CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY AND LOCATION:
THE CHANGING DISCOURSE OF ISRAELI GEOPOLITICS

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Introduction.

States do not occupy a single place within an unchanging geopolitical structure. The geopolitical imagination of the political elites, the resident and citizens, and other groups whose fate is tied up with that of the State, reflect alternative locations within the regional and global setting. The collective imagination of the State, to the extent that it represents the aggregate collective identity of its diverse components, is itself a composition of the individual imaginations of the residents and citizens of that State. The degree to which an individual identifies with the State ethos, sees him/herself as an equal citizen, as a member of the majority or minority groups and/or as a member of the global village, will determine the way in which he/she perceives the location of the State as part of the changing global community (Soysal, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1997). The more internally homogeneous is the composition of a State’s population and its alternative identities, the less diverse the geopolitical imaginations. The more heterogeneous a population, the more diverse the varied forms of local, national and regional identities and, hence, the positioning within the global system. This becomes all the more diverse as boundaries - both social and spatial - are opened up, as information is disseminated through cyber space and satellites, as travel restrictions are eased, as diaspora populations become closely linked to “homeland” populations, and as increasing numbers of migrant workers arrive to take their place within the socio-economic system (Brunn, Jones & Purcell, 1994; Morley & Robins, 1995; Soysal, 1996).

While the geopolitical imagination of the State may be determined from within, it’s actual positioning within the regional and global systems is largely determined from without. The international community and regional superpowers perceive other component parts of the state system according to their own geopolitical imaginations and determine the extent to which they are prepared to include other states within economic and/or political unions. General perceptions of the world and the “other” are the result of generations of national socialization in which the “self” society views itself as the superior culture, the civilizer of others, and by whose definition all others are defined and located within a global hierarchical system. The strength of national identity is something which is taken for granted, an imagined community, and which seeks to reproduce itself elsewhere through a series of ideological practices (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995). Notions of Orientalism, Afrocentrism and the spatial
constructs of east and west are good examples of how specific perceptions of the world, for which the point of departure is the national identity of the self, feed into the historical formation of the geographical imagination and are responsible for the ordering of the global political system at any one point in time (Said, 1979; Lewis & Wigen 1997; Tuathail, 1997). Thus boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, the definition of the “in” group and the “other” are as relevant to states within the world system as they are to ethnic and social groups residing within the State (Newman & Paasi, 1998). The geopolitical imagination of a country’s population or political elites may often contrast with the geopolitical positioning of that State by other States within the system, resulting in inter-State tension on the one hand, and attempts to become accepted on the other. Peer power is important in this request, with powerful States or regional groupings, such as the United States or the European Union, determining the extent to which other States can gain entry, partial or full, to their own exclusive geopolitical clubs.

Critical geopolitics is concerned with the discursive nature of geopolitical maneuvering and the way in which global positioning is represented and contested. Agnew & Corbridge (1995) note that the identity and interests of states are formed in interaction with one another. But this interaction itself derives from a combination of realist outlooks by the political elites and leaders concerning the world system as well, if not more, as the domestic interests of the population (Telhami, 1996). One of the main arguments of this chapter is that in order to understand the geopolitical positioning of any country, it is essential to understand the internal discourse of identity of that country’s citizens. It is an approach which looks at geopolitics from below, from within the State, rather than the from the perspective of the global system.

It is also an approach which reconciles the geographies of political scale, in each of which the state continues to constitute the central institutional locus (Cox, 1998). It allows us to understand the role of the State in the global system through a discursive analysis of the internal components which go to making up that State. Local politics is increasingly influenced by processes of economic and information globalization, while equally global positioning is influenced by local and domestic interests (Smith, 1998). Thus the social production of a geopolitics discourse takes place at the levels of local, regional and national identity formation, such that it is impossible to understand the former without the latter. It is the politics of identity which creates and produces the geopolitical knowledge and/or perceptions of the States elites (Morley & Robins, 1995; Dalby & O’Tuathail, 1996).
The geopolitical discourse of any country will vary over time as both the internal identities of the population and the global positioning of the State, the latter representing some form of aggregate collective identity, undergo change. The two are related inasmuch as the imagined national identities of the individuals will influence the way in which the political elites view the role of the State in regional and global affairs. Notwithstanding, the geopolitical positioning of the State vis a vis the rest of the world may only represent some of the constituent parts of the population, those who are closest to the decision-makers and political elites. Thus, some geopolitical representations, professed by minority groups, are not reflected in the wider geopolitical locus of the State. This assumes that the foreign policy of the state is based, at least partially, on the impact of domestic interests, rather than a realist perspective which would assume an objective analysis of the state’s function in the international system (Telhami, 1996).

In this respect, Israel provides an interesting case study of a country whose geopolitical positioning is diverse and has undergone change over time, but always display a strong component of domestic interests. A country, recently formed, established by European immigrants in a region in which an Islamic culture dominates, drawing on its links with the global Jewish diaspora as a basic construct of collective identity and as a means of support. The ideology of state formation is viewed by its adherents as an ideology of national renaissance and emancipation after centuries of minority status and geographic dispersion, while at the same time is seen by its opponents as a form of colonialism through which indigenous peoples have been uprooted and dislocated as a result of European immigration. The traditional geopolitical discourse in Israel has been based around two interrelated themes. First, the State of Israel is a Jewish state and, as such, retains cultural and religious characteristics that are unique to the normative behaviour of the State and its’ Jewish citizens. It also accords preferential behaviour to members of the Jewish people, worldwide, in terms of immigration, citizenship, the rights to purchase land and build new settlements. Secondly, Israel sees itself as being isolated and beleagured in a region of anti-Israel animosity. The existential threat facing the state and its collective citizenry is part of the geopolitical imagination in which the State has to remain militarily strong and to persuade the major world powers, especially the United States, to continue to support the “only democracy” in the Middle East. It is this traditional discourse which is now being questioned, both in terms of the way the State is defined from within by its citizenry, and from without by the other members of the international community.
In a world in which many boundaries are being opened and some ethno-territorial conflicts are being resolved, Israel finds itself at one and the same time becoming part of a global economic and information system but still tied up in a cycle of conflict and ethnic particularism. While the notion of an imagined national community remains strong, due in no small part to processes of social construction (Anderson, 1983; Doty, 1996), the changing nature of collective identity within Israel and amongst the Jewish diaspora has meant that alternative and diverse visions of Israel’s geopolitical position are emerging, relating to both notions of citizenship and identity and the question of Who is an Israeli on the one hand, and equally to issues of relative location and the question of Where is Israel?, on the other. Each of these two issues is complex and has to be understood within the context of overlapping and multiple layers, in which there is no single collective identity or location for the country, despite its self presentation as an internally unified Jewish state. Questions of space and time are interlinked as issues of individual and collective identity respond to the social and political changes overtaking Israel and transforming it into an increasingly heterogeneous society. The boundaries separating the “in” group and the “other” are not as clear cut as in the past, while notions of inclusion and exclusion have become multi, rather than uni, dimensional.

Who is an Israeli? Issues of Citizenship and Identity.

