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Constructing Democracy: The Role of LGBTQ+ Rights in Israeli Identity Formation

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Abstract

In recent years, the focus that LGBTQ+ rights have been receiving internationally has led to the reconsideration of their status, in both national and international contexts. Among many examples, this shift has been significant in Israel, where political discourse has made LGBTQ+ rights more and more visible. This study aims to present the processes of how Israeli politicians have incorporated LGBTQ+ rights into their political discourse in order to strengthen the national identity and to portray a progressive image of the country both nationally and abroad. The research found recurrent patterns in the ways in which social groups and issues are framed by Israel's political landscape. They were identified through the use of thematic analysis of political speeches, combined with an analysis of scholarly literature. By unfolding the complexities of the discourse, which presents homonationalist and orientalist features, the research intends to provide insights about Israel's stances regarding human rights, and about how the country intends to portray itself as an example of democracy in the MENA region.

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Abbreviations

UN - United Nations

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Queer, plus

HIV - Human immunodeficiency virus

AIDS - Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

EU - European Union

MENA - Middle East North Africa

1. Introduction

In the last few years, after many decades of general disregard, LGBTQ+ rights have gained widespread attention in national and even international discourses, and as a consequence they have been included in different human rights agendas, for instance by the UN, which has been increasingly active in the protection of LGBTQ+ rights since 2013, with the foundation of the campaign Free and Equal (Langlois, 2019). While this is especially true for countries that go under the label of Global North, the situation for sexual and gender minorities in the Global South has to be approached differently, due to historical and socio-political reasons and cannot be dealt with through the use of a Western-centric perspective (Bosia, 2019). While the trend of increasing attention to LGBTQ+ rights has mostly been visible in European nations, Israel exemplifies a country outside of the EU which has also experienced a significant increase in the safeguard of LGBTQ+ rights. The country has indeed tried to make progress and to be perceived as a modern liberal democracy and has done that with the use of gay rights as means to enhance public relations (Gross, 2015). Although Israel has actually reached good standards when it comes to the protection of sexual minority rights, homophobia is still present in the country, especially in more rural areas, far away from cities such as Tel Aviv, which despite being an exception, has been celebrated for its tolerance and for its annual Pride parade (Gross, 2015). However, in relation to its history of occupation of the Palestinian territories, Israel has been facing criticism in the way it has dealt with LGBTQ+ rights, being deemed as a fabricated reality that portrays itself as a democratic country that treats its citizens with plenty of tolerance. The Israeli government has been vocal about the LGBTQ+ friendly reputation of the country, for example through the sponsoring of campaigns that would attract gay tourism to the country. While doing so, Israel also presents a narrative which demonises other countries in the area, blending together matters of nationalism and LGBTQ+ rights (Schulman, 2011).

1.1 Research aim

This paper has the aim of identifying the different patterns that are presented by Israel to display the country's positive position on LGBTQ+ rights, both in comparison to neighbouring nations and on the global stage. Through the analysis of selected political speeches, and the review of existing pieces of literature provided by different scholars, the research aims to identify and discuss recurring patterns in the way elements such as social

groups and national issues are framed within the speeches, while supporting them with secondary data from literature sources. The study therefore aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that are presented in the Israeli political discourse. Simultaneously, the paper also investigates the root intentions behind the use of this rhetoric that addresses both domestic and international audiences, resulting in providing a broader analysis on Israel's role in the geopolitical landscape.

1.2 Research question

This research has the aim of investigating how LGTBQ+ issues have been integrated in political speeches in order to strengthen the discourse that surrounds Israeli nationalism. This has led to the research question *"How have Israeli politicians strategically incorporated LGBTQ+ rights discourse into their speeches?" How does it reinforce the country's national identity and advertise it as a progressive and democratic state?"*

1.3 Relevance

The way Israel has brought up LGBTQ+ rights to link them to nationalist narratives is a relevant issue that should be taken into consideration in social sciences as the phenomenon represents an ongoing reality that affects multiple spheres, including international relations, human rights advocacy and LGBTQ+ activism.

Due to the geopolitical circumstances, the phenomenon has negative consequences on Palestinian rights advocacy and more extensively on LGBTQ+ people who live in the rest of the Middle East. Homophobic attitudes in the MENA region are common and as a result, the struggles of the LGBTQ+ people living there are very important to take into consideration: the persecution of communities of sexual and gender minorities in the Middle East has led many to call for their rescue, but this rescue attitude echoes neocolonial sentiments.This discourse would follow the lines of the concept "white men saving brown women from brown men" that was very common during British colonialism (Spivak 1988, as cited in Bracke, 2012). The discourse in this case would be "saving the gays from brown men".

The research should be of interest for sociologists, as it investigates how social issues such as LGBTQ+ are incorporated in the socially constructed notion of national identity in political discourses. As they both present social elements to their chore, the research examines how social issues are used to manipulate the democratic views that are intertwined with legitimacy

and cohesion. The paper is relevant to sociological disciplines as it blends together several issues that have broad sociological implications, such as national identity, national politics, and social inclusion and exclusion that are in several occasions still very current and relevant. The research comprises several insights that revolve around societal behaviours and actions and the way they can be seen and interpreted in different ways, being manufactured in order to serve a purpose. Furthermore, the analysis of the speeches through thematic and rhetorical lens might be of inspiration for sociologists that want to look at other social issues through the framing of the issue using the same methodology.

1.4 Delimitations

This section wants to present the scope of the research, explaining the pre-decided limits and boundaries within which the research was conducted. A significant role in the research is played by the analysis of speeches that were given by current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his administration, from the years 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2018. The selection of these years aims to offer a comprehensive overview of the themes over a significant span of time. Specific criteria were established in order to analyse the speeches in a more coherent way. By looking up keywords pertinent to the geopolitical context of Israel, only speeches sections that contained them were considered for the analysis. This methodological choice is justified by the intent to put a tight focus only on certain aspects. Furthermore, all the speeches selected were delivered in English. This choice was made to maintain linguistic consistency, so that inaccuracies resulted from translating from Hebrew could be avoided.

