—but the idea of having such a state at all.

Against the desire to abolish the Jewish nation-state are voices in Israel and the diaspora claiming that the Jewish state is not only important but vital to the future of the Jewish people. In the May 11, 1998 issue of *The Weekly Standard*, columnist Charles Krauthammer writes that in light of the rapid demographic decline in the diaspora (due primarily to intermarriage and low fertility), the State of Israel offers the only future for the children of Israel. “The return to Zion is now the principal drama of Jewish history. What began as an experiment has become the very heart of the Jewish people—its cultural, spiritual and psychological center, soon to become its demographic center as well. Israel is the hinge. Upon it rest the hopes—the only hope—for Jewish continuity and survival.”

Those Israelis who challenge the need for a Jewish state are still few and fairly marginal. Nevertheless, their ideas have found their way into influential circles of the nation’s cultural and political establishment. Over the summer, the Israeli “peace movement” published with great fanfare a call to the international community—the United States, the European Union and the United Nations—effectively to force a political settlement on Israel and its neighbors. As reported in *Yedi’ot Aharonot*, participants in the call included Peace Now and Dor Shalom (“Peace Generation”), whose

---

members form an integral part of the Israeli Left elite—political figures such as Knesset Members Tzali Reshef of Labor and Dedi Zucker of Meretz, and public personae such as former Tel Aviv mayor Shlomo Lahat, and the son of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Yuval Rabin.

This is possibly the first time in the country's history that members of the Israeli cultural leadership have called into question the merit of Jewish sovereignty. The basic claim of Jewish nationalism—Zionism—is that the nation-state is the most effective and just means of protecting the Jewish people. There have always been those who reject this idea, claiming that Jewish interests would be better served by appealing to the international community, rather than through Jewish sovereignty. Yet in Israel at least, the opponents of Zionism were always an inconsequential minority; for example, the Jewish community in Israel before statehood rejected outright the ideas of Judah Magnes, the Hebrew University's first president, who called for international decrees to determine the fate of the land. Consciously or not, the current appeal to international bodies to impose a settlement to international disputes—a settlement to be reached and judged by international standards—represents a vote of no confidence in the Jewish state's ability to solve its own problems. And the fact that the signatories of the current appeal include individuals at the heart of the Israeli establishment means that the loss of faith in the national idea is no longer a marginal problem.

Other nations have adopted positions similar to what is being urged upon Israel. Kuwait, for instance, admits that it cannot defend itself militarily and has entrusted its security to the international community; and in the European Union are some who declare that only by forfeiting national sovereignties in favor of a "United States of Europe" can Europeans ensure a prosperous future. Until recently, however, such a position was anathema in Israel: The horrors of the first half of the twentieth century had convinced Jews everywhere of the necessity of an independent, sovereign Jewish state. Today, an increasing number are no longer convinced. Some already seem to believe that sovereignty causes more problems than it solves,

---

at least in the case of negotiation with Israel's neighbors. Yet this is a slippery slope: If we give up, even partially, on the nation-state as the solution to problems of peace and security—that is, of our basic national existence—then why should we insist upon sovereignty in economic, social or cultural matters?

The belief that Jews must rely upon themselves, foremost, is what built Israel. Those who concede that the international community and its moral stance offer the preferred path to peace and security are essentially giving up on the idea of the Jewish state. And if that idea is lost, it will not be long before the state's right to exist is delegitimized as well—in the eyes of both its citizenry and the world.

This, then, is the question to ask at Israel's mid-century mark: Is national sovereignty still the best tool for protecting the interests of the Jews? It is no exaggeration to say that the fate of Israel is bound up in this question. And, if Krauthammer is right, so is the future of the entire Jewish people.

Ofir Haivry, for the Editors  
October 1, 1998