

Contesting the nation: negotiating national narratives and the Jewish settlements

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ABSTRACT. Why and how does national identity reopen for contestation? Existing theories argue that institutional design, social ties or elite manipulation alter the saliency and nature of national identity. These theories view the ethno-nation as homogenous and shaped vis-à-vis other groups. However, I argue that we should examine the re-emergence of nationalism as an intra-national struggle between groups with different saliency and understandings of national identity: new issues can raise the importance of national identity for some members of the group but not others. Moreover, members develop diverging understandings of fundamentals of national identity such as citizenship, borders and the role of religion. To support the theory, the paper utilises original not yet studied archival materials to show that struggle over Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories led to contestation of the saliency and meaning of Jewish Israeli national identity. Specifically, I analyse letters individuals sent to leading government officials in the early days of the settlements and show that settlement supporters tied the issue to Zionist ethos, injecting new content into Zionist identity. Meanwhile, national identity did not rise in importance or alter in meaning for settlement opposition. The method reveals individual understandings of national identity and points at broader societal divisions.

KEYWORDS: constructivism, ethnic nationalism, Israel, nationhood/national identity, territory, theories of nationalism

Introduction

In the recently released documentary, *Ben Gurion, Epilogue*, the elderly couple, David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, and his wife, Paula, sit down for an interview. Responding to a question about Zionism, Ben Gurion declares that he is not a Zionist. He has not been one for 10 or 12 years. Zionism, he says, was the movement that brought Jews to the country and built a state, and that is now done. About his wife he says later, she was never a Zionist; she had other causes at the time and did not share her husband's political activity.¹ To David and Paula Ben Gurion in 1960s Israel, the Zionist question

was very specific: it pertained to the political movement that fought to create a national home for Jews in the land of Palestine/Israel. Answering in the negative, Ben Gurion did not mean to say he was not an Israeli or a member of the Jewish nation or that he did not believe Jews should have a national home on the land of Palestine/Israel. He strongly viewed himself as all the above; however, the question did not entail these complex elements. It is hard to imagine a mainstream Jewish public figure or their spouse in Israel today responding in the same manner. Zionism has departed from this particular historical context and taken on new meanings, a process that this paper aims to explore.

This paper asks why and how national identity reopens for contestation. Existing theories of nationalism lead us to believe that the saliency of national identity can rise or decline, and its nature can alter because of institutional design (Chandra 2005; Posner 2005); social ties between groups (Varshney 2001); or elite manipulation (Gagnon 1994; Wilkinson 2006). For the most part, these theories view the ethno-national group as homogenous and as shaped vis-à-vis other ethnic groups within the political unit. However, I argue that in the Israeli case, as in many recent cases of re-emergence of nationalist discourse in political life, the saliency of ethnic identity does not rise in the same measure for every member of the group. For some members, national identity becomes very important, whereas for others, it does not. The ethno-nation is not homogenous in this process in another manner; different members of the nation develop different ideas on what the nation means: where are or should the national borders be; who belongs to the nation; what is the role of religion in public life; and what should the relationship between the nation and other nations be. Therefore, the re-emergence of nationalism is not necessarily a struggle vis-à-vis a different ethno-national group as existing explanations argue, but instead an internal struggle over the saliency and meaning of the nation.

I show in this paper that contestation of the meaning of the nation occurs when new issues make certain elements of national identity important for some members of the ethno-nation but not for others or generate controversy over the fundamentals of national identity. Mass immigration can have this effect – for some members, the existing ethnic composition of the nation becomes crucial, and for others, it does not. Moreover, some members may strongly feel that the absorption of immigrants trumps ethnic homogeneity as a core element of national identity. This will generate two groups with different understandings of the nation. This identity conflict is consequential for policies on immigration, religion, welfare and other issues. Another controversial issue is the addition of new territories and new populations as was the case for Israel and the Occupied Territories, which this paper addresses.

To support the theory of uneven rise in saliency and meaning of the nation, this paper analyses the early stages of Israeli discussion over Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories in the West Bank and Gaza. The paper shows that the struggle over the issue of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories raised the saliency of national identity for some members of the Jewish

ethno-nation but not others. It was also a struggle over the meaning of the nation, as for some members of the Jewish ethno-nation but for not others, elements like religion and expansionism became central within their national identity. The paper traces this process using novel archival materials, not yet studied. Specifically, I analyse letters individuals sent to leading government officials in the early days of the settlement project in the 1970s and 1980s and show that settlement supporters tied the issue to Zionist ethos and symbols, reshaping Zionist identity in the process. Those opposing the settlements, on the other hand, did not identify the challenge the issue posed for their identity. This method of investigation reveals the different individual understandings of national identity, but it also points at broader societal divisions over the nation.

The paper offers a new interpretation to the re-emergence of nationalism and suggests we should examine it as an intra-national struggle over identity between groups with different understandings of the nation. In addition, the case of the Jewish Settlements in the Occupied Territories in Israel/Palestine is of particular interest as it is at the centre of the persistent and consequential Arab–Israeli conflict. Finally, the letters analysed here are a unique and novel source that sheds light on the way individuals perceived their own identity and wished to influence others’.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section presents a theory of emergence of uneven saliency of national identity and intra-ethnic contestation of the content of national identity. Next, I review the Israeli case, both Zionist nationalism and the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories. The following section presents the main data source of this paper, sets of letters individuals wrote to political officials in the 1970s and 1980s. The letters address pivotal events in the early settlement project in the Occupied Territories and articulate the political arguments of each side in the debate on the settlements. The following section is a systematic text analysis of the letters. Finally, I discuss the implications of the analysis in the Discussion section.

Contested nations

As we have witnessed recently in the USA, across Europe, in Turkey and elsewhere, nationalist mobilisation and struggles over national identity can emerge in countries that have long since settled the key element of nationalism – a political unit for a national group (Gellner 1983; Hechter 2000). What explains the re-emergence of nationalism?

Much of the literature on nationalism focuses on the initial process of the development of nations (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Hechter 2000), on new regimes (Laitin 1998; Snyder 2000), and on countries undergoing ethnic violence (Horowitz 1985; Varshney 2001; Wilkinson 2006). Still, there are multiple studies that help clarify conditions leading to a rise in saliency of ethno-national identity in existing and stable countries.

Institutional design is often cited as determining the saliency and nature of ethnic identity. Chandra (2005), for example, argues that institutional structure can encourage ethnic parties that are either unidimensional and polarised or multidimensional and centrist, and these in turn can polarise or moderate the nature of ethnic identity. Posner (2005) demonstrates that identities quickly adapt to changes from multiparty competition to one party rule and back. Varshney (2001) points at the importance of social institutions in generating cross-cutting cleavages that reduce the polarisation of ethnic identities in society. Laitin (1998) demonstrates that institutions can generate incentives for individuals to adopt or reject a new language and identity.

