

**Liberalism as Interpretive Frame in Israel/Palestine: Justifying
Occupation and Antidemocratic Politics Within the Settler *Demos***

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Introduction

In late March of last year, an extraordinary event unfolded at kibbutz Sde Boker. The kibbutz, known as Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion’s desert home and gravesite, was repurposed for a summit with the Israeli, Egyptian, Bahraini, Moroccan, US, and Emirati foreign ministers. With commitments made to construct a new “regional security architecture,” the summit highlighted the Abraham Accords’ ongoing transformation from a shotgun wedding arranged by the Trump Administration into more durable, normalized relations.¹ The Negev Summit also came shortly after then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s meeting in Egypt with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, *de facto* leader of the UAE.²

This sequence of public diplomacy was a remarkable testament to Israel’s new role as a diplomatic partner for Sunni-led, authoritarian Arab regimes in the Middle East. Israeli leaders have long visited Jordan and Egypt—historically the only two countries in the region Israel with which Israel had diplomatic relations.³ But the Sde Boker summit was a shift, an “unprecedented” public gathering of leaders from Arab countries in Israel.⁴ That these leaders were comfortable publicly meeting at Sde Boker, with its obvious affinity to Ben-Gurion and the Zionist project more broadly, underscores the shifting political reality in the region. The summit suggested that Israel was, for the first time, being publicly viewed by key powers in the region as a neighbor and partner—not an adversary.

Yet amidst the public diplomacy was the glaring absence of the Palestinians. While those gathered in the Negev gestured towards the two-state solution, there was no new Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, no Israeli commitments on Palestinian rights, and no indication that any such progress was a prerequisite for continued Israeli-Arab diplomatic partnership.⁵

This new diplomatic reality, created by the Abraham Accords, is more than just a departure from the Arab League’s two-decade old policy making normalization with Israel contingent on a two-state solution.⁶ Rather, the Accords are also facilitating a reformulation of the relationship between Zionism and liberalism. Historically, liberalism in Israel was constructed upon the commitment to a Jewish *and* democratic Israel. It therefore imagined the occupation—a system of antidemocratic rule over millions of Palestinians—as an existential threat.⁷ Yet as I argue, the Abraham Accords are being utilized by Israeli-Jewish political leaders to advance a new liberal

¹ Lazar Berman and Aaron Boxerman, “Announcing Permanent Regional Forum, Israel, Arab States Laud Alliance, Decry Terror,” *The Times of Israel*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/announcing-permanent-regional-forum-israel-arab-states-laud-alliance-decry-terror/>.

² Jonathan Lis, “Israel’s Bennett, UAE Crown Prince and Egypt’s Sissi Hold Summit to Boost Ties,” *Haaretz*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-bennett-uae-crown-prince-and-egypt-s-sissi-hold-summit-to-boost-ties-1.10690387>.

³ Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979 with Egypt and in 1994 with Jordan. Until the Abraham Accords, these were the only countries in the region that had full normalization agreements with Israel.

⁴ Berman and Boxerman, “Announcing Permanent Regional Forum, Israel, Arab States Laud Alliance, Decry Terror.”

⁵ Patrick Kingsley and Laura Jakes, “To Palestinians, the Summit Is Another Betrayal,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/03/28/world/israel-arab-nations-meeting/to-palestinians-the-summit-is-another-betrayal>.

⁶ Ahmed, “Remembering the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative,” *Middle East Monitor* (blog), March 28, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210328-remembering-the-2002-arab-peace-initiative/>.

⁷ See for example: Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2012), 17–20. See also: Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53–56, 79–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195340686.001.0001>.

and Zionist narrative that is reconciled to the concept of permanent Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza.

In this paper, I employ a discourse analysis of Bennett and Yair Lapid's public remarks during their visits to the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco and with Emirati, Bahraini, and Moroccan leaders both in these countries and in Israel.⁸ I show how these Israeli leaders used the Abraham Accords to advance a narrative that uses liberalism as an interpretive frame to rationalize ongoing occupation. Bennett and Lapid frame the Accords as a triumph of cooperation, free trade, and moderation against the supposed threat of Irani and Palestinian religious extremism and violence. Their narrative uses liberal frames to implicitly justify the occupation as necessary to protect emergent regional cooperation. In so doing, this narrative disaggregates liberalism from democracy, using the former to rationalize the manifestly antidemocratic reality of occupation and Israeli control over Palestinian livelihood and land.

Yet separating liberalism from democracy in this way comes at significant cost. As I show, Bennett and Lapid's project bears meaningful affinity with the new, Netanyahu-led Israeli government's efforts to justify their 'judicial coup' through liberal discourses. The 'judicial coup' is a multi-pronged legislative effort led by Netanyahu and his allies that would politicize judicial appointments and weaken or destroy judicial review in Israel.⁹ I therefore argue that the presently unfolding crisis of Israel's democratic institutions should be understood in relation to the previous coalition's efforts to use liberal frames to justify antidemocratic control over Palestinians. The use of liberal frames by both Lapid and Bennett and present far-right leaders provide a key case study into how liberalism is utilized by settler-colonial regimes more broadly to justify antidemocratic politics. Rather than seeing liberalism and democracy as co-constituted, I use this case from Israel/Palestine to show how liberalism can be used to project an imagined future bereft of Indigenous people onto the present, thereby rationalizing and invisibilizing realities of expulsion, dispossession, and antidemocratic politics within the settler *demos*.

