



Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis

An important and topical contribution to the field of Middle East Studies, this innovative, provocative, and timely study tackles head-on the main assumptions of the foundation of Israel as a Jewish state. Theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich, this study provides a novel analysis of the interplay between Israeli nationalism and Jewish tradition, arriving at a fresh understanding of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict through its focus on internal questions about Israeli identity. By critiquing and transcending the current discourse on religion and politics in Israel, this study brings to an international audience debates within Israel that have previously been inaccessible to non-Hebrew-speaking academics. Featuring discussions on Israeli jurisprudence, the nation-state law, and rabbinic courts, *Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis* will have far-reaching implications, not only within the state of Israel but on politics, society, and culture beyond its borders.

YAACOV YADGAR is the Stanley Lewis Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Oxford. He has written extensively on matters of Jewish identity, nationalism, secularism, modernity, and tradition in Israel. He is the author of *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism* (2017).

The Global Middle East

General Editors

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *SOAS, University of London*
 Ali Mirsepassi, *New York University*

Editorial Advisory Board

Faisal Devji, *University of Oxford*
 John Hobson, *University of Sheffield*
 Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *University of Pennsylvania*
 Zachary Lockman, *New York University*
 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *London School of Economics and Political Science*
 David Ryan, *University College Cork, Ireland*

The Global Middle East series seeks to broaden and deconstruct the geographical boundaries of the 'Middle East' as a concept to include North Africa, Central and South Asia, and diaspora communities in Western Europe and North America. The series features fresh scholarship that employs theoretically rigorous and innovative methodological frameworks resonating across relevant disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. In particular, the general editors welcome approaches that focus on mobility, the erosion of nation-state structures, travelling ideas and theories, transcendental technopolitics, the decentralization of grand narratives, and the dislocation of ideologies inspired by popular movements. The series will also consider translations of works by authors in these regions whose ideas are salient to global scholarly trends but have yet to be introduced to the Anglophone academy.

Other books in the series:

1. *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*, Ali Mirsepassi
2. *Psycho-nationalism: Global Thought, Iranian Imaginations*, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam
3. *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History*, Golbarg Rekabtalaei
4. *Money, Markets and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East*, Adam Hanieh
5. *Iran's Troubled Modernity: Debating Ahmad Fardid's Legacy*, Ali Mirsepassi
6. *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War*, Reem Abou-El-Fadl
7. *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran*, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48894-5 — Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis
Yaacov Yadgar
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

8. *Creating the Modern Iranian Woman: Popular Culture between Two Revolutions*, Liora Hendelman-Baavur
9. *Iran's Quiet Revolution: The Downfall of the Pahlavi State*, Ali Mirsepassi
10. *Reversing the Colonial Gaze: Persian Travelers Abroad*, Hamid Dabashi
11. *Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis: State and Politics in the Middle East*, Yaacov Yadgar

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48894-5 — Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis
Yaacov Yadgar
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis

State and Politics in the Middle East

YAACOV YADGAR
University of Oxford



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-48894-5 — Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis
 Yaacov Yadgar
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108488945

DOI: 10.1017/9781108773249

© Yaacov Yadgar 2020

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Yadgar, Yaacov, author.

Title: Israel's Jewish identity crisis : state and politics in the Middle East / Yaacov Yadgar.

Other titles: Global Middle East (Cambridge, England)

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2020. |

Series: The global Middle East ; 11 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019038290 (print) | LCCN 2019038291 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781108488945 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108715706 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781108773249 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Jews–Israel–Identity. | Zionism. | Nationalism–Israel. | Religion and politics–Israel. |

Judaism and politics–Israel. | Judaism and secularism–Israel. | Judaism and state–Israel.