A different set of theories emphasises the active role of elites in changing the saliency of ethnic identity. Wilkinson (2006) demonstrates that where elites are threatened by inter-ethnic coalitions, they incite ethnic hatred and violence. Gagnon (1994) argues that elites provoke ethnic violence to distract from other political agenda.

These theories explain in different ways why certain ethnic identities are salient in politics and why relationships between ethnic groups can be peaceful or contentious. However, most of these accounts treat the ethnic group as homogenous – when institutional design, civil society or elite interests make identity more salient, they do so for the entire group. Conversely, these factors can reduce the saliency of identity for the entire group. Even Chandra, who views identity as multidimensional, sees the rise in saliency of a certain identity as a quality of the political unit as a whole and not of sections of society.

In reality, however, ethno-national identity can become more salient for some members of the group but not others. Moreover, it can generate a struggle over the meaning of the nation within the ethno-nation. For example, some members of the ethno-nation may begin to think about the nation in more exclusive terms, while others continue to think about it in inclusive terms, leading to internal struggle. The rise of populism in many countries around the globe is a manifestation of exactly this type of struggle in many societies. While for some, migration of populations and globalisation meant that exclusive elements of the nation became more salient: nativism, ethnic and religious majoritarianism and economic chauvinism; for others, inclusions and low economic and cultural barriers remained strong elements of identity. The populist struggle is therefore an intra-ethnic struggle over the saliency and meaning of the nation that existing theories fail to capture.

There are exceptions in nationalism literature to the homogenous view of the nation. Most notably, Rogers Brubaker (2002) suggests that ‘groupness’ of co-ethnics varies. Some co-ethnics have a strong attachment to their group and others do not. These differences emerge from more or less successful projects of group making, such as nation-building efforts.

This paper takes off from this valuable critique and adds a crucial element: co-ethnics may vary not only in the level of their attachment to the group but also in the content they assign to the group: criteria of belonging to the nation (permissive or restrictive); the role of religion in political life (separation of

church and state, exclusive state religion). The result is a struggle between groups within the nation over the meaning and implication of 'French', 'American' or 'Israeli'. Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) make a similar point from an empirical perspective by showing multiple separate categories of national identity in the USA using survey data.

I argue here that new issues that are tied to the core elements of national identity such as borders, immigration, demographic changes and relationships with friends and foes can lead to a rise in saliency of identity that is uneven in the entire population and to struggles over the content of the nation within the dominant ethno-national group.

The paper brings evidence for the formation and articulation of a challenging national perception to that of hegemonic Jewish Israeli national ethos. I show that in the struggle over the settlement issue, supporters of the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories negotiated and revised Jewish Israeli national identity. They emphasised certain elements within the Zionist project and disregarded others. Specifically, settlement supporters raised the importance of religious practice and transcendent messianic justifications and of expansionism within national identity. These made the act of Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories into the central expression of nationalism. Importantly, the rise in saliency of national identity and the new content of this identity were not spread homogeneously within the Jewish Israeli group. For settlement supporters, the issue of settlements was extremely salient, and it was tied to national identity because it related to core elements of nationalism: land, religion and religious/national history. For those who opposed settlements, the saliency of the issue was not as high (it was usually one among many issues). As a result, the saliency of national identity did not rise. Moreover, both religion and expansionism were components of the Zionist identity, but their role did not become more central for settlement opposition.

As I elaborate below, 1967 was a critical moment for negotiation and reshaping of national identity. Taking over the territories put under Israeli control a Palestinian group that was large enough and present enough in the landscape that its exclusion required taking action both in practice and in the construction of the national story. In addition, for a section of the Jewish religious population within Israel, victory in the 1967 war reaffirmed the centrality of the transcendent within politics, which was in tension with mainstream secular Israeli politics.

Zionism and the settlers

The Zionist left-wing hegemony

Long before the formal establishment of the State of Israel, the labour party, Mapai, was at the centre of the Zionist project. Mapai was the head of the

Jewish governing institutions in pre-1948 Palestine; it was the head of the labour union, which included most workers in the country (Histadrut), and it owned large sectors of the economy. Through its different roles, Mapai controlled heavy industry, manufacturing, banking, services and education (Shafir and Peled 2002: 49–51, 63). During the long years of the left in power, right-wing politicians and individuals aligned with right-wing parties were outcasts within Jewish society. Right-wing identified individuals were marginalised in the job market, and their access to the party's superior welfare system, health care and other benefits was restricted (Shafir and Peled 2002: 62). Moreover, the main right-wing party, Herut, was considered an illegitimate political actor.² This utter marginalization from political power lasted for nearly two decades after the formation of the state of Israel.³

Due to its position in power, the left controlled the national discourse and symbols. Leaders of the Jewish national project focused on the construction of shared language and symbols. Quite literally, the spoken Hebrew language itself was invented (or 'revived') to serve the national project (Sachar 2013: 82–85). To create the national ethos, Zionists turned stories from Jewish antiquity into national symbols and holidays. The stories chosen stressed the cultural/national elements of Judaism. They focused less on faith and more on heroic defence of the land and self-rule within the land (Zerubavel 1995). Zionist ideology was a new form of Jewish politics, which sought to disconnect from messianic, transcendent and divine elements of Judaism and from rabbinical authorities and base politics on reality and power relations. (Lerner 2018: 218; Yovel 2007, Introduction: XXIV).

At the same time, the Zionist movement did not reject all religious components; religious leaders were a significant part of the Zionist movement. For some of them, the political territorial element of Zionism was complementary to national religious definition of Jewish identity. They viewed a return to Zion as a first step towards messianic redemption and helped articulate the link between Zionism and the land of Israel (Lerner 2018: 219; Shimoni 1995: 50–51, 72).

The Zionist movement in general and the formation of Israel in particular were perceived by some as the victory of secular Judaism, but there was a tension between religion and secularism in Zionism that persisted in the state of Israel and its foundational documents (Lerner 2018: 220). The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel recognises Israel as the state of the Jewish people. The Basic Laws of Human Dignity and Liberty and of Freedom of occupation describe Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. The most recent law, the Basic Law: Israel the State of the Jewish Nation, recognises Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, focusing on Judaism as an ethno-national identity. The framers of the law objected to including the term *equality* in the law, rejecting the more balanced approach to 'Jewish and Democratic' of the previous documents. The identity struggle this paper describes is a part of the broader struggle over religion in the public sphere and political life that became a central pillar of Israeli politics.

Another central aspect of Zionism was the sanctification of the land. This was done not only by Jewish-turned national symbols but also through the 'religion of labour'. Although the movement was urban from early on, its ideals were of agricultural labour. One of the prominent Zionist thinkers, A. D. Gordon, preached for agricultural labour as a means for gaining legitimate ownership of the land (Segev 1998: 200). Accordingly, the relatively rare socialist Kibbutz became the representative image of Zionism (Segev 1998: 293–5).