To demonstrate how liberalism is used in this way, I divide this paper into four sections. In part one, I begin with a brief analysis of the political context regarding contemporary liberal Zionist narratives. In part two, I explain my methodology and discuss how liberalism can be understood as an interpretive frame. In part three, I analyze Bennett and Lapid's remarks. In part four, I consider the affinities between Bennett and Lapid's narrative interventions and the use of liberalism by right-wing Israeli-Jewish leaders to defend the current 'judicial coup.' I conclude by considering how liberal frames construct futurities that justify violent antidemocratic politics in the present.

Part I: Liberal Zionism, Occupation, and the Abraham Accords

For over a decade, Zionist leaders in both Israel and the Diaspora have publicly warned how the occupation threatens Jewish democracy. Liberal Zionist scholar Peter Beinart wrote in 2012 that permanent Israeli control over the West Bank would transform Israel into an antidemocratic apartheid state.¹⁰ An array of Israeli-Jewish notaries—including former Israeli

⁸ The Trump Administration also pushed for a fourth normalization agreement, between the US and Sudan. There has been significantly less public dialogue between Sudan and Israel, nor have there been public, high-level diplomatic visits by officials from either country to the other.

⁹ Amir Tibon, "Netanyahu's Coup for Dummies: Israel's Constitutional Crisis, Explained," *Haaretz*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-02-22/ty-article/.premium/netanyahus-coup-for-dummies-israels-constitutional-crisis-explained/00000186-743d-d403-a5cf-75ffa3e90000>.

¹⁰ Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, 20.

Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert, former Meretz leader Shulamit Aloni, author AB Yehoshua, former Shin Bet director Ami Ayalon, and former Labor politician Yossi Sarid—all described the occupation as an apartheid regime.¹¹ Their analyses frame the occupation as an illiberal stain that threatens a Jewish democracy, which itself can be preserved only through partition.

Yet public support for partition is receding: Israeli-Jewish support for the two-state solution dropped from 70% in 2007 to 40% in 2021.¹² Under the Lapid-Bennett coalition, Israel's more progressive Zionist political parties—namely, Meretz and the Israeli Labor Party—sat in a government led by Bennett, the former head of the *Yesha* (West Bank settlements) council, that was also legally committed to maintaining the occupation.¹³ The willingness of Meretz and Labor leaders to enter into such partnerships suggests a willingness by left-wing Zionist politicians to deprioritize partition and instead embrace (however reluctantly) the apartheid status quo.

The Abraham Accords provide an opportunity for Israeli leaders to use liberal frames to justify permanent Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza. The Accords both signify and advance the marginalization of the Palestinian cause from the regional diplomatic stage; this has critical importance for how liberalism is used to justify Jewish sovereignty over the whole of Israel/Palestine. In an essay on “colonial completion” and the temporality of settler-colonialism, Elizabeth Strakosch argues that settler-colonial polities can (and, historically speaking, do) embrace a more “universal,” liberal politics once the erasure or removal of Indigenous people from the polity is imagined to be complete.¹⁴ This invests settler projects with a particular temporality, in which an imagined futurity of completion is utilized to both justify and erase the present realities of anti-Indigenous dispossession.¹⁵ As Palestinian scholar Raef Zreik notes, Zionism is best understood as a national liberation movement instituted through the practices of settler-colonialism.¹⁶ Zionism's particular arrangement is one in which ongoing practices of settler-colonial expansion are justified through discourses of Jewish national liberation.¹⁷

To be sure, the presence of millions of Palestinians in Israeli-controlled territory highlights how the Zionist settler-colonial project is far from “complete.” But in the realm of regional diplomacy, the Abraham Accords and Negev Summit signal how major Arab states are willing to sideline their advocacy of the Palestinian national cause. For the first time since 1948, Arab

¹¹ Chris McGreal, “Amnesty Says Israel Is an Apartheid State. Many Israeli Politicians Agree,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2022, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/05/amnesty-israel-apartheid-israeli-politicians-agree>. Major human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and B'Tselem, have also labeled Israel an apartheid regime. See: “Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity” (Amnesty International, February 1, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MDE1551412022ENGLISH.pdf>. “A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid,” B'Tselem, accessed March 28, 2022, https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid.

¹² Tovah Lazaroff, “With Only 40% Support, Israelis Still Think 2 States Best Option - Poll,” *The Jerusalem Post*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/with-only-40-percent-support-israelis-still-think-2-states-best-option-poll-675838>.

¹³ Haggai Matar, “Israel's Likely New Government, Explained,” *+972 Magazine*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.972mag.com/israel-new-government-explained/>.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Strakosch, “Beyond Colonial Completion: Arendt, Settler Colonialism and the End of Politics,” in *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage* (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 21.

¹⁵ Strakosch, 21.

¹⁶ Raef Zreik, “When Does a Settler Become a Native? (With Apologies to Mamdani),” *Constellations* 23, no. 3 (2016): 358–59.

¹⁷ Zreik, 359.

regimes are willing to engage publicly with the Israeli state, without preconditions regarding the Palestinian cause.¹⁸

Undermining Palestinian identity, sovereignty, and national organization has been a longstanding policy goal of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, one that has oftentimes been implemented through military force.¹⁹ Israeli military hero (and former IDF chief, Minister of Defense, and Foreign Minister) Moshe Dayan notoriously argued in a 1977 Knesset debate that the Israeli military should be committed to ensuring that no Palestinians in the occupied territories “declare himself as... Palestinian, and establish for himself here a Palestinian nucleus.”²⁰ The army, he further argued, should be singularly responsible for preventing the return of Palestinian refugees and ensuring the sale of Palestinian lands to Jews (to facilitate settlement growth).²¹ Although Dayan’s comments caused a minor uproar in Israel at the time, they are suggestive of how Israeli military and foreign policy are committed to undermining Palestinian identity, national organization, livelihood, and rights in order to secure Jewish sovereignty and settler-colonial expansion.²²

