

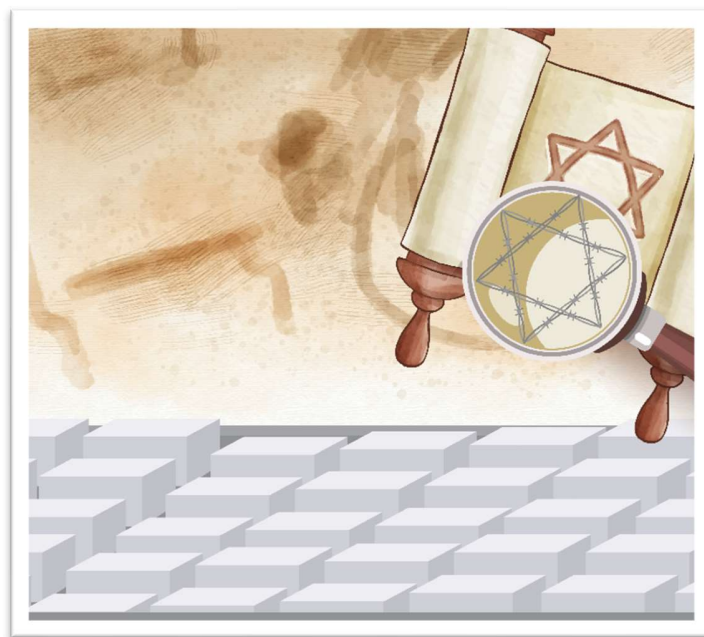
## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

### *EVERLASTING IS THEIR HERITAGE: BENJAMIN NETANYAHU'S HISTORICAL REVISIONISM*

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#### **Abstract**

Since 2015, Israeli foreign policy exhibited a revisionist shift with regard to international Holocaust remembrance in its European foreign policy. As such, state policies issued by the Netanyahu led administration were often in stark contradiction to the officially propagated narrative of the Shoah established by Yad Vashem, Israel's principle institution for the remembrance of the Holocaust. Proceeding from a brief exploration into the official role of Yad Vashem for Israeli state identity, this article examines the revisionist shift in Israeli foreign policy. It concludes that Netanyahu led administrations have been pursuing a realist agenda in their EU foreign policy, while focusing substantively on Eastern European countries as possible future allies that would support Israel's hawkish stance with regard to the Palestinian Question.. Lastly, the article will examine what possible ramifications this revisionist shift could carry for Israeli state identity and international remembrance of the Shoah.



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## **Introduction**

In 2020, the state of Israel found itself at a crossroads. The lingering prologue towards the third Israeli legislative election since April 2019 was characterized by rough campaigning, political scandal, armed conflict, a new peace plan proposal by the US administration, the first ever indictment of an Israeli serving Prime Minister and a global pandemic. All of these circumstances testify to the gravity of the situation as Israel did not merely decide on any new administration, but more importantly on the nature of the state itself. Now, as Prime Minister Netanyahu acceded into his fifth term in office, one might speculate how the newly formed unity government in coalition with his former political rival Benny Gantz will differ from previous administrations. Will Israel continue its executive and legislative development from a liberal Democracy towards a more religiously conservative and perhaps even illiberal Jewish state?

From a foreign policy perspective, it seems that the unity government will pursue what previous Likud led administrations have done before: Seeking strong US support for anti-Iran policies and assuming a hawkish stance on the Palestinian question, including a possible annexation of the West Bank in accordance with Donald Trump's *Deal of the Century*. However, one foreign policy strategy might change under an administration with participation of the Kahol-Lavan party: A previously induced revisionist shift in propagating the narrative of the Shoah on the stage of international politics. Since 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu has set a number of staggering precedents that questioned the official narrative of the Shoah previously conveyed by the Israeli state.

In this article, I will consider those precedents and try to explore a possible reason for the revisionist shift in Israeli foreign policy since 2015. Starting with a general characterization of Yad Vashem as Israel's official institution responsible for establishing a narrative of the Shoah, I will proceed to explore in what way Benjamin Netanyahu's foreign policy constituted an open challenge of the institution's authority on historical remembrance. The article will try to explain these policies as resulting from mutual estrangement between the EU and Israel as well as a rapprochement to Eastern European illiberal governments after the US embassy move in 2018. Furthermore, the article will briefly try to assess the ramifications of these policies for Israel on a domestic as well as international level.