In the first decades of Zionism and into the early years of the State of Israel, the Zionist ethos belonged to the left. Right-wing Herut and politicians of the right in those years used the flag and the discourse of the 'Whole Land of Israel', but they did not have access to core Zionist values like socialism and the mythology of pioneering that belonged to the left. They also did not practice the 'pragmatism' that was at the heart of Zionism, a type of real-politic, which favoured concrete achievements over ideology (Avi-Ha' 1974: 2, 74–75). Importantly, the right did not have a settling movement and so had no 'ownership' over the land (Lustick 1993). As I demonstrate below, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was an opportunity to change the relationship between the political groups and Zionist identity.

The settler challenge

Following the 1967 War, Israel took control over Golan Heights, Sinai, Gaza and the West Bank territories between the Jordan River and the Green Line, Israel's internationally recognised border. The West Bank and Gaza, inhabited by Palestinian population, were neither annexed to Israel nor given an independent status (Gorenberg 2006; Zertal and Eldar 2009).⁴ In the 50 years since, despite some changes in legal arrangements including the Oslo Accords and the formation of the Palestinian Authority, the status of the Occupied Territories remains disputed, and the Jewish settlements are unrecognised by the international community.

The settlement project began shortly after the war. Jewish settlements were built around Jerusalem and later in the West Bank and Gaza strip. By 1973, the Israeli state had built approximately fifty settlements in the Occupied Territories, home to 4,000 settlers.⁵ However, settling the north of the West Bank was against the government's informal policy on the future of the territories because of the region's dense Arab population.⁶

The group most motivated to form new settlements in the Occupied Territories were young religious Jews. The organising movement of these settlers was 'Gush Emunim', formed in 1974 (Rubinstein 1982: 38).⁷ In 1974–1975, the settlers made vigilante attempts to settle around Nablus in the north of the West Bank. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin ordered the military to forcefully remove the settlers from the land. The most notable attempt was the Sebastia settlement of December 1974. The attempt drew significant public and media attention, making settlements in the Occupied

Territories into a truly controversial issue for the first time since 1967. After initially ordering the evacuation of the settlement, Rabin agreed to negotiate with the settlers and struck a compromise which ultimately led to the beginning of settlement in the area (Gorenberg 2006). The first batch of letters analysed below addresses these settlement attempts.

A few years later, the settlement project received a significant boost when right-wing Likud became the largest party in parliament for the first time. Likud supported the settlements both materially and ideologically. However, in the following years, the project experienced significant setbacks: first, the peace process between Israel and Egypt led to international pressure on Israel to stop expanding settlements; second, in 1979, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled for the first time in favour of Palestinian plaintiffs and deemed the Jewish settlement Elon Moreh illegal since it was built on private Palestinian land without security justification.⁸ After postponing and deliberation, the state complied with the court's order causing much concern among settlers; third, this was a period of growing unrest within the Palestinian population over the Jewish settlements, including violent incidents. Thus, these were years of settlement expansion but also of fierce struggle over their legitimacy and future. The second batch of letters analyses the discursive struggle over the settlements during these years.

Taking control over vast new territories in 1967 forced Jewish citizens and the leadership of Israel to rethink the core definition of their identity. This development occurred on several dimensions. First, the territories were home to a large Palestinian group that Jewish Israelis had to address. Prior to 1967, the refugees of 1948 were absent from Israel and so could easily be ignored by legislation and Jewish Israeli consciousness; the Palestinian citizens of Israel that remained after 1948 were a relatively small and weak minority, and thus, their exclusion from power and from the Jewish Israeli story did not take much effort and did not require extensive direct legal discrimination (Zreik 2004). The Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories were different from both groups. They were excluded from political and civic rights and from Jewish Israeli nationhood, but the territories themselves were treated as part of Israel: Jewish settlements were built in the territories, and Israel used materials from the territories (e.g. stone excavated in West Bank quarries).⁹ Thus, the exclusion of this significant group, at least legally, required a more significant ongoing effort and led to the formation of a vast bureaucratic apparatus (Berda 2012).

Addressing different theories on the nature of the Zionist project, Raef Zreik argues that it was a colonial and a national project at the same time. It was colonial as a project achieved through the dispossession of another people. But the Zionist project was also a national project because of the shared ethnic identity and religion of Zionists and because national identity predated the colonial act (Zreik 2016: 359–360). The year 1967 had the potential to change the balance between the colonial and national elements of the Zionist project. On the one hand, as reflected by the quote of Ben Gurion in the beginning of

this paper, the left in Israel viewed Israeli identity as moving away from the phase of expansionism that characterised the establishment of the state and towards an expansion of civil rights. Ideally, that would imply a process that grants rights to Jewish national identity and equal rights to Palestinian national identity, though there was no real discussion on the Law of Return, a naturalisation law that applied exclusively to Jews. Arguably, a strong approach against the settlement project in the West Bank based on rights discourse would have strengthened this national view of Jewish Israeli identity. Alternatively, promoting the settlements would reinforce exclusive and expansionist elements that characterised the Zionist project from its early days and negate rights-based equality. To Zreik, it is particularly important to disentangle colonialism and nationalism, both inherent to the Zionist project, because Jewish national identity that is not based on colonial dispossession and supremacy is a viable possibility (Zreik 2016: 360).

The theory and materials presented here address the way individuals understood and articulated their identity. The year 1967 was important in this regard especially because the settlement project that followed made it difficult for left-wing hegemonic Zionism to continue arguing as Ben Gurion did, that Zionism, the settler-expansionist phase of national identity, was over. It was therefore a moment of challenge not so much to the practices of Zionism but to the way Jewish Israeli understood their national identity and the state's identity as democratic. Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, too, discuss the development of challenging identity discourses following 1967. Their research identifies the strengthening of an ethno-religious discourse on the one hand and the development of a liberal rights discourse of identity on the other (Shafir and Peled 2002:159).

Indeed, 1967 was also a critical moment because of the potential for changes in the role of religion within Jewish Israeli identity. As noted by Tom Segev (2007), the victory in 1967 was perceived by many Jewish Israelis both secular and religious as a 'miracle', a victory achieved through divine intervention. For some religious leaders beyond the victory itself, the newly gained control over holy biblical sites was a sign of messianic redemption (Segev 2007 : 546–547). For figures like Rabbis Kook and Goren, 1967 was a cathartic moment in which prophecies of redemption and political realities coincided. For their young followers, 1967 was a moment to renegotiate their own status within the religious community and in Israeli politics and society as well as the role of the transcendent in politics more broadly.