Who and what is an Israeli is a complex question of identity. At the simplest level, an Israeli is a person who holds Israeli citizenship, by virtue of having been born in the country or having immigrated from elsewhere and taken on citizenship. But the question of Israeli identity is also tied up with Jewish-Arab relations and majority-minority status, as well as with a variety of ideological and cultural/religious considerations (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The geopolitical imagination and positioning of the country is, to a great extent, dependent on the way in which the individual identities are defined and understood, both internally (by the residents of the country) and externally (by other countries in the global system). The fact that a decreasing number of its citizens identify with the single, socially constructed, national ethos of Zionism is a testament to the fact that Israel has become a far more heterogeneous society on the one hand, and increasingly critical in its search for alternative forms of meaning and identity (Shefer, 1997; Ram, 1998a; 1998b). This, in turn, will change the nature of the collective, geopolitical, identity of the State as a player within the global system.
a) A Jewish state or a State of its Citizens: the Post-Zionist Discourse.

Israel as a State is self defined as both a nation (Jewish) state, a homeland for the Jewish people, as well as a democratic state in which all citizens are, on paper, equal under the law. In reality, this dual definition has proved, over fifty years, to be a structural contradiction. By giving special status to the Jewish majority and all Jewish immigrants, the twenty percent Arab minority of the country have not fully partaken in the fruits of democracy and equality. This is displayed in the lower socio-economic levels of development, the unequal allocation of scarce public resources to Arab and Jewish sectors, and the fact that Arab leaders and representatives do not enjoy the same access to the corridors of power as do their Jewish counterparts, nor have they ever become full members of Israel cabinets.

The raison d’etre of the State, as expressed through Zionism as an ideology of state formation, has been the necessity for an independent and strong Jewish Homeland. This, in turn, was tied in with utopian concepts of “returning to the land”, the creation of egalitarian rural cooperatives and the renaissance of a dormant national life. The symbols of statehood were uniquely Jewish and Zionist, while notions of territorial attachment and spatial exclusivity were an important part of the educational and socialization process promoted by the State during its fifty years of existence.

Jewish residents of Israel have had to define themselves in relation to three identities: an Israeli, a Jew and/or a Zionist. What makes the identity problem even more complex is the fact that none of these components of identity have a single meaning. They are interpreted differently by diverse groups within Israeli society. For some, being Jewish means adhering to the strict letter of the laws of orthodoxy, while for others being Jewish is a form of cultural attachment which does not require the unquestioning belief in a Divine role or adherence to stringent customs and ritual. Equally, some groups define a Zionist as being a member of an exclusive club who has chosen to live in Israel, serves in its army and does not question the political decisions made by the State concerning the nature of the Arab-Israel conflict. For some, attempts to reach conflict resolution with Arab neighbours or with the Palestinians which would entail territorial withdrawal is nothing short of “anti-Zionist” and treacherous, while for others the desire to retain control of every last centimeter of occupied territory is a betrayal of the Zionist tradition of compromise for the sake of a secure future.
Even amongst those who define themselves as Zionist, the vast majority of the population, new sub-identities have emerged. These include the separate Ashkenazi (Jews of European extraction) and Mizrahi (Jews of North African and Middle Eastern extraction) identities and the feelings of social and economic discrimination felt by the latter (Yiftachel, 1997a; 1997b). Gender identities and empowerment are only just beginning to emerge although these are not expressed through the same form of political mobilization as has recently been practiced by both Mizrachi and religious Jewish groups (Fogel-Bijaoui, 1997; Dahan-Kalev, 1997; Fenster, 1997).

For many religious Jews, the Jewish identity is all encompassing, with Zionism being no more than one sub-construct of this cultural/religious identity, and Israeli simply being a coincidence of place and time. Equally, for ultra-orthodox groups, the very notion of a Jewish state which is not a fundamentalist theocracy is unacceptable, leading to their total rejection of Zionism as an ideology of state formation which is relevant to the Jewish people. Other religious groups, notably the West Bank settlers, have adopted a neo-Zionist position, focusing on an ideology which places territorial irredentism as a supreme value. The paradox is, therefore, that for some religious groups, Zionism is sacred, while for others it is profane. Their respective subjective interpretations of a common history and culture and the way in which these are imbued with contemporary significance are entirely different.

For some secular Israelis, still the large majority of the country’s residents, Zionism is no less than an attempt to create and mould the new Jewish identity, one which is not tied to the traditions of old, but which is an integral part of a modern, emancipated, world. But at the same time they face their own identity dilemma when rejecting the historic and religious link on the one hand, but are not prepared to accept the alternative version of being no more than another example of European colonialists settling in a far-off location and bringing about the partial dislocation of the indigenous population. Their search for identity is tied up with a search for a rationale justifying their presence in this region.

These diverse forms of multi-identity overlap as Israelis spend much of their time trying to work out just who they are. Their relationship with the wider world, their geopolitical positioning, is itself an outcome of this identity game. For some, Israel’s unique identity is dependent on it remaining different and isolated from all other countries, while for others State normalcy within an international system can only be achieved by becoming part of that system. Both Jewish and Zionist identities are tied up with this struggle between their respective
particularistic and universal characteristics, reflecting diverse forms of citizenship on the one hand, and geopolitical imagination on the other.

Minority identities which do not conform with the single state-constructed Zionist ethos abound within Israel (Peled, 1992; Kook, 1996; Yiftachel, 1997a; 1997b). These range from the Arab-Palestinian residents who make up approximately twenty percent of the country’s population, ultra-religious populations who do not recognize the legitimacy of a secular Zionist state, non-Jewish identities, particularly amongst the hundreds of thousands of Russian immigrants who arrived in Israel during the early part of the 1990’s, and most recently over a quarter of a million migrant workers - from places as far afield as the Philipines, Rumania, Africa - who have come to fill many of the menial jobs vacated by the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Peled, 1992). These groups have began to form the cores of small, but vibrant, ethnic concentrations in South Tel Aviv which may well signal the growth of future ethnic neighborhoods in this city, an element previously unknown in the Israeli urban landscape.

The importance of these multi-layered identities for the geopolitical imagination are such that some of these groups identify first and foremost with the State, while others identify primarily with non-State groupings. The post-Zionist discourse which has emerged in recent years argues that for the State to function under conditions of normalcy, then the State itself has to undergo a process of redefinition, from one which places its role as a Jewish state as its primary form of identity, and hence excluding large groups of residents from this single raison d’etre, to one which is defined as a state for all its citizens (Cohen, 1989; Peled & Shafir, 1996; Ram, 1998a, 1998b). Only the latter can, it is argued, be a true participatory democracy. For the political elites, this is seen as a negation of the state formation process and as being anti, rather than post, Zionist in its orientation. Such a transformation would, by necessity, result in changed geopolitical orientations on the part of the political elites.

One of the paradoxes of recent Israeli history is the fact that the right-wing government which came to power in 1996 and which, like right-wing governments throughout the world, perceives itself as being more loyal to the notions of nationalism and patriotism is the closest there has ever been to a post-Zionist government in fifty years of State history. It relies greatly for its support on ultra-orthodox non (some would say anti-) Zionist, and right-wing neo-Zionist, parties, for its support. While it is not prepared to co-opt politicians from Arab parties (neither was the previous Labour government prepared to), the current government has more
representatives from parties who do not accept the single socially constructed state ethos of secular Zionism, than any previous Israeli administration.