1.5 Disposition

The paper begins with an introduction that presents the topic of LGBTQ+ rights in the modern world, and that explains how people have dealt with them has changed throughout the years, with the establishment of a more open-minded approach that has resulted in combining the rights of sexual minorities with politics of different countries.

The background will give insights about the specific context that the research wants to focus on, which is the situation of LGBTQ+ rights in Israel. The background provides a historical context, an expansion on the history of accusations of pinkwashing that were raised by different movements that oppose themselves against Israeli occupation in the Palestinian

Territories. The background also talks about Israel's relations with the West, specifically when it comes to parallelisms regarding LGBTQ+ rights status. The literature review delves into studies that were previously made about national identity, construction of tradition and how they can be used to move direct people's mindset in a specific direction. The theoretical framework presents the theories of homonationalism and orientalism, which are strictly connected to the sociological concepts of identity and nationality issues. The methods and data part discusses the reasons behind the choice of triangulation combining thematic analysis and literature review as method, as well as the process behind the data selection. While the analysis part consists of presenting the patterns identified throughout the speeches, and connections between these and texts from other authors, the discussion is going to combine these analysis findings with the theories presented in the theoretical framework.

2. Background

This section provides a contextualization of the problem, presenting the historical status of LGBTQ+ rights in Israel, the increasing accusations of pinkwashing, and the historical and social ties of the country with the Western world, which have significantly affected the attitudes regarding the LGBTQ+ community.

2.1 Historical context of LGBTQ+ rights in Israel

LGBTQ+ rights in Israel have experienced significant progress throughout the last few decades. With the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1988, the social acceptance of sexual minorities and their legal recognition the LGBTQ+ rights have generally been steadily on the rise. However, the situation is not homogeneous in the whole country, with big cities showing higher levels of tolerance, while rural areas tend to be much more conservative (Gross, 2015).

2.2 The accusations of pinkwashing

Because of the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian Territories that has been taking place for decades, with roots in the officialisation of the Balfour declaration in 1917 and the UN partition resolution in 1947 (Pressmann 2019), scholars suggest that the status of LGBTQ+ rights in the country has been used by Israel as a way to legitimise itself as righteous, active in the protection of human rights, and as a modern and progressive nation. The accusations that deem the progress as achieved when it comes to the protection of LGBTQ+ rights as a

facade have been gathered under the umbrella definition of "pinkwashing". Pinkwashing was coined by worldwide gay movements against the continued Israeli occupation in the Palestinian Territories (Schulman, 2011). The term should not be confused with the homonymous phenomenon of branding products that are sold with a pink ribbon but that may contribute to breast cancer research, as this has also been defined by breast cancer awareness activists as "pinkwashing".

The term pinkwashing that is used in the LGBTQ+ rights field refers to the widespread use of an LGBTQ+ friendly rhetoric, that is weaponized in order to manipulate perceptions and to divert attention from other matters: in the case of Israel, the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories and its subsequent conflict. The term also expresses the intentions of Israel to be perceived by the international community as a place of sexual freedom in the more conservative region of the Middle East, while "washing away" its colonial violations against human rights in the Palestinian Territories, considering that these have been occurring for decades (Milani and Levon, 2016, p.3). A major first condemnation against the occupation of Palestinian Territories by Israeli forces can in fact be traced back to 1967, when in view of the Six Days War, the UN Security Council Resolution 242 denounced the illegitimate presence of Israeli troops in pre-established borders and ordered their withdrawal (UN Peacemaker, 1967). Although pinkwashing is a phenomenon that can be seen in different contexts around the world, that of Israel is a particularly discussed case. The geographical location of a country in the Middle East and its history of creation and occupation surely characterise the issue, making it a relevant and unique case.

In recent years, the accusations of pinkwashing have increased, as Israel has shown on several occasions to be willing to invest a lot of resources to brand itself as a legitimate democracy in the Middle East (Schulman, 2011). Already in 1999, not long after having become Prime Minister of the country, Benjamin Netanyahu's office appealed to the "World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations" to denounce homophobia in Palestine (Gross, 2015). Another notable example of an attempt to stand out as a modern country to the eyes of the international community was the implementation of a strategy named "Brand Israel", which was a detailed plan implemented in 2005 with the aim of portraying Israel as an ideal gay destination. The same year the Brand Israel movement was launched, Palestinian movements counteracted with the creation of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) (Schulman, 2011). On a similar note, Atshan (2020) also highlights the extent to which Israel

has tried to present itself as a democracy that puts a lot of resources into matters that reflect a good image on foreign affairs. For instance, the national institutions collaborated with the private sector of tourism to set up a 90 million dollars campaign to promote Tel Aviv as gay destination in 2010 (Atshan, 2020).

Blackmer (2019) claims that pinkwashing is somewhat an exaggeration and defines it as a phenomenon that stems from negative opinions about Israel and as failure to recognize the positive actions that the country has done for its people, arguing how pointless it is to pinpoint the negatives. She highlights the overall situation of LGBTQ+ rights in the Middle East, stating the criminalised legal status of queer people and the countries where death penalty is one of the possible charges (Blackmer, 2019).

It is crucial to remember that although the situation with LGBTQ+ rights is hostile in many of the countries of the Middle East, it is indeed problematic to not take into account the limitations of what the situation is like in Israel. The country has indeed reached substantial levels of progress in some aspects concerned with LGBT rights, and the definition of pinkwashing itself does not deny it, but rather is a lens through which this progress is put into perspective (Gross, 2015).

2.3 A historical, ongoing relationship with the West

Israel's ties with the European continent and, more in general, with the so-called Global North have been significant ever since the country came to existence back in 1948. The end of the nineteenth century Europe saw the development of the Zionist movement, which pushed for the creation of an Israeli state. The movement openly rejected European Jewish thinking in favour of a "Judaism with muscles", which would symbolise a new different expression of Jewish identity. Many within the Jewish community expressed support for the construction of a new Jew prototype (Biale, 1997, Almog, 2000 as cited in Levon and Gafter, 2019). Zionism put a strong emphasis on the desire of creating a Jewish reality that would be unique, with a Jewish physical homeland located in the Middle East. However, after the creation of the state of Israel, Jews in the Middle East have throughout time shown their reluctance in conforming to the standards of the region. In fact, the arrival of Jews from the European continent was advertised as a symbol of people bringing sophistication and modernization to the Middle East (Levon and Gafter, 2019).