Contesting the nation in their own words – Citizens' letters to political officials

The paper employs letters citizens wrote to political leaders in support and protest of the Jewish settlements. They were retrieved from the Israeli State Archive.¹⁰ Letter authors clearly felt strongly about the issue, and as such, they are not a representative sample of the Israeli public. However, they do

articulate the arguments on each side of this political debate and the way these arguments were perceived and internalised by individuals. Moreover, in a yet unpublished study, I reviewed hundreds of Israeli news articles on the settlements published during the same period. The arguments in the letters are reflected in the media, demonstrating these were common in Jewish Israeli public discourse. Analysing the letters has two advantages: first, the style and language of media reports do not change according to the political argument they voice. The letters, on the other hand, have a clear difference in style and language between settler supporters and opposition, which helps understand their different identity and motivations. Second, the letters were composed by individuals and thus reflect the way individuals tie different topics together and experience their identity. The letters are therefore a unique source of individuals' views, sentiment and language in an earlier period. The letters do not seem to be directed by a top-down call for action of a political movement. Many of them are long, emotional or personal and full of pathos. They are not businesslike and do not contain a single unified message.

The first batch of letters addresses the Sebastia settlement affair of 1974. The letters in this batch were addressed to Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin (24 letters against the settlements and 56 letters for the settlements; Table 1). Many of the letters are hand written, a few are typed, and several are telegrams. Most of the letters are in Hebrew, although several on both sides are in the English language and were sent from abroad. While most letters in support of the settlement project were written by private individuals, the majority of letters against the settlements were written by groups (e.g. party branches, Kibbutz assemblies and professional politicians from left party Mapam).

The settlers were mostly religious, but their supporters are more diverse in religiosity; many letters do not open with a Jewish religious acronym.¹¹ Geographically, letters in favour of the settlement project are very diverse, whereas letters protesting the settlements are commonly from Kibbutz, Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. In terms of gender, most letters in both groups were written by males.

As a first step of analysis, I divided the letters into those supporting and those opposing the settlements. The letters are very clear on that issue and usually state the agenda of the writer in the first line (e.g. 'We protest the illegal act of settling Sebastia in Samaria'; 'Preventing Jews from settling in Samaria is an affront to Zionism'). Next, I identified topics or discourses within the

Table 1. *Letter classification*

<i>Years</i>	<i>For settlements</i>	<i>Against settlements</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
1974–1975	56	24		80
1978–1981	8	44	8	60

letters. Words or expressions were divided into eight categories: Nationalism; Judaism; Democracy and Rule of Law; State Institutions; Security; Emotions; Personal; and Other. The words included in each discourse can be found in Table A1.

Some words or expressions were readily classified: 'Zionism', 'Pioneer' and 'State of Israel' were placed in the Nationalism category; biblical phrases or quotes were placed in the Judaism category. Other terms were more ambiguous, in particular between the Judaism and Nationalism categories. As Jewish nationalism naturally has a Jewish component, it was not always easy to disentangle the two discourses, but I strived to do so because religion was often discussed in a narrow context. The context of words guided the classification; for example, 'Land of Fathers' was classified as Jewish rather than national, as in Hebrew, the expression has a highly religious context. Similarly, 'Jerusalem' was classified as Jewish rather than national.

Not only the language and culture context but also the way words were used in the letters informed the classification. 'Democracy', for example, could have been classified as a separate category from rule of law. 'Democracy' can be used to mean 'Justice' or 'Will of the People'. However, in the analysed letters, 'Democracy' was most often used in conjugation with other 'Rule of Law' terms. The reference to a democratic state was often clarified as one in which citizens abide by the law and the decisions of an elected government. Thus, the context of the letters, more than a dictionary definition of a word, guided the classification.

Though Arabs (but not Palestinians) were mentioned in the letters (specifically in six letters in favour of settlements and three letters opposing settlements), I did not classify them as a separate category but under 'security'. Arabs were almost always mentioned in the context of security concerns ('Arab violence'). Arabs were never discussed as subjects: they were not addressed as a people or nation, and their preferences other than violence were never mentioned. In that sense, this debate on the Jewish settlements reflects the exclusive colonial nature of Jewish Israeli identity (Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2011).

Since the letters exclude Palestinians as subjects or even as symbols, they are also excluded from the analysis. This was also the case for the second batch of letters. It is important to note however that the struggle for self-determination of the Palestinian people has become a central regional and international issue. Moreover, Zionist identity by no means covers all Israeli citizens. The Israeli population includes a large Arab-Palestinian minority of approximately 20 per cent. Political parties and political discourse in Israel are divided along ethnic lines.

The second batch of letters is a less unified group of documents than the first and indeed was recovered from six different files in the State Archive.¹² These letters, written between 1978 and 1981, were addressed to Deputy Prime Minister Yigael Yadin, the head of the party DMC ('*DASH*', Democratic Movement for Change).¹³ The letters indicate that many DMC voters did not

support the new right-wing government and particularly their party's role in it. From Yadin's many correspondences, I have selected to analyse those addressing the issue of the settlements. The result was sixty letters (Table 1); forty-four are letters of protest against DMC's lack of action in government or against Yadin personally (and against the settlements). Eight letters were written in support of the settlements, and the rest include general suggestions and comments about the settlements.

For this batch of letters, I examined the new lines of argumentation against the settlements that emerged during the 1978–1981 period. All letters opposing the settlements in this period were written by males, mostly from urban areas. Unlike those opposing the settlements in the earlier years, authors of these letters were voters of a centrist party and not far-left political activists. All the letters were sent by individuals, though some composers claimed to represent 'thousands of likeminded voters' or 'the views of professors of Tel Aviv University',

The multiple lexicons of nationalism

This section analyses the language and rhetorical modes individuals used to discuss the settlements in their early days (1974–1981). The analysis demonstrates first that the saliency of ethno-national identity rose for those who supported the settlements but not for those who opposed them. It also demonstrates that the content of national identity was different for these two groups. Where settlement supporters put very high value on expansionist borders and on religiosity as part of their ethno-national identity, those who opposed the settlements did not view these as core identity elements. Finally, I demonstrate that settlement supporters used rhetorical means intended to contest existing national identity, whereas settlement opposition did not share this ambition.

1974–1975 Letters

The letters from this period all address the civilian attempts to settle the north West Bank described above. However, there is little communality between letters supporting settlement in the area and letters opposing it. The authors use words taken from different discourses, the tone and sentiment are different, as are the lines of argumentation. The discourses used by each group of letters are shown in Figure 1. Broadly, letters in support of settlements are more national, Jewish, emotional and personal, whereas letters opposing the settlement project focus on 'rule of law' arguments and are far more impersonal and unemotional in tone.

