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Let the Knesset decide

The Knesset presidium's decision to disqualify the proposed Basic Law on Israel as the State of All its Citizens a priori, even before it had been submitted to the representatives for debate, is an essentially anti-democratic act. The Knesset is the premier representative of the people, who are the sovereign power in a democracy, and it is the body which debates bills and approves or rejects them. There was no reason to prevent it from debating the bill submitted by Joint List MKs Jamal Zahalka, Haneen Zoabi and Joumah Azbarga.

On the contrary, in the long-standing debate over whether there's a contradiction between Israel's democratic component and its Jewish component, those who insist that there is no contradiction between the two argue that this is so because a majority of Israelis want it to be the state of the Jewish people. For this very reason, had the bill been brought up for debate, it would surely have been voted down. And in any case, should the time come when most Israelis want to make substantive changes in the state's self-definition, no democratic mechanism, and certainly not the Knesset bylaws, can stand between the people and such a change.

The bill was disqualified on the basis of Article 75(e) of the Knesset's bylaws, which says, "The Knesset presidium shall not approve a bill which, in its view, rejects Israel's existence as the state of the Jewish people, or which is racist in essence." But a footnote to this provision states, "This authority does not include the power to not approve a bill because of objections, no matter how strong, to its sociopolitical content."

Even though the presidium claims it disqualified the bill because it subverts Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, the real reason for its disqualification actually appears to have been strong objections to its political content. These objections were even shared by the Zionist Union party's representative in the presidium, MK Revital Swid, who supported the decision to disqualify the bill. This is further proof that on key issues, Zionist Union is not an alternative to the right.

The Knesset presidium has approved many bills that blatantly discriminate between Jews and Arabs, enshrine the extra rights enjoyed by the Jewish majority and reinforce the inferiority of the Arab minority, first and foremost the nation-state bill. Wouldn't it be possible to argue that these bills – as many of their opponents, Jewish and Arab alike, do in fact argue – are essentially racist? Wouldn't it be possible to view the various annexation bills – which, among other things, would mean a radical change in Israel's demographic balance – as constituting a more serious threat to Israel's future as the national home of the Jewish people?

Attempting to use the Knesset bylaws to block bills which challenge Israel's Jewish majority is unacceptable. The Knesset must be allowed to debate the proposed Basic Law on Israel as a State of All its Citizens.



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Zvi Bar'el

Hamas is an excellent partner

When Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman threatens to topple Hamas, the walls should shake, and not with laughter. The last thing we need is for this threat to become real and for it really to be possible with a few targeted assassinations to kill off the organization's leaders. Because doing so would have two terrifying consequences. First, Israel would have to reoccupy Gaza and manage the world's largest and most densely crowded refugee camp, supply water, electricity, medical and educational services to the two million civilians there, allocate billions from its budget and bear direct responsibility for any civil activity. Second, the Israel Defense Forces would find itself facing an array of local terrorist militias that operate without coordination and without a united leadership, unlike the current leadership that is still ready to take responsibility for security, even if it at times falls short.

This would be the type of occupation from which the United States fled in Iraq and Afghanistan, and from which Israel extricated itself after 18 years in Lebanon. Fortunately for Israel, it could still occupy Gaza the way it

occupies the West Bank – an occupation that is done in part via an emissary. In the West Bank this is the Palestinian Authority and in Gaza it's Hamas. In both cases, Israel is exempt from direct management, from paying huge sums at the Israeli taxpayer's expense for the sake of the occupied residents, and in Gaza it is also free from legal responsibility.

Lieberman is lying to the public when he promises to bring down the Hamas government.

In Gaza and the West Bank, Israel enjoys a deluxe occupation. But unlike with the West Bank, where the theoretical threat of a "peace process" still hovers, Hamas also frees Israel from having to deal with this nuisance. Hamas does not recognize Israel, it has no interest in diplomatic negotiations with it, its demand that Israel withdraw from all territories does not come with any promises of a diplomatic or military gain, and so this demand serves no purpose.