Classification: LCC DS113.3 .Y33 2020 (print) | LCC DS113.3 (ebook) | DDC 956.9405/5–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038290>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038291>

ISBN 978-1-108-48894-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-71570-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48894-5 — Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis
Yaacov Yadgar
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

To Ester.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48894-5 — Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis
Yaacov Yadgar
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xi
Introduction: Israel’s Jewish Identity Crisis	1
1 The Politics of Religious Conversion and the Limits of Zionist Nationhood	33
2 Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People?	78
3 Two Contemporary Debates on Zionism and Secularism	112
4 Non-Jewish Israeli Nationalism and the Limits of Israeliness	151
Conclusion: Israel, Judaism, and Critique	172
<i>Bibliography</i>	196
<i>Index</i>	210

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48894-5 — Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis
Yaacov Yadgar
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Preface

The idea of writing this book first occurred to me a few years ago when I spent a year as a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley. The campus had been teeming with debates, protests, and public controversies surrounding Israel – or, to be precise, Israel's role in the violently conflictual politics of the Middle East. My courses – dealing with the history of Zionism, Israeli political culture, and matters that are usually discussed under the header of 'religion and politics' in Israel – were of obvious interest to many students. But there seemed to be a lingering confusion among my students: Were my courses about this conflict? Would the discussions in my classes – the titles of which suggested a focus on issues that are seemingly internal to Jewish-Israeli history and politics – be of relevance to the matters fiercely debated on campus?

I found this confusion among my students to be a telling testimony to some of the major failings of the dominant discourse on Middle Eastern politics, specifically regarding the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. My students were echoing a predominant sense of a categorical distinction between matters that are internal to Israeli sociopolitics (i.e., what we would usually call national politics), which are supposedly of only implicit relevance to this conflict, and matters that are international, and bear directly on it. The internal issues – dealing, for example, with Israeli/Zionist national identity, religion, and politics in Israel, Israeli political culture, Jewish identity in Israel, etc. – were seen as only remotely and indirectly influencing the actions taken by Israel in its conflictual relations with the Palestinians and the Arab world at large.

This distinction, which lies at the root of the usual framing of the discussion on a conflict that is commonly (as well as incorrectly and rather insensitively) labeled the 'Jewish-Arab' conflict, assumes the meaning of these names, or sides, to be obvious. It assumes that the meaning implicit in the designation 'Jewish' – which is often

synonymized in practice with 'Israeli' – is obvious, an unchallenged given fact of the conflict. Moreover, according to this conventional view this meaning is relevant to the politics of the Middle East *only* in so far as it frames the conflict between the two opposing sides. ('Arab' or 'Palestinian' are consequently seen as the essential opposite of the said meaning.) If debates on the meaning of this Jewishness/Israeliness are acknowledged, they are assumed to be only peripheral to the main binary of Jew versus Arab or Israeli versus Arab/Palestinian.

Another way of putting this is to say that this distinction assumes that the meaning of Israel being a 'Jewish state' is a rather clear and unchallenged issue; that the meaning(s) of Jewish sovereignty, of nationalist (allegedly secular, or at least 'non-religious') Jewish identity, and of the distinction between Jewish politics/nationalism and religion/theology is clear, and essentially unchallenged. Even if it does acknowledge the contested nature of these issues, the predominant discourse does not view them as immediately shaping the 'hard' politics of a violent ethno-national conflict over land and power. It assumes the 'sociology' of Israel to be only remotely of relevance to the politics of the Middle East.

Confronted with my students' confusion, I came to realize that what seemed to me to be an obvious connection – an essential interdependence between the sociology, culture, and internal politics of Israel and the conflict in the Middle East – often went unacknowledged by large swaths of the discursive field in which we all – students, teachers, politicians, activists, and protesters alike – found ourselves. Having studied Israeli sociopolitics extensively, it was apparent to me that we cannot truly understand the one without the other; that a disciplinary distinction between international relations, political science, sociology, and cultural studies may make organizational-institutional sense, but discursively has been caustically misguided.

Searching for reading assignments that would render this interdependence explicit was a frustrating endeavor indeed. A vast field of scholarship on religion and politics in Israel, for example, rarely draws the connection between its immediate subject matter and its implications regarding the Jewish State's self-positioning in the Middle East.

It was easy enough to find books and articles that would acquaint my students with the alleged secularity of Zionist ideology, of the alleged religious-secular cleavage among Jews in Israel, of the history of the controversies on the legal definition of Jewishness in Israel, etc.