Of course, Israel has *not* succeeded in this project of violent erasure. The increasing support for Palestinian rights in the United States, the 2021 Palestinian uprising (which occurred simultaneously in Israel proper, the West Bank, and Gaza), and even Israel’s own begrudging recognition of (extremely limited) Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank through the Oslo Accords are all testament to the endurance of the Palestinian national cause and movement.²³

However, in the realm of interstate regional diplomacy specifically, Israel has been enormously successful in marginalizing Palestinian rights and self-determination (insofar as Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza is no longer an obstacle to normalized relations with key powers in the Arab world).²⁴ The Accords signal how Arab countries are willing to have public relations with Israel without any meaningful consideration of Palestinian rights, nor do they feel compelled to include or consult the Palestinian Authority in their public diplomacy with Israel. I therefore argue that this marginalization of Palestinians from the regional diplomatic arena allows Israel to embrace a more liberal regional foreign policy, since it is in this political realm that Zionist leaders can imagine the process of “colonial completion” as most nearly finished. As I demonstrate, Israeli diplomatic partnerships with Arab countries are reframed by Israeli leaders as evidence of the country’s continued liberal commitments, while petitions for Palestinian self-

¹⁸ Amr Hamzawy, “The Negev Summit’s Participants Had Wildly Different Goals,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/06/negev-summit-s-participants-had-wildly-different-goals-pub-86826>.

¹⁹ See, for example: Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*, First Picador paperback edition. (New York: Picador, 2021), 8–14.

²⁰ Uri Davis and Walter Lehn, “And the Fund Still Lives: The Role of the Jewish National Fund in the Determination of Israel’s Land Policies,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 33.

²¹ Davis and Lehn, 33.

²² Davis and Lehn, 33.

²³ Amjad Iraqi, “How Palestinian Resistance Tore down the Green Line Long Ago,” *+972 Magazine*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.972mag.com/green-line-palestinian-resistance/>. Lydia Saad, “Democrats’ Sympathies in Middle East Shift to Palestinians,” Gallup, March 16, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/472070/democrats-sympathies-middle-east-shift-palestinians.aspx>.

²⁴ While Israel has had diplomatic relations with Egypt and Jordan for decades, the Abraham Accords violated the Arab League’s commitment, made in 2002, to condition normalization on a two-state solution. The Accords refuted the classic “land-for-peace” framework that was a staple of previous Israeli-Arab negotiations. Akiva Eldar, “Twenty Years Since Israel’s Biggest Missed Opportunity,” *Haaretz*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-twenty-years-since-israel-s-biggest-missed-opportunity-1.10701869>.

determination are recast as the demands of religious extremists or terrorists who threaten the regional order and must therefore be controlled through occupation.

Part II: Liberalism as Interpretive Frame & Methodology

This study uses Menaka Philips' reading of liberalism as an interpretive frame that structures political judgements. Rather than viewing liberalism solely as a political ideology or an "actor's category" (as Duncan Bell argues), Philips uses debates in contemporary feminist theory to show how liberalism is utilized as an interpretive frame in which theoretical judgements are routed through a liberal/non-liberal binary.²⁵ Liberalism can then be imposed onto political events to structure our understanding of them. As Philips notes, utilizing liberalism in this way reduces a plurality of events to either liberal or non-liberal: the "investment in liberalism" amongst feminist scholars, she contends, "may no longer be illuminating the politics of our time but rather may be committing us to certain narratives and objectives."²⁶ Philips shows how attachment to liberalism as interpretive frame obscures the diversity within and between political phenomena. Her intervention suggests that relying on liberalism as interpretive frame may ossify or thin the theoretical content of liberalism in order to utilize it as a frame that can justify judgements about political phenomena—or rationalize these phenomena themselves.

Philips' approach carries a critical utility for considering how liberalism is used by Israeli-Jewish leaders to justify occupation and antidemocratic politics more broadly. Her theory points towards considering how liberalism is used as an interpretive device not only by theorists, but by political leaders and within public discourse more broadly. In these settings, liberalism is not emptied of all meaning. Rather, positioning liberalism as interpretive frame reminds us how liberalism can and is deployed by political actors to structure public discourse, opinion, and perception of given events.

Such an approach is of particular resonance in Israel/Palestine, where there has been longstanding concern and debate about how the occupation threatens the viability of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state (see examples cited in part I). Within these debates, liberalism is often utilized by Israeli-Jewish scholars to show how occupation threatens Jewish democracy and the Zionist project more broadly. Chaim Gans, for instance, advocates for an "egalitarian Zionism" that makes a normative distinction between pre- and post-1967, framing post-1967 "wrongs" (eg, the occupation) as abuses of what is otherwise a morally just Zionist project.²⁷ In such a framing, the occupation is positioned as a threat to the liberal Zionist endeavor. In such Israeli-Jewish settings, liberalism becomes a heuristic device through which the occupation is judged by Israeli-Jewish political observers to be a threat to the broader project of Zionist settler-colonialism and Jewish democracy.

The key innovation by Bennett and Lapid, therefore, is to deploy liberal frames to justify, rather than undermine, occupation. As I show subsequently, their use of liberal frames is cautious and contingent. Neither use the term "liberal" in their public remarks, instead utilizing the rhetoric of openness, moderation, free trade, and cooperation. Neither do Bennett and Lapid directly state that occupation is compatible with Jewish democracy. Rather, their rhetoric positions occupation

²⁵ Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire, Reordering the World* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400881024>. Menaka Philips, "Feminist Preoccupations: Liberalism as Method in Debates Concerning Gender and Culture," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 4 (June 2019): 961–62, 969, 972, <https://doi.org/10.1086/702033>.