In 1948, Israel's attitude regarding foreign affairs was officially shaped in a way that would have led to "a Jewish-Arab alliance within the framework of the UN" and it was said the country would "do its share in common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East" (Podeh, 1997). However, the country has continuously maintained its Western-like identity, mostly disconnected from its geographical surroundings. David Ben-Gurion, who would later become Prime Minister of the country, particularly insisted on keeping strong ties with the West. Despite some initial thoughts of enhancing cooperation to build social and political fields, Israel remained a separate entity in the area (Podeh, 1997). Nowadays, because of the exacerbated conflict with Palestine, Israel's position is not held in high regard in the Middle East. The mainstream perception of the country from an Arab perspective consists in seeing Israel as a foreign enclave for Western imperialism (Podeh, 1997). At present, only five Arab states have diplomatic ties with Israel: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and UAE (Duggal, 2023).

The legalisation of homosexuality at the end of the 1980s in the country roughly coincided with a shift that occurred in the utilisation of the rights discourse within Western LGBTQ+ movements. Among several reasons, this change was caused by the blooming of neoliberal ideologies, the democratisation movements in areas such as Eastern Europe and South Africa, and the HIV–AIDS epidemic (Ayoub, 2022).

Up to this day, there is a growing need to align to what are labelled Western trends, identified with the acronym GWC (Globalised Western Culture). Since its foundation, the country of Israel has been part of the Western bloc, and it is still considered part of it. Arab culture has for long been deemed as incompatible with the Western one (Rosenmann, 2015).

2.4 Israeli politics and LGBTQ+ rights

Unlike in other countries, the Israeli political left parties are not the only side of politics campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights. Overall, in many places around the world, left-wing parties are usually known to be the ones that more vocally support LGBTQ+ rights (Lockhart 2022). In Israel however, the political right has in fact often shown a tolerant attitude towards LGBTQ+ issues. LGBTQ+ individuals are to some extent assimilated when it comes to state support. A lot of people that identify themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community in Israel actually describe themselves as Zionist and therefore strongly support the authority of the state and the occupation of the Palestinian Territories. "It is time we stop apologising to our

enemy, foreign and domestic, to proudly declare – in its double meaning – our support for our state, for being Zionists and to fight for equality for the LGBT community as Zionists" said Evan Cohen, member of the right-wing party Likud (Mandelbaum 2018, p. 172). Overall, and this is a widespread case, there is indeed a recorded trend according to which people that belong to the LGBTQ+ community are likely to lean towards political parties which vocally defend their interests (Foster and Kirke, 2022).

It is arguable that through the mitigation of the attitudes towards LGBTQ+ related issues, Israel has enhanced its attempts to distinguish itself from what is often deemed as a more "backward" area. Through the intensification of recognition and the construction of a state that shows to be tolerant to sexual minorities, Israel has tried to brand itself as a safe haven in the area, and has been doing it also through politics.

3. Previous studies

This section has the purpose to expand on themes that are going to be addressed throughout the paper, especially in the analysis, but that also appear in the theories provided by the theoretical framework, as concepts that can be studied with them as lenses. National identity, language and construction of tradition were researched by different sociologists, as they represent realities that are present all across the modern world.

3.1 The concept of national identity

There are different factors that contribute to the construction of national identity. It can stem from the language, the way the people dress, that label people under the same category. The concept of national identity has a double effect, as it stresses both the commonalities that people from the same country share, while also highlighting the differences with people that are from other countries. What is highlighted by national identity construction are the differences that exist between one nation and the other. The concept is strongly intertwined with the right of self-determination that countries claim to have, together with uniqueness that distinguish one population from another (Triandafyllidou, 2010).

The concept of national identity is defined by Andrew Smith as "human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (Smith, 1996, p.

447). Smith (1996) also mentions territorialization of memory as a very relevant factor when it comes to national identity construction: geographical places represent sources of connection for people. In Israel, this can be seen for example in the city of Jerusalem, or Mount Zion, the ladder lending its name to the Zionist movement, chore of the creation of the country of Israel (Smith, 1996). There are many factors that render a state cohesive and unified and one of these is with no doubt tradition. Traditions keep people together, make them proud of being from the country they are from and legitimise a country as a place that has its own history, its characters, its spiritual nature (Hobsbawm, 1983).

The struggles of national identity in a context like the one between Israel and Palestine, as both entities claim sovereignty over the territory of the historic territory of Palestine, it is the chore identity to threaten the existence of the other. Therefore, the way to establish themselves internally is through the demonization of the other entity (Kelman, 1999). Furthermore, in order to enhance the national identity and sovereignty of the country, both parties have to construct a self-image that has to have positive qualities, through tradition, language, and culture. These two different populations have many differences that can be traced in many fields that define their everyday lives: their language, their religion, their traditions. Hebrew and Arabic are very different languages, and Israel has very strong ties with Judaism, while Islam influences Palestinian traditions. Their languages and religions deeply influence the way they perceive themselves and are perceived externally (Kelman, 1999).

National identity is a complex and very powerful concept that is felt and exercised all across the modern world, supported by large numbers of people who feel connected to their land because of historical and/or religious events. These feelings have often been so rooted, that it has become easy for populations to feel threatened in the moment where one's identity and the existence of their state is questioned. Consequently, the trauma accumulated shows through actions that are claimed as done in the name of self-defence, through a process of collective victimhood (Bar-Tal et al, 2009).