## **Remembrance as State Identity**

Although the Hebrew term *Shoah* is nowadays firmly established to denote the genocide of the European Jewry during the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>21</sup> questions on perpetration, complicity, guilt and responsibility are still posed in academic, political as well as popular discourse. At first glance, asking these questions seems superfluous, perhaps even insultingly generalizing with regards to a matter that appears to have been so meticulously uncovered by historians, so painstakingly well established by research and personal testimony.

Of course, there is no doubt behind Nazi Germany's principal role for the mass murder of millions innocent lives appertaining to different religious, ethnic, societal and religious groups. However, historians have carefully uncovered the complicity of non-German actors in many crimes perpetrated in the name of National-socialism. The complicated history of the Shoah is a process that can-not be restricted to one clear-cut variant without risking to omit or misinterpret certain facts and experiences of great importance for the overall conceptualization of this historical event. As such, the genocide of the European Jewry still sparks controversies, denial, alternate perspectives and, of course, conspiracy theories around the globe.

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<sup>21</sup> As opposed to the term *Holocaust*, which is understood to denote the systematical murder of all minorities, religious and ethnic groups persecuted by Nazi Germany

Although almost all modern states trace their current identity and legitimacy either to legend or historical events, the case of Israel with regards to the Shoah is a special case in point. The ceaseless debate around the exact narrative of the Shoah seems to be in direct contradiction to a transparent or clear-cut principle that would usually give rise to more sophisticated notions of identity or legitimacy in politics. A crucial part of Israel's state identity as well as international legitimacy is self-perceived to be built upon the catastrophe of the Shoah. As such, its importance cannot be overstated and much has already been done to shed light on how it influenced Israeli identity, culture and society. (Frilling 2014, Ofer 2008, Porat 2008) Moreover, within the Israeli Declaration of Independence, the Shoah is mentioned as one principal reason for the necessity of the Israeli state and its legitimacy among the international community. (Provisional Government of Israel 1948) For the purposes of Israeli policy making, the Shoah necessitates an unambiguous characterization as well as a central authority that, more or less, defines an official narrative and establishes historical facts, while identifying falsehoods, revisionist distortions or historical misinterpretations. This role has been assumed until today by the institution of Yad Vashem.

A first conception of Yad Vashem was published by Mordechai Shenhavi in 1945 and, after several amendments, discussed during the 1945 Zionist Congress in London. (Doron 2016) With the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948 and the instant eruption of the Arab-Israeli war, authorities lost their interest in the idea, whereas state attention was focused on the war effort. To make the institution more appealing to Zionist sentiments, Shenhavi proposed to confer symbolic citizenship to the victims of the Shoah which necessitated an official institution dedicated to its remembrance. His efforts ultimately led to the *Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance (Yad Vashem) Law* passed by the Knesset in August 1953. (Knesset 1953) As such, Yad Vashem became Israel's state institution responsible for remembrance of the Shoah and the establishment of an official narrative that would be propagated by the Israeli state. Because of its centrality for the state's identity, no high ranking Israeli official openly challenged Yad Vashem's authority or differ significantly from its position on the Shoah in public until very recently. Since 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu has set a number of staggering precedents to openly contradict Yad Vashem's narrative on the stage of international politics. Before trying to explain this revisionist shift, I will present the most important instances of these in the following section.

### ***A kosher stamp for Historical Revisionism***

In October 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu faced grave criticism for one of his statements concerning Haj Amin al-Husseini, the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Netanyahu claimed at the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem that Adolf Hitler turned away from his decision to expel Jews from Germany in favor of the complete annihilation of the European Jewry only after a consultation with al-Husseini. Although the Grand Mufti was a fervent anti-Semite and met Hitler in 1941, Netanyahu's statement was without doubt an untenable historical claim that openly contradicted Yad Vashem's narrative of the Shoah. (Aderet 2015) After causing international indignation and open opposition by Prof. Dina Porat, Yad Vashem's chief historian, Netanyahu quickly backtracked from his statements. Although he still emphasized the similarities between present day radical Palestinian nationalist rhetoric and al-Husseini's convictions (Staff 2015), he avoided to openly challenge Yad Vashem's narrative until 2018.