The notion of Israel as a State of all its citizens rather than a Zionist state could also bring about a redefinition of the basic core of the Arab-Israel conflict. Public surveys continually show that the least desired solution to the conflict for both Arabs and Jews is that of a single binational democratic entity. Since the aspiration for statehood is defined only in terms of national dominance, both Jews and Arabs prefer the creation of separate nation states rather than a single binational or multinational entity. The perception by each of the national groups of the “other” as constituting the basic existential threat facing the “self” is at the heart of the security fears thrown up by the political elites and which enables the creation of a socially constructed form of national unity which forms the lowest common denominator of the collective identity, namely the fear of the outsider. Since the outsider constitutes a threat, it therefore follows that he/she cannot live as an equal because he/she cannot be trusted. The solution is therefore to create separate, ethnically homogeneous states, in which citizenship is defined by national identity, or to maintain a situation in which one national group retains military and economic dominance over the other, and in which de facto citizenship is not expressed through equal rights to all groups. While a redefinition of the State in terms of all of its citizens is aimed at creating a non-ideological and non-exclusive form of identification with the State on the part of all of its citizens, it is also a means by which the Israel-Palestine conflict could conceivably be solved within the existing territorial frame as a bi-national entity. This, however, is a solution which is rejected by the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians alike, each preferring a separate national entity.

b) Security as national identity.

The geopolitical discourse in Israel has, for the past fifty years, evolved around notions of security and collective safety. Focusing on the existential threat, real or perceived, facing Israel from host of hostile neighbors, the internal discourse has used this as a means of creating national concensus and in socializing generations of Israeli youth to be prepared to fight, and even lay down their lives, for the defense of the homeland. With the growth in internal diversity and ideological polarization within Israeli-Jewish society, it is the Israel-Palestine conflict and the security threat which has remained the single main cement holding these diverse strands together (Shain, 1997).
The notion that that Israel is the only safe haven against a second holocaust and that all of its (Jewish) citizens have to display unquestioning loyalty to the State’s fight for survival in the face of a hostile region have been central to the socialization processes of the State during the past fifty years. There are two major themes in this discourse. The first is that of the Holocaust and its remembrance as an indication of what happened, and could happen again, when the Jewish people were stateless and were unable to defend themselves. The second is that of the need for an independent Jewish state with a strong military deterrence to ensure that “never again” will such an event be allowed to take place. Visits by thousands of Israeli schoolchildren to the sites of the Nazi atrocities in eastern Europe, sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Education, and accompanied with the raising of the Israeli flag and the prominence of additional national symbols, has become a powerful means through which this dual message is transmitted. In many cases, it has become the single most powerful factor bonding the child with the fate of the State and impressing upon him/her the need to defend the State against all external threat - real or perceived.

Traditionally, Israel has perceived itself as being a lone and isolated player on the world stage. In terms of the historical discourse, this is partly due to the persecution experiences of Diaspora Jewish communities over centuries of dispersion, culminating in the evil of the Holocaust during the Second World War. This conception has also evolved as part of the reality of statehood, during which period the country has been involved in five major wars, most of which have been perceived as defensive wars against external aggression and which guarantee the continued existence of the State in a hostile region. Israel also sees itself isolated within the major international forum, the United Nations, where vote after vote condemns the country for its continued occupation of the West Bank and the security zone in Southern Lebanon. The “Zionism=racism” vote which was passed in the mid-1970’s, later to be rescinded in the early 1990’s, only served to strengthen this feeling of isolation, despite the fact that Israel draws its major legal justification to sovereignty from the United Nations partition resolution of November 1947. The major philosophical context behind this form of geopolitical isolationism is best summed up in a book by former Israeli diplomat, Jacob Herzog, entitled “Behold a People who Dwell Alone”, a title taken from the Biblical description of the Jewish people by the prophet Balaam. (Herzog, Y, 1975). The contemporary political manifestations of this discourse are themselves summed up in a book written by Herzog’s brother, later to be Sixth President of the State of Israel, Chaim Herzog. As ambassador to the United Nations at the time of the Zionism=Racism vote, he publically tore up the piece of
paper on which the resolution was printed, thus demonstrating his disdain for an international community which did not recognize the “noble” and “state formation” characteristics of Zionism, as compared to the “colonial” and exploitative characteristics emphasized by its detractors (Herzog, C, 1978).

The policy implications of this self perceived isolation is that the country can only rely on itself, through a strong military posture, and that it must maintain an independent foreign policy without external intervention (including that of the USA) in its security decision-making. Defending the homeland against all comers became the ultimate form of heroism, with the ultimate sacrifice being the willingness to die for the defence of the country, a phenomenon which became known as the Masada complex, after the “heroic” suicides of the warriors at Masada in the face of the Roman attempts to put down their rebellion in the first century A.D. Young Israeli soldiers are often taken to the Masada hill top overlooking the Dead Sea for their swearing-in ceremony, where they declare in unison that “Masada will not fall again” (Zerubavel, 1996). It is also a place where Jews from throughout the world will come to have family occasions, notably a bar-mitzvah ceremony, due to its association with Jewish heroism and, hence, the responsibility incumbent upon the youth to live up to these standards of defending one’s people and one’s country. In contemporary Israeli history, this has been equated with the mythical declaration of a Jewish pioneer soldier, Joseph Trumpeldour, who was killed while defending a new settlement outpost, Tel Hai, in the 1920’s. As he lay dying, he is reputed to have cried out: “It is good to die for my country”, a slogan which has been used, together with that of Masada, to focus on military heroism and bravery, often at the expense of other social, cultural and moral messages.

Loyalty to the common cause is expressed through the role of the army, or as it is known the “defence forces”, which has traditionally been viewed as all encompassing and constituting unifying factor within Israeli society (Popper, 1998). The notion that there were wars in which Israel took part during its fifty years of history which were not forced upon the country as an act of self defense is a subject of heated debate. While the 1948 War of Independence, the 1967 Six Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War are commonly seen as legitimate acts of self defense, the same is not the case regarding the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 or the continued occupation of the West Bank through the 1980’s and 1990’s. The army itself has become more politicized over time, although it still remains the major institution of concensus. Young adults who finish their army service have, traditionally, been eligible for a range of financial benefits, notably better mortgages, than those who have not served. These policies serve to exclude,
amongst others, the Arab citizens of the country, the majority of whom do not serve in the army, but neither have been requested to do so by the State which fears the influx of such a large group of people whose basic loyalty to the State remains under question.

Events of the past decade, notably the Palestinian intifada (civil uprising against the Israeli occupation), the Gulf War which brought Iraqi missiles into the heart of Israel’s cities, and the attempts at conflict resolution with Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians respectively, have only served to strengthen this traditional security discourse (Newman, 1997; 1998a). Each is used as part of a socially constructed message to show, both to Israeli citizens at home and the international community, that Israel is threatened and must take measures to defend itself (Falah & Newman, 1995; Bar-Tal, Jacobson & Klieman, 1998).

The major paradox in this continued sense of security identity is the fact that Israel displays its obvious military strength and superiority while, at the same time, emphasizing the security threat as part of a national discourse aimed at justifying actions and policies which would not normally be supported by the global community. Thus Israel’s military strengths, its’ continued occupation of much of the West Bank and the Golan Heights and the security zone in Southern Lebanon, its’ requests for international aid and assistance are interpreted as an outcome of its structural weakness, rather than as the basis of a strong country - as much of the world perceives it. To be strong, one must portray oneself as weak, both internally and externally. By presenting itself as threatened and isolated, the State is able to create a strong military deterrent with the direct assistance of the majority of the population who identify with the need to collectively combat the perceived threat. The fact that the perceived threat is based on the objective reality of wars ever since the establishment of the State in 1948 means that the subjective interpretation of that reality continues to be one in which the State will forever face a threat to its very existence. This, despite the fact that the threat facing the collective, as contrasted with the threat facing the individual in the case of a terrorist attack, virtually ceased to exist after the Six Day War in 1967, and certainly after the implementation of the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords in the early 1980’s. While the scud missiles of 1990, and the terrorists bombing of civilian centers within Israel, have not removed the threat altogether, these do not represent the sort of threat which can wipe the State out of existence. But they serve to remind the Israeli population of the threat environment within which they live, making them suspicious of any moves towards a peace process which could, but at the same time may not, bring about the end to an atmosphere of continual violence. So much of the daily discourse is tied up with conflict, threat and security that it is almost impossible for most Israelis to come to grips with
the concept of a post-conflict Israel, one in which the main social and political agenda switches away from issues of defence and security and turns its attention to pressing welfare, economic and cultural problems facing society from within.

