

Israel's neo-Nazi gang: A symptom of a deeper malaise

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There is a genuinely disturbing element to the alleged discovery of a neo-Nazi gang of youth in Israel and one can understand how shocked many Jewish people will be. But it is necessary to rise above the sensational media reportage and often hysterical response of parties across the political spectrum in the Knesset and consider more broadly what it reveals about Israeli society.

The eight suspects are charged with causing bodily harm, illegal possession of weapons and denying the Holocaust. A ninth suspect has fled the country. Aged between 16 and 21, all immigrated to Israel as children from the former Soviet Union. Under the Israeli Law of Return, someone can claim automatic citizenship if a parent or grandparent is Jewish according to *halakha*, religious law.

Police discovered the gang of racist skinheads more than a year ago after investigating the desecration of two synagogues sprayed with swastikas in the Tel Aviv satellite of Petah Tikva and the beating and mugging of three religious students. Gang members wore Nazi tattoos. Their brutal physical attacks on foreign labourers from Asia, drug addicts, homosexuals, punks and 15 Orthodox Jews are recorded on film and in photographs. One Thai worker is stabbed and kicked until he loses consciousness. Gang members hit another man until he bleeds and force him to ask forgiveness of the Russian people for being a Jewish drug addict.

Police found knives, spiked balls, TNT, wires and detonators in the suspects' possession. They are reported as having discussed planning a murder. One photo shows a suspect holding an M16 rifle and a sign reading "Heil Hitler." Police identified the group leader as Eli Boanitov, 19. Computer experts determined they had contacts with neo-Nazi groups abroad including Russia's most extreme group, Format 18.

The arrests have prompted calls for harsh punishment to be meted out and changes to the Law of Return, from Interior Minister Meir Shetreet of Kadima and others. Proposals include barring prospective immigrants with no personal concrete connection to Judaism and making it in line with religious law by specifying that to be Jewish means having a Jewish mother.

Labour Knesset member Colette Avital has blocked with Zevulun Orlev, chairman of the right-wing National Union-National Religious Party to call for legislation allowing for the deportation of neo-Nazis and stripping them of their citizenship after serving a jail term.

Effi Eitam, the leader of the National Religious Party, has said he would propose a bill restricting the rights of non-Jews to come to Israel, even if their grandfathers are Jewish. "There are people who immigrate here and have no attachment to Judaism. Some of them even come as Christians, and not only do they not want to convert to Judaism, they also run a non-Jewish lifestyle and build churches," he

said. "The immigration to Israel of non-Jews who do not want to enlist in the army, coupled with the Arab population that lives here, leads to the blurring of the State of Israel's Jewish identity, and this needs to be corrected."

Calls for changes to immigration legislation have been opposed and prompted warnings that the entire Russian émigré population should not be stigmatised, by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Public Security Minister Avi Dichter, both of Kadima, and Yossi Beilin of Meretz-Yahad. But these figures share Eitam's concern with preserving the "Jewish character" of the State of Israel from an external threat. That is why they warn that an overreaction to a handful of neo-Nazis must not halt immigration from the former Soviet Union (FSU) or alienate those immigrants already in Israel.

Around 1.2 million immigrants from the FSU have come to Israel since 1991. The liberalisation of the Law of Return was not made for the altruistic reason of offering shelter to the potential victims of anti-Semitism, but out of a concern that without immigration Israel's Arabs population will at some point outnumber Jews.

Those calling for a clampdown on immigration argue that relaxing the definition of "Jewishness" has gone too far, with an estimated 250,000 to 330,000 immigrants arriving who are not Jewish, who have no sympathy for Zionism and are merely seeking to escape the economic collapse of the Soviet Union.

That this campaign has found its leadership in the National Union-NRP epitomises its reactionary character. Eitam is notorious for his call to expel "most of the Judea and Samaria [West Bank] Arabs" and to "remove Israeli Arabs"—which he describes as "a fifth column," "a group of traitors," a "cancer" and "an existential threat"—from the political system. He has simply discovered another "fifth column" in Israel's immigrant community.

If Eitam epitomises the reactionary concerns of one side of the debate, then deputy-prime minister and minister of strategic affairs Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu is his opposite number. He has warned against altering the Law of Return and said that it was "important to avoid a smear campaign and the vilification of an entire population of immigrants from the former Soviet Union."

He does so because his party is backed largely by FSU immigrants. Arguing against his opponents, he asked Israelis to "consider how many FSU immigrants are in elite units in the IDF [Israeli Defence Force]. Do people know that more than half of the IDF's snipers are FSU immigrants?"

Lieberman shares Eitam's aim of excluding Arabs from Israel, by redrawing the Green Line with the West Bank in such a way that a third of Arab Israelis would lose citizenship. In the present debate, he stressed that a more pressing problem than FSU immigrants was the

number of illegal workers and Sudanese—“ especially those who are not from genocide-hit regions.”

