

Israel's March of Madness. Towards an Ultra-nationalist, Racist, Religious Society.

By [Uri Avnery](#)

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Israeli democracy is sliding downwards. Sliding slowly, comfortably, but unmistakably.

Sliding where? Everybody knows that: towards an ultra-nationalist, racist, religious society.

Who is leading the ride?

Why, the government, of course, that group of noisy nobodies which came to power at the last elections, led by Binyamin Netanyahu.

Not really. Take all these big-mouthed little demagogues, the ministers of this or that (I can't quite remember who is supposed to be minister for what) and shut them up somewhere, and nothing will change. In 10 years from now, nobody will remember the name of any of them.

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If the government does not lead, who does? Perhaps the right-wing mob? Those people we see on TV, with faces contorted by hatred, shouting "Death to the Arabs!" at soccer matches until they are hoarse, or demonstrating after each violent incident in the mixed Jewish-Arab towns "All Arabs are Terrorists! Kill them all!"

This mob can hold the same demonstrations tomorrow against somebody else: gays, judges, feminists, whoever. It is not consistent. It cannot build a new system.

No, there is only one group in the country that is strong enough, cohesive enough, determined enough to take over the state: the settlers.

"The periphery becomes the center": examples from history

In the middle of last century, a towering historian, Arnold Toynbee, wrote a monumental work. His central thesis was that civilisations are like human beings: they are born, grow up, mature, age and die. This was not really new - the German historian Oswald Spengler said something similar before him (*The Decline of the West*). But Toynbee, being British, was much less metaphysical than his German predecessor, and tried to draw practical conclusions.

Among Toynbee's many insights, there was one that should interest us now. It concerns the

process by which border districts attain power and take over the state.

Take, for example, German history. German civilization grew and matured in the south, next to France and Austria. A rich and cultured upper class spread across the country. In the towns, the patrician bourgeoisie patronized writers and composers. Germans saw themselves as a “people of poets and thinkers”.

But, in the course of centuries, the young and the energetic from the rich areas, especially second sons who did not inherit anything, longed to carve out for themselves new domains. They went to the eastern border, conquered new lands from the Slavic inhabitants and carved out new estates for themselves.

The eastern land was called Mark Brandenburg. “Mark” means marches, borderland. Under a line of able princes, they enlarged their state until Brandenburg became a leading power. Not satisfied with that, one of the princes married a woman who brought as her dowry a little eastern kingdom called Prussia. So, the prince became a king, Brandenburg was joined to Prussia and enlarged itself by war and diplomacy until Prussia ruled half of Germany.

The Prussian state, located in the middle of Europe, surrounded by strong neighbours, had no natural borders – neither wide seas, nor high mountains, nor broad rivers. It was just flat land. So, the Prussian kings created an artificial border: a mighty army. Count Mirabeau, the French statesman, famously said: “Other states have armies. In Prussia, the army has a state.” The Prussians themselves coined the phrase: “The soldier is the first man in the state”.

Unlike most other countries, in Prussia the word “state” assumed an almost sacred status. Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism and a great admirer of Prussia, adopted this ideal, calling his future creation *Der Judenstaat* – *The Jew-State*.

Toynbee, not being given to mysticism, found the earthly reason for this phenomenon of civilized states being taken over by less civilized but hardier border people.

The Prussians had to fight. Conquer the land and annihilate part of its inhabitants, create villages and towns, withstand counterattacks by resentful neighbors – Swedes, Poles and Russians. They just had to be hardy.

At the same time, the people at the center led a much easier life. The burghers of Frankfurt, Cologne, Munich and Nuremberg could take it easy, make money, read their great poets, listen to their great composers. They could treat the primitive Prussians with contempt. Until 1871 when they found themselves in a new German Reich dominated by the Prussians, with a Prussian kaiser.

This kind of process has happened in many countries throughout history. The periphery becomes the center.

In ancient times, the Greek empire was not founded by the civilized citizens of a Greek town like Athens, but by a leader from the Macedonian borderland, Alexander the Great. Later, the Mediterranean empire was not set up by a civilised Greek city, but by a peripheral Italian town called Rome.

A small German borderland in the southeast became the huge multinational empire called

Austria (Österreich, “Eastern Empire” in German) until it was occupied by the Nazis and renamed Ostmark – Eastern Border area.

Examples abound.

Jewish history, both real and imagined, has its own examples.

When a stone-throwing boy from the southern periphery by the name of David became king of Israel, he moved his capital from the old town of Hebron to a new site, which he had just conquered – Jerusalem. There he was far from all the cities in which a new aristocracy had established itself and prospered.