Contextually, the Israeli government came under strong pressure from within, in 1991, to retaliate for the Iraqi missiles which were fired into the heart of Israel’s metropolitan centres, rather than acquiesce to the United States pressure not to take any action. This was seen as much of an ideological issue as it was a purely military one. On the one hand, Israel was seen to bow to external pressure rather than make its own independent decisions concerning its defense priorities. In addition, many saw the country as having professed a weakness to the outside world in the sense that it had been attacked by missiles and had not been able to retaliate for fear, perhaps, that it would not have succeeded in its mission. When, for a short time, in early 1998, there was renewed tension between the United States and Iraq over the issue of the United Nations armaments inspectors, there was a strong feeling within Israel that, if fired upon by Iraq, the government would not hesitate in retaliating, if only to prove that the country was able to make its own decisions and that it was capable of launching an attack, whether or not such an attack would have served the long-term security concerns of the country or not.

Both geography and demography play an important role in the social construction of the security discourse. The small size of the country in relation to the rest of the Middle East is an important geo-regional component of this discourse. The notion of a minute Israel, in terms of both territory and population, are used as a means of portraying the image of the isolated and besieged nation. For propaganda purposes, the map of Israel is often overlayed on any one of the individual states or provinces of North America as a means of stressing this message (Newman, 1997; 1998a). Internally too, the scale dimensions of a small territory and the location of antagonistic populations in upland areas overlooking the Israeli towns and population centres is another important means through which the discourse of fear and threat is used in an attempt to create a single national unifying identity around notions of security.

Demographically, Israel and the Jewish people are portrayed as a small nation surrounded by a hostile Arab population undergoing much faster rates of natural growth. Within Israel and the Occupied Territories, the Jewish-Arab ratio is approximately 65:35, changing to 81:19 respectively within the pre-1967 boundaries of the State of Israel. Israeli non-annexation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip prior to the Oslo Agreements was traditionally explained as being
due to the implications of granting full citizenship to the Palestinian population of these areas and thus endangering the long term Jewish majority in the Jewish state. Even within the pre-1967 boundaries, the demographic ratios play an important part in the security discourse, with Jewish immigration to the country being encouraged and extra child benefits being granted to all families with four or more children (Newman, 1998b).

The issue of water geopolitics also plays an important part in the security discourse. As a basic existential, but increasingly scarce, resource, water is viewed in political terms (Kliot, 1994; Shapland, 1997). Any attempt by a neighboring country to tamper unilaterally with Israel’s water supply is, automatically, seen as being a legitimate casus belli. Past conflagrations between Israel and Syria have erupted over issues of water diversion, while Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980’s was interpreted, wrongly as it turns out, by some as having been intended to gain control over some of the Litani River headwaters. Israel’s negotiations with both Syria and the Palestinians focus strongly on issues relating to the control of water resources, none of whom are prepared to give up ultimate control to the benefit of the “other” side (Elmusa, 1994; Shuval, 1996), while nearly half of the Israel-Jordan peace agreement deals with issues relating to cooperation in the search and utilization of this important resource.

Paradoxically, the implementation of the peace process has brought with it, if anything, a decreased rather than increased sense of security. The fact that suicide bombings occurred after the initial implementation of the Oslo Accords resulted in the strengthening of fears that the ultimate intention of the “other” side was to destroy the State of Israel, and that territorial withdrawal from parts of the West Bank as part of the peace agreements enabled the creation of a stronger base from which to carry out these threats, as witnessed by the continued attacks. The transfer, albeit partial, of some territory to Palestinian autonomy is seen, by detractors of the peace process, as providing a territorial base for the continued assault on Israel, rather than as a basis for territorial and ethnic separation which could bring about regional peace and stability. It is this continued security threat which has continually been thrown up by the post-1999 Netanyahu administration in its attempt to slow down the peace process and to minimize the continued transfer of territory to the Palestinian Authority.

Alternative discourses to those of perpetual conflict are difficult for the Israeli populace to accept. Isolated, besieged, threatened, having to go it alone in the face of a hostile and anti-semitic world, these are concepts which are easy to grasp. The notion that peace is a concrete and objective reality, rather than some for of metaphysical aspiration, makes it difficult to
come to terms with the government attempts to move towards meaningful conflict resolution. At the same time, the futility of continuous warfare and the occupation of another people has started to erode away at the single remaining consensus, that of the army. During the past decade there have been instances of soldiers refusing to obey orders, while a decreasing percentage of Israeli youth undertake their obligatory army service (Linn, 1994; Helman, 1998). The social ethos of army service is no longer the only card of entry into Israeli society, and while the army continues to occupy a prominent place in daily life, it has ceased to constitute the single frame around which Israeli society automatically rallies and gives its unquestioning loyalty (Shain, 1997). The decision by a young rock singer, Aviv Gefen, to refuse to undertake military service for no other reason than self-defined incompatibility, and the fact that, despite this “unpatriotic” behaviour, he was nevertheless invited to appear together with former Prime Minister Rabin - one of Israel’s military heroes - at the mass pro-peace rally which took place only minutes before the latter was assassinated. This gave credence to the notion that the role of the army in Israeli society was beginning to undergo change.

Thus, inasmuch as notions and perceptions of security are central to the conflict, they also play an important role in the formation of separate national identities. This is in direct contrast to the notions of heterogeneity discussed above. The focus on the conflict and the existential threat facing the national collective has covered up much of the internal heterogeneity which is located within the collective. National identity remains unique and particularistic, while ethnic and group identities are much more diverse and, to a certain extent, can even cross national group boundaries, although this is rare. Emphasis on national identity leads, in turn, to certain types of geopolitical imagination, focusing on Israel’s isolated and unique position in the global order, while a focus on inter-group differentiation and the fragmentation of the single Zionist state ethos will, by definition, throw up alternative and more diverse geopolitical imaginations.

Where is Israel?