Evidently, at least in that early stage, settler supporters viewed the issue in much broader terms than their opponents. Where one group was dramatically discussing the future of Israel and Zionism in almost fatal terms, the opposing

group was far more limited in its perspective. Pro-settlement letters refer to a new settlement in the north West Bank as ‘an integral part of the historic land of Israel’ or as ‘a vision, a dynamic of a movement, the heart and soul of Zionism’. The different scope the groups assign to the issue could be linked to the high saliency of the issue for settlers. Settlers themselves viewed it not only as a personal crucial issue but also as a highly important national and religious matter. Many of the composers of pro-settlement letters are not themselves settlers or personally linked to settlers (according to their own testimony). The dramatic tone and large scope indicates at the successful construction of the issue by settlers. Settlement opposition, on the other hand, did not view it as the most important issue on the political agenda, and they moreover did not link their opposition to settlements to their identity (Figure 1, ‘Nationalism’).

Nationalist arguments included the act of settlement under the Zionist umbrella or even placed Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories as the main expression of Zionism. The letters demonstrate that many supporters viewed the settlements in that light, ‘We visited Elon Moreh and found there the most beautiful expression of pioneering Zionism and love of Israel that may be found in our country’; another letter written by a group of Bar Ilan University professors states, ‘In these days of malicious attacks on Zionism, we plead you not to curtail the pioneer enthusiasm expressed in the settlement in Elon Moreh and find a way to officially authorize it’. This was a response to 1975 UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 defining Zionism as a form of racism. A north West Bank settlement was still unauthorised, and the settlement supporters tied the two issues as if arguing that the proper response to the UN’s resolution is more Zionism, and more Zionism implies more settlements. A letter from Elon Moreh settlers themselves expresses the view, ‘This

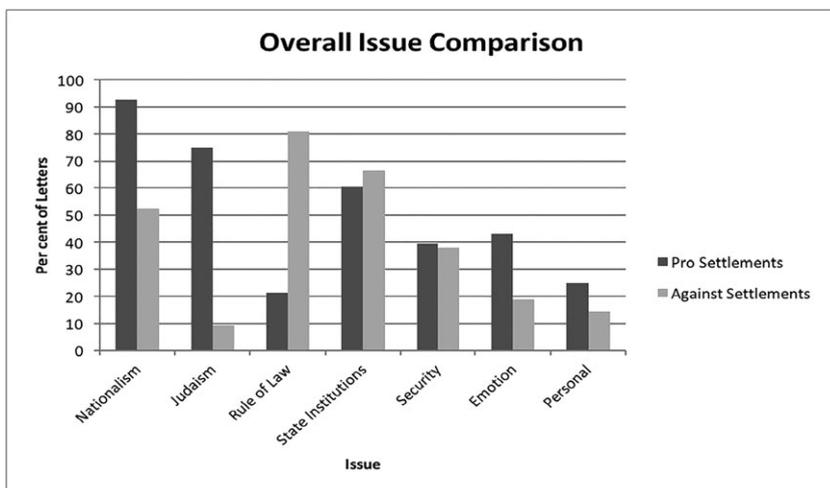


Figure 1. Issue comparison in letters in support and in protest of settlements.

[a government decision to allow settling the Occupied Territories] will be the most simple and clear expression of our sovereignty over the land of Israel. Us, the Elon Moreh settlers, along with the entire people, strengthen the hands of the government to make this decision, and will not budge from our place'.¹⁴

The data presented in Figure 1 considers each line of discourse only once per letter, even if it was represented by multiple words and repetition. For example, if a letter from a settlement supporter spoke of the 'land of Israel', of 'pioneers' and of 'Zionism', it was counted as one entry of national discourse. The differences between pro- and anti-settlement letters were in fact greater: most pro-settlement letters contained multiple words from the national discourse, whereas anti-settlement letters usually contained one or less. Figure 2 attempts to capture these differences by measuring how many words from each discourse were included in each letter on average. The measures in Figure 2 still exclude word repetition. Thus, if the word 'Israel' appeared several times within a single letter, it is still counted as a single entry within the national discourse. Figure 2 illustrates that 'rule of law' is the only issue mentioned on average with more than one word or expression per letter in anti-settlement letters. On pro-settlement letters, there are two issues with more than one word or expression per letter: nationalism and Judaism. Nationalism in fact is mentioned with nearly 2.5 different words or expressions per letter, again highlighting the increased saliency of national identity for settlement supporters.

Beyond the differences in intensity, there was also variation in the vocabulary of the national discourse. Pro-settlement letters used a far richer national vocabulary as demonstrated in Figure 3. Certain words like 'Israel'

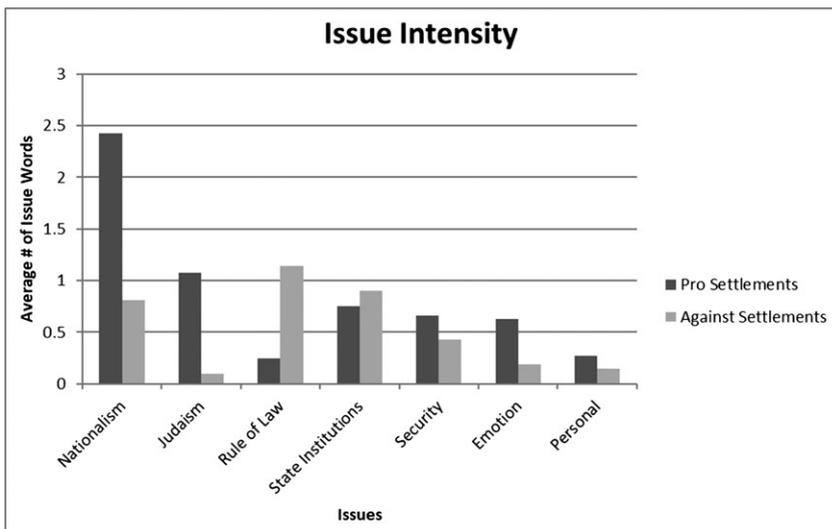


Figure 2. Issue intensity in letters in support and in protest of settlements.

and ‘Country’ are shared between letter types; however, there is a variety of national-Zionist words used only in pro-settlements letters. These include ‘Zionism’, ‘National’ or ‘Nationalism’, ‘Pioneer’ and ‘Land of Israel’.

The vocabulary disparity shows that for one group, saliency was lower, and national identity was settled – there was no need to revisit its old components. For the other group, not only was saliency high but there was a clear attempt to take the original elements of Zionism and apply them to the present, thus reopening identity for negotiation.

References to the land on the side of the settlers are easy to account for, as the purpose of their letters was to obtain permission and support for settling the land. Nonetheless, the choice of ‘land’ (*Adama, Eretz*) over ‘territory’ (*Shtachim*) is political. In Hebrew, these words for land have biblical-historical source, and they easily conjure the Zionist national story that used these words to tie the biblical story to national political goals. ‘Territory’ (*Shtachim*), on the other hand, has no such connotation and refers directly to the Occupied Territories and to the occupation itself.

