

The Geographic Framing of Israel

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CALEB GRIFFIN, SEP 2 2025

I recently attended an academic conference in the U.S. where several Israeli scholars were presenting. What struck me most from their presentations was not the content, but the way they referred to Israel. I marked repeated instances where they referred to Israel as a “Western” country. As someone who does a lot of work in the MENA region, my default arrangement of world regions has Israel firmly situated with its neighbours in the Middle Eastern (ME) part of the MENA acronym. Of course, there is no reason why both designations cannot be true, but it served as yet another reminder to me of the ongoing contestation over *where* countries belong in the world and to what regions. Israel is a good case study to illustrate how multiple geographic framings are possible for a country, and the lengths elites in a given country go to in order to achieve the desired framing.

World regions are socially constructed entities rather than geographic facts. We have collectively decided there is a place on the map called the Middle East, but the boundaries of that region, and who belongs there, are in the eye of the beholder. Likewise, for “the West,” it is an even more ambiguous concept from a geographical standpoint. My forthcoming dissertation examines the way elites shape where world regions are, and what countries are part of each region. Thus far, I have found over forty-five cases of elite creation, manipulation, and labeling of world regions. Israel’s regional belonging is a fascinating example of that elite influence.

Consider the incentives at play. Naturally, Israeli elites have an incentive to frame Israel as belonging to this region we call the West to try to appeal to American and European audiences in the ongoing battle of public opinion that accompanies the Israel-Palestine conflict. At least, they do so when dealing with Americans and Europeans. This has been especially true during the war against Hamas, where op-eds in various American papers by Israeli intellectuals framed the October 7 attack as an assault on a Western country by a non-Western power (see, for example Halevi 2023). Ironically, opponents of Israel have been framing it as a Western Imperial power since virtually its inception as a state (for the most famous example see Khomeini 1979).

Zaga and Weisel’s article “Mapping the Middle East” (2024) includes additional motivating factors that may prompt Israeli elites to seek out a Western orientation. They believe that Israel’s limited economic and social integration with its neighbours (due to a history of conflict) prompted a strategic and cultural shift to Europe more or less by default. This included membership in many European organizations such as the E.U. Research and Development Program, as well as cultural membership in things like sporting organizations and even the Eurovision Song Contest. Even in academia, Israeli universities separated “Israel Studies” from “Middle Eastern Studies” (ibid). This trend has led, over time, to less than a third of Israelis considering Israel to be part of the Middle East (Mitvim 2023).

Israeli elites may want to situate Israel as a Western country for domestic reasons, too. Part of the reason stems from the demographic origins of the modern state of Israel. The ruling elite of the country have historically been Ashkenazi Jews who came to Israel from Europe, and “the dominant Ashkenazi-Zionist ideology...conceives of Israel as a European bastion of the West in the East” (Calderwood 2023, 200). These European-descendant elites prefer not only for Israeli domestic politics to resemble Western regimes to a greater extent, but “Western” also serves as an identity marker; it provides contrast with the Mizrahi Jews who are descended from non-European communities, and who may be considered not to share this Western heritage. These Mizrahi Jews were perceived by many Jewish leaders as “to hail from a backward, primitive Arab culture steeped in superstitions. They were portrayed as uneducated, untrained in Western ways, and reluctant to embrace rational thinking” (Guedj 2024, 123). Consider this

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statement by the Israeli leader, Ben Gurion, on the large influx of Jews from Morocco:

Their customs are those of the Arabs [...] maybe in the third generation something will appear from the Oriental Jew that is different. But I don't see it yet [...] the culture of Morocco I would not like to have here [...] we do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies (Ben-Gurion, quoted in Tessler 1994, 505).

And in analyzing the statements and actions of Giora Yoseftal, the head of the Jewish Agency's Absorption Department of immigrants, the scholar Yaron Tsur writes: "Yekkes [German-origin Jews] like him, for whom the western image of Israel was the apple of their eyes. They were terrified at the prospect that this bastion of Europe in Asia might lose its former image and sought to fend off the Oriental invasion" (quoted in Guedj 2024, 131). Some scholars have argued that this "othering" of Mizrahi Jews served to preserve distinctions between the two groups and ensure that Ashkenazi Jews retained their position of dominance, as well as justifying actions that led to that dominance (Guedj 2014, 125-130). While that may be true, there has also been a deliberate policy of influencing the second generation of Mizrahi Jews into a more Western mindset: "State institutions-army, schools, TV-try their best to westernize the second generation, to cut the Orientals from their roots" (Sofer & Schmitt 1992, 105).

Interestingly, however, Israeli elites have sometimes tacked in the opposite direction. Some early Zionists, in order to diminish anti-Zionist sentiment in Palestine, tried to deliberately situate Jewish settlers as being part of the Arab East rather than the West. One of the early Zionist leaders, Nissim Malul, opined that "we must consolidate our Semitic nationality and not obfuscate it with European culture. Through Arabic, we can create a true Hebrew culture. But if we introduce European elements into our culture then we shall be committing suicide" (quoted in Tessler 1995, 135-36). Another prominent figure, Arthur Ruppin, the head of the Palestine Land Development Company, wrote that "we [Jews] must integrate in the family of Eastern nations," and Martin Buber likewise urged Jews to "identify with the spirit of the East [instead of being] ... emissaries of [the] West" (Tessler 1994, 182).

The framing over world regions and who belongs to them is a fight between competing sets of elites, and while the Western framing of Israel was dominant for nearly a century, recently the battle has been less one-sided. Indeed, Israel is a good example of how regional framing can radically alter as the incentive structure for elites alters, too. Zaga and Weisel (2024) point out that the Abraham Accords presented unique and unprecedented opportunities for Israeli businesses and politicians in the region. Suddenly, four countries (U.A.E, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan) in the broader region had normalized relations with Israel, and, eager to take advantage of the new economic and political opportunities, elites in business, media, and government rapidly opened new Desks, offices, and business structures to deal with the new regional realignment. The Israeli Ministry of Education even introduced additional curricula in high schools discussing Israel's new Middle East regional position (ibid). Although it is still too early to tell with any sort of certainty if this has led to greater identification with the Middle East among the Israeli public, Zaga and Weisel (2024) do find that Israeli awareness of the Gulf States and Morocco have increased dramatically since the Accords, and that more students are including Israel as part of the Middle East in mapping exercises.

Israel is a country that offers multiple possible regional alignments. It can be Western, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Asian, and any other region that one could make plausibly stick. Different regions are associated with different characteristics and are judged and evaluated differently, too (Didelon-Loiseau et al. 2018; Feld and Basso 1996). It is no wonder then that Israeli elites have generally sought to identify as Western rather than Middle Eastern; the stereotypes about the Middle East are typically more unfavourable. That Western identification is not hegemonic, however. Some Israeli elites have sought out a Middle Eastern orientation in the past, and currently, the Middle East is becoming more accessible to Israeli citizens for travel, business, and leisure due to the Abraham Accords. Undoubtedly, the struggle to define what kind of country Israel is and where it belongs will continue.

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