
Leaders and Laborers: How Democratic Zionist Leadership and Jewish Workers in Palestine led to Israel's Democratic Foundation

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Abstract:

Despite the extensive influx of research surrounding Israel in light of its recent conflict in Gaza, a majority of these studies explore Israel's contemporary history, often neglecting its formative years. While Israel's status as a democracy has been subject to ample debate, its democratic foundations at the time of its inception have yet to be thoroughly explained. This article therefore revisits Israel's early years to address why Israel was founded as a democracy. Ultimately, it is concluded that the democratic, Western beliefs of key Israeli leaders such as David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, combined with the central role of Jewish workers in the construction of Israel, placed an emphasis on the importance of popular democracy. This study provides valuable insights on how new nations come to adopt democratic practices, contributing not only to the discourse on the scope of Israel's democracy, but also to the broader question of how nations end up democratic versus authoritarian.

Keywords: Israel, state-building, democracy, zionism, David Ben-Gurion, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, Theodore Herzl

Background

The nation-state of Israel currently dominates geopolitical discourse, and given that Israel's creation involved significant and prolonged conflict with the Arab populations residing in Palestine, the country continues to face condemnation for its existence and its ongoing conflict with Palestine and the Middle Eastern communities within its borders and beyond. In addition, Israel is a country that stands alone in various ways compared to its neighbours in the Middle East. While the region comprises many Islamic nations, Israel identifies itself as a Jewish state. However, one of the most notable distinctions is Israel's establishment as a democracy, which contrasts with the governance structures of many of its Middle Eastern counterparts. Indeed, the region is home to some of the world's strictest authoritarian regimes in the world, yet Israel, despite experiencing current democratic backsliding, is still categorized as a democracy. Freedom House, a global organization which monitors and advocates for democracy, attributes scores to nations based on the health of their democracy. Israel received a score of 77/100, which is only 5 points below the United States (Freedom House). The country which comes closest to this score in the Middle East is Lebanon, with a score of 43 (Freedom House). Moreover, the Democracy Matrix, a project by the University of Würzburg, evaluated countries based on their democratic performance and ranked Israel as the 35th most democratic nation in the world (Democracy Matrix). Simply put, Israel's democratic status, though currently flawed, has always been an outlier. This anomaly prompts the question: why was Israel initially created as a democracy?

Israel was founded as a democracy for two reasons. First, the founders, such as David-Ben Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, adhered to liberal Western political ideals that championed democracy. Second, young Jewish people and workers embraced democracy, which shifted the Zionist movement leftward and away from authoritarianism. This research will examine Israel's creation to answer the following question: given the scarcity of

democratic practices in the initial stages of state-building, what factors explain Israel's establishment as a democracy? Here, it is postulated that Israel's democratic inception can be largely attributed to the relationship between liberal Jewish leaders and liberal Jewish workers. Early Israeli leaders were fundamentally democratic and Western-oriented in their political philosophies. Specifically, three of Israel's most influential individuals will be analyzed. The first is David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, who is often recognized as Israel's most important founding father. The second is Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the president of the Zionist organization and the first president of Israel. The third is political figure Theodor Herzl, who is widely credited with having popularized Zionism in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These three individuals effectively represent Israel's leadership, with Herzl shaping the Zionist movement and Ben-Gurion as well as Weizmann playing pivotal leadership roles in the early years of the state. Similarly to them, Jewish workers and the common people adopted Western, democratic beliefs after experiencing the ruthless religious persecution perpetuated by authoritarian governments. In order to explore the correlation between these two factors, this research will look at the following things in order. First, several of the most important figures at the time of Israel's creation were positioned on the left side of the political cleavage and strived to support Jewish workers. Second, Jewish workers were uniquely invaluable in helping create the nation as they were willing to move and provide the necessary labour to build Israel. Third, authoritarianism, the philosophy of Theodor Herzl, fell out of favour as time went on due to a pivot in focus to the Jewish worker.

Definitions

The term "democracy" must be defined for the context of this research. There is fierce academic debate on whether or not Israel is, or ever was, a democracy. While Israel has free and fair elections, a good judicial system and high democratic participation, Israel

does have a clear preference for Jews over other religious groups (Patten 2020). This has led authors to discredit Israel as a democracy. Despite the academic literature which disagrees with Israel's characterization as a democracy, there are a few reasons why Israel will be considered a democracy in the context of this research.