Because of its diplomatic and economic weakness, Hamas is forced to accede to the dictates of Egypt, which maintains a brutal blockade

of Gaza on a par with Israel's. Paradoxically, because of the close ties between Egypt and Israel, Hamas finds itself trapped in a security coordination with Israel, just like the Palestinian Authority. This can be seen in the occasional assessments that high-ranking IDF officers provide the government and the media, saying that Hamas is or is not interested

the only party with which Israel is willing to do business. And there is plenty of business to be done. Negotiations for the return of the missing men and the bodies of the soldiers held in Gaza; cease-fire agreements, border openings and closings (on the Israel and Egyptian sides), granting transit permits to Egypt and Israel, overseeing the transfer of construction materials, and Israeli pressure on the PA to transfer designated funds to Gaza, even when they are certain to fall into Hamas' hands.

The rehabilitation of Gaza will not be accomplished without Hamas' cooperation, and the easing of conditions that the IDF wants to grant Gazans cannot go ahead without a nod from Hamas. Lieberman is lying to the public when he promises to bring down the Hamas government, because unlike some of his vociferous colleagues, he is well aware of the benefits that Israel reaps from Hamas being in power. Just as Israel recognizes that there is no alternative to Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, it knows that Hamas is the only option right now for ruling the dangerous prison that is Gaza. Whoever wants to get rid of Hamas should first explain who he would put in its place.

The distinction Israel has made in recent years between Hamas and other organizations like Islamic Jihad and the Salafi groups, and the policy of holding Hamas solely accountable creates a governmental hierarchy that places Hamas in the position of a recognized government,

B. Michael

Fake Jews

"They've forgotten what it means to be Jewish" has lately become quite a common slur lately. Bibi started it, Gabbay followed suit, and journalist Yisrael Cohen is the latest to adopt it (Haaretz Hebrew, June 3). He used it to describe the woman who was filmed exhorting those Chabad nudniks who try to lasso travelers at the airport. One can understand her – they really are annoying, and not just at the airport. Once in their sights, it's pretty impossible to get away from them without losing your cool.

I like to tell them, with a straight face, that in our egalitarian family we take turns. This month my wife puts on the tefillin and I wear the wig. But maybe next month... And when I'm in a particularly bad mood, I unleash fake holy wrath on them and say that because their dead Rebbe-Messiah was a zealous anti-Zionist his whole life, I refuse to cooperate with his anti-Zionist adherents. It's quite amusing to see their jaw drop and how deeply offended they are (I don't tell them, of course, that in my book, "anti-Zionist" isn't necessarily a derogatory term).

Yisrael Cohen will probably decide that I, too, have "forgotten what it means to be Jewish." So be it. I'm not insulted. Forgetfulness is a useful human trait devoid of malice. To me, the fake Jews are a lot worse than

the forgetful Jews. The fake Jews who've invented their own Judaism. A Judaism that's as fake as a \$3 bill. A Judaism tailored to their despicable needs, a Judaism designed to liberate all of their worst impulses – arrogance, ghegery, condescension, greed, racism and so on.

Here's a little story, a small but typical incident that was reported a few days ago ("Jerusalem Palestinians

The police have only been called to silence the Muslim 'vekker' in the Old City who disturbs the rest of the "fake Jews."

detained, fined for waking up Muslims for nightly Ramadan meal," May 30) about the exploits of some "fake Jews" who settled in Al-Quds not so long ago.

This is what happened: There's an ancient Muslim tradition whereby, during the month of Ramadan, before sunrise, young people in traditional garb go through the streets calling out to believers to rise and worship the Creator. This has been going on for centuries. This year, for the first time, the Israel Police started detaining some of these young men,

issuing fines of thousands of shekels and generally treating them roughly. Why? What was different all of a sudden? Why now and never before?

According to the police: "Residents complained about the noise." You don't have to be a genius to know which "residents" complained.