On January 26th that year, the Polish parliament passed its infamous *Holocaust Law*. (Times of Israel 2018) This piece of legislation was an amendment to the Polish *Act on the Institute of National Remembrance* and was proposed by the ruling Law and Justice Party [PiS]. It would have criminalized statements which designated concentration camps in Poland as "Polish death camps" and any referral to Poles as "being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich" with prison penalties of up to three years. After being

confirmed in the senate with a 57:23 majority, the law gained international attention and sparked outrage within the Israeli public. (Tara 2018) Prime Minister Netanyahu strongly opposed the amendment initially (Hoffman 2018), but later offered to meet with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki to solve the issue. In June 27th 2018, Israel and Poland issued a joint statement (Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland 2018) and declared the deletion of sections 55a and 55b of the amendment including an omission of the clause which included the penalization of the before mentioned statements. (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018) However, the press release did not in any way oppose the underlying historical assumptions propagated within the legislation and thereby acknowledged its narrative of the Shoah as "committed by Nazi Germany against the Jewish nation" in denial of any Polish responsibilities.

In a rare and detailed statement, Yad Vashem criticized this press release,<sup>22</sup> accusing it to include "highly problematic wording that contradicts existing and accepted historical knowledge in this field [and] effectively supports a narrative that research has long since disproved [...]". (Yad Vashem 2018) The institution came to the conclusion that Netanyahu's efforts lead to "[r]evising the amendment without changing its essence" among other grave consequences. By issuing the joint statement, the amendment's conceptualization of the Shoah gained legitimacy through acknowledgment by the Israeli state. Irrespective of Yad Vashem's fervent criticism, Poland, through a statement given by Deputy Foreign Minister Bartosz Cichocki, declared its indifference and asserted that it considers Prime Minister Netanyahu's position to be "binding". (Heller 2018) In interpretation of this rather odd choice of wording, we might deduce that this controversy is enigmatic of the dispute of who wields a *binding* authority with regards to the official Israeli narrative of the Shoah propagated in international politics.

Inspired by the infamous Polish *Holocaust Law*, Arūnas Gumuliauskas chair-man of the Seimas' commission on national history and remembrance in Lithuania announced in late 2019 the drafting of a bill that would exonerate the country from any involvement in the killing of more than 95% of its Jewish population during the 1940s. (Liphshiz 2020) Although Gumuliauskas is a member of Prime Minister Skvernelis' ruling Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union party and the bill's stark contradiction to Yad Vashem's position on antisemitism in Lithuanian history, Benjamin Netanyahu has openly endorsed Skvernelis several times. He even conducted an official state visit which was devoid of any Israeli criticism towards Lithuania's revisionist state policies, but intended to "balance the not-always-friendly EU approach toward the state of Israel". (Keinon 2018) Even the Israeli ambassador to Lithuania, Yossi Levy, has kept silent on open occurrences of Antisemitism in current Lithuanian society as well as the public veneration of perpetrators of the Shoah as heroic fighters against Soviet communism. (Repeckaite 2019)

In addition, Netanyahu is known for his close affinity to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán whose Fidesz party has driven an anti-immigrant campaign in 2017 that alluded to anti-Semitic tropes against Jewish philanthropist and Shoah survivor George Soros. Similar to Lithuanian revisionist state policies, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has constantly tried to exonerate Hungarians involved in the Shoah and portrayed them as patriotic heroes in the fight against soviet communism, most prominently in the case of Miklós Horthy, former ruler of Hungary during the 1940s and ally of Adolf Hitler. (Echikson 2019) Furthermore, the Hungarian Government