3.2 Language in identity construction

One crucial way with which national identity is built is through the use of language. The selected choice of certain expressions can create dichotomies that lead to very different

portrayals of entities. The use of language is exercised through the production of speeches, which are a very common tool in the political world. As Wodak (2011) says, nations are constructed through the use of language, by highlighting its power in conveying nationalist messages. Language is a powerful tool that can be used to construct identity, which is characterised by the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion, entailing the tendency to safeguard one's own identity at the disadvantage of someone else's (Wodak 2011). There is a strong correlation between language and power: the use of language narratives is responsible for the construction of conflicts and hatred in many parts of the world, and it has been so ever since the old times. Guttormsen (2018) also argues that in order to question the layers that constitute the macro topic of identity, it is fundamental to question the role of language, which is described as being able to have a dark side, a tool that has been employed throughout history to serve colonial purposes, causing a social construction of otherness (Guttormsen 2018).

3.2.1 Use of coding when addressing democracy versus non-democratic realities

Alexander and Smith (1993) present a narrative of binary coding that has been carried out in written texts. The narrative consists in the use of terms that are opposite to each other, with the aim of presenting one entity as better, and the other one as flawed. They present the example of the United States of America as a democracy that uses codes in order to define itself as a functioning democracy. This creates the existence of "binary codes", meaning language patterns that are employed to convey a sense of difference in the way other countries that are labelled as non-democratic states that are labelled with specific codes that indicate opposite qualities to the ones that are used to refer to democracies like the United States of America. While the terms referred to the democratic deemed states are positive, indicating rationality, the non-democratic states are deemed as willingly using brutality. These binary codes have been employed in order to construct national identity and the promotion of the state through the use of exceptionalism, making use of examples of countries that do not meet the democratic standards: the "othering" narrative (Alexander and Smith, 1993).

3.3 The construction of tradition

Hobsbawm (1983) wrote "The Invention of Tradition", in which he presents tradition as something that can be to some extent manipulated, and that many countries use their stories

to build national identity in intricate ways. This process consists in the construction of certain cultural discourses that actually differ from the reality of how these traditions were originally brought to life. Rather than celebrations from the past, these are reinterpreted and transformed in new concepts under a more contemporary lens, contributing to collective feelings of belonging and celebration of one's own identity, by repeating a series of acts throughout time (Hobsbawm 1983). Anderson (1983) presents a lens through which one can observe the concept of nationalism. He claims that a state is an "imagined community", since the people who make up the population will never personally meet every other conational. By expressing this claim, he supports the social constructivism of the concept. Moreover, national identity is constantly changing, as a nation is influenced by past, present and future (Anderson, 1983).

Along the same lines, H.C. Kelman (1999) talks about the social constructivism behind national identity, which consists in the discovery or rediscovery of common values which are used to keep power structures in place. Both authors suggest the use of national symbols to serve the purpose of controlling discourse, playing on people's hearts (Anderson, 1983, Kelman, 1999). The use of national symbols fuels discourses that cause a significant gap between the two actors of "ingroup" and "outgroup". While the ingroup wants to portray itself as the better one, adopting a positive approach when describing itself, the outgroup is portrayed with negative connotations, which are often supported by the creation of negative narratives about it. What makes the gap between two groups even bigger is reinforced by each of the groups' conviction that the other one is a homogenous party that is characterised only or at least predominantly by bad connotations, without acknowledging that every group is at least to some extent heterogeneous (Fischer et al, 2018).

3.4 Contribution to the existing knowledge

While there is already extensive literature regarding the themes of invention of tradition, creation of national identity, and collective victimhood there is not much content that shows how these concepts are combined together with regard to gay rights in Israel. By choosing speeches given by influential Israeli figures, who embody national cohesion and pride, while also addressing LGBTQ+ rights, the results after appropriate coding can lead to the realisation that these are indeed interrelated topics. A common thread of an instrumentalization of LGBTQ+ rights may become clearer, since the legalisation of

homosexuality has led to a strengthened national identity. This is achieved through the active participation of queer in different spheres of society, such as the state army and the government, with the aim of promoting the country as haven of progress and democracy, in contrast to a "backward" Middle East that does not compare to the modernity of Israel. Examining how rights of sexual minorities have been incorporated in the nationalist agenda of the country, through a lens of homonormativity is an insightful process, as it questions power structures, the existence of hegemonic colonial narratives and mobilises civil societies to question what is behind progress and "friendly" institutions. The previous existing literature leads to question whether the discourse can be found in speeches, comparing Israel's performance on LGBTQ+ to the one in the surrounding countries in the MENA region.

4. Theoretical framework

This section explains theories that have been discussed by different scholars to conduct an analysis of speeches and pieces of literature. By presenting the concepts of homonationalism, orientalism, the paper aims to show how the two are coexistent in the discourse. The theoretical framework presents lenses through which the issue can be seen and better understood. It has the purpose of immersing the reader in a more oriented interpretation of the findings that is dictated by these three pre-existing theories.

4.1 Homonationalism

Homonationalism consists in the institutionalisation of a standardised category of homosexuality, as other groups within the LGBTQ+ community are not integrated in this institutionalisation (Puar 2015). As this research also aims to argue, the existence of homonationalism causes a dichotomy between the pronoun "us" opposed to the pronoun "them", that ends up creating a gap between groups depending on their ethnicity. According to this narrative, the good is associated with "us" and the evil is associated with the generalised other, labelled as "them" (Zur 1991, as cited in Ersoy-Ceylan 2022). According to the concept, the protection of LGBTQ+ rights is guaranteed for a very much standardised, selected category of individuals, usually white (Puar 2015, p.327). Following the lines of this definition, Aeyal Gross (2015) argues that in the country of Israel, homosexuality has been incorporated into governmentality. "Homosexuality is incorporated into governmentality, through the combined dynamic of neoliberal consumerist ideology and state intervention"

(Gross, 2015 as cited in Hartal and Sasson Levy, 2017, p.1392). Blus-Kadosh et al (2023) also see homonationalism as a framework that entails a neoliberal perspective that is linked to nationalist assimilation. However, the fact that the city Tel Aviv has been pretty much uniquely constructed as a gay haven highlights the lack of a complete assimilation in the rest of the country (Blus-Kadosh et al, 2023).