²⁶ Philips, "Feminist Preoccupations," 973.

²⁷ Chaim Gans, *A Political Theory for the Jewish People* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 144–49.

as a necessary project to safeguard the emerging regional order constructed upon the Abraham Accords. The Accords themselves are the most significant public evidence available to Israeli-Jewish leaders that openness, trade, and regional cooperation are possible without abandoning Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza. It is for this reason that I focus on Lapid and Bennett's public remarks with and to Abraham Accords' signatory states.

That an attachment to liberalism is compatible with antidemocratic rule is a feature of liberal thought and politics—not an aberration. Bell shows how 19th century British liberalism gained inspiration from British settler-colonies, while Jennifer Pitts identifies the contradictions of French and English liberal thinkers of the same time who combined a “commitment to the values of equal human dignity, freedom, the rule of law, and accountable, representative government” and a “belief in human unity and a recognition of cultural, social, and political variation,” with support for imperialism.²⁸ Historically speaking, liberal commitments to egalitarianism, pluralism, and rights have been bounded, conditioned, and need not preclude support for antidemocratic rule (typically justified in settler-colonial contexts by racializing the non-settler population).²⁹

While Bell and Pitts focus on liberal theorists, their interventions highlight how liberalism can be used to justify antidemocratic rule in settler states more broadly. 19th century British liberal thinkers framed settler-colonial projects as justification for British imperial rule; in this framework, Bell notes, Indigenous people were “pictured as incapable, as immature, lacking in both rationality and competence, and thus unworthy of political or social equality” in comparison to their settler counterparts.³⁰ One might also consider how J.S. Mill conditions liberty on an individual or population's ability to reason as a paradigmatic representation of how liberalism, despite its universal promise, renders freedom and self-rule contingent upon rationality.³¹ In this framework, it is the white European whose judgement about the rationality of another community carries political weight; this framework invests liberalism with a “form of *Herrenvolk* ethics.”³² Lapid and Bennett are not theorists, but they too use liberalism to reconcile a racialized, Jewish *demos* to a system of antidemocratic rule over Palestinians. They position occupation over Palestinians as necessary to uphold regional cooperation.

For this paper, I include remarks made by both Bennett and Lapid during their visits to Abraham Accords signatory states, and during the official visits of Abraham Accords signatory states foreign ministers to Israel. Given the key role of the US in brokering the Abraham Accords, I also include remarks made by Lapid and Bennett during President Joe Biden's summer 2022 visit to Israel.

I focus on *both* Bennett and Lapid for three reasons. First, Bennett only visited Bahrain and the UAE (while Lapid also visited Morocco). Second, the leaders come from different ideological backgrounds.³³ Third and most importantly, the two both served as Prime Minister within the same coalition government: Bennett from June 2021 until June 2022, and Lapid from June through the end of December of 2022 (whereupon he was replaced by Netanyahu, having lost to him during the November 2022 election). When either Lapid or Bennett was not serving as Prime Minister, the other served as Alternate Prime Minister; the two were legally required to coordinate on

²⁸ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, Course Book (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1–4. Bell, *Reordering the World*, 33, 36, 38–41.

²⁹ Bell, *Reordering the World*, 39.

³⁰ Bell, 39.

³¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 10.

³² Bell, *Reordering the World*, 39.

³³ Bennett leads the far-right, nationalist *Yamina* party while Lapid leads the centrist, liberal Zionist *Yesh Atid* party.

government policy as per their coalition agreement.³⁴ Lapid also served as Foreign Minister during Bennett's term as Prime Minister, and continued in this role even after he assumed the premiership. Lapid and Bennett thus both functioned as national leaders. Bennett lacked the popular support most Prime Ministers typically enjoy (given *Yamina's* small size) while Lapid anchored the coalition government but lacked the formal authority of the Prime Minister's Office for the coalition's first year in power.³⁵

My analysis considers how these two leaders describe Israeli relations with Abraham Accords signatory nations.³⁶ I focus on press conferences and statements made by the two leaders during their trips and during the visits of foreign leaders, the texts of which were distributed by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Prime Minister's Office. To be sure, this is a limited subset of all of Bennett and Lapid's remarks on the Abraham Accords. This study also not have the scope to fully consider how these leaders' rhetoric is situated within broader historical and contemporary Israeli-Jewish uses of liberalism to justify Jewish sovereignty over the whole of historic Palestine. Rather, drawing on Shaul Shenhav, I focus on how Lapid and Bennett use the Abraham Accords to tell a novel story about regional cooperation that, using the rhetoric of liberalism, rationalizes the present reality of the occupation. To use Shenhav's words, Bennett and Lapid's rhetoric functions as a narrative that "situate[s] contemporary events in a broad temporal context of social experience and involve[s] the individual in a story of collective agency."³⁷ Bennett and Lapid use liberalism to reconcile Jewish democracy to the reality of ongoing, permanent Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza.

Part III: The Abraham Accords, Liberalism, Jewish Sovereignty

"The global struggle is between moderate and extreme," said Lapid during his remarks alongside Bahraini foreign minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani. "Together with all our friends in the Gulf, we are leading a brave coalition of moderates who are looking ahead to create a prosperous future of stability and tolerance."³⁸ Lapid's comments frame the Abraham Accords as the foundation of a "moderate" political alliance; they present cooperation and tolerance as means towards material plenty, security, and as ends unto themselves. Cooperation signifies the political moderation Lapid idealizes.

