# Why Israel's Legitimacy Faces Unique Challenges

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Thalia Bouchehrian




Israel stands as a unique state on the global stage – a small democracy in the Middle East, the world's only Jewish state, and a country surrounded by enemies since its founding. It is also one of the few countries whose legitimacy as a state is frequently called into question. Throughout the globe, from the chambers of the United Nations to university campuses, Israel finds itself uniquely targeted for condemnation, divestment, and boycott. Why does Israel, a democratic state, face more scrutiny over its legitimacy than many authoritarian or undemocratic regimes?

The answer lies in a complex web of historical, legal, and political factors. From competing narratives of national identity to territorial disputes and international law, Israel's legitimacy has become a lightning rod for ideological battles.

## Competing Historical Narratives

The roots of Israel's legitimacy debate lie in two fundamentally different historical narratives. From the Israeli perspective, the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 is framed as both a historical right and a moral necessity. The Israeli perspective on the creation of the state highlights the historical and legal entitlements of the Jewish people to establish a sovereign state in their ancestral land – a right affirmed by documents such as the Balfour Declaration and the United Nations Partition Plan and by the necessity for a Jewish homeland after the Holocaust. In contrast, for Palestinians, Israel's founding represents the Nakba (catastrophe), during which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes. For them, the establishment of Israel was seen as an encroachment on Palestinian rights, rejecting the UN Partition Plan, which they viewed as an unfair division of their homeland. This perception of injustice continues, as the occupation of the West Bank and the expansion of settlements are seen as ongoing violations of Palestinian sovereignty. This dual historical narrative fuels the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which remains unresolved decades after the 1948 war.

## Territorial Disputes

Territorial disputes have long exacerbated the debate over Israel's legitimacy. While Israel's sovereignty within its pre-1967 borders is widely acknowledged, the status of territories beyond the Green Line remains a subject of debate. According to the prevailing consensus, the matter is quite simple: after the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel conquered the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. Since then, it has occupied territories beyond the Green Line and enabled the initiation of further Jewish settlement. The international community considers these settlements illegal on the basis of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilians (1949).

However, critics argue that this interpretation is flawed. They claim that the territory was never part of a sovereign state and thus cannot be considered "occupied", as defined under international law. Jordan's annexation of the West Bank following the 1948 war was not internationally recognized, and the territory lacked a universally acknowledged legal sovereign. So, if no recognized sovereign is asserting ownership over the territory, who are the people or nation laying claim to this land?

## The Role of National Identity

Israel was founded as a Jewish state – an identity that encompasses both religious and ethnic dimensions, contrasting with many modern democratic nation-states that are often secular and rooted in civic nationalism. This distinctive model has attracted scrutiny, particularly from those who perceive Israel's identity as incompatible with liberal, pluralistic values. Although the Israeli Supreme Court guarantees full civil rights to all citizens, preferential policies – such as prioritization of Hebrew over Arabic, the Law of Return favoring Jewish immigration, and the exclusive functions of institutions like the Jewish Agency – highlight divergences from Western democratic norms.

Critics often frame these divergences as evidence of an "apartheid" system, disregarding Israel's legitimate security concerns and unique national context. Tensions between Jewish and Arab citizens are frequently instrumentalized to undermine the state's legitimacy, despite the fact that similar challenges related to minority rights are present in other democracies as well. Israel appears to be held to an idealized standard of equality that many other democracies also find difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, it maintains key democratic benchmarks, as reflected in the Freedom House Democracy Index. While Israel faces challenges in balancing its Jewish and democratic identity, the intense scrutiny it endures – especially compared to authoritarian regimes in the region – often turns these internal tensions into instruments for undermining the state's legitimacy.

## Postmodern Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism

The global rise of identity-based movements, particularly in the postmodern era, has brought national identity into sharper focus. Anti-colonial and postcolonial movements often portray Israel as a relic of Western colonialism, imposing an external Jewish identity on Palestinian land. Anti-Zionist attitudes depict Israel as an illegitimate "Western colonial project," portray it as a neocolonial evil, and suggest "Jewish complicity". This unfolding situation poses a significant threat to Israel, given that antisemitic ideologies are particularly prominent among the intellectual circles of the political left and that modern conflicts increasingly involve media as a battleground. The recent Israel-Hamas war has further intensified these antisemitic sentiments, as images and narratives proliferate across social media and mainstream platforms. While criticism of Israel's policies is legitimate, it's important to recognize when this criticism crosses the line into antisemitism, particularly when it calls into question Israel's right to exist.

## Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is undeniably one of the most intricate geopolitical issues of our time, characterized by deep-seated historical grievances, national aspirations, and political turmoil. Both Palestinians and

Israelis possess legitimate claims to the land, grounded in a long history of displacement, national aspirations, and political conflict. While it is imperative to critically evaluate Israel's actions, outright denial of its right to exist oversimplifies a complex situation and obstructs the potential for constructive dialogue.

In light of these complexities, it is essential for the international community to prioritize promoting dialogue and developing solutions that respect the rights and aspirations of both peoples. The answer cannot lie in delegitimizing Israel but rather in pursuing a peaceful resolution that ensures coexistence of both an Israeli and a Palestinian state, where mutual recognition and compromise pave the way for a just and sustainable peace.

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