First, most research that discredits Israel as a democracy cites recent activity from Israel. This research will not consider whether Israel is a democracy in its current form. Instead, this research will focus on Israel's inception and why Israel was a democracy at the creation of the state. Second, there is still an argument from current authors that Israel's structural favoritism towards Jews over other groups at the inception of the country discredits the state as a democracy, even at its foundation. However, ethnic preference does not necessarily disqualify Israel as a democracy, but rather as a pure democracy. Professor Sammy Smooha explains why; "Scholars who classify Israel as a liberal democracy or a non-democracy ignore part of the complex reality. In contrast, the model of ethnic democracy does justice to the dual character of Israel. It presumes Israel to be a democracy, though not a first-rate Western democracy." (Smooha 2002) Professor Sammy Smooha's characterization of Israel as an "ethnic democracy" will be used in this research, as it effectively characterizes Israel as an ethnic state which favors one group while still granting full rights to other groups. His characterization is accurate: Israel is simply too complex to be considered a pure democracy or a non-democracy. Instead, Israel lies in the middle as a reasonably stable democracy, though it falls short of being ranked among the world's leading democracies.

Literature Review

The relevant research on Israel's foundation can be classified into three broad categories: the factors that contribute to democratic governance, the specific reasons behind Israel's democratic character, and the role of Israel's founders.

I: Why are Certain States Democratic

Starting with the broader research, which is not specific to Israel or the Middle East, there are multiple established factors explaining how democracies arise. First, it is widely accepted that wealthier nations are more likely to sustain democracy in the long-term (Przeworski 1997), as economic and social development lead to democratization (Welzel and Inglehart 2009). Education (Inkeles and Smith 1974) and the presence of a middle class (Zak and Feng 2003) are other factors which have been linked to democracy. Here, this research will approach Israel as a unique case; consequently, broader studies on the natural emergence of democracy and their contributing factors are less applicable.

II: Why is Israel Democratic

The second category of relevant academic literature focuses on the specific factors that explain why Israel is democratic. Indeed, multiple theories have emerged to explain Israel's inception as a democracy. The first is that the Jewish religion has tenets that make a Jewish state conducive to democracy (Gold). This argument is not only culturalist, but it is also historically inaccurate. Several Hebrew monarchies were established throughout history, such as the Kingdom of Israel in 930 BCE, so this argument will not be considered. The next argument is that Israel deliberately positioned itself as a democracy in order to align with its close allies, the United States and Britain (Reich and Powers 2016). This theory posits that Israel's creation was closely tied to Western powers and that its democratic nature was intended to preserve this alliance. Proponents of this argument cite statements from Western foreign policy representatives to support their claims. For example, in the 1970s, Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister of Britain, pledged his support to Israel, citing its democratic status as a contributing factor (Spyer 2004). There are some severe issues with this argument, however. Britain supports authoritarian nations like Jordan, both of which are heavily

authoritarian and the United States maintains close alliances with nations such as Saudi Arabia. This demonstrates that democracy is not a prerequisite to forming alliances with Western powers. Additionally, statements such as Wilson's are unreliable pieces of evidence, as positions on foreign policy tend to fluctuate. For example, in the early 1960s, Britain was dismissive of the idea that Israel receive its support because of the latter's democratic status, highlighting Britain's inconsistent rationale and approach (Spyer 2004). Another related theory suggests that the British Mandate of Palestine influenced Israel's democratic development. However, the effects of British colonial influence are notoriously inconsistent. While a slight trend toward democratization has been observed (Lee and Paine), there are numerous instances where British influence had the opposite effect, leading to state collapse. Iran serves as a prominent example of this, as it was under a mandate during the same period as Palestine (Pierpoint 1999). Therefore, the correlation between British colonialism and Israeli democratization cannot be proven reasonably.

III: The Role of Israel's Founders

This section analyzes Israel's founding members: David Ben-Gurion, Dr. Chaim Weizmann and Theodore Herzl, whose contributions were instrumental in shaping the state of Israel. Current academic scholarship on the founders is unorganized, primarily because authors analyze them for drastically different reasons, leading to a very broad set of research. Much of the literature is untrustworthy, since Zionist organizations provide a poor portrayal of the three founders, especially Herzl (Veszprémy 2022). While some research examines Israel's founding, much of the focus on Weizmann and Ben-Gurion pertains to their roles in Israel's governance during the late 1940s and early 1950s, rather than their contributions to the state's establishment. The most relevant body of research for this analysis focuses on the political philosophies of these three figures. Ben-Gurion is the most straightforward to analyze since he consistently championed socialism, democracy, and a more liberal