Lapid consistently lionizes cooperation as the foundation of a moderate political order that supports economic innovation and security. In Morocco, he stated that nascent Israeli-Moroccan relations were "a pragmatic alternative to religious extremism."³⁹ Cooperation thus denotes not

³⁴ Rina Bassist, "Israel's New Government Explained," *Al-Monitor*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/israels-new-government-explained>.

³⁵ Shalom Lipner, "Doing It His Way: How Naftali Bennett Could Beat the Odds and Wind Up Transforming Israel" (Atlantic Council, December 2021), 2, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Doing-It-His-Way-v5.pdf>.

³⁶ Bennett and Lapid are not the only senior Israeli officials to meet with Arab leaders: Defense Minister Benny Gantz and President Isaac Herzog have also met with signatories of the Abraham Accords. But given the limited scope of this project, I excluded their remarks to focus on Israel's top political leadership.

³⁷ Shaul R. Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2015), 11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203109083>.

³⁸ "FM Lapid and Bahraini FM Abdullatif Bin Rashid Al Zayani Hold Joint Press Conference" (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 30, 2021), <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/fm-lapid-and-bahraini-fm-abdullatif-bin-rashid-al-zayani-hold-joint-press-conference-30-september-2021>.

³⁹ "Mesibat Eitoneyim im Sar Ha-Chutz Yair Lapid B'Morocco (Press Conference with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid in Morocco)" (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 12, 2021), https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/press_conference_with_fm_lapid.

simply international partnership generally, but partnership with a clear geopolitical goal. In these discourses, Arab-Israeli cooperation is placed in contradistinction to the supposed unreasonableness of religious extremists—likely referring to both Iran and the Palestinians. But Lapid’s rhetoric goes further, framing cooperation as a founding value of both Israel and the UAE. At the opening of the Israeli consulate in Dubai, Lapid argued that

Here in Dubai, out of the desert, sprang forth a smart, educated nation with incredible economic and technological abilities. In Israel, people who returned to their land after thousands of years, created the start-up nation. Brought to the world drip irrigation and cherry tomatoes, Waze and the USB drive, translation software and the x-ray pill. All these inventions come from one skill: The ability to cooperate.⁴⁰

Here, the defining ideal of both Zionism and Emirati nationalism is nothing less than cooperation itself. Questionable historical accuracy aside, his comments frame Israel (a Jewish state ruled by representative government) and the UAE (an autocratic Islamic emirate) as ideological partners. The term “liberal” is never explicitly invoked. But in emphasizing the centrality of cooperation across political and national difference, these discourses center a notion of pluralistic partnership that depict the Abraham Accords as an open and equitable political alliance.

Lapid and Bennett use the virtue of cooperation to position the Abraham Accords as a counter to Irani and Palestinian claims. In Bahrain, Bennett stated that he was “arriving from Israel with a spirit of goodwill, cooperation, and of standing together in the face of shared challenges.”⁴¹ In his joint statement with the Bahraini monarch, Bennett noted that diplomatic relations were needed to “address regional challenges, including nuclear threats, terrorist activity, religious extremism, poverty, and social challenges.”⁴² Although no nationalities are directly named in the statement, the mention of “nuclear threats, terrorist activity, [and] religious extremism” serves as an implicit reference to both Iran and Palestinian organizations such as Hamas.⁴³

To be sure, Palestinians are never mentioned by name by either Lapid or Bennett during their visits. This is one of the key silences in their discourse. But this silence is telling. Given the significance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to regional politics, the lack of mention of the Palestinians suggests that a formal acknowledgement of Palestinian self-determination remains misaligned with Bennett and Lapid’s project. Their rejection of Iran is explicit (given the reference to “nuclear threats”). But their framing also positions Palestinians as violent, unreasonable actors.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ “FM Lapid Inaugurates Consulate General of Israel in Dubai” (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 30, 2021), <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/fm-lapid-inaugurates-consulate-general-of-israel-in-dubai-30-june-2021>.

⁴¹ “Divrei Rosh HaMemshalah Bennett v’Yoresh Ha’Atzar v’Rosh Memshelet Bahrain Salman ben Hamad al-Khalifa b’Petach Pgishatam (Remarks of Prime Minister Bennett and Prime Minister of Bahrain Salman ben Hamad al-Khalifa at the Opening of their Meeting)” (Prime Minister’s Office, February 15, 2022), https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/event_bahrain_150222.

⁴² “Joint Statement: PM Bennett Visits the Kingdom of Bahrain” (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 15, 2022), <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/joint-statement-pm-bennett-visits-the-kingdom-of-bahrain-15-feb-2022>.

⁴³ Consider Bennett’s comments in November about Hamas, framing them as a “radical Islamic group.” Naftali Bennett בנט [@naftalibennett], “Hamas Is a Radical Islamic Group That Targets Innocent Israelis & Seeks Israel’s Destruction. I Welcome the UK’s Intention to Declare Hamas a Terrorist Organization in Its Entirety — Because That’s Exactly What It Is. Thank You to My Friend @BorisJohnson for Your Leadership.” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 19, 2021, <https://twitter.com/naftalibennett/status/1461615166362210304>.

⁴⁴ The fact that the UAE and Bahrain, in particular, are both religious Islamic states that have variously supported extremist violence suggests that Bennett and Lapid’s rhetoric is referencing Irani and Palestinian actions—assuming that their discourse is not understood as a critique of their new diplomatic partners.