Israel does not have a single geopolitical imagination. It is located, at one and the same time, in a number of diverse locations, not all of which are geographically contiguos. Both the internal and external political discourse which takes place is characteristic of a sort of geopolitical schizophrenia, if not quadrophenia, as this relatively young country attempts to draw together its contrasting global, national and regional identities. Five separate geopolitical imaginations
are discussed here, all of which are relevant to different groups within Israel and are partly an outcome of the extent to which the individual identities of the diverse population groups are translated into collective identities and are expressed in terms of the perceived relationship and positioning of the country vis-à-vis neighbouring countries, the region as a whole, and the global system. The five geopolitical imaginations are: a) the Middle East; b) Europe; c) the Jewish Diaspora; d) the United States, and e) the center of the world. These locations are not exclusive. They overlap to the extent that some groups imagine themselves to be part of more than one geopolitical location, although there is a tendency to prioritize certain locations over others.

a) **In the Middle East**

Geographically, Israel is located at the western margins of the Middle East. It is perhaps not surprising that the historic center for two of the world’s monotheistic regions - Christianity and Judaism - and an important focus for the third - Islam - should lie at the confluence of Europe, Asia and Africa. Israel’s state building ideology, Zionism, has at its core the “return” to the ancient homeland of the Jewish people, but not necessarily a “return” to the regional culture which is characteristic of that particular location. Political Zionism was a national ideology, created in Central and eastern Europe, implemented by immigrants and settlers from Europe. The desire to be part of the Middle East, often declared by the country’s leaders, may be politically correct but does not necessarily coincide with the cultural origins or aspirations of the political elites.

As a state, Israel has always been ambivalent with respect to its standing in the wider region. On the one hand, the desire to be accepted as a political reality and to be recognized by its neighbours, has always been uppermost in much foreign policy thinking in Israel (Susser, 1997). It remains politically correct for Israeli leaders to state their hopes that the country will one day be truly and fully integrated into their geographic region. At the same time, Israel’s political and economic elites have always seen themselves as being part of the western world, with a highly technological, post-industrial economy and with a highly educated and literate workforce. Western Europe and North America have proved to be much more attractive, culturally and economically, to the Israeli population than is the Middle East.

The regional vision espoused in the post-Oslo period was that of the “New Middle East”. Drawing on processes of globalization and the expansion of regional economics, former Israeli
Prime Minister, Shimon Peres, described the new regional order which was, in his view, about to dawn and in which Israel would finally be accepted and integrated into the geographic region within which it is located (Peres, 1994). Prior to this period, Israel had been unable to play any role in the region owing to Arab opposition to the existence of the State. The Peres vision is based around the economic benefits to be attained from peace and regional integration, similar to much of the discourse surrounding the “end of the nation state” and the “disappearance of boundaries” theories which are part of the postmodern discourse but which focus almost entirely on economic integration in Western Europe and North America (REFS), without reflecting the very real ethnic and cultural obstacles in the way of full regional integration, especially in those regions (such as the Middle East) in which ethno-territorial identities and conflicts continue to play a major role in everyday life.

Israel’s main contribution to the region is in the field of economics. Given its special status with both the European Community and the United States, the only country on the face of the globe to enjoy preferential status with both western economic superpowers, Israel finds itself in a unique situation. Many countries in Asia and Africa see Israel as a country which can provide a backdoor into the world’s major trading blocks, in some cases even using Israel’s leaders to argue their case before the American political elites. Israeli businessmen themselves are aware of the enormous economic potential that Israel possesses in future dealings with the Arab world if, and when, real peace is to be achieved. At the same time, the economic benefits which could accrue to the Israeli business community from becoming more fully integrated into the region, are not necessarily welcomed by all Arab countries. For many, it is seen as a modern form of neo-colonialism, through which Israel is able to impose its economic advantages on the region, and achieve what they were unable to achieve during forty years of conflict. Thus, as much as Israeli perceptions of its own role within the region remain ambivalent, so too do the perceptions of the neighbouring countries concerning their willingness, even under conditions of conflict resolution, to have Israel participate fully in the regions cultural and economic activities.

The extent to which Israel sees itself as part of the Middle East or as the eastern extension of Europe (see discussion below) has to be seen within the context of the battle for political hegemony within Israel between the Ashkenazi (European) and Mizrahi (Asian and African) Jewish populations. The dominance of the Ashkenazi-European elites is now being questioned as the Mizrahi populations are undergoing empowerment. The fact that over half of the Jewish population of the country are from North African and Eastern origin - mizrahim - would
suggest that there is a desire to become more fully integrated in the Middle East. As a growing number of representatives of these communities attain positions of power, particularly with the emergence of strong ethno-based political parties in recent years, it has been argued that these groups are a more integral part of the geographical region (REFS). This translates into two contrary political positions based on the notion of: “we lived amongst the Arabs for hundreds of years, therefore we know them, their mentality, their negotiating culture and the way to deal with them”. Some groups argue that the experience of living within a Middle Eastern culture will enable them, rather than the European based political elites, to negotiate with the Arab leaders, based on mutual respect for their common regional heritage, while other groups argue that these same experiences of living as a minority amongst Arab nations for hundreds of years have taught them that there is no possibility of ever reaching an agreement with the Arab world. Regardless of which position is adopted, the notion that Israel must become part of its geographical region, rather than a European colonial implantation within a different cultural milieu, is common to both perspectives

The fact that an immigrant from Morocco, David Levy, became Israel’s foreign minister was an important indication of the shift which is taking place, although he was belittled by many of his political colleagues for not being able to represent Israel adequately in world fora due to his lack of English language skills. The Ashkenazi-Mizrahi discourse is not only played out in formal political institutions but also through popular culture. It took until the late 1960’s until it was acceptable to play Oriental music on the Israeli radio, and even then it commenced as part of the Arabic department. By contrast, classical music played a major role in the broadcasting services from their inception. These discourses of music, art and culture equally reflect the geopolitical tensions between a desire to integrate into the region as contrasted with a desire to be part of Europe (Izenberg, 1998; Waterman, 1998).

In contemporary Israel, the non-integration into the region is perhaps best reflected in the linguistic skills of the inhabitants. English is the preferred second language taught in all schools, while Arabic is compulsory for one year only and is chosen by few students. Despite their daily contact with both Arab citizens of Israel and Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories, only a small percentage of Israelis are able to converse with them in Arabic. This is typical of majority-minority relations in general, and in situations of conflict in particular, where the minority population is dependent on the language of the majority population in order to undertake beauracratic and economic transactions. This creates an interesting paradox in that while a decreasing number of Jewish citizens speak Arab, a large, if not most, of the
Palestinian population understand and speak Hebrew, while the majority of Diaspora Jewry are unable to speak, read or write the language of their Israeli compatriots.

It was, perhaps, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat’s analogy of Israel with that of the twelfth century Crusader states which characterized much of the Arab thinking on Israel’s role in the region. The Crusaders were early colonizers, controlling the “holy land” through a series of well fortified army bases, eventually being vanquished by the Islamic warriors under the leadership of Saladdin. The Crusaders have always been seen as being external and alien intruders to this region, whose presence proved to be no more than a temporary phenomenon in the long and tumultuous history of the Middle East. At the same time, this statement was seen by many Israelis as being an indication of the ultimate Arab intentions concerning Israel and that, by definition, there was no point in attempting to enter into a peace agreement with the Palestinians. This highlights the essentially pragmatic, rather than ideological, underpinnings of the Israel-Arab peace processes, namely the fact that the agreements serve the realpolitik interests of all sides involved, rather than signalling any real desire by the Arab countries of the Middle East to accept Israel as one of them (Susser, 1997).

b) In Europe

In terms of cultural aspirations, Israel sees itself firmly rooted in Europe. In a well publicised article some years ago, Meron Benveniste argued that while Israel’s geographical location is in the Levant, it’s preferred cultural location is somewhere between Paris and Prague (Benveniste, 199X). Israel’s founder elites have their roots in Central and Eastern Europe, and the systems of state government and a host of other state institutions are strongly rooted in European culture. During its first fifty years, all of Israel’s Prime Ministers, from Ben Gurion to Netanyahu, and all but one of its Presidents, were of European extraction, despite the fact that over half of the Jewish population of the country are Mizrahi (North African and Asian) in origin. Even the leaders of the right wing Likud party, which has traditionally enjoyed the support of the Mizrahi population in elections, have been European. This has been strengthened in recent years with the arrival of over 800,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union. For some, this signals a rebalancing of the delicate ethnic mosaic, swinging the scales back in favour of the European-Ashkenazi cultural hegemony, at a time when Mizrahi empowerment is coming to the fore for the first time in Israel’s political history.
Israel enjoys favoured trading status with the European Community and participates in many European cultural activities, such as the Eurovision song contest and the European football (soccer) competitions. While this has largely come about as a result of Israel’s exclusion from Middle Eastern political and cultural activities, it is unlikely that the stated desire to become part of the natural region within which the country is located actually extends as far as opting to replace those European links with those of the Middle East.