interpretation of Zionism. His beliefs in socialism, democracy and a more liberal version of Zionism are very consistent and widely agreed upon. Weizmann's legacy is more contested, with scholars debating whether he was autocratic or democratic (Reinharz 1992). The notion that Weizmann is authoritarian seems to be based upon his friendliness to British and American mandate leadership. Importantly, Weizmann supported British and American mandate leadership not out of a preference for authoritarianism, but because he believed that British leadership would strengthen the Jewish people and help them establish in Palestine (Leon and Adin 1974). Weizmann never actually opposed democracy, but because of his support for the British mandate, he has been misconstrued as antidemocratic. Overall, Weizmann was liberal and democratic, but not to the socialist extent that Ben-Gurion was. Finally, Herzl is also a controversial figure. Herzl, by his own words, despised socialism and democracy. However, there is a small body of literature that believes Herzl didn't actually oppose socialism or liberal policy, but instead, he wanted to postpone debates over political office until after Israel was established. This argument is largely sourced from a line from Herzl in one of his speeches in Russia, which states, "In Palestine, our land, such a party would vitalize our political life – and then I shall determine my own attitude toward it. You do me an injustice if you say that I am opposed to progressive social ideas. But, now, in our present condition, it is too soon to deal with such matters. They are extraneous. Zionism demands complete, not partial involvement." (Veszprémy 2022) However, Herzl has taken very hard stances against both socialism and democracy. He has called socialism "nonsensical" and called democracy "political nonsense." (Herzl 1946) Even if Herzl's attitude towards democracy isn't as extreme as Veszprémy suggests, Herzl's own statements clearly demonstrate his negative perception of democratic values. This paper credits Ben-Gurion as a liberal socialist, Weissman a moderate yet liberal democrat, and Herzl a hardline social conservative.

Methodology

The approach will analyze Israel's most influential founders and how their backgrounds contributed to Israeli democracy. The approach will show how Ben-Gurion and Dr. Weizmann both had Western political backgrounds and were politically liberal and democratic, while showing how Herzl's anti-democratic approach to Zionism lost favour amongst a Jewish population which favored democracy.

I: Western Backgrounds of Israeli Leadership and Support for Workers

Early Israeli leadership favored democracy because of their Western political backgrounds, which shaped their support for Western governmental structures. David Ben-Gurion, in particular, emerged as a strong advocate for American democratic frameworks. Ben-Gurion was expelled for his Zionist views from the Ottoman Empire in 1915, leading him to move to the United States to attempt to further recruit a pioneer army for the Ottomans. During this time, he became an avid supporter of the American political system. Ben-Gurion joined the American Jewish Congress, and he witnessed the power of political organization in the American democratic context (Gal 2010). It was documented that Ben-Gurion would research American democracy and read guidebooks for mass mobilization in the New York Public Library. During his time in the United States, he saw how a democracy could be used to advance the goals of the Jewish population, as he believed that American democracy was conducive to minority rights (Gal 2010). He specifically saw how American public opinion supported a free Ireland, and believed a similar democratic model could be used to advance Zionism and the creation of a new Israel (Gal 2010). Overall, Ben-Gurion's time in the United States showed him how democracy was the method which was most conducive to advancing the political success of the Jewish people.

Dr. Chaim Weizmann, unlike Ben-Gurion, did not personally experience or study Western democracy, but he acknowledged its increasing significance within the Jewish community of his era. By the 1800s, a mass of Jews fled West from persecution against the pogroms¹. A series of Russian pogroms led to the origins of a political party named Poale Zion, which was based in Jewish socialism and a return to The Land of Israel. The pogroms engrained democracy into these European Jews (Abramsky 1973). Weizmann explained in one of his writings, *Zionism and the Jewish Problem*, how Jews were fleeing Westward for expanded rights. “Jews streamed out in ever increasing numbers during the nineteenth century into the countries of the West, there to enjoy the political freedom and economic opportunities which were persistently denied.” (Leon and Adin 1974) He knew there was a rising group of Jews with Western political beliefs. Additionally, Weizmann sympathized with the West and saw them as a useful ally in the creation of a Jewish state. Weizmann greatly believed that the British would be one of the most useful instruments to the push for the creation of Israel. He staked his political career on the support from Britain (Leon and Adin 1974). The second reason why these leaders favored democracy is their support for Jewish workers. Starting with Ben-Gurion, he was one of the strongest supporters of democracy in early Israeli politics, one of the reasons being that he had the strongest socialist background. In 1905, after moving to Warsaw, Ben-Gurion joined Poale Zion. This party shaped Ben-Gurion’s fundamental beliefs, and drew an association between Zionism and socialism (Cohen 2018). He tied the ideas of Zionism and socialism together, and believed that strong support of socialism would strengthen Zionism in Europe. This is because he believed that socialism would provide greater protection to oppressed groups (Cohen 2018). Additionally, Weizmann also sympathized with Jewish workers. Weizmann helped create the Democratic Fraction at a young age, a political

¹ Jewish Genocide practices in Eastern Europe and Russia

group with the goal of getting pro-democracy Jews to support Zionism (Abramsky 1973). Weizmann's leftism carried with him throughout his life as he placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of the Jewish worker in both the agricultural and industrial sector. Weizmann rejected the idea that Israel would be built primarily by elite capital and instead believed that it needed to be constructed by Jewish workers building it from the ground up. His plan to settle Jews into Palestine revolved around a slow, deliberative process of moving Jews into the area and having them develop and produce agriculture (Leon and Adin 1974). Both Ben-Gurion and Weizmann were not elitists; they were supporters of Jewish common workers. Thus, Zionism formed as a common, democratic movement, rather than an authoritarian one.