This rhetorical move is facilitated by the fact that Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas has decried the Accords.⁴⁵ While Israel forges a cooperative regional order, the Palestinians' intransigence can be utilized to rationalize continued occupation and exclusion from said order. Lapid and Bennett do not directly foreclose the possibility of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. Indeed, the only direct mention of the Palestinians in the discourse reviewed was by Lapid during Biden's summer 2022 visit to the region, in which Lapid stated that Israel was sending "to all the nations of the region, including of course the Palestinians, a message of peace."⁴⁶

But "peace" in this context is quickly defined as partnership predicated upon Palestinian acquiescence to Israeli terms. While speaking with Biden, Lapid added a disclaimer to his "message of peace," stating that while "Israel wants peace and believes in peace. We will never yield an inch of security. We are obligated to be cautious at every step. But to any country, any nation that wants peace and normalization with us, we say: Ahalan wasahalan, shalom, peace."⁴⁷ By linking peace to both Israeli security and normalization, Lapid suggests that for Israel, peace can only occur on its own terms—there is no mention of compromise here. We might also wonder about the relationship between security and land in Lapid's statement; how security, when attached to the term "never yield an inch," is a subtextual reference to Jewish control over the whole of Israel/Palestine. Lapid welcomes peace with Palestinians, so long as it involves political normalization and the fulfilling of Israel's security and territorial demands.

This is not a novel framing of peace with Palestinians: there is significant precedent of Israel using security demands as a precursor to restrict Palestinian sovereignty. During the 2000 Camp David summit, when Israel and the Palestinian Authority engaged in "final status" negotiations, Israel (in the name of security) refused to cede control of West Bank airspace or allow a Palestinian military.⁴⁸ Israeli security was a pretext to severely limit the scope of any potential Palestinian sovereignty. Absent Palestinian agreement to Israeli terms, continued Israeli rule over the Palestinian territories is implicitly justified as necessary to counter the "extremism" which Lapid and Bennet position as a threat to both Jewish sovereignty and the new regional order.

Cooperation also supports the expansion of regional free trade and technological progress. Bennett and Lapid emphasized the importance of trade and technological development in nearly every remark they made during their visits. "Civilian, economic, business, and trade cooperation between the two countries can be strengthened to secure peace and create prosperity which benefits both peoples," said Bennett's joint statement with his Bahraini counterpart.⁴⁹ During his visit to the UAE, Bennett made a point of meeting with the Emirati ministers of culture and of industry and advanced technology.⁵⁰ In Morocco, Lapid argued that the Abraham Accords offered, "in the face of the circle of extremism and death...not only an ideological alternative but also economics, jobs for young people, entry into areas of technological innovation."⁵¹ Trade and technological

⁴⁵ "Israel Normalisation Deals 'Violation of Just and Lasting' Peace," *Al Jazeera*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/25/abbas-normalisation-deals-violation-of-just-and-lasting-peace>.

⁴⁶ "PM Yair Lapid's Remarks alongside President of the United States Joe Biden" (Prime Minister's Office, July 14, 2022), https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke_joint_statements140722.

⁴⁷ "PM Yair Lapid's Remarks alongside President of the United States Joe Biden."

⁴⁸ Dennis Ross, *The Missing Piece: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 702–3.

⁴⁹ "JOINT STATEMENT."

⁵⁰ "Prime Minister Naftali Bennett Concludes His Visit to the UAE" (Prime Minister's Office, December 13, 2021), https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_flight131221.

⁵¹ "Mesibat Eitoneyim im Sar Ha-Chutz Yair Lapid B'Morocco (Press Conference with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid in Morocco)."

development are the material basis of Israeli-Arab cooperation.⁵² Narratively, they serve as the material anchor for the story of regional cooperation Bennett and Lapid are telling.

Economic trade and cooperation are hardly equivalent to individual rights, the rule of law, and representative government—which Pitts argues are critical liberal commitments. Indeed, Lapid and Bennett did not ever invoke the language of rights, freedom, or democracy—except, notably, when speaking alongside President Biden.⁵³ Instead, their narrative emphasizes pluralism and humanism by portraying cooperation, moderation, and free trade as the precursor to prosperity and technological progress. In effect, these leaders used pluralism as a substitute for the rhetoric of democracy and freedom.⁵⁴ Within their discourse, it is not the occupation that directly threatens liberal progress, but rather extremism and intransigence to cooperation on Israel’s terms. Occupation remains an antidemocratic project. But it is no longer necessarily an illiberal one, insofar as it is construed as necessary to counter the violent extremism that jeopardizes cooperation and trade.

Finally, the ideals of cooperation, development, trade, and reasonableness create a distinction between Israel’s new, “pragmatic,” regional partners on the one side, and Palestinians and Iran on the other. Framing Palestinians as either religious extremists or politically intransigent positions them as unreasonable. This effort by Lapid and Bennett resonates with the long history within the liberal tradition of justifying imperial (or otherwise antidemocratic) rule on the basis of a population’s supposed irrationality or incapacity for self-government.⁵⁵ By describing Palestinians as extreme, intransigent, or otherwise irrational, Bennett and Lapid’s rhetoric effectively undermines multiple segments of the Palestinian national movement: Hamas is dismissed as religiously extreme while the Palestinian Authority’s consistent criticism of the Abraham Accords can be framed as uncooperative. Bennett and Lapid draw on liberal frames that emphasize the importance of reason for self-determination to position the occupation as a system of Israeli rule over irrational Palestinians. Within Lapid and Bennett’s discourse, the liberal framework in which freedom is contingent on rationality thereby becomes further justification for occupation.