Yet for many Israelis, links with Europe are problematic. The collective memory of the country’s Jewish citizens still finds it difficult to come to terms with the normalcy of relations between Israel and Germany (Timm, 1997). Despite the growing cultural and economic ties between the two countries, the idea that Germany could, or should, provide military or other guarantees to a Middle East peace solution is still unacceptable. Many Israelis still refuse to visit the country, despite the fact that formal relations have been established for over thirty years and Israel has received substantial reparations from successive German governments during this same period (Levy, 1996).

Israel’s relations with the other two major European powers, France and Britain, has been ambivalent. Britain is traditionally perceived as a country whose foreign policy is dictated by a pro-Arab lobby, tracing its roots back to the traditional affinity of past British governments with the romance of the desert and the nomadic culture. In addition, Britain’s mandate rule of Palestine, the 1939 White paper limiting the number of Jewish immigrants, and the period following the end of the World War II is remembered for its attempts to prevent the establishment of an independent Jewish State and its refusal to allow holocaust survivors entry into Palestine. Successive Israeli governments have viewed British interests in the region with great suspicion, despite the interests of the latter in playing a more prominent role in Middle East peacemaking. This was highlighted as recently as 1998, following a disastrous visit by British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cooke, who, at the time, also represented the European Community. His decision to ignore much diplomatic protocol in his visit to East Jerusalem was interpreted by most Israelis as being a clear indication of a pro-Arab bias on the part of the European Community.

Israel’s relationship with France was the warmest of any of the three European powers. During the 1950’s, France assisted in the development of Israel’s defense industries, particularly in the establishment of Israel’s nuclear reactor in Dimona. But this relationship has cooled in recent
years as France has opposed many of the Israeli policies concerning the Palestinians and the West Bank occupation.

The notion of a single European entity, as contrasted with the individual member countries of the Union, presents new opportunities of forging stronger links with Europe. The emergence of the European Union has enabled Israel to reassess its regional position vis à vis Europe. Economic and political ties with the EU are linked to each other, with the Union demanding a more active role in the peace process if Israel is to enjoy even further integration into the regional economic markets. The dissatisfaction of the European Community with the progress of the peace process under the Netanyahu administration, together with the Israeli reticence to allow European leaders to take an active role as third party arbitrators alongside that of the United States, has made it difficult for Israel to gain any further concessions within the European Community.

Somewhere between a Middle Eastern or European affiliation lies the Mediterranean location. In this respect, Israel is similar to additional countries within the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Cyprus and Turkey. The geographical and cultural location at the Europe-Middle East, Christian-Islamic interface, has resulted in the emergence of a common Mediterranean identity, together with other European countries such as Italy and Spain and the North African countries of the Maghreb. But this has not resulted in any significant political positioning on the part of Israel or the other countries involved.

c) In the Jewish Diaspora

The State of Israel maintains strong links with Jewish communities throughout the world. It also sees itself as the self-appointed protector of these communities in times of persecution or crisis. In his study of Israel as an ethnocracy, Yiftachel (1997a) has described the country as one “without borders”, or a state within which the boundaries of identity do not sorrespond to the limited territorial boundaries of the country. While some people residing outside the territorial boundaries are included within the national collective, others who reside within the territorial boundaries are excluded. Automatic “right of return” and instant citizenship is granted to Jews throughout the world whether they have ever actually previously set foot in Israel or not, while local Arab-Palestinian residents who have lived uninterrupted in this region for hundreds of years do not enjoy the same rights. This is particularly the case with respect to
the right to purchase land, a right which has been granted to Jewish residents of the Diaspora but not to Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories. Much of the state owned land was purchased by global Jewish organizations, notably the Jewish National Fund, while the Jewish Agency remains a quasi public agency which operates on behalf of the global Jewish community and the State of Israel at one and the same time.

The notion that Israel is located within the Jewish diaspora is, in many ways, an antithesis to the territorial notion of Zionism as an ideology around which state formation took place. The establishment of an independent Jewish state was seen by the state founders as constituting a solution to the condition of diaspora, a negation of the situation which had lasted for approximately two thousand years during which period the Jewish people had been a dispersed and, in many instances, a persecuted minority throughout the world. The very fact that Zionism, rather than Jewish nationalism, was chosen as the name of the national movement was itself an indication of the strong territorial focus on a particular piece of territory, a territory which had remained a central part of Jewish prayer and ritual throughout the diaspora period as a result of strong processes of cultural socialization (Davies, 1982; Newman, 1998c; 1998d).

The relationship between the State of Israel and the Jewish diaspora has been, and remains, a complex one (Kimmerling, 1989; Shefer, 1996). On the one hand, an underlying ideological foundation of the State has been to persuade Jews throughout the world to immigrate to Israel. This is not referred to simply as a process of immigration, but one of “aliyah”, a process of “going up”, through which the person achieves a form of national self-fulfillment by choosing to live within the ancient homeland. The process through which emissaries representing the State have traditionally raised funds from the diaspora Jewish communities has often been described as one in which those who have not chosen to live in Israel pay a form of tax, by assisting those that have made this choice. But at the same time, Jewish criticism of Israeli government policies is met with the response that they should not interfere in the decisions of a State in which they have not chosen to live. Thus it is an asymmetrical relationship in which the diaspora Jewish communities are told to “pay up, but shut up”.

In recent years, this complex relationship has began to change, as many diaspora communities have become disenchanted with Israeli government policies concerning the peace process and the growing influence of fundamental religious groups within government circles. Right wing diaspora groups criticised the Rabin government for daring to give up “holy” territory in the
name of peace, while left wing groups have criticised the Netanyahu administration for slowing down the peace process and giving in to religious and irredentist demands from his coalition partners. Both groups have chosen to publically show their disaffection for the policies of the Israeli governments and have even demonstrated outside the Israeli embassies in the major capital cities of the world, an action which would have been considered inconceivable some years ago.

Israel perceives itself as being a partner with the diaspora Jewish communities, but a senior partner who occupies the moral high ground. For its part, the diaspora communities are no longer willing to accept this secondary role, not least because the very existence of the State has made them more self assured and culturally independent in their own countries of residence. Whereas much of the money raised by these communities in the past was unquestioningly transferred to the coffers of the State and its institutions, the current trend is for a greater portion of these resources to remain within the communities themselves as a means of increasing religious and cultural awareness and identity. While the Israel-diaspora partnership remains intact, the role of each has changed, with neither feeling as dependent on the other as in the past. It is by no means ensured that the diaspora community will continue to represent Israel’s interests before foreign governments, especially in the U.S.A, if current political and social trends continue to take hold of the Israeli body politic.