Should anyone believe that such considerations are the province of Israel’s far right, one should note that September 10 saw the release of the latest census by the Central Bureau of Statistics. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the report notes amongst other issues of concern that “of Israel’s 7.2 million population, 5,393,400 were Jews (75.8 percent), 1,413,300 Arabs (19.9 percent) and 309,900 others.” In 2006, the growth rate of Israel’s Jewish population “was 1.5 percent, while that of the Arab population was 2.6 percent” and among Muslims it “was 2.9 percent.”

The same overriding aim of maintaining a Jewish state also dominates liberal Zionists. Josh Freedman Berthoud for example, writing in the *Guardian* on September 10, begins by dismissing Ahmed Tibi of the Arab-Israeli party Ra’am Ta’al’s questioning “the justice of a law that allows those with no connection to Israel—such as those in the neo-Nazi cell—to become citizens, while native-born Palestinians are denied similar status.”

Berthoud claims that “Israel’s part in the prevention of the existence of a Palestinian state is another matter, another debate,” as is “the issue of whether Israeli Arabs are treated less well than new immigrants with no connection to Israel.” The problem, he insists, is that Eitam’s call to “allow only halachic [religious/observant] Jews into Israel” would be “a fundamental change to the nature of Judaism, which “has always been a fluid construct of religion, race, culture, tradition and self-identification.... As it stands, the one grandparent law allows for the full spectrum of Jewish identity to make a home in the Jewish state.”

The idea of Israel as a “home” for the Jews is in fact the central problem afflicting Israeli society—and is ultimately responsible for creating the political and social environment that gave rise to the peculiar phenomenon of neo-Nazi gang activity.

The foundation of the State of Israel institutionalises the worst forms of xenophobia. Israel came into existence through the forcible expulsion of the Palestinians. Its preservation has entailed not only the ongoing brutality against the occupants of the Occupied Territories, but also preventing the Arab Diaspora from having the right to “return” and relegating the one and a half million Arab Israelis to the status of second-class citizens.

This is the fundamental source of both racism and racial violence in Israel. Amidst the generally worthless commentary on the neo-Nazis, Moshe Zimmerman, head of the German History department at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, notes on Ynetnews.com, “Israeli society is replete with racism and violence regardless of this [neo-Nazi] group” and is directed against “the Arab population, whether in the occupied territories or in Israel proper” as well as towards foreign workers.

He asks perceptively, “On a more fundamental level, isn’t the ‘working assumption’ of Israeli society, which talks about a ‘Jewish state,’ about a preference to Jews to the point of undermining the rights of non-Jews.... Isn’t the attitude of Israeli society to ethnic Jewish origins, that is, Jewish ethnocentricity and racism, an indirect or direct reason for the scary phenomenon we’re discussing now?”

Ethnocentrism does not impact on Arabs alone. The assertion of Jewishness as the criterion for citizenship has also impacted negatively on Russian émigrés, making Israel’s young immigrant population yet one more incendiary factor in a society already rent by divisions: between Jew and Arab, the religious and the secular, Ashkenazim and Sephardim—and above all between a super-rich and

militarist elite and an increasingly financially insecure and often impoverished working class.

Despite being brought over to safeguard the ethno-religious character of the state, FSU immigrants are met with accusations that they are either not Jewish at all or at least not genuine Zionists concerned with Israel’s fate—only economic migrants seeking to exploit Israel’s benefit system. They provide a useful scapegoat and often suffer most as a result of the generally deteriorating economic situation and the constant erosion of wages, working conditions and cuts to the welfare system.

The often appalling social situation facing Russian immigrants no doubt contributed to the explosive rage demonstrated by the neo-Nazi youth gang. Many immigrants live in large communities in Israel’s cities in which they have little interaction with other Israelis—viewed with suspicion by other Israelis and the police.

Amos Hermon, head of the Jewish Agency’s task force to combat anti-Semitism, told the *Jerusalem Post*, “We know from our research that these kids suffer from frustration, a lack of integration into Israeli society...some of their aggressions come out through these kinds of terrible things”.

Maxim Reider, a freelance journalist for the Russian-language media, said that he disputed media claims of widespread Nazi sympathies. While he in no way sympathised with the eight accused, he believed that the alienation of Russian youth had socio-economic roots: “The parents [of these children] have lost their status since moving here. They have lost their self-confidence and are raising their children in an empty space. They want to fit in here but are told all the time that they are not Jews.”

Genady Borchevsqi of the Immigrant Absorption Department, who acts as an official representative for the FSU community, said that Petah Tikva was like an “apartheid state, with much racism against the Russian immigrant population.”

The emergence of neo-Nazi sympathies amongst Russian immigrants is only a particularly diseased expression of how the nationalist ideology of Zionism is antithetical to the interests of all workers in Israel, Jewish, Arab or Christian, first, second or third generation. Far from offering the basis for overcoming anti-Semitism, the crimes committed by the Zionist elite against the Arab masses and the creation of a state based on religious exclusivism have led to its recrudescence—even within Israel’s borders.

Just as with all other forms of racism and xenophobia, the only basis on which the scourge of anti-Semitism can be ended is through a turn by the Jewish people themselves to the international culture of democracy and socialism. This will provide the impulse for the forging of a unified political movement of the working class throughout the Middle East and the overcoming of all national and ethnic divisions.



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