But only rarely could I come up with a reading assignment that would tie these in with what was being debated outside of class, on campus, and in the public sphere at large. In the same vein, books that address the conflict – whether critical of the political status quo of Israeli/Zionist dominance or propagating Zionist apologetics that justify this status quo – tend to focus on the relations between the two conflicting sides, and often fail to problematize the ways in which these rivals negotiate and construct the various aspects of their histories and identities.

Indeed, as a colleague once commented to me in private, debates on secularism, religiosity, and politics in Israel (i.e., among Israeli Jews) sometimes amount to a discursively violent erasure of the very presence of Palestinian-Arabs in Israel, as the dominant discourse assumes the debate to be of no relevance to non-Jews in Israel, while the whole issue of Israel's Jewish identity is constructed exactly around (non-Jewish) Palestinian-Arabs.¹

This book, then, is primarily an attempt at correcting this lacuna, at least as far as a study of the Israeli side is concerned. I make the connections between the 'internals' of Zionism and Israel and 'the conflict' apparent. This book deals with what is commonly titled 'religion and politics' in Israel: with the meaning of Israeli nationhood and the various ways in which it corresponds with the State of Israel's self-identification as Jewish; with the ways in which this self-identification of the state shapes the state's stance vis-à-vis its non-Jewish, mainly Palestinian-Arab, citizens; with the ways in which this apparent entanglement of 'religion and politics' shapes Israel's position in the Middle East; and with the ways in which the State's claim to Jewish identity shapes Jewish-Israeli nationhood's relations with Jews outside of the Jewish state.

The book tackles these issues, and others derived from them, by refocusing the discussion on the Israeli nation-state's unresolved relationship with its own claim to a nonreligious, or 'secular' Jewish

¹ This insight is echoed in Ian Lustick's analysis of the political implications of Israel's immigration politics, which he summarizes as constituting 'Israel as a non-Arab state.' I. S. Lustick, 'Israel as a non-Arab state: The political implications of mass immigration of non-Jews,' *Middle East Journal*, 53/3 (1999), 417–33. In this context see also Y. Yonah, 'Israel's immigration policies: The twofold face of the 'demographic threat,' *Social Identities*, 10/2 (2004), 195–218.

identity – or, as the title of this book suggests, with Israel's Jewish identity crisis. I argue that this is a key to understanding not only the intricacies of intra-Jewish sociopolitics, but also Israel's positions and actions in international affairs. If we wish to understand the Israeli–Arab conflict we must try and decipher the meaning of Israeli nationhood, and especially the way it understands its own Jewishness.²

At the same time, it should be clear to the reader that the main subject of this book is far from being an Israeli or Zionist idiosyncrasy. To a significant extent, this book is about the modern, liberal, so-called nonreligious nation-state as such; it takes Israel as a specific case history that sheds light on the broader issue of the theopolitics³ of the nation-state. Specifically, the book offers a view into the ways in which the dichotomy between religion and politics serves the allegedly 'secular' state and the limitations of this service.

* * *

Before I introduce my argument in a more comprehensive manner, a quick return to my Berkeley experience may be in place, for it sheds light on the charged nature of the discourse that I will analyze.

One day a guest appeared in my 'Religion and Politics in Israel' class. The young man, in his early 20s, was an Israeli-Jewish cousin of one of my American students. He came to the United States for a family visit, and when he heard about the class, he told me, he had to come and see it for himself. He was happy that his American cousin is learning about Israel and wanted to see what the class is like. The topic of the discussion that day was the implicit-yet-all-too-dominant identification between Israeliness and Jewishness in Israel. We necessarily also discussed the exclusionary, discriminatory implications that this sociocultural fact has for non-Jewish, mainly Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, rendering them, by practical definition, Israel's Others. (This is also, of course, a major topic of discussion in this book.) The Israeli visitor, who kept silent during the class itself, approached me afterwards, and in a rather familiar tone kept for insiders, chided me for what went on in class. Surely, these are all facts of the Israeli reality, he said, but they

² See Y. M. Rabkin, 'The problem, Benny Morris, is Zionism,' *The Jerusalem Post*, January 29 (2007).