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<sup>22</sup> It has to be added, that Prof. Dina Porat has apparently worked together with Israeli and Polish authorities to prepare the statement. Though Netanyahu's office refuses to reveal the authors of the statement until today, it had cited Porat's assistance in the matter in order to avert Yad Vashem's criticism. (Landau 2019) However, we do not know the exact extent of Prof. Porat's assistance nor her compliance with the statements made in the press release

is currently planning on re-opening the "House of Fates", Budapest's controversial Shoah remembrance museum, which has provoked international criticism over its revisionist aims to exonerate Hungarians from participation in the Shoah. Yad Vashem's expert on the persecution of the Hungarian Jewry, Dr. Robert Rozett, has openly criticized the effort and made the Institution's reservations against the project public. (Rozett 2018) However, none of these controversies did spark any official complaint from the Netanyahu administration towards the Hungarian government or Orbán's Fidesz party. On the contrary, political as well as personal ties between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Viktor Orbán have grown steadily closer ever since.

Similar to Polish legislation and as a reaction to the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the Ukrainian parliament passed the so called "De-communization Laws" which would propagate the "legitimacy of the struggle for independence of Ukraine in the twentieth century". Ukrainian legislation practically exonerated Nazi collaborators like Roman Shukhevych or Stepan Bandera whose followers were responsible for abhorrent crimes against the Ukrainian Jewish population during the 1940s. (Sokol 22nd August 2019) During an official state visit to the Babi Yar site, where in 1941 Ukrainian police took roughly 30000 Jews to be murdered by the German Wehrmacht, Netanyahu gave a speech praising the country's efforts for the remembrance of the Shoah, while failing to address its collaboration with Nazism or the troubled history of Ukrainian antisemitism before WWII in any shape or form. (Sokol 30th Jan 2019)

Effectively, the Netanyahu administration handed the governments of Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Ukraine, in the words of historian Deborah Lipstadt, a "kosher stamp" (Ahren 2019) or, for that matter, legitimacy in contradicting the narrative of the Shoah that was previously propagated by the state of Israel within international politics. A constructivist thinker in international relations theory will find a seemingly unsolvable challenge here: why does an Israeli administration pursue policies that are altering the narrative of an event which is commonly invoked to establish the legitimacy of the Israeli state in the first place - through imagining it as a safe haven for the Jewish people? The treacherous path of historical revisionism, it seems, might lead to an erosion of the historical identity of the state of Israel itself. So what could have incentivized the Israeli government to pursue such a radical shift in foreign policy?

### ***The dance of illiberal democracies***

In May 2018, the US Trump administration moved its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The move, although enjoying widespread support within Israeli society, did spark an international outcry of indignation as it was understood to be a significant setback for the two-state solution and an unnecessary provocation from the USA as well as Israel. (Al-Jazeera 2018) As western European countries grew ever more weary of Israel's dubious human rights record with regards to the Palestinian Question as well as its recent religio-nationalist turn in domestic politics, the Netanyahu administration sought out to find international support and to forge new alliances. Although EU-Israeli relations have grown steadily on an economic level, the two entities have drifted significantly from one another in the realm of politics. With the 1995 EU-Israel Association Agreement (Euro-Mediterranean Agreement 2000) and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy, bilateral ties have reached their peak, however since 2012, no Association-Council meetings took place and political relations stagnated significantly. The EU's strong adherence to the conditionality principles enshrined in the 1980 Venice Declaration (Venice Declaration 1980) has made the improvement of bilateral political ties almost impossible under a hawkish and far-right, nationalist government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. However, instead of seeking positive European recognition for the embassy move via the EU itself, the Israeli government altered its European foreign policy by developing close ties with Eastern European nation states.

As such, intensive diplomatic efforts ensured a steady rapprochement between Israel, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia as well as Ukraine and Lithuania. These efforts culminated in Benjamin Netanyahu's attendance of the V4 summit in 2017 and his invitation to host the 2019 summit in Jerusalem. This new strategy showed immediate effects: a joint EU statement which would have condemned the US embassy move was blocked by Hungary and the Czech Republic, members of the Visegrád Group are reported to be less critical towards Israel in UN resolutions on the Palestinian Question and Eastern European countries take a differing stance towards the EU's differentiation policy that strictly distinguishes economic activity originating within settlements in the West Bank from those of Israel proper. (Dyduch 2018) From the perspective of international relations, it seems, Benjamin Netanyahu's historical revisionism arose from a trade-off between strict value adherence on one side and realist considerations of maximizing influence in international politics on the other. But what are the possible ramifications of this strategy for Israeli foreign policy as well as domestic politics?