The notion that the diaspora could, and should, be negated is itself an experiment in inculcating a false consciousness amongst the Jewish communities of the world. With the mass immigration of Russian and Ethiopian Jews to Israel during the 1990’s, and the final exodus of the small remaining communities in both Syria and Iraq, the State no longer has a function as a place to which oppressed Jews can come, simply because the number of oppressed communities has virtually disappeared. Within the western world, the Jewish communities are politically and financially secure and do not perceive modern, materialistic, Israel as representing the sort of ideological challenge as it did during the first three decades of statehood. Israel is no longer perceived as occupying the moral high ground in this relationship and, as such, the two constituent parts of this global geopolitical relationship are in the process of taking on new roles. In addition, while the Diaspora community desires to see a strong and independent Israel, its very strength and self-assuredness is a factor which, paradoxically, reduces the feeling of commitment on the part of the Diaspora who no longer feel needed in the same way as before.
The geopolitical imagination of Israel as part of the global Jewish community is also coming into conflict with the very basic notions of Jewish identity. Orthodox Jewry refuse to recognize alternative trends within Judaism - notably the Reform and Conservative communities - as legitimate Jews since they do not always answer to the strict orthodox interpretation of “Who is a Jew?”. Within Israel, Jewish identity is determined by the orthodox groups, not least because they have strong representation in the Israeli parliament through their political parties. The “status quo” on religious affairs, instituted soon after the establishment of the State in 1948, placed all matters of personal and religious status in the hands of the religious (orthodox) establishment. While the Reform and Conservative movements do not have demographic or political clout within Israel, they nevertheless make up the vast majority of diaspora Jewry, especially in the United States. These communities have traditionally been strong supporters and lobbyists on behalf of Israel. But as these communities become increasingly estranged from the growing tide of religious fundamentalism within Israel, coupled with attempts by some orthodox groups to deny their Jewishness, so too their direct support for, and automatic identity with, Israel is diminished (REFS).

Finally, this process of estrangement is also seen with respect to Israeli emigrants. During the past two decades, the process of Israeli out-migration has grown, in some years exceeding the numbers of Jewish immigrants to the country. Not only is this seen as a bad advert for encouraging further Jewish immigration, but the Israeli communities which have grown up in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Toronto and London, function separately from the local Jewish communities. The relationship between the two communities have often been tense, with the former perceiving themselves as just one more amongst a group of migrant communities, while the latter preferring to stress their religious and cultural affinities. Thus, the nature of the Israel-diaspora relationship is becoming more complex and tenuos than in the past, while Israel is unable to count automatically on the blind support of World Jewry for all its policies.

d) The 51st State of the United States

Israel has always had a special relationship with the United States. Without American recognition of Israel in 1948, it is questionable whether the Zionist leadership of the time would have been as quick to establish the new state following the departure of the British Mandate forces. Israel has relied on United States support, both political and fiscal, during the past fifty
years, even to the extent that that support has, on some occasions, been contrary to the weighted opinion of the entire international community. As recently as 1997, there was the weird spectre of the United States and Micronesia as the only two countries voting against a United Nations motion to condemn Israel for establishing further settlements in East Jerusalem (REFS).

The United States support for Israel has been based on two factors. The first of these is, undoubtedly, the weight of the pro-Israel lobby within the American body politic. America’s Jewish community is well established, both financially and politically. Members of the Jewish community have been elected to important political positions, while they are also an important source of party funding for both Democrats and Republicans. The notion of the “Jewish vote” is less established, given the fact that the entire community numbers fewer than six million, of which a large proportion are not necessarily affiliated to the Jewish community and do not automatically support Jewish or Israeli causes. Thus the influence of the Jewish community on American foreign policy making in the Middle East is disproportionate to their actual numbers.

Israeli leaders have traditionally had an ambivalent attitude towards the United States (Reich, 1994). On the one hand, there has always been a strong lobby aimed at maintaining, if not increasing, the amount of foreign aid, both military and financial. Appeals to the American conscience in supporting the beleagured Jewish state have not been offset by Israel’s military superiority. At the same time, American pressure on the Israeli government to make political and territorial concessions is displayed within Israel as intervention in the internal affairs of an independent sovereign entity. This has particularly been the case under Israel’s right wing governments, with notable tension having emerged between the Shamir and Bush administrations in the early 1990’s, and between the Netanyahu and Clinton administrations seven years later. In both cases, some of the cracks in USA-Israel relations were conveniently papered over by the Iraqi crises, during which periods the United States immediately offered unquestioning assistance to Israel in its preparation of the home front against possible missile attacks.

Right wing groups in Israel often demonstrate outside the hotels of visiting American leaders and policy makers when they are directly involved in shuttle negotiations between Israel and her Arab neighbours, in extreme cases crudely displaying the visiting diplomats as being anti-semitic and damaging Israel’s interests. This reached a peak following the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, with United States Secretary Kissinger mediating an Israeli partial withdrawal
on the Golan Heights. Despite his own Jewish refugee background, he was displayed as being an American “self-defined Jew hater” in vocal, and in some cases violent, anti-American demonstrations. Visits by American mediator Denis Ross and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright have, in recent years, been greeted with similar anti-American sentiments on the part of some right wing groups, often expressed through public advertisements in the daily press. The fact that these diplomats are themselves Jewish places them in an awkward position. Right wing Israelis see them as traitors to their own people for bringing American pressure to bear, while Arab countries view them as pro-Israel and, hence, too soft in dealing with Israeli settlement policies.

Despite these contradictions, America has remained Israel’s strongest backer over the past fifty years. Without United States support, Israel would have been unable to maintain its political and financial position in the region. American criticism of Israeli policy and the occasional tensions between the two countries is normally referred to as being no more than an “in-house feud”, to be expected in even the best of family relationships. Perhaps the only situation in which the United States has unilaterally forced Israel to make a major policy change was the Eisenhower insistence on an immediate Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai peninsula, following Israel’s capture of the region in 1956 in collusion with Britain and France.

Another factor underlying American support for Israel has been the oft stated notion that the leader of the free world must support the only democracy in the Middle East. This argument is used by Israel in arguing that true peace can only be made between democracies (as defined by the normative western models of participatory democracy) (Garnham & Tessler, 1997; Elman, 1997) and that the United States must insist on internal political transformations within Arab countries before it can offer them equal support. For as long as Egypt was under the direct influence of the Soviet Union, the United States had a major interest in defending, and even strengthening, Israel as a bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Middle East. But Egypt’s decision to move out of the Soviet sphere of influence, the Israel-Egypt peace treaty at Camp David, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc has changed the regional balance of power and has brought much of the region under both direct and indirect American influence. Israel and Egypt are currently seen as being joint allies of the United States in their fight against what is perceived as the new regional threat, namely that of Islamic fundamentalism, and the expansionist policies of Iraq which threaten America’s oil interests in the Persian Gulf. After Israel, Egypt is now the second largest recipient of United States foreign aid, together these two countries accounting for well over half of the entire foreign aid package.
Two further factors are likely to change the nature of the U.S - Israel relationship in the foreseeable future. In the first place, there is a growing division within the American Jewish community concerning the unquestionable support for Israeli governments who do not necessarily represent the interests of the entire community. Secondly, the growth of the American Islamic community and their entry into local and national politics is likely to create a strong counter force amongst American policy makers. This is likely to be the case particularly when Israeli governments hold back on the peace process. In the case of the latter, continued and unqualified support for Israel is seen by the growing Arab lobby as biased and as a sign that the United States is unable to be an honest broker for both sides of the conflict, an argument which the Americans are keen to counter. Despite their occasional threats to the contrary, America is unlikely to ever withdraw its involvement from the Middle East, not least because they are unwilling to allow Europe to insert a significant foothold into the region.