³ W. T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2003).

Preface

xv

do not reflect nicely upon Israel. One has to be careful when talking about such sensitive matters 'to them' (i.e., non-Israeli Americans, in this case), for they, unlike us Israelis, do not see 'the whole picture.'

I understood this to mean, as one so often hears in intra-Jewish-Israeli discussions, that while these, and other elements of our reality, are indeed problematic, often ugly facts of our lives, we nevertheless have to accept them in practice, since 'they,' our alleged enemies, are much worse than us; were it not for this or that discriminatory policy or practice, for example, the state would no longer be, and the fate of the whole Jewish people will be in jeopardy. They, non-Israeli-Jews, do not know this, or they may not care for the state as much as we do. Hence, one has to be careful when talking to them.

Indeed, this has been one of the more profound implications of the establishment of Israel in the shadow of the Holocaust, as the state positions itself as the guarantor of the very survival of Jews worldwide. As such, it is, in an important sense, beyond critiquing. Unjust and misguided as its policies may be, they are nevertheless justified by the menace of the alleged alternative, namely a precarious existence of stateless Jews. This binary, unidimensional and fallacious as it is, nevertheless shadows much of the debate on Israel. One is assumed to be taking a position in this binary, and in it alone: Either one is critical of the state – and hence assumed to be wishing for its demise, or one is supporting the very idea of the state, and hence expected to eventually, almost unreflectively, justify its actions. (Needless to say, this is obviously a simplified image of a complicated field of shifting red line, on both sides of this binary.)

Regrettably for my visitor-cum-critic, I accept neither this binary, nor the statist narrative that propagates it. My position is critical; it challenges the status quo and seeks to shed light on and problematize those unmarked aspects of our political reality, those taken-for-granted significations and meanings, that carry overwhelming political consequences exactly because they go unnoticed, working, as they are, as the infrastructure of the way our very reality is constructed. This necessarily is a disturbing exercise. It brings to the surface arguments, notions, meanings, and other facts of our political world, which may be uncomfortable to acknowledge explicitly, no matter how prevalent they are when working silently 'in the background.' Yet, I believe it is an

inescapable fact that without confronting these truths we may never be able to truly understand our reality. Hence this book.

* * *

I am grateful to the numerous people who have accompanied me in the intellectual journey culminating in this book, and whose ideas must have ultimately also found their place in its pages – whether knowingly and explicitly or unknowingly and implicitly so. Of these I should especially note Brian Klug, who offered his unwavering, carefully attuned and unconditionally supportive engagement with my work, and whose intellectual companionship I cherish. I am also especially grateful to Yakov Rabkin, who not only endured hearing my arguments repeatedly, but also offered his comments on early versions of their textual iteration. The anonymous readers who reviewed the manuscript for Cambridge University Press have offered illuminating critiques and have helped me improve my presentation of my argument in a manner that was impossible for me to achieve without their attentive readings. Kfir Cohen, David Myers, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Lena Salaymeh, Yehouda Shenhav, and Yael Zerubavel have all taken part in the gradual formation of my own thoughts on the subjects discussed here, and for this I am indebted to them.

The book was written as my family and I were relocating to Oxford, and it would not have been possible to write it without the heart-warming support of members of the university and its wider community. Among these, I am especially grateful to Raymond Dweck, Louise Fawcett, Martin Goodman, Roger Goodman, Matthew Leigh, Hindy Najman, Eduardo Posada-Carbo, Eugene Rogan, Anna Sapir-Abulafia, and Avi Shlaim. St. Anne's College has been a welcoming, warm academic home to me. I am also grateful to the different institutions in Oxford who provided me with the strong backing that allows for one's thoughts to fruitfully develop: Oxford's School of Global and Area Studies, the Department of Politics and International Relations, The Middle East Centre at St. Antony's College, and the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Working with Cambridge University Press has been a delightfully productive process thanks to the professionalism, accessibility, and generosity of Maria Marsh, Daniel Brown, Mathew Rohit, and Stephanie Taylor. Thanks also to Alta Bridges, who edited the text, and to Yuval Ben-David, who prepared the index.