



Zionism and agricultural land: National narratives, environmental objectives, and land policy in Israel

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ABSTRACT

The 1990s saw two different and even contradictory trends in Israel. On the one hand, there was a substantial increase in environmental awareness, on the part of both the general public and decision-makers, that led to a change in the land use planning policy at the national level. On the other hand, the Israel Lands Council (ILC), the body empowered by law to shape the national land policy, made a series of decisions that severely violated the principle of preserving agricultural land and led to massive conversion of agricultural land and open space for commercial, industrial, and residential development. Thus the national land policy became incompatible with the land use planning policy and the rise in environmental awareness it reflected.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the changes in the ILC members' attitudes toward the principle of preserving agricultural land. The findings point to a complex and ambivalent relationship, in Israel's national land policy, between Zionist-nationalist considerations and the principle of preserving agricultural land. They also point to fundamental changes in this relationship over time. The analysis that follows can explain the incompatibility between the land use planning policy and the national land policy.

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Introduction

The 1990s were a time of great environmental policy development in Israel (Tal, 2002, pp. 299–300). During this decade, Israel's environmental policy changed dramatically. Whereas previously it had focused mainly on preserving open space and reacting to development proposals, it now began to take the initiative and deal with all aspects affecting daily life, including those involving social and economic values (Feitelson, 2004, p. 9).

At the beginning of this period, in 1989, the Ministry of Environment (ME)¹ was established. Since then, the number of issues under its jurisdiction has risen steadily.² Moreover, during the 1990s the land use planning policy gradually began to give greater weight to environmental considerations and even incorporated some environmental objectives into legislation. A prime example of these trends was the first comprehensive national plan (Tama 31), which included a comprehensive environmental land use planning pol-

icy for the entire country (Mazor, 1994; Shachar, 1998; Alterman, 1997).

A rise in environmental awareness also occurred at the civil level. During the 1990s the Israeli environmental movement grew considerably, and many new environmental organizations were established, targeting different audiences, focusing on different issues, and operating in different spheres (the national, regional, urban, and even local). Traditional environmental organizations (for example, the largest environmental NGO, The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel [SPNI], founded in 1954) also changed. They began to tackle questions of environmental justice and the just allocation of environmental resources, sometimes in association with social-change groups.

However, in contrast to the growth in environmental awareness in the land use planning policy and the civil activity described above, during the 1990s the Israel Lands Council (*Moetzet Mekarke'ei Israel* – henceforth the ILC), the body legally empowered to shape national land policy, created a policy that violated the principle of preserving agricultural land and allowed massive conversion of agricultural land for industrial, commercial, and residential development. These opposing trends created dissonance between Israel's land use planning policy and its land policy.

In this paper I suggest one possible explanation for the incompatibility described above, by analyzing the relationship between national narratives and environmental objectives in the

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¹ In June 2006 the name changed to the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP).

² For the range of issues dealt with by the Ministry of Environment see <http://www.environment.gov.il>.

ILC's decision-making with regard to land policy. Using content analysis, I present, for the first time, the justifications given by the decision-makers themselves (the ILC members) for the policy they created. The findings point to a complex and ambivalent relationship between Zionist-nationalist considerations and the principle of preserving agricultural land. They also point to fundamental changes in this relationship over time.

This paper consists of five parts. The second part provides a brief introduction to the historical, ideological, and legal aspects of Israel's national land policy. It also describes the attitudes toward preserving agricultural land in Israel's land use planning policy and land policy, and the changes in those attitudes over time. The third part presents the research methodology. The fourth (and main) part analyzes the attitudes of the ILC decision-makers toward the principle of preserving agricultural land and the shifts it underwent over time.

Throughout this paper, I refer to Israel within its internationally recognized borders, exclusive of the occupied territories. This is of particular importance, because since 1967 the concepts of "Jewish settlements" and "Jewish settlers" have come to be identified with Jewish settlement in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hence, in this paper, the terms "settlements" and "settlers" refer only to the Jewish cooperative and communal rural settlements within Israel's internationally recognized borders. Moreover, as I show below, the Jewish settlement program, which refers, in the main, to the cooperative and communal rural sector in Israel, was a basic tenet of the Zionist movement from its inception in 1897, many years before the establishment of the state of Israel. The First Aliyah settlement began even earlier, in the 1880s. Although there were also Jewish rural settlers and settlements in Israel that were not communal or cooperative, in this paper I have chosen to focus on those settlers who were part of the Jewish cooperative and communal rural sector.