But overall, Israel has successfully managed to retain American support for the country, even where its policies have not always been in the best global interests of the United States. Israel insists on American, rather than European, guarantees for any peace agreements, or promises of demilitarization. The notion of Israel as the 51st State of America continues to be a source of major geopolitical strength for Israel.

e) The Center of the World

The most metaphysical of the five geopolitical locations is the notion of Israel being located at the very centre of the world. Israel is the geographical location of the “holy” land, the birthplace of both Judaism and Christianity, and the third most important center of Islam. As such, this piece of territory takes on symbolic importance in the sense that it possesses some form of abstract notion of sanctity. It is elevated and more important than other territories, owing to the events, some real, many mythical, which are supposed to have taken place here. Bloody religious wars have been fought over the right to control the holy sites. The Crusaders attempted to recapture the old city of Jerusalem for Christianity, the Moslems built the Mosque of Omar on the site of the ancient Jewish temple, while for religious Jews the capture of the old city of Jerusalem in the Six day war of 1967 was no less than a miraculous “liberation” of sites which belonged to them by right through the Divine promise to the Jewish forefathers, outlined in the Biblical narratives (Davies, 1982; Newman, 1998c).
In this sense, the modern state of Israel is no more than a temporary objective reality within whose boundaries the holy sites happen to be located. As a metaphysical location, the precise boundaries of the modern state are unimportant, although the contemporary State is able to emphasize the fact that they exercise political control of the symbolic spaces and sites. This is reflected in the pilgrimage of Jews and Christians from throughout the world, especially around the time of major festival periods such as Christmas or the Jewish New Year, with a boost of hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims expected to take place around the millennium. It is increasingly common for Jewish residents of the Diaspora to purchase holiday apartments in Israel and to spend their vacation periods in the country during the period of the major Jewish festivals. Paradoxically, while the whole world watches the Christmas Mass live from the “holy land”, the neighbouring towns of Bethlehem and Jerusalem are places where there is a normal working day on this most important day in the Christian calendar. Most Jews and Moslems in the State of Israel and the West Bank are virtually unaware of the existence of this religious festival as they go about their normal weekday activities.

As the center of the world, this particular piece of territory takes on metaphysical dimensions. The notion of the “Jerusalem of above” as contrasted with that on the ground is perceived as being a place of utopia and perfection, as contrasted with the realities of bitter conflict which takes place between Arabs and Jews in this city. The idea that Jerusalem can exist in other places, such as in “England’s green and pleasant fields” is also part of this perceived aspatial location of a particular place. This metaphor of place constitutes a powerful component in the geopolitical imagination which moves the place from the realm of a defined territory to a space which is both movable and transient. This explains the use of Biblical place names in locations throughout the world, notably Succot, Shiloh, Nazareth, Lebanon, Jordan River, to name but a few. At the same time, it throws up the paradox of transforming a metaphysical sense of aspatiality into a concrete political notion of space which has a single physical location, which then takes on greater importance than all other locations and which ends up being fought over. This also explains why the West Bank settlers have been so insistent on naming their settlements after the Biblical places which were located on, or nearby, their settlement sites (Cohen & Kliot, 1981; 1992)

As such, the notion of being at the “centre of the world” is an exclusive, and hence contested, discourse of place. Just as the “promised land” and Jerusalem are central to Jewish religious and geographical thinking (Davies, 1982), so too is it central in Moslem and Christian thought.
The Vatican view these same places as central to its own political interpretations of theology and history and, as such, display a great interest and desire to be involved in the political events taking place therein (Perko, 1997). But as a contested theological discourse of place, the notion of centrality is exclusive, rather than shared. For each “centre”, the religions of the “other” are relegated to the periphery, thus enhancing the sense of zero-sum conflict, the sort which takes place at Armageddon (also geographically located within Israel) rather than on a human battlefield.

The symbolic dimension of this territory and its global significance also means that it is perceived as being much larger than it really is. For a country occupying no more than 20,000 sq/ kms (25,000 including the Occupied Territories), with a distance of no more than 75 kms between the Mediterranean Sea in the west and the Jordan River in the east, and encompassing no more than eight million people (Israelis and Palestinians together), the country and its conflicts take on megastate proportions in the world media and general interest expressed by virtually the whole of the international community. Violent conflict elsewhere in the world may only receive passing mention, while the smallest of stone throwing events in and around Jerusalem or Bethlehem will automatically become headline news. The amount of attention accorded Israel in world affairs is over and beyond its demographic or economic contribution to the changing dynamics of the world political map. While other conflicts, such as Bosnia or Northern Ireland, also take prominence, in terms of ongoing coverage over an uninterrupted period of fifty years there is probably no other single conflict which has continually occupied such a central place in world attention.

At the same time, there is a sense amongst many Israelis that it is fitting to be at the centre of world attention, if only to show the rest of the world that this small state composed of so many Jewish refugees can not be dismissed as insignificant. This is also part of the post-holocaust syndrome, a need to categorically state to the world that “we are here” and are in no hurry to disappear from the stage of world history.

A joke going around Israel in the early 1980’s, partially plagiarized from a Peter Sellers film “The Mouse that Roared” plays up this sense of global self importance. The early 1980’s was a period of stagflation in the Israeli economy with the national debt growing to unmanageable proportions. The Israeli cabinet met in emergency session to discuss ways to solve the economic crisis. On observing that two of the world’s most succesfull countries at the time, Germany and Japan, had been the vanquished nations of World War II, one cabinet minister
suggested declaring war on the United States. Having been vanquished in such a war, American would then create a modern version of the Marshall Plan to restructure and strengthen the Israeli economy. As this novel plan was being discussed, the defence minister, warrior general Ariel Sharon stood up, and dismissed the plan out of hand. “What”, he argued, would happen to Israel’s economy, “if and when we win the war”?

The sense of being in the centre of the world and at the centre of world attention therefore has a dual dimension. On the one hand, many Israelis complain at the undue attention given to Israel and its problems when contrasted with other states. But, at the same time, the collective need to be an important player on the world stage, in disproportion to the actual size of either population or territory, continues to play a role in the thinking of most Israelis. The subjective interpretation of Israel’s global role as an international player, despite its objective reality of being a small country located at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, explains this fifth geopolitical dimension of the collective imagination.

**Conclusions**

The objective of this chapter has been to show the diversity of the Israeli geopolitical imagination. This varies according to the extent to which the objective realities of the country’s geographic location and size, or the subjective interpretation of the symbolic significance of the place, is taken into account. These varied interpretations of location, both spatial and aspatial, are themselves a function of the way in which residents of Israel self identify, as part of an exclusive national club or as citizens of a plural democracy which is expanding its ties within a global economy. As Israel becomes more heterogeneous in its internal composition, as attempts are made to achieve conflict resolution between Israel and her neighbours, and as schisms occur between different branches of Judaism worldwide, so too the nature of both individual and collective identity becomes more diverse, resulting in the formation, and overlapping, of numerous geopolitical imaginations. These can only be understood by reference to the discursive narratives of the different groups themselves and the extent to which they are redefined at local, regional and global levels.
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