Israel’s Identity: from hegemony of the New Jew (“Sabra”) to current “tribalism”

- The Other to which the new Jew, the Sabra, was counterpoised was the old “Diaspora” Jew more than the Arab residents of Palestine.
“Sabra” (prickly pear)

- Synopsis: “This book provides a comprehensive portrait of the Sabras (the state of Israel's first generation, born between the 1930's and 40's) . . . It's an interesting look at the creation of a new Jewish identity, and the reasons why Israeli Jews have become so different from their Diaspora forefathers.”
Take David Ben-Gurion, for example (1886-1973)

- Immigrated from Russia to Palestine in 1906.
- Worked initially as an ag. Laborer.
- Hebraized his name from “Grün.” Hated speaking Yiddish.
- An avid bible reader, yet thoroughly secular.
- From ~1930, became the undisputed leader of the “Yishuv,” then Israel’s first PM
Yitzhak Rabin, 1922-1995. Israel’s first Sabra PM
Ariel Sharon, 1928-
Identity politics in Israel

• The “New Jew” vision viewed Israel as a largely-secular state of Jews (e.g., the “Law of Return”).
• If initially the New Jew was set apart primarily from the Diaspora Jew, after 1948, the view of the Arab as the cultural Other hardened (whereas the Holocaust weakened the Jewish Other).
• From 1948 to the 1970s, the “New Jew” identity was hegemonic. The swift victory of 1967 was its high tide; its decline was precipitated by:
  – Demographic and political changes in Israeli society
• Demographics change: what “tribes” had no place within the dominant narrative?
Israel’s “tribes: the Arab citizens

• Do not fit comfortably within either a “state of Jews” or “Jewish state.”

• Might fit more comfortably within:
  – A communist Jewish state
  – Some kind of a Middle Eastern (or Semitic) hybrid identity
  – An Islamic state
  – “A state of its citizens”
Nazareth (R)
Israel’s “tribes”: the Sepharadi Jews
The *Mellah* in Sefrou, Morocco
Iraqi Jews arrive in Israel ~1950 (L)  
“Ma’abara” (R)
Ashdod
Israel’s tribes: the “ultra-Orthodox”

- Historically hostile to Zionism
- Were devastated by the holocaust
- Were expected by the Zionist leadership to become extinct—expectations were confounded by history
- Don’t care much for a “state of Jews.”
Knitted kippahs and black hats
Me’a Shearim, Jerusalem
Beitar Ilit, an ultra-orthodox settlement
Israel’s tribes: the national-religious bloc

• Was a junior partner of the hegemonic elite
• Became awakened by the 1967 victory
• Want a Jewish state in Greater Israel
• The core of the settler movement
Projection of the Clinton Proposal - December 2000

Based on a 6% West Bank Territorial Transfer to Israel

- Palestinian Autonomous Areas (Areas A and B)
- Brown Area: Palestinian Sovereignty
- 'Green' Area: Israeli Security Control
- Ultimately under Pal. Sovereignty
- White Area: Israeli Sovereignty / Settlement Built-up Areas
- Na'aman's Landas defined in Armistic Agreement 1949
- Israel Settlements within 'Green' Areas or Brown Areas

West Bank

Green Area 7.5% (63/83.6%)

White Area 6%

Brown Area 86.5%

West Bank Sovereignty Areas, including Number of Israel Settlements and Percentage of Settlers, excluding East Jerusalem

A Palestinian State - Historical Comparison
Settlement of Shilo, near Ramallah
Settlers demonstrating against PM Sharon in 2005
Whatever happened to the old, hegemonic elite?

- It became a “tribe,” epitomized by Tel-Aviv. Largely Ashkenazi.
- Tel-Aviv’s state of mind: party time; militantly secular; high tech; looking outward toward Europe and the U.S.
- Identity: a [democratic] state of Jews. Wants peace to become a part of the West more than a part of the Middle East.
Tel-Aviv Skyline
Tel-Aviv, 2004 Gay Pride Parade
Tel Aviv: streetlife and nightlife
The newest tribe: the “Russians”
Rabin and the Oslo Process

• Rabin’s secular-Zionist vision: “we want a [democratic] state of Jews” (Quoted by Barnett, p. 75)

• Coalition of “Tel-Aviv,” elements of the Sepharadi “development towns,” elements of the new “Russians,” with outside support of (for the only time in Israeli history) the Arabs.

• Rabin was killed in 1995 by a member of the “national-religious” tribe, Yigal Amir. Today, many Israelis support amnesty for Amir.
On October 26, 2004, the Knesset approved PM Sharon’s plan to remove all Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip.

Vote tally: 67 in favor; 45 opposed; 7 abstentions; 1 absent (illness)

Who were the 67? Labor; Shinui; roughly half the Likud (Sharon’s own party). Who do they represent in Israeli society? Tel-Aviv.

Who were the 45 opposed? Half the Likud; the National Religious Party (knitted kippahs); the Ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi parties; Shas (Ultra-orthodox Sepharadi); the National Union.