Part IV: Discussion and Implications

Bennett and Lapid therefore use three key liberal frames to justify occupation: cooperation and political openness; trade and economic development; and reason/reasonableness. Cooperation, described by Lapid as a cornerstone of Emirati nationalism and Zionism, is necessary for both technological progress and pluralistic (regional) partnership. Trade and economic development, meanwhile, are produced through cooperation and provide a material grounding to said cooperation. Finally, supposed Palestinian extremism is used to create a self-fulfilling prophecy,

⁵² Between Israel and the UAE, for instance, the Accords have led to visa free travel, hundreds of thousands of Israeli tourists visiting the UAE, and \$700 million in annual trade—all in the first year of normalization. Lahav Harkov, “Visa-Free Travel between Israel and UAE to Start next Week,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/visa-free-travel-between-israel-and-uae-to-start-next-week-681091>. Reuters, “Israel, UAE Sign Tourism, Healthcare Agreements - Twitter,” *Reuters*, February 8, 2022, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-uae-sign-tourism-healthcare-agreements-twitter-2022-02-08/>. Josh Corder, “250,000 Israel Tourists Visit UAE since Abraham Accords - Hotelier Middle East,” *Hotelier*, October 17, 2021, sec. News, <https://www.hoteliermiddleeast.com/news/250000-israel-tourists-visit-uae-since-abraham-accords>.

⁵³ “PM Yair Lapid’s Remarks alongside President of the United States Joe Biden.”

⁵⁴ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, 3.

⁵⁵ Bell, *Reordering the World*, 39.

in which their refusal to join the Accords—despite Israel’s invitation for peace—can be used as justification for maintaining the antidemocratic status quo.

Bennett and Lapid’s willingness to use liberal frames to justify occupation is also the precursor to a broader use of liberal frames by Israeli-Jewish politicians to justify antidemocratic politics. After calling elections in the summer of 2022, Lapid lost the subsequent November 2022 election and the new Netanyahu government’s proposed ‘judicial coup’ has sparked three months of mass demonstrations within the Israeli-Jewish public, which are ongoing.⁵⁶ The proposed ‘coup’ is widely described by Israeli-Jewish protestors and leaders as a threat to Israeli democracy and freedom.⁵⁷ But strikingly, the legislative package itself is routinely justified by coalition leaders using liberal frames.

Netanyahu himself argued that the new laws would make Israel “more liberal” and “protect the rights of minorities.”⁵⁸ Simcha Rothman, leader of the Knesset Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee who plays a critical role in shepherding the proposed laws through the Knesset, frames these new policies as restoring the power of the Jewish *demos*. Rothman argues, in the words of one recent analysis and interview, that “the will of the majority (albeit one that is artificially engineered to ensure that it is Jewish) should reign unchecked.”⁵⁹ Moshe Koppel, the founding chairman of Kohelet—the Israeli think tank that developed many of the current legislative proposals—describes himself as a “classical liberal” who “worr[ies] about the excesses of the elected branches” of government and who simply believes that Israel needs new “checks and balances on the court.”⁶⁰ Finally, Yariv Levin, Israel’s justice minister and the chief parliamentary advocate for the ‘judicial coup,’ argues publicly that the legislative package is needed to “create a much more diverse court.”⁶¹ These individuals, perhaps the four most important leaders behind the present overhaul plan, consistently use liberal frames to justify their legislative agenda. Rather than framing the effort as a threat to liberal values, these leaders do the inverse and claim their plans to be necessary for upholding or entrenching liberalism in Israel.

Even if these statements are read as cynical efforts to disguise the manifestly antidemocratic character of the legislative agenda, are they any more cynical than Lapid and Bennett’s efforts to justify occupation? To be sure, the hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews protesting in the streets, using the rhetoric of democracy, freedom, and liberalism, are testament to how these liberal justifications for the ‘judicial coup’ are not taken seriously by a large component of the Israeli-Jewish public. But that should not distract from the affinities between the

⁵⁶ “Hundreds of Thousands Join Nationwide Protests, with Key Overhaul Law about to Pass,” March 25, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/over-200000-protest-across-israel-against-judicial-overhaul-as-gallant-urges-pause/>.

⁵⁷ See, for example: “Hundreds of Thousands Take Part in Nationwide Protests against Judicial Overhaul,” *Times of Israel*, March 25, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/over-200000-protest-across-israel-against-judicial-overhaul-as-gallant-urges-pause/>.

⁵⁸ Yossi Verter, “Netanyahu Is Not His Own Master but a Captive in His Partners’ Hands,” *Haaretz*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-03-17/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-is-not-his-own-master-but-a-captive-in-his-partners-hands/00000186-ebe4-dd8e-a7d7-ffef23e60000>.

⁵⁹ Nate Orbach, “Welcome to Simcha Rothman’s Vengeful Coup,” *+972 Magazine*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.972mag.com/simcha-rothman-coup-judicial-system/>.

⁶⁰ “Prof. Moshe Koppel: The Judicial Branch Must Be Subject to Checks and Balances,” *Israel’s Judiciary: Reform or Ruin?*, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/prof-moshe-koppel-the-judicial-branch-must-be-subject-to-checks-and-balances/>. David Segal and Isabel Kershner, “Who’s Behind the Judicial Overhaul Now Dividing Israel? Two New Yorkers.,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/20/business/israel-judges-kohelet.html>.

⁶¹ “Justice Minister Insists Judicial Changes Will Keep Supreme Court Independent,” February 28, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/justice-minister-insists-judicial-changes-will-keep-supreme-court-independent/>.

new coalition's attempts to justify their plans using liberal frames and Bennett and Lapid's efforts. In both cases, liberalism is used as a heuristic to justify manifestly antidemocratic political projects.