In recent years, there has been a surge in homonationalist rhetoric that consists in contraposing immigration and the defence of LGBTQ+ rights. By constructing a self-image of a state that protects its citizens, their argument gets intertwined with views according to which immigrants are more homophobic. Connected to this is Orientalist thinking, which sees Muslims as both aggressors and victims, and as individuals who are incapable of bringing about modernity by themselves. This perspective has been used as a way to justify Western imperialism (Said, 1979 as cited in El Tayeb, 2012). Parallelisms can be found when looking at the way both feminism and the protection of LGBTQ+ rights have been brought up in nationalist discourses in order to counteract discourses in favour of immigrant communities. In the same way homonationalism prioritises the image of white LGBTQ+ people in opposition to brown men, femonationalism sees the need of enhancing the protection of women from non-white men (Colella, 2021).

4.2 Orientalism

Orientalism is a concept that was developed by Edward Said in its work with the same name. It describes how throughout history, the Middle East has been labelled as "other", a land that was mystic and far away, with the purpose of justifying why hegemony over the territory was necessary in order to bring about modernity associated with the West to these areas labelled as "backwards". Said (1977) describes how lands bordering are likely to label each other as "barbarian", by associating the familiar, what is known, with positive connotations, the "ours", opposing it to the unfamiliar, the "theirs", which is blamed as negative. Furthermore, he explores how the Orient was deemed by the Europeans as an overall backward and hostile land (Said 1977, p. 169). Due to its geopolitical location and background, it is coherent to include this theory to the research.

While presenting different perspectives, the two theories aforementioned are similar in the way they both entail the use of a sociological stance that puts focus on the use of discourses that strengthen the distinction between an ingroup and an outgroup. The intersection between

the two theories helps the research as the speeches can be interpreted with the use of both lenses. They are both discourses which explore the social construction of power dynamics and identities. They both entail the "othering" of groups, together with homogenization of categories of individuals. While homonationalism tends to call for the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ identities that do not follow the lines of Western standardised, Orientalism entails the view of Orient as an inferior and backward reality compared to the West. Both discourses uphold power structures based on sexuality and race. Expected results are in fact results that are influenced by this dichotomy that differentiates a more positive and familiar ingroup that wants to be normalised against the outgroup that instead is otherized, made different and scary, flawed and cruel.

5. Methods and data

This paper is going to focus on five excerpts of speeches given by the current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli administration and will analyse them through the use of the method of thematic analysis. The speeches were taken from online archives of the Jewish Virtual Library (https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org) by looking up keywords such as "LGBT" and "gay rights" in the search bar. As the different speeches transcriptions report, these texts were publicly orally delivered to different audiences in the years 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018. The situations in which they were given are not casual: one speech was given in honour of Holocaust Remembrance Day, two speeches were given at AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) conferences, one speech was delivered to the Jewish Federations of North America and one was given to the United Nations General Assembly. The span of a few years between the different speeches allows the possibility to see if there have been changes in the way the issues are talked about. Integrating speeches in data analysis allows one to focus on a wide spectrum of elements, as they can showcase numerous interesting elements, from rhetorical devices to power dynamics. Speeches are aimed at the delivery of messages through powerful selected words that are heard by a public, who are in the moment a direct witness of what the speaker is presenting.

This research employed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a tool used within qualitative research in order to draw recurring patterns (themes) in the data collected (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Inductive thematic analysis was used: inductive thematic analysis implies a more subjective and personal thinking process that aims at drawing conclusions, finding patterns

without consulting pre-existing structures (Proudfoot, 2023). In order to present a more comprehensive analysis, the content analysis was accompanied by triangulation, which entails the coexistence of multiple methods in the research process with the aim to integrate more data at once. The use of this specific method allows the broadening of results, in this case a mixture of findings from speeches and literature pieces analogue to the codes found in the speeches (Carter et al, 2014). Together with a thematic analysis, the speeches were also analysed according to a less thorough rhetorical analysis, as the speeches present the recurrent use of rhetorical devices of ethos, logos and pathos.

5.1 The use of speech in institutions

Political speech is a helpful tool to trace the patterns in the ideology of those in power. This is because there is a lot of work done behind a political text, and by studying a political speech one can have access to the complex picture, the collection of bits and pieces of work that was undertaken by different stakeholders, among which advisors and secretaries. Political speeches are the proof of how communication is institutionalised (Finlayson and Martin 2008). What a political speech aims to do is to persuade the public into thinking in a certain way, to see things under a certain perspective. By studying political speeches, one can focus not only on what the speaker is trying to say, but also how the speaker thinks (Finlayson and Martin 2008, p.451).

5.2 Validity and reliability

This section wants to expand on the reasons why the data employed in the research is valid and reliable. Firstly, the contexts in which the speeches selected were delivered are official and formal situations such as the Holocaust Remembrance Day of 2016, hence representing a powerful instance for the Jewish public, but also to verbalise disappointment towards UN resolutions that would attack Israel as a country. The speeches were transcribed on an archival website that is easily accessible, the Jewish Virtual Library, meaning that the use of these data will result in findings that are methodologically rigorous.

5.3 Limitations

Because of their relative brevity, speeches as content for analysis might lack in depth and there might be some space for misunderstandings. As the speakers have to pick and choose the specific nuances that they want to convey with their words, they might omit the deeper

ways they feel about those issues, which are often in need of more in-depth observation. Also, by selecting just excerpts, the full picture might not be visible, resulting in some oversimplifications. However, the finding of patterns in the different excerpts would show how often concepts are repeated and by doing so, it would actually provide a realistic overview that is actually well-founded and proven. Speeches usually do not represent a whole ideology, but rather bits and pieces of it. Therefore, findings might be overgeneralized and made applicable to a larger scale. Still, the way important figures deliver speeches show their interest in delivering specific messages, while leaving others unsaid. However, as mentioned earlier, the selection of literature pieces has the purpose to try to make up for the eventual lacks that the use of speeches might cause.