The language of ‘Zionist- National- Pioneer-British Mandate’ was more metaphoric and constructed. The settler movement connected to the basic myths of the Zionist movement. Being a Jewish minority situated among Palestinians in the ancient biblical territory of Israel, they could easily portray themselves as successors of the Masada Jews, another minority population who refused to surrender the land and was celebrated by Zionist pioneers (Zerubavel 1995). As part of the embodiment of the Zionist spirit, settlers used illegal methods similar to those used by the Zionist pioneers to settle the land.

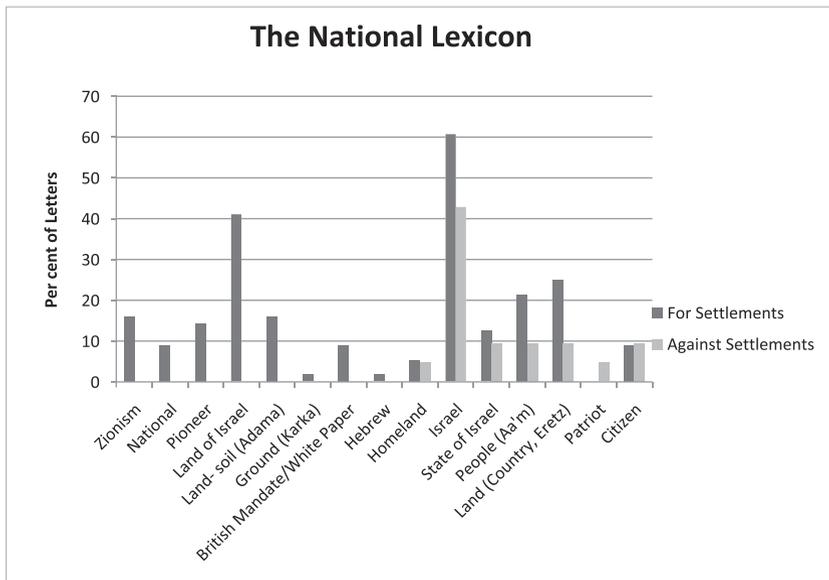


Figure 3. National lexicon in letters in support and in protest of settlements.

Like the Zionist pioneers, settlers often built new settlements at night to create facts on the ground and avoid penalty (Wolfe 2006: 393). Land was purchased illegally from Palestinian owners. The settlers named these illegal actions after the historic rebellious activities of the Zionists against British rule. The difference was that settlers were operating against the Israeli state rather than foreign colonial mandate (Rubinstein 1982: 53–57; Sprinzak 1986).

Rhetorically, settlers used slogans connected to the Zionist ethos of land. They were the movement of the ‘Whole Land of Israel’ (*Eretz Yisrael Ha’Shlema*) alluding both to the biblical territory and to their connection with the expansionist movement formed by Zionist pioneers. They too spoke of agricultural labour as a mean for obtaining ownership of the land. Much like the Zionist movement, the first settlements in the occupied territories were agricultural, but the project more broadly was not (Taub 2010). The Zionists’ socialist element was left behind, and that too suited the zeitgeist, as Israel was going through accelerated economic liberalisation, especially after 1977 (Shafir and Peled 2002).

Only two words from the national discourse are used more commonly by settler opposition: ‘Patriot’ and ‘Citizen’ (Figure 3). The context of ‘Citizen’ is quite different for pro- and anti-settlement letters. In anti-settlements letters, the word is used in conjugation with rule of law discourse, and citizenship is referred to as a community of people subjected to state laws. One of the letters states: ‘Do not allow the posers of the settlements to destroy the faith of the *citizen* in the rule of law’. Another letter protests ‘the behaviour of *citizens* [civilians] toward soldiers ...’ On pro-settlement letters, on the other hand, citizenship is used in the specific context of belonging to the Israeli national state and the rights that follow from such belonging. ‘We believe it is the right of *citizens* and students of the state of Israel to travel through the entire country and especially to pray at *Rachel’s Tomb* which is located a short distance from Jerusalem, the country’s capital’, states one letter, and another, ‘As a Jew and *citizen* I am proud of the idealism and the purity of the struggle of the Emunim youth ...’ Even when pro- and anti-settlements use words from the same national lexicon, they choose different words or use them to mean different things.

Late 1970s and 1980s: The development of anti-settlement discourse

The next batch of letters presents a partial reversal of roles from the previous period. Here, the government stated its support for the settlements,¹⁵ and yet during its tenure, settlers experienced existential threats. Settler leaders were dismayed with the government, and they lobbied, wrote and orchestrated large demonstrations to protest the Camp David accords.¹⁶

A few of the letters Deputy Prime Minister Yigael Yadin received from settler supporters were quite similar to the 1974–1975 letters in the range of discourses. Settler supporters continued to incorporate national discourse into their rhetoric. A line from one of these letters seems to best capture the attempts to bind together the settlements and Zionism. The author writes to

Yadin, 'Do you not see, as the masses of Israel see clearly [that questioning settlements in the West Bank] is questioning the justification for the entire Jewish settlement in Israel?'

Overall, during this period, the saliency of national identity continued to be high for settlement supporters, and they continued to highly value religiosity and expansionism within this identity. Some of the letters focus on Jewish messianic ownership over the land of Israel rather than on Zionism. The period following the Camp David Accords was one of internal struggles and ideological and political splits within the settlement movement. The failure to prevent land compromise and Jewish settlement evacuation reinforced extremist voices within the movement.¹⁷

The divisions within the settler movement and vocal Jewish messianism made it easier for the centre-left to mobilise against the settlers. During this period, settlement opposition spoke more of their national identity. However, their national vocabulary was still limited, and religiosity and expansionism did not become a core element of identity. Thus, in this period, settlement supporters and opposition demonstrate diverging and conflicting perceptions of national identity.

The letters opposing settlements all share a common theme: the right-wing government is destroying Israel in every sense, and so their party, DMC, must quit the government and break the ruling coalition to save the country. Phrases like 'save the state of Israel', 'utter national despair' and 'imminent destruction' appear in approximately ninety per cent of the letters. The dramatic tones are not only a response to the expansion of settlements but also to economic crisis and rising inflation at the time. In addition, regardless of the settlement issue, struggles between religious and secular powers over policy were prominent during this period.¹⁸

In terms of language, there is certainly a vast use of words from the national discourse, in particular 'State of Israel' and 'People' but also 'Zionism'. The letters often declare that the 'Situation' in the country is a 'Shame' or a 'Disgrace' to the 'State of Israel' and to 'Zionism'. Unlike the pro-settlement group, these authors do not attempt to define Zionism but take it for granted that growing economic cleavages, religious extremism and certain aspects of the settlement project are against the values of Zionism.