Much later, in Roman times, the hardy borderland fighters from Galilee came down to Jerusalem, by now a civilized patrician city, and imposed on the peaceful citizens a crazy war against the infinitely superior Romans. In vain did the Jewish king Agrippa, descendant of Herod the Great, try to stop them with an impressive speech recorded by Flavius Josephus. The border people prevailed, Judea revolted, the (“second”) temple was destroyed, and the consequences could be felt this week on the Temple Mount (“Haram al-Sharif”, the Holy Shrine in Arabic), where Arab boys, imitators of David, threw stones at the Jewish imitators of Goliath.

Israel’s settler periphery

In today’s Israel, there is a clear distinction – and antagonism – between the affluent big cities, like Tel Aviv, and the much poorer “periphery”, whose inhabitants are mostly the descendants of immigrants from poor and backward Oriental countries.

This was not always so. Before the founding of the state of Israel, the Jewish community in Palestine (called the *Yishuv*) was ruled by the Labor Party, which was dominated by the *Kibbutzim*, the communal villages, many of which were located along the borders (one could say that they actually constituted the “borders” of the *Yishuv*.) There a new race of hardy fighters was born, while pampered city dwellers were despised.



In the new state, the *Kibbutzim* have become a mere shadow of themselves, and the central cities have become the centers of civilization, envied and even hated by the periphery. That was the situation until recently. It is now changing rapidly.

On the morrow of the 1967 Six-Day War, a new Israeli phenomenon raised its head: the settlements in the newly occupied Palestinian territories. Their founders were “national-religious” youth.

During the days of the *Yishuv*, the religious Zionists were rather despised. They were a small minority. On the one hand, they were devoid of the revolutionary élan of the secular, socialist *Kibbutzim*. On the other hand, real orthodox Jews were not Zionists at all and condemned the whole Zionist enterprise as a sin against God. (Was it not God who had condemned the Jews to live in exile, dispersed among the nations, because of their sins?)

But after the conquests of 1967, the “national-religious” group suddenly became a moving force. The conquest of the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem and all the other biblical sites filled them with religious fervor. From being a marginal minority, they became a powerful

driving force.

They created the settlers' movement and set up many dozens of new towns and villages throughout the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. With the energetic help of all successive Israeli governments, both left and right, they grew and prospered. While the leftist "peace camp" degenerated and withered, they spread their wings.

The "national-religious" party, once one of the most moderate forces in Israeli politics, turned into the ultra-nationalist, almost fascist "Jewish Home" party. The settlers also became a dominant force in the Likud party. They now control the government. Avigdor Lieberman, a settler, leads an even more rightist party, in nominal opposition. The star of the "centre", Yair Lapid, founded his party in the Ariel settlement and now talks like an extreme rightist. Yitzhak Herzog, the leader of the Labour Party, tries feebly to emulate them.

All of them now use settler-speak. They no longer talk of the West Bank, but use the settler language: "Judea and Samaria".

Following Toynbee, I explain this phenomenon by the challenge posed by life on the border.

Even when the situation is less tense than it is now, settlers face dangers. They are surrounded by Arab villages and towns (or, rather, they interposed themselves in their middle). They are exposed to stones and sporadic attacks on the highways and live under constant army protection, while people in Israeli towns live a comfortable life.

Of course, not all settlers are fanatics. Many of them went to live in a settlement because the government gave them, almost for nothing, a villa and garden they could not even dream of in Israel proper. Many of them are government employees with good salaries. Many just like the view - all these picturesque Muslim minarets.

Many factories have left Israel proper, sold their land there for exorbitant sums and received huge government subsidies for relocating to the West Bank. They employ, of course, cheap Palestinian workers from the neighbouring villages, free from legal minimum wages or any labour laws. The Palestinians toil for them because no other work is available.

But even these "comfort" settlers become extremists, in order to survive and defend their homes, while people in Tel Aviv enjoy their cafes and theatres. Many of these old-timers already hold a second passport, just in case. No wonder the settlers are taking over the state.

The process is already well advanced. The new police chief is a kippah-wearing former settler. So is the chief of the secret service. More and more of the army and police officers are settlers. In the government and in the Knesset, the settlers wield a huge influence.

Some 18 years ago, when my friends and I first declared an Israeli boycott of the products of the settlements, we saw what was coming.

This is now the real battle for Israel.

Uri Avnery is a distinguished Israeli writer, peace activist and former lawmaker. Founder of Gush Shalom peace movement, Avnery has had a ring-side view of the Middle East and the Arab-Israel conflict for the past seven decades.

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