5.4 Biases

This section discusses what biases might obstruct the findings of the research, altering their validity and accuracy. A possible bias that might interfere with the research is selection bias. By only taking into account political speeches given by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the given picture is not as extensive as it could be, as it does not focus on what other politicians or stakeholders might have said about the same issues. However, by using triangulation of more methods, the research presents higher levels of validity, while also reducing the impact of the possible biases. Also, as the pieces of literature are secondary sources, the research makes use of both primary and secondary data. By including both categories of data, the research offers both a first-hand type of findings, while also reporting what other researchers have said. The combination of both allows for a more in-depth exploration of the findings.

6. Analysis and findings

The process of producing codes through the use of thematic analysis led to the identification of eight general themes that can be understood as "umbrella themes". The speech analysis was integrated with a review of pieces of literature, to present a more comprehensive view of these newly found themes. What all of the speeches have in common is the way LGBTQ+ issues are brought up, although with different nuances and to serve different purposes in different contexts. However, they are all integrated into discourses that revolve around issues such as national identity.

Here listed in chronological order are the selected speeches excerpts:

1. "Israel's fate is to continue to be the forward position of freedom in the Middle East. The only place in the Middle East where minorities enjoy full civil rights; the only place in the Middle East where Arabs enjoy full civil rights; the only place in the Middle East where Christians are free to practice their faith; the only place in the Middle East where real judges protect the rule of law" (Netanyahu, 2012)

2. "Ladies and gentlemen, we live in a world steeped in tyranny and terror where gays are hanged from cranes in Tehran, political prisoners are executed in Gaza, young girls are abducted en masse in Nigeria, and hundreds of thousands are butchered in Syria, Libya and Iraq, yet nearly half — nearly half of the U.N. Human Rights Council's resolutions focusing on a single country have been directed against Israel, the one true democracy in the Middle East; Israel, where issues are openly debated in a boisterous parliament, where human rights are protected by the — by independent courts, and where women, gays and minorities live in a genuinely free society" (Netanyahu, 2014)

3. "You see it in our pluralism – in our growing and thriving Christian population, the only Christian population in the Middle East that is growing and thriving and not shrinking and being decimated; in our proud and our strong LGBT community. Tel Aviv is a renowned capital of pluralism and diversity and tolerance, as is Israel altogether" (Netanyahu, 2015)

4. "The obsession with the Jews – the fixation on the Jewish state – defies any other rational explanation. While across the region, Islamist militants brutalize entire populations, enslave and rape women, murder Christians and gays, the UN Human Rights Council repeatedly condemns Israel. More than North Korea. More than Iran. More than Syria. More than all of them put together. Some things just don't change" (Netanyahu, 2016)

5. "And we're able to do all this because of the extraordinary soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, men and women—just look at them—men and women, black and white, religious and secular, gay and straight, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze,

Circassians. They come from different backgrounds, but they're united with a common mission: to protect the State of Israel. They keep us safe. They make us proud" (Netanyahu, 2018)

Table 1: Overview of Speech Excerpts by Benjamin Netanyahu

Speech number	Context of speech	Year of delivery
1	"AIPAC Policy Conference"	2012
2	"On militant Islam"	2014
3	"Address to the Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly"	2015
4	"Statement on International Holocaust Remembrance Day"	2016
5	"Address to the 2018 AIPAC Policy Conference"	2018

6.1 Historical trauma

The concept of trauma can be picked up in the speeches, as strong emphasis is put for example on how the people enrolled in the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) have been "protecting" the country (Netanyahu 2018).

The author J. Pressmann (2019) collected several speeches given by important Israeli figures between 1998 and 2016 and pointed out the presence of some recurring themes throughout their rhetoric, among which victimisation, existential insecurity, and delegitimization of Palestinians. Elements that were also extensively brought up in the texts were the

discrimination and the atrocities endured by the Jews during the Holocaust, feelings embedded in the Jewish population related to fear of cruelties occurring again, and a strong sense of religious connection to the land, reinforced by the utilisation of a biblical narrative that portrays the area of Palestine as a Jewish holy land (Pressmann 2019).

It is widely acknowledged that Jews have been victims of hate throughout history, and this might be one of the causes of how nowadays the state of Israel is held in high esteem when it comes to the protection of its population, who reportedly still lives in a state of fear toward possible threats that would put their identity at risk. Traumatic recollection of memories has had a big impact on nationalistic values of the country, and historical events like the Holocaust have in fact contributed to the development of ethnocentric features that make the Jews "chosen people" who have cultural superiority and are provided with a mission. These beliefs are part of the constructed Jewish collective memory. Feinstein and Bonikowski (2021) argue that this collective reasoning has led to some significant xenophobic attitudes in Israeli society. In addition, research done in the country has shown that many people would actually justify the violence in Palestine, despite reporting that they do not "hate" anyone when asked (Fischer et al, 2018).

6.2 Collective victimhood

The impact of the historical events that affected the negative perception of Jewish communities around the world have been investigated quite widely. The repeated occurrence of negative experiences caused levels of trauma, which is a factor considered as a possible ground for the creation of Israeli national narratives (Yair, 2014). The several instances that saw Jewish people being victims of discrimination led to the creation of an ongoing rooted existential crisis, that consists in the presence of feelings of anxiety in people that are linked to the fear of being attacked, accompanied by a feeling of uncertainty about how much time they have left: modern times Jewish interviewees have in fact reported to believe to only being able to survive a generation when asked to subjectively estimate how long they think the country will survive in the Middle East. The feeling of crisis is accompanied by the feeling of necessity of protection, which translates into the need of a strong army that would be at any time ready to prevent the cancellation of the identity of Israelis, or of the country from the maps (Yair, 2014). Furthermore, figures such as Benjamin Netanyahu have released

statements that concern collective past experiences. 'I will not allow Israelis to live under the shadow of annihilation' was for example pronounced by him in 2012 (Yair, 2014).

Collective victimisation seems to be quite well represented throughout the speeches, since the speaker highlights how unjust to the country the resolutions taken were, not addressing the accusations that they themselves got in order to receive those accusations of occupation.