Most letters do not reject or even discuss the basic justification for the settlement project. None of the letters argues that Israel has no right over the Occupied Territories or that the action of taking the land is against the values of Zionism, for the most part the arguments are instrumental.

Several lines of argumentation against settlements that did not appear in the earlier period come up in these letters, most of them still very much prominent today in the Jewish Israeli centre-left.

Three related themes recur in many letters (Figure 4): international isolation, peace and security. The concern of letter composers was that Israel's visible expansion actions in the settlements were a danger to its relationship with the USA and thus to its international position; that these actions were

aggravating Palestinians, leading to growing support for the PLO; and that they were damaging the chances of peace in the region. The rising saliency of Israel's isolation in the international arena was the result of UN and American pressure on Israel during this period (Aronson 1996: 50–51; Malone 2004).

These arguments were not an ideological rejection of the settlement but an instrumental one. Several letters reject either 'showy' settlement actions of the government or 'useless' small and remote settlements. Of particular objection was the expansion of the Jewish settlement in Hebron. This was deemed by many letters as 'irrational', as a cause for aggravation at the heart of a Palestinian city, as entirely 'useless' and as a symbol of the government succumbing to Messianic Jews. Indeed, the Hebron Jewish settlement was and still remains at the 'Jewish' end of the settlers' ideological scale and is populated by the extreme religious and violent representatives of the movement. The Hebron issue demonstrates that religious justifications for policy were particularly objectionable to settlement opposition, and they likely viewed them as conflicting with their identity.

The resources allotted to the settlements are another prominent theme in the letters, which remains salient in current day Israeli political discourse. This too is an instrumental rather than principle-based issue that settlement opponents take offence with. One author even states this directly, 'Let these settlements prove themselves economically'. Similarly, the repeating argument that settlers are a negligible minority, whose agenda is overrepresented in government decisions, does not directly address Israel's right to settle the territories (Figure 3, Majority–Minority).

Two more themes that appear in the letters are worth discussing. First, the Jewish and Democratic theme appears in only a few letters but has since

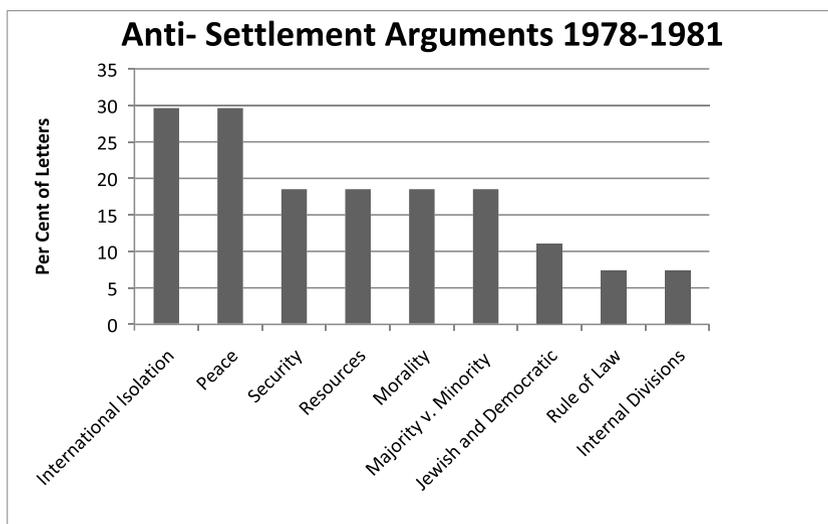


Figure 4. Lines of argument in letters protesting settlements.

become a central argument for the centre-left. According to this line of argument, Israel can only remain both Jewish and democratic if the Occupied Territories do not become a part of the state. Only within the 1967 borders, there is a Jewish majority, which will enable to preserve the Jewish nature of the state by democratic means. The practical implications of the Jewish and Democratic argument change according to the period and the agenda behind it. For Yadin himself, 'Jewish and Democratic' did not imply the formation of a Palestinian state. He writes in one of his response letters:

Ultimately, Israel ought to be Jewish and Democratic. This will not be possible if one of our goals would be to include over a million Arabs within the domain of the state. If this is the case, and the state grants all the Arabs voting rights, the state will cease being Jewish. If we will not grant them this right, the state will not be democratic. Therefore, I am in the opinion that there has to be a political solution that gives Israel complete security in the East front (and thus I support settlements in the Jordan Valley and the East slopes of Judea and Samaria), and prevents the formation of an independent Palestinian state between Jordan and Israel.¹⁹

For Yadin then, some political solution that is not annexation will suffice to fulfil the Jewish and Democratic conditions. Here, the objection is only to certain settlements that are an obstacle for such political solution. In later periods, the Jewish and Democratic argument did serve in the Jewish centre-left as justification for formation of an independent Palestinian state.

Secondly, the *Morality* justification that appears in Figure 4 deserves attention. These refer to the moral implication of occupation over another people for Israeli citizens and society. They are usually combined with a variety of other lines of argument as expressed by one of the letters, 'The settlements lead us to complete isolation and internal division which destroy all that is good in the morality of the Israeli citizen, and demonstrate the government has no control over its members, and the minority of Gush Emunim can do as they please'. Only a couple of letters mention certain Israeli acts in the Occupied Territories as immoral, for example, the destruction of Palestinian property in Hebron.

The debate over the nature of the Zionist project and what acts should define Zionism remains in the pro-settlement group. Those opposing the settlements were committed to Zionist national identity, but the salience of national identity was still lower in this group, and their identity was not redefined by the settlement issue.

Discussion

This paper presents evidence for the development of a contesting meaning to hegemonic Jewish Israeli national identity. I showed that settlement supporters and those who opposed the settlements used entirely different rhetorical means to make their case. Settlement supporters told causal stories that placed the

settlers as the new link in the long chain of Jewish nationalism. Their language combined nationalism, religion and emotion to turn the act of Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories into the true expression of Zionism. The pathos in their rhetoric matched the ambitious goal of opening the meaning of national identity for contestation and setting new limits of argumentation for other groups in society.

On the opposite side, those who opposed the settlements did not recognise the challenge on the legitimacy of their perception of national identity. They did see the settlements as a threat: first, as a threat to the rule of law and later as a threat to Israel's international standing, to its security and its economy. But they failed to respond to the ideational challenge the settlements posed. Instead, they chose to make narrow instrumental arguments that did not reassert their perception of the nation. As I have shown, settlement opposition did not use their core identity to reject the principle of settlements. The reason is likely that though settlers' perception of the nation was a challenge to hegemonic Zionism, some elements of these two perceptions were compatible. The new meaning of identity settlement supporters put forth was built on hegemonic Zionism in the sense that it continued the ethos of sanctifying the land of Israel, and the Jewish myths Zionism was built upon.