Especially the V4 group endorsed Netanyahu's harsh criticism of the EU and the liberal values the institution is often associated with, as well as his fervent insistence on national sovereignty and state security that is often infused with anti-Muslim and arabophobic rhetoric. As such, the newly forged ties with Israel have been used as a smokescreen to avert criticism against illiberal, nationalistic or even xenophobic policies as well as open opposition to principles of multilateralism or multiculturalism pursued by members of the V4 group. Alas, how could the anti-Soros campaign propagated by the Hungarian Fidesz-party be deemed antisemitic if Likud officials, let alone the Israeli Prime Minister himself, were complicit in it? (Harkov 2017) If the Israeli government were to further pursue such a revisionist foreign policy, it would not only contribute to the possible erosion of one significant aspect of the state's identity and historical legitimacy in international politics, but also blur the perspicuity of anti-Semitic, perhaps xenophobic, policies in Europe.

On the domestic level, it seems, the "dance of illiberal democracies", as the peculiar relationship between Israel and the Visegrád Group has been termed before (Institut Montaigne 2019), does perpetuate the ongoing polarization within Israeli society and important state institutions. Not only did it significantly deepen aversion against Benjamin Netanyahu from liberal parts of society, but it also sparked considerable indignation from more conservative circles. We have even seen resistance from within Netanyahu's cabinet and the foreign ministry, pre-eminently with former Foreign Minister Israel Katz stating in an overtly provocative comment that "poles suckle anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk". (Holmes 2019)

Furthermore, Netanyahu's now repeated clashes with Yad Vashem are enigmatic of a rampant trend in institutional politicization within the state. Similar to the current politicization of nominally apolitical institutions within the Judiciary, such as the Supreme Court or the office of the Attorney General, Netanyahu has provoked the entering of Yad Vashem into the political arena. Although the institution is formally apolitical and merely devoted to research and education, its historical expertise has now been subjected to political dis-course and with that might be in danger of losing its state-defining role as a neutral guardian of the official Israeli narrative of the Shoah. Moreover, it seems that Netanyahu's consistent resistance to the previously propagated narrative of the Shoah could lead to a politicization of the historical event itself, with the lack of an uncontested and commonly accepted institution to establish its official narrative in the long run.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the recent revisionist shift in Israeli foreign policy that deviated considerably from previously well established and officially propagated principles with regards to the remembrance of the Shoah.

It has tried to conceptualize this shift as a consequence from the mutual estrangement of the Israeli state and the EU, especially after the US embassy move in 2018, but perhaps already since 2012. With the intention of fostering ties with Eastern European nation states that have recently undergone a change towards more nationalistic, perhaps even illiberal foreign and domestic policies, Netanyahu led administration's have relinquished strict adherence to Yad Vashem's narrative of the Shoah in favour of gaining new influence within European politics. As such, this strategy might contribute to the erosion of an important part of Israeli state identity as well as state legitimacy.

But what does the future hold for Israeli foreign policy? The new so-called Emergency Unity Government in coalition with Kahol-Lavan and Benny Gantz as alternate prime minister might bring an abrupt end to this novel revisionist shift. Although it seems that the new administration will not pursue a less hawkish strategy with regards to the Palestinian Question, we might see a return towards strict adherence to the narrative of the Shoah established by Yad Vashem. If that were to be the case, further research in this regard seems promising. As such, the prevalence of realist convictions over strict adherence of well-established values in international politics might be a significant differentiation factor between the ultra-nationalist Zionism of Benjamin Netanyahu or the Likud party on one side and the centered, conservative Zionism of Benny Gantz and Kahol-Lavan on the other. A focus on Israeli European foreign policy could facilitate the future comprehension of the polarization within the conservative Zionist majority of Israeli society and shed new light on cleavages among rightist Zionist factions.

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