Every Jewish child is familiar with the tales of the old beadle, the synagogue caretaker, who walks through the town and awakens Jews for the penitential selihot prayers. Jerusalemites have heard the tales of the vekker ("waker," in Yiddish) in the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, neighborhoods. Countless tourists come to these areas at night to witness this holy work. Anyone who lives in religious parts of Jerusalem hears the shofar blasts and selihot prayers in the Hebrew months of Elul and Tishrei, at first light, or late at night.

Amazingly, the police have never been called to silence this loud public nuisance. Only against the Muslim "vekker" in the Old City who disturbs the rest of the "fake Jews." That's the only time the police are called. How much chutzpah and racism does it take to call the police in order to sabotage someone else's tradition? Leave it to the fake Jews. If only they would forget some of the fake Judaism they've invented. If there were a God in heaven and if he were to look and see those who cite his name in vain, he would surely be sickened.

A practical solution to the crisis in Gaza

The situation in Gaza is depressing, it's true. But rather than give in to despair, I would like to suggest a practical solution that could save us and the Gazans from the vicious cycle in which we are currently trapped.

This depressing situation has arisen in Gaza, and to a large degree in the West Bank too, because there is no significant force acting to improve conditions for the people. Hamas' main interest is in preserving its power while amassing firepower, and it is willing to sacrifice lives to this end. The Israeli government is not offering any original ideas, and is taking a fairly passive stance toward Gaza. It certainly isn't overly concerned with Gazans' welfare. Egypt is trying to minimize the damage from Gaza, and international organizations are working at the margins, on a small scale. From time to time, conferences are held about support for Gaza, but they are mostly for show. In the absence of an "unseen hand" that will bring real change, this trap will continue to exact a heavy price.

A practical solution exists, however, and it is even fairly simple and inexpensive. The Gaza Strip is not the focus of any religious-ideological dispute, and is not situated in a strategic location. Its fundamental problems are terrible overcrowding, extreme poverty and continuous destruction of infrastructure. As

Emmanuel Sivan recently wrote (in Haaretz in Hebrew, May 18), this situation has been developing for more than 30 years. But it is now acute, because Gaza has become vulnerable to epidemics that could overwhelm its hospitals and to possible acts of despair.

There is a connection between this situation and the events of the past days and weeks – the clashes over the marches to the border fence and the round of fighting (rocket and mortar fire from Gaza and Israeli airstrikes in response). Israel is mistaken to think that military pressure will lead to a solution in Gaza. In the 11 years since Hamas came to power, the situation has only gotten worse, as has the negative reaction to Israel.

Israel has taken hardly any positive, constructive steps. Its responses have been to destroy infrastructure, tighten the blockade and use military firepower. I'm not saying that an economic solution will end the conflict, but the logic that was applied with the Americans' Marshall Plan following World War II should be applied here too: One should aid in the civil and economic rehabilitation of the enemy, and not only that of the allies (Germany received the third largest amount of American aid).

There are proposals, such as building an artificial island, that could bear fruit many years from now. But by then Gaza will have col-

lapsed. Practical steps must be taken first before weighing the viability of such grandiose projects.

Much more modest proposals, like easing the blockade and the facilitating the transit of goods, are insufficient. This sort of thing is heard all the time from politicians and pundits, but Israel cannot easily implement these steps – and, in any case, they would be a mere drop in the sea, given

If there were major construction projects underway in Gaza, the kind of protests we've seen lately would almost surely have been less massive.

the scale of the problems.

What solution would give incentives for greater calm and pave the way to a sustainable "hudna" – or long-term cease-fire? Israel could act behind the scenes to establish an international task force, without being part of it. This task force would bring together experts in fields like health and vital infrastructure and would include European countries acceptable to both sides (Britain, Germany and France, for example).

The task force's first objective would be to rebuild the health and sanitation systems in Gaza, improving water and sewage systems and ensuring that hospitals can function properly. These

countries have a wealth of experience with such systems in large urban areas, so progress could be seen in six to eight months, and this would help alleviate the humanitarian crisis that fueled the recent violence.