II: How Workers Helped make Israel Democratic and why Herzl's Authoritarianism lost Popularity

The most prominent leader who supported a Jewish autocracy is Theodor Herzl, one of the largest influences in the Zionist movement. As the founder of the modern Zionist movement, his contribution to the creation of Israel is just as large as Ben-Gurion's and Weizmann's. Herzl wanted to use a Jewish anti-socialism platform to gain support with existing political leaders and to disconnect Zionism from democracy, even preferring current antisemitic leaders over socialism (Veszprémy 2022). Therefore, the question still remains: Why did the autocratic, Jewish opposition fail to prevail over Ben-Gurion and Weissman's liberalism?

Younger and working Jews, who were the most likely to move to Palestine, came from socialist and left-leaning backgrounds (Weinryb 1946). Therefore, the leaders after Herzl, such as Ben-Gurion and Weizmann, used democracy and progressive politics to get Jews and others to support Zionism and move to Palestine. The instigating factor in why

Jews began to have Western beliefs was a shift in the 1880s and 1890s with pogroms in Russia, which forced many Jews to flee the nation (Weinryb 1946). Over 60% of Jewish immigrants to the United States from 1900-1925 were Russian (Weinryb 1946). This mass migration introduced these immigrants to American values such as democracy and demonstrated that working-class Jews were willing to resettle, making them good candidates to immigrate to Israel. Additionally, these workers could develop the area of Palestine, building up the agriculture and infrastructure necessary to support a large influx of Jews into the region. Therefore, Jewish workers served a key purpose for Zionists: they were a large group of people who were willing to move and had the capacity to develop Palestine, which was perfect for creating Israel. A common theme in Ben-Gurion and Weizmann's stories as young political activists is how they combined liberal policies with Zionism to attract people to Zionism (Cohen 2018). Ben-Gurion tied the ideas of Zionism and socialism together, and believed that a strong support of socialism would strengthen Zionism in Europe by garnering sympathy across the globe for Jewish people as historic victims, generating more support for the establishment of a Jewish nation (Cohen 2018). Ben-Gurion believed that young socialists would respond positively to a socialist form of Zionism and would push young socialists to move there (Cohen 2018). His combination of socialism and Zionism stood against Herzl's anti-socialist policy, but Ben-Gurion used socialism to market Zionism to new demographics (Cohen 2018). Weizmann also believed that early Israel would fail if Jewish workers weren't present to construct the nation. The political ideology of both of these men show how they saw getting Jewish workers and pro-democracy Jews on board with Zionism as the fundamental necessity behind creating Israel. Both Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion were democratic (Leon and Adin 1974) (Gal 2010). Therefore, Israel was not built from a top-down power structure. Instead, Israel's early political vision came from working-class Jews moving there and building the nation. Herzl's autocratic vision of Israel

failed because none of the prospective Israelis who would've moved to Palestine wanted an autocratic government. Democracy was not a mere advantage in the creation of Israel; it was an absolute necessity.

Section III: Conclusion

Israel was founded as a democracy because its leaders had Western democratic backgrounds and because the immigrating Jewish population desired democracy due to their oppression under autocratic rule and their own democratic beliefs. Between the leaders' personal politics, their backgrounds, and the role Jewish workers played in the creation of Palestine, the new Jewish social order in Israel prioritized workers and individuals and had a bottom-up distribution of power. Israeli leaders were supporters of democratic power structures because they had backgrounds in social, democratic politics. Without democracy, it is possible a substantially lesser population would have immigrated to Palestine, and there would have been many fewer workers in the region, jeopardizing the entire creation of Israel.

Israel and Palestine are one of the most unstable regions in the world currently, and the history which led this region into this conflict has been heavily discussed both in academia and the general public recently. However, these discussions center on Israel's current structure, not on the origins of Israel's democracy, fueling the need for research surrounding Israel's creation as a democracy instead of purely focusing on Israel in the present. An understanding of how Israel came to be and why the country is in the situation that it is currently is essential to understand the current conflict. This research adds further clarity to understand how Israel became democratic, and will hopefully be productive to current debates surrounding the nation.

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