The term "Israel" or the equivalent "Jewish state" (Netanyahu 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018) is repeated multiple times in the speeches, suggesting that the tone is intended to be nationalistic and therefore reinforcing the national identity of the country. By highlighting Israel's religious character through the linguistic attribute "Jewish", the discourse makes use of the concept of faith with the purpose of evoking the historical context that led Jews to the creation of a state where they could live in peace after a long history of discrimination.

6.3 Political mobilisation through social belonging

The phenomenon of collective victimisation results in strengthening social belonging. According to Daniel Bar-Tal et al (2009), collective victimhood is a social phenomenon that has the ultimate aim to legitimise the existence of a group through the remembrance of the injustice this community has faced. The author lists different points through which he shows how powerful collective victimhood can be, to the point where it is used to justify violence against outgroups, that are often the object towards which collective blame is put on. He describes how collective victimhood results in the construction of a solid perception of the self that is not easily modifiable, and that is reinforced by strong emotions, anger, fear, or self pity, which all strengthen the differences between the two groups at conflict (Bar-Tal et al, 2009).

There have been several instances where the politicians of the country resorted to heated issues in order to mobilise reactions from the population, drawing on underlying feelings of victimisation. For instance, in view of the attack of Israel in Lebanon back in 1982, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin pronounced the words " It is our destiny that in Israel there is no other way but fighting', 'We won't allow another Treblinka' (Bar-Tal et al, 2009, p.246). This is a clear example of how collective victimhood and past events can be evoked to justify a decision such as initiating a conflict. By bringing up events that reminisce the

horrible events that occurred with the Holocaust for example, and in this case the concentration camp of Treblinka, by using heavy expressions, the aim is to find self confidence in acting in unethical ways but with a constructed justification.

In the speeches analysed, social belonging is expressed by the frequent use of the pronouns "we" and "our": "we're able to do all" (Netanyahu, 2018) "you see it in our pluralism" (Netanyahu, 2015). The solemn tone used evokes a sense of community, pride and mobility.

6.4 Diversity within the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces)

Throughout the speeches, the LGBT community is brought up to be described as a group at risk in countries where people that belong to it are being murdered. Furthermore, general liberties of the Israeli population thanks to the presence of democratic institutions are highlighted through its mention. A significant push was also made to underline the importance of the army in the country, the creation of which was also possible thanks to queer people that decided to enrol for the country. Then, specific focus is put on the fact that these individuals who joined the military came from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, are from both sexes, both gay and straight, and still united in order to serve a greater good: "men and women, black and white, religious and secular, gay and straight, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Circassians" (Netanyahu 2018).

While the IDF labelled homosexuality as a disease up to 1973, gay soldiers were discriminated against as they were deemed as a threat to security until the 1990s, with a complete revocation of discriminatory practices that would hinder the enrollment of gay soldiers only taking place in 1998. However, the discourse has changed dramatically throughout the last few decades (Dotan 2014).

When talking about the need of protecting the Israeli population while addressing the soldiers fighting in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces), Netanyahu pronounces the words "to protect the State of Israel. They keep us safe. They make us proud" (Netanyahu, 2018).

6.5 Celebration of diversity

The concept of "pluralism" is extensively brought up in the speeches, to support the discourse that wants to portray Israel as a diverse country, with different religious, and in general

minority groups. Multiple categories are mentioned throughout the texts, from ethnic minorities to women, especially girls: the rhetorical device of pathos enrages the reader, who by feeling bad for these categories put at risk in other countries, emphasises with Israel for denouncing the dire situation they are in, while the country is not committing any of those acts. However, these categories are described as thriving in Israel "Our growing and thriving Christian population"; "in our proud and our strong LGBT community"(Netanyahu 2015).

The correlation between sexual identity and politics in Israel is quite evident, with multiple instances in which diversity seems to be celebrated. Tsfati and Ben-Ari (2018) conducted interviews and the results confirm patterns in what can be identified as a general attitude of nationalist homonormativity. For example, the allowance of gay parenthood that has been granted for years has resulted in LGBTQ+ people feeling like they are regular citizens of a state which provides them with rights that hetero couples are granted with. Gay parents are therefore a good means for the state to portray itself as progressive (Tsfati and Ben-Ari, 2018)

6.6 Assimilation of diversity

Blus-Kadosh et al (2023) see homonationalism as a framework that entails a neoliberal perspective that is linked to nationalist assimilation. The fact that the city Tel Aviv has been pretty much uniquely constructed as a gay haven highlights the lack of a complete assimilation in the rest of the country.

When mentioning groups at risk, emphasis in the speeches is also put on other categories of minorities, such as Christians. The accusations towards the Islamic faith are palpable in the speeches, as the countries that are criticised are Syria, Nigeria and Iraq, all predominantly Muslim countries. The concept of Othering is clear in the way these issues are brought up, since the verbs are clear in defining what is positive and admirable about Israel and what is negative, despicable, and horrifying in Muslim countries. "Nearly half — nearly half of the U.N. Human Rights Council's resolutions focusing on a single country have been directed against Israel" (Netanyahu administration, 2014), "The obsession with the Jews – the fixation on the Jewish state – defies any other rational explanation." (Netanyahu, 2016) "UN Human Rights Council repeatedly condemns Israel" (Netanyahu, 2016). The direct accusations toward the UN gives no space for misunderstanding, as the national discourse is so strong that it sees no fault in the system, but rather gets upset when this system gets

questioned. The UN had in fact repeatedly moved accusations against Israel regarding the treatment of Palestinians, deeming them as proper crimes against humanity, probably referring to issues such as the blockade of Gaza and several irregular settlements in the West Bank.

6.7 Binary codes for ingroup and outgroup

The process of coding the speeches highlighted the use of terms that are recurrently used in the different speeches. These are either fueled with negative connotations, and that is the case when other countries in the Middle East are addressed, or given positive connotations, by using an almost enthusiastic tone, when referring to Israel. While "brutalize" "rape" "murder" and "enslave" (Netanyahu, 2016) are used to refer to what happens to certain categories of people in other countries, verbs such as "enjoy" and "protected" (Netanyahu, 2012) are referred to the status of minorities in Israel.