The affinity between these two discourses should not be construed as a causal relationship. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to consider how Bennett and Lapid's project is situated within a longer history of Israeli-Jewish leaders using liberalism to justify antidemocratic rule over Palestinians. But at this political juncture, when partition is no longer viewed as a realistic futurity, the relationship between liberalism and Zionism is perhaps more politically tenuous than at previous historical junctures. In this precarity, Israeli-Jewish politicians from different places on the Israeli partisan spectrum are utilizing liberalism to justify either continued (and the possibility of permanent) occupation or novel policies that target judicial review and the separation of powers within the Israeli government.

Even if current coalition leaders are not consciously drawing upon Bennett and Lapid's strategy, the similarities between the two discourses underscore how liberalism remains a frame that can be utilized to justify antidemocratic policies within Israeli politics. These justificatory efforts are not always successful in persuading the Israeli public. But it is the use of liberalism in this way that is noteworthy on its own terms, not merely the outcome these liberal frames are deployed to rationalize.

The reviewed discourse thereby highlights how liberalism can be used not simply to justify democratic politics—which might be expected given historical affinities between liberalism and democracy—but antidemocratic politics, too. Recovering how liberalism is used as an interpretive frame by Israeli-Jewish leaders makes it possible to disaggregate liberalism from democracy within our normative understanding of the two concepts. Liberalism need not be seen as coterminous with democracy. Instead, we might better understand liberalism as a device that can be deployed to support a diversity of politics and national sovereignty more broadly, with ambivalent or outwardly hostile relationships to the tenants of democratic politics.

Within Israel, the fact that politicians use liberalism in this way is suggestive of the enduring resonance of liberal ideals within significant segments of the Israeli-Jewish public. It would make very little sense, after all, for Lapid, Bennett, Netanyahu, Rothman, and Levin to draw upon liberalism if they did not believe it would carry at least some resonance with the publics they are elected to represent. But at the same time, these leaders' willingness to explicitly divorce liberalism from democracy is suggestive of a broader effort to reconcile liberal tenants with realities of—or desires for—antidemocratic settler futurities predicated upon hegemonic settler sovereignty.

That these efforts are occurring within an unfolding settler-colonial project is also a reminder of the historical and contemporary relationship between settler-colonialism and liberalism. Settler-colonial regimes were not only the historical spaces where “liberals found the concrete place of their dreams,” as Bell posits.⁶² Rather, settler-colonial spaces such as Israel remain important sites of political experimentation, where relationships between liberalism, democracy, and antidemocratic politics continue to be negotiated. Bell notes that historically, liberal theorists “claimed the settler world as their own progeny.”⁶³ But today, it is not Euro-American liberals “claim[ing]” Israel/Palestine as much as Israeli-Jewish leaders claiming liberalism as an instrument to rationalize antidemocratic, anti-Palestinian projects that entrench

⁶² Bell, *Reordering the World*, 33.

⁶³ Bell, 46.

hegemonic Jewish sovereignty over the entirety of historic Palestine. Liberalism here is used to justify policies of occupation, expulsion, and authoritarian rule that uphold Jewish sovereignty.

Conclusion

This study provides initial insight into how Israeli-Jewish political leaders use liberalism undergirded by nascent Israeli-Arab diplomatic cooperation to rationalize ongoing occupation. Bennet and Lapid's visits are an ideal opportunity to utilize liberalism in this way, since these visits provide tangible evidence of the multinational cooperation which they frame as the counter to Irani and Palestinian violence and extremism. Additional analysis is necessary to understand the wider Israeli-Jewish response to these visits and the narrative intervention Lapid and Bennett have made. But even absent that context, the significance of Lapid and Bennett's efforts should not be understated. Their rhetoric uses Israeli-Arab partnership to reconcile liberal ideals to a system of apartheid rule over Palestinians. Lapid and Bennett's approach suggests an increased willingness to divorce liberalism from democracy in an effort to preserve the latter as justification for Jewish sovereignty at the expense of Palestinian rights.

The ongoing efforts by leaders in the new Netanyahu government to similarly use liberalism to rationalize their own legislative attacks on Jewish representative government signal the broader applicability of these tactics within Israeli-Jewish politics. Liberalism remains an accessible frame through which an array of antidemocratic policies can be justified. In such discourses, liberal/non-liberal binaries obscure the agency of Palestinian subjects and rely upon (and reinforce) an imagined hegemony of Jewish sovereignty. Liberalism therefore becomes available as a device that politicians can use to justify the ongoing anti-Palestinian dispossession upon which the Jewish *demos* relies for its own constitution. With Israeli-Jewish politics at a crisis point, we might wonder how liberalism and its attendant futurities will continue to be utilized by Israeli-Jewish actors across the political spectrum in Israel/Palestine.

This paper provides a small case study furthering existing scholarly research into the co-productive relationship between settler-colonialism and liberalism. Specifically, the paper sheds light into how settler politics can utilize liberal ideals and discourses as rhetorical instruments to justify expulsion, dispossession, and settler sovereignty. Yet if the current 'judicial coup' is any indication, then liberal frames can also be used not simply to justify authoritarian rule at the boundaries of the settler-colony, but to undermine democratic politics within the settler *demos*, too. The enduring availability of liberalism as interpretive frame within Israeli-Jewish politics suggests how liberalism, as a widely understood heuristic within Israeli-Jewish politics, carries a tenuous relationship to democracy: either restricted to settler democracy or disconnected from basic democratic ideals altogether.

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