The historical, ideological, and legal basis of Israel's national land policy

The Zionist narrative is a central national narrative in Israel (and also in the Jewish Diaspora). Its roots are in the late 19th century in the establishment of the Zionist movement, long before the state of Israel was established.³ At that time, this narrative referred to the desire to establish a Jewish state for the Jewish people in Eretz Israel.⁴ After the state of Israel was established in 1948, the focus shifted to a desire to preserve the Jewish identity of the state and to disperse the Jewish population throughout the state (Peled, 1993; Rubinstein, 1996; Barzilai, 2003).

Israel's national land policy was shaped to a large extent by the Zionist movement and the Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet Le'Israel* – henceforth the JNF), at the beginning of the 20th century. Over the years, major social, economic, and political developments in Israel influenced the national land policy. However, as we shall see from the analysis of the ILC protocols, these major but gradual changes never challenged the Zionist-nationalist narrative.

The JNF and the national land policy

The fundamental principles of the national land policy were formulated at the first Zionist Congress in Basel, in 1897, in the decision to establish the JNF. The idea was to establish a national foundation to collect donations from world Jewry that were designated for acquiring lands in Eretz Israel (Douchan-Landau, 1979, pp. 53–97). Hence, the JNF saw the lands acquired as Jewish collective property that could not be sold or transferred to private owners but could be leased for 49 years, a period based on the biblical jubilee.⁵ This principle of national land ownership, which received Zionist Congress approval in 1907, was subsequently anchored in Israeli legislation and is the basis of Israel's national land policy to this day.

The Basic Law: Israel Lands (*Mekarke'ei Israel*) of 1960 defined the nationally owned lands as the lands owned by the state, the Development Authority, and the JNF. It also stated that these lands may not be transferred by sale or in any other manner and must remain under national ownership. Another law, The Israel Lands Law, 1960, defined seven exceptional circumstances under which ownership of nationally owned lands could be transferred. A third act, The Israel Lands Administration Law, 1960, established a statutory body (*Minhal Mekarke'ei Israel* – henceforth the ILA) to administer publicly owned lands.

As a result, most of the land in Israel (93%) is nationally owned. In this, Israel is unique among Western countries. Consequently, Israeli public/national land use is diverse. It includes residential, commercial, and industrial land uses in addition to the traditional uses of public land, such as parks, natural resources, and infrastructure. Therefore, land policy in Israel affects, both directly and indirectly, the majority of Israelis, who reside, work, and spend their leisure time on national land (Alterman, 2003).

Agricultural land and the national land policy

At the beginning of the 20th century the focus was on building a society based on agricultural labor, whereas prior to the establishment of the Zionist movement the focus had been on a return of individuals to the holy sites of Israel, such as Jerusalem and Tiberias (De-Shalit, 1995). The agricultural settlement was viewed as the primary means of realizing the Zionist idea, as necessary for the definition of the demographic map, and as a central component of the security policy of the Yishuv⁶ (Alterman, 1997). Through a combination of rural life and working the land, the Zionist movement hoped to build the "new Jew," in contrast to his Diaspora incarnation. The new Jew, typified by the "sabara" (native Israeli), the tanned, muscular man who works the land and makes the desert bloom – a farmer – contrasted starkly with the pale Diaspora Jew who spends his days hunched over, learning Torah (Benstein, 2004; Tal, 2002, pp. 109–110).

These agricultural settlements were, to a large extent, identified with rural cooperative and communal settlements (such as moshavim and kibbutzim). They were considered part of the "Zionist settlement project" and essential to the establishment of the state of Israel (and later to its continued existence).

Consequently, in addition to acquiring lands, the JNF also helped establish agricultural settlements and sought to increase the amount of Jewish-owned agricultural land in Israel (Kats, 2000,

³ National narratives are ideological super-stories that are dominant within a society. They are usually based on a common history, culture, language, and tradition and therefore differ from one society to another. National narratives are ideological tools that help create a collective and unified identity that provides the justification and the motivation for collective action (especially when a defined external enemy threatens the existence of the collective and its interests) (West, 2003).

⁴ Eretz Israel is the term used by Jews prior to the establishment of the state of Israel to refer to the area non-Jews referred to as Palestine.

⁵ "And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine," (Leviticus 25:23–24), Masoretic Text, JPS 1917 edition from Mechon Mamre, 2005. www.mechon-mamre.org.

⁶ Literally meaning "the settlement," the Yishuv was the name given to the Jewish presence in pre-independent Israel.

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