If there were major construction projects underway on the Gaza side of the fence, the kind of protests we've seen lately would almost surely have been less massive. If the task force is

successful, these countries could set up something akin to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to address infrastructure problems.

Such an international professional body could jumpstart a long list of short-range and long-range projects (like building an airport and developing the offshore gas field). As for the "security risks" involved, bear in mind that Hamas has already waged several rounds of warfare against Israel, fired rockets and dug tunnels despite the Israeli blockade of the past decade or more. Still, creative ways can be found to reduce these risks.

This task force could also

Chemi Shalev

GOP, Likud betray democracy

Donald Trump's lawyers admitted this week that they and the White House had lied when denying the president's involvement in the formulation of the statement about the June 2016 meeting between Donald Trump Jr. and other advisers with Russian representatives. At first they asserted that Trump had nothing to do with last year's statement that claimed that the meeting centered on adoption of Russian children, rather than, as it later transpired, a Russian offer for dirt on Hillary Clinton. A few weeks later they changed their story, saying that Trump had actually "weighed in" on the contents of the statement. But in a letter to Special Counsel Robert Mueller published by the New York Times this week, the same lawyers now admit that Trump "dictated" the misleading statement, word for word.

House Majority leader Kevin McCarthy, who seeks to replace Paul Ryan after his retirement as speaker, was asked twice about Trump's blatant reversal in a CNN interview on Sunday, and twice refused to respond. Instead, he derided the Mueller investigation and the media's fixation with it. We should concentrate on the president's economic achievements and his upcoming summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un instead, he suggested.

McCarthy knows that if he crosses Trump he will effectively scuttle his chances to replace Ryan. He is not alone: Fear of Trump's retribution and the wrath of his loyal Republican base paralyzes most of McCarthy's colleagues in the Senate and House of Representatives. They kept silent on Monday, when Trump asserted that he has the authority to pardon himself, a position that would turn him into a president who stands above the law, and some even applauded.

GOP enablers tell themselves that they are overlooking Trump's personal deficiencies in order to advance the conservative ideology they believe in, but most are allowing concern for their personal futures to erase their morals and conscience. The mirror image in Israel

is actually far worse, because Benjamin Netanyahu has shown his Likud colleagues time and time again the heavy price that is exacted from anyone who dares challenge him in public. It's enough for them to remember the fate of former top Likudniks Dan Meridor, Moshe Yaalon, Gideon Saar, Roni Milo and a host of others, as well as the long line of former security chiefs who confronted Netanyahu, who were either expelled from political life or were made into targets of his fans' abuse and hatred. They know full well that in his efforts to avoid prosecution, Netanyahu is undermining the rule of law, but they have internalized that silence is golden while enthusiastic support for the prime minister is an insurance policy that guarantees their future success.

The result, in both Israel and the United States, is that their respective ruling parties, Likud and GOP, have become nothing more than rubber stamps. They have turned into organizations in which flattery will get you everywhere, kowtowing is a sure-fire recipe for advancement and sycophants are generously rewarded. Their members have willingly relinquished any pretense of acting independently, reining in their leaders or influencing the votes and policies of the cabinets and legislatures that they ostensibly control.

In exchange for personal survival and accumulation of power, senior Republicans and members of the Likud betray their political and constitutional duty to serve as checks and balances. They are turning their backs on the democracy that enabled their election in the first place. The legislators among them are betraying their oaths to "protect and defend The Constitution," in Congress, and to "be loyal to the State of Israel and faithfully fulfill my mission," in the Knesset.

It's a slippery slope, of course. Ruling parties that ignore their leaders' clear-cut declarations of intent to stand above the law and the constitution are then crippled when sinister designs turn into reality. For the moment, their leaders enjoy the bounty of their capitulation but they eventually find it hard to escape conviction when facing the judgment of history.

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