A palpable sense of annoyance is found in the way the UN is addressed, in reaction to the fact that they have punished Israel, and have been doing it repeatedly, rather than focusing on other areas of the world and issues that are *actually* in need of intervention. The Israeli context is referred to with a variety of terms which have a positive connotation, when talking for instance about how different realities, sexualities, religions and ethnicities manage to peacefully coexist in the country, which is portrayed as a democratic example. "True democracy" (Netanyahu, 2014) "genuinely free society" (Netanyahu, 2014) "pluralism" (Netanyahu, 2015) all refer to a strong sense of national identity that is strengthened by the belief that the system is a diversified and equal reality, in contrast to the one in other countries that are instead home to crimes and general cruelty against groups such as women, religious and sexual minorities.

The phrase "the only place in the Middle East" (Netanyahu, 2012) is repeated multiple times throughout one speech, and this conveys a sense of uniqueness and superiority of the state of Israel in opposition to the other states that do not share the same characteristics. The expression intends to highlight the position of unicity and open-mindness that Israel has, presenting itself as a top-tier example of a country in the region.

Different sorts of comparisons are made throughout the speeches, both with countries situated

within the Middle East, but also with other countries located further away, even in Africa or East Asia, such as North Korea and Nigeria (Netanyahu, 2016). By referring to countries that are supposedly letting much worse crimes against humanity happen but have not been taken into consideration when sanctioning by the UN. The aim is to evoke a sense of annoyance in the audience, that will rather side with the Israeli thinking, making the listeners think that Israel is being punished when the country is actually doing a lot for the protection of its citizens.

The term "human/civil rights" are also presented multiple times (Netanyahu 2012, 2014, 2016), with the aim to suggest that Israel is a country that, as a democracy, supports equal rights for its citizens and has been granting them.

The terms used also refer to the vision of Israel as a country that is safe for its minorities: with a focus on the discourse also put on women, which are mentioned in multiple speeches, it is possible to notice that there are similarities between homonationalism and femonationalism. By showing women rights in a country as better than other countries, according to a vision that can be summarised as "saving women from brown men", the nation in the discourse is shown as friendly and careful to the well-being of women.

By bringing up very crude and graphic images, such as rape and killings, the speakers evoke a sense of outrage and discomfort, which is used to make the audience feel the outrage that is conveyed through the speeches. Examples of pathos are also found in the speeches, as the liberties that the Israeli people are treated as something to take for granted, it is logical to consider them as such because it is a country that has been standing out in a backward area. There results in a deep contraposition in the way the different countries are portrayed and juxtaposed, where these cruel scenarios are occurring, and Israel. Once again, this dichotomy is a representation of the othering theory, where there are both an ingroup and an outgroup. While the ingroup finds a series of points to pride itself with, it uses those same points to distance itself from the outgroup, which is heavily generalised.

Furthermore, the tone throughout the speeches is very confident and authoritarian, and conveys a sense of officiality. This is what is expressed by the concept of ethos, which can be translated with credibility. By officially reporting how the parliament and the institutions are

just in Israel, the speakers are trying to instil in the ones who are the recipients of the speeches, a sense of trust in the Israeli system.

6.8 Othering rhetoric

By stating "ladies and gentlemen" the general rhetoric of the speeches sounds very official, evoking a sense of solemnity, the voice of an authority that one feels the responsibility to listen to. Furthermore, the expression is fairly inclusionary, as it addresses both men and women.

Human rights and liberties are mentioned often, this gives the impression that Israel is an example of a country that doesn't miss on granting its citizens with rights. This leads the audiences to believe what has been said. By using rhetorical devices, the speakers are able to convey credibility, authority, and to evoke persuasion in the audiences listening. Through the consistent use of loaded expressions, often referring to violence and human rights injustices, the general tone aims to demonise other countries in order to highlight an estrangement from what is happening in those "other countries", unlike in Israel.

7. Discussion

This section sums up the findings that were identified in the analysis, by relating them to the sections of theoretical framework and literature review, to see the connections between them. The codes that were created through the use of thematic analysis have shown that the speeches present patterns in the way LGBTQ+ rights are integrated in nationalist discourses, while techniques of othering are employed, together with a homonationalist rhetoric. The findings indicate to be in line with the theoretical framework, which presented the sociological lens of othering. Because of this, the findings both provide a common narrative that is focused on stressing differences between groups, in this case between how certain categories of people are treated and are seen in Israel compared to other countries in the Middle East. As said in the literature review, the concept of national identity is also strongly connected to stressing the importance of the community built in the ingroup by highlighting its successes and qualities, while demonising the outgroup, which is in this case represented by several states mostly put on the same level because of their common religion, Islam.

8. Conclusion

"How have Israeli politicians strategically incorporated LGBTQ+ rights discourse into their speeches? How does it reinforce the country's national identity and advertise it as a progressive and democratic state?" The paper offers a comprehensive analysis of texts that is able to navigate this research question, which revolved around dissecting the different ways LGBTQ+ rights have been framed and incorporated into nationalist discourses in the Israeli political context. This was done through the identification and exposure of recurrent themes that make use of othering. This process has shown the use of narratives that create a solid distinction between the democratic and progressive stance that Israel has taken to protects its minorities, who are labelled active part of the society, to alienate those same minorities in other countries, by highlighting how inhumanely and poorly they have been treated, in comparison. By presenting the theoretical framework as comprehensive of the intertwined homonationalism and orientalism discourses, it is a helpful tool to frame the issue in a sociological way, to see how different social categories that are brought up in the discourse are portrayed depending on how positively or how negatively of an image the speakers want to convey. Another finding consisted in analysing the different ways in which the language was utilised to convey specific reactions. This was possible through a process of individuation of the rhetorical devices of ethos, pathos and logos, that end up creating certain feelings in the audiences, by appealing to sensitive issues. By recognizing and exposing the use of these persuasive techniques, the texts are shown to be well thought and loaded with significance. The findings, which were obtained through coding of the primary data of the speeches, were supported by the literature selected, providing a broader and cohesive series of results.

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