Settlers' Zionist identity did challenge some of the fundamental elements of hegemonic Jewish national identity. First, the borders of the 'Whole Land of Israel' were not in line with hegemonic perception. While Zionist pioneers did not set fixed borders for the State of Israel, the principle that guided them had always been pragmatism (Avi-Ha' 1974). The firm borders between the sea and the Jordan River that settlement supporters insisted on went against the pragmatic element so fundamental to Zionism. Second, though Zionism used Jewish religion to legitimise its causes (and in particular the claim on the land), it approached Jewish mythology as a historical national story rather than a divine religious story. Settlement supporters, on the other hand, reinserted the divine into national stories. To them, the act of settlement on the land was at the same time national heroism and religious redemption (Rubinstein 1982). Thus, settlers' Zionist perception reshaped the role and nature of religion within national identity.

One element that deserves further discussion is the role of exclusion in hegemonic Zionist identity and in the new settlers Zionism. Hegemonic Zionism was built on the exclusion of the Arab population (Wolfe 2006; Yiftachel 2006). Settlements were no more exclusive than the entire Zionist project. However, the settlement project itself (rather than settler ideology) amplified the practice of exclusion, and so it could only contribute to the strengthening of exclusive elements within national identity. This strengthening is manifested among other things in the 2018 Basic Law: Israel the State of the Jewish Nation²⁰ that both discriminates against the Arab–Palestinian minority and excludes non-Orthodox strands of Judaism (Kremnitzer 2018; Sommer 2018). In that sense, the Jewish Settlements

present both continuity and change in regard to the exclusion of the Arab population.

More broadly, the paper challenges the view of nations as coherent groups. Constructivist theories view national identity as amenable to changes, but they often describe the process of change as societal or at least affecting entire ethnic groups evenly (Chandra 2005; Laitin 1998; Posner 2005; Varshney 2001). This was not the case for Jewish Israeli identity, and it is not the case of many countries exposed to demographic changes and changing international alliances. The paper showed that the saliency of national identity rose for some sections of the population and that the meaning of the nation diverged for different groups in society. The result of such constructivist process is not a rapid societal shift of identity but an opening for contestation. The implication is that national identity is open to struggle over the 'true' meaning of the nation and who has a claim over it between intra-national groups. The recent rise of populism is a manifestation of just such struggle: the saliency of ethno-national identity rises for some but not others, and in addition, certain elements of identity like ethnic or religious exclusion become central for some but not others. This struggle can manifest in the rise of nationalist discourse that presents the elite establishment as foreign to the 'true' nation and even legitimises an overturn of liberal institutions. Thus, theorising on intra-national struggles over the meaning of the nation can shed light on the recent rise of populism.

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Notes

1 Ben Gurion: Epilogue. 2016. Dir. Yariv Mozer

2 Prime Minister Ben Gurion coined the slogan 'Without Herut and without Maki' to mean that the right wing party and the extremist communist party cannot be considered for governing positions (Lustick, 1993: 39; Segev 1998: 283).

3 Likud joined the government for the first time before the 1967 War to increase unity and public support in the government.

4 The territories around Western Jerusalem have a different legal status (Lustick 1997)

5 Settlement Committee, Ministry of Agriculture, File A/17/7310 Israeli State Archives

6 Allon Plan (Gorenberg 2006, 164–166).

7 Gush Emunim united other factions of nationalist non-religious activists as well.

8 Israeli State Archive Publications: Elon Moreh.

9 Rinat, Haaretz 28.12.2011

10 File codes: G/37/6721; G/38/6721; GL/2/7827; GL/7/7829; GL/8/7827; GL/9/7834; GL/10/7834; GL/11/7834 Israeli State Archives

- 11 In the Orthodox tradition, written documents open with an acronym for *Besiyata Dishmaya* or *B'ezrat Hashem* (with God's aid).
- 12 GL/2/7827; GL/7/7829; GL/8/7827; GL/9/7834; GL/10/7834; GL/11/7834 Israeli State Archives
- 13 The party ran for elections in 1977 on a liberal and anti-corruption platform and managed to draw votes mostly from the left, causing a tremendous political overturn, when the leftist ruling party was ousted for the first time since the establishment of the state (Peretz 1977: 251–66).
- 14 An ironic statement considering Rabin's animosity towards the settlers and their project (File G/37/6721 Israeli State Archives; Rabin 1996).
- 15 When elected, Prime Minister Begin declared, 'There will be many more Elon Morehs' (Zertal and Eldar 2009).
- 16 'With Heavy Heart, But Head Held High'. Israel State Archives Publication.
- 17 One extreme example was the Jewish Underground, a terrorist group that stemmed from the centre of Jewish settlers (Huberman 2008; Zertal and Eldar 2009).
- 18 Including legislation on abortions (1977, 1978) and religious female military service (1978).
- 19 Israeli State Archive GL/10/7834. Self-translation
- 20 The text of the law is available at: <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Read-the-full-Jewish-Nation-State-Law-562923>.

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Israeli State Archives Publications. "With heavy heart, but head held high": making peace – the story of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, July 1978–March 1979.

Appendix: Categories and words in the letters**Table A1.** *Classification of words and phrases into discourse categories*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Word</i>
Zionism	Zionism National Pioneer Land of Israel Land/Soil (Adama) Ground (Karka) Patriot Homeland British Mandate/White Paper Israel State of Israel Israeli people People (Am) Land (Country, Eretz) Hebrew
Jewish	Religion Jewish people Jew/Jewish Land of Fathers Bible/biblical quote/biblical location Exile/2000 years God Prophet Holy Jerusalem
Rule of Law	Outlaw/intruder/law violators Legal Illegal Rule of law Law Law and order Democracy Authorized settlements Unauthorized settlements Law violation Citizen/civil

(Continues)

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Word</i>
State Institutions	Authority
	Justice
	IDF/military
	Police
	Government
	Government action
	Government policy/decision
	Government authority
	State/state institutions
	Knesset
Security and Peace	Security
	War
	Peace
	Peace process/negotiations on peace
	Arabs
	Killers* 39
	PLO
Emotions	Fear
	Pain
	Anxiety
	Disgust
	Appalled
	Shocked
	Amazed
	Concern
	Hurt (as in I am hurt)
	Hate
	Hatred
	Outrage
	Love/heart
	Pride
	Hope
	Conscious
Home	
Personal	Death/loss family in war
	Father/mother/son/daughter/I am a soldier/ I am a student/I am a kid

(Continues)

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Word</i>
Other	Extremist
	Holocaust
	Unity
	Right
	Civil War
	Violent
	Give up/surrender
	Compromise/negotiation
	Diaspora
	World/International/UN
	US
	Marxist
	Two states
	Waste of resources
	Public opinion
	Will of the people
	Silent majority
	Green line
	Small group/minority
	Ideology/idealism
