

How Long Can Israel Defy the World?

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Palestinians in Gaza are being decimated. Over 20,000 have been killed, mostly women and children. Three times more have been wounded. Some experts qualify it as genocide, others as massacre. Two million people have been displaced, many more than during the entire history of displacement of the Palestinians since the start of the Zionist settlement at the turn of the 20th century.

As Israel takes out hospitals and civilian infrastructure, infectious diseases and famine threaten to kill many more people. Several Israeli soldiers have been reported infected during the ground operations, one has died. General Giora Eiland suggests relying on the weapon of imminent epidemics in lieu of endangering the lives of Israeli soldiers in real warfare. Gaza is violently demodernized, bombed into stone age: hospitals, schools, power stations are bombed to rubble. What is happening appears unprecedented.

The number of victims is, indeed, unprecedented. Yet the unfolding tragedy follows the old script of the Zionist project, which is European in more than one sense. It is rooted in ethnic nationalisms of Eastern and Central Europe. Nations must live in their "natural" environment where those not of the titular nationality would be at best tolerated. According to an Iraqi journalist writing in 1945, the Zionists' goal was "to expel the British and the Arabs from Palestine so that it will be a pure Zionist state. ... Terrorism [was] the only means that can bring the Zionist aspirations to fruition." Significantly, the journalist did not consider the future state Jewish but Zionist. He must have known that Jews from countries other than those of Europe and European colonization constituted a miniscule part of the Zionist movement.

Zionism is also European because it is a settler colonial project, the most recent of

all. The Palestine Jewish Colonization Association was among several agencies devoted to turning the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Palestine into “the Jewish homeland”. The Jewish Colonial Trust, the predecessor of Bank Leumi, today Israel’s largest bank, financed the segregated economic development of the Zionist settlement in Palestine. In the usual colonial manner, the early Zionist settlers were eager to establish a separate colony rather than integrate in the existing Palestinian society.

Zionism is not only the most recent case of settler colonialism. Israel is unique in that, unlike Algeria or Kenya, it is not populated by migrants from the colonial metropolis. But this distinction matters little to the indigenous Palestinians who, just like in many other such situations, are being displaced, dispossessed, and massacred by the settlers. Displacement is enacted not only in Gaza, where it is massive and indiscriminate, but also in the West Bank where it is more focused.

To attain its objectives Zionism has had to rely on major powers, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, France and, nowadays, the United States. The Zionists, committed to the success of their project, have been pragmatic and ideologically promiscuous. They would enjoy the support of the Socialist International during most of the 20th century and then switch to become the darlings of White supremacists and the extreme-right.

Zionism is a nationalist response to anti-Jewish discrimination and violence in Europe. It deems antisemitism endemic and ineradicable, explicitly rejecting long-term viability of Jewish life anywhere except in “the Jewish state” in Palestine. The Nazi genocide in Europe reinforced this conviction and offered legitimacy to the fledgling colonial project while such projects were crumbling elsewhere in the world. The Zionist project, ignoring the opposition of the Palestinians and other Arabs, simply exported Europe’s “Jewish question” to Palestine.

Palestinians gradually understood that the Zionist project would deprive them of their land and resisted it. This is why the early Zionist settlers, most of them from the Russian Empire, formed militias to fight local population. They perfected their terrorist experience gained during the Russian revolution of 1905 with colonial counterinsurgency measures learned from the vast experience of the British. Established against the will of the entire Arab world, including the local Palestinians, the state of Israel has had to live by the sword. The army and the police have worked hard to keep the Palestinians down (the British used to call it “pacification of the natives”). Their task has been to conquer as much land as possible with as few Palestinians remaining on it as possible.

Many Palestinians now in Gaza had been expelled from the very area in what is now Israel that experienced the Hamas attack in October. They are mostly refugees or descendants of refugees. The high density of the population in an enclosed area (some called it “the largest open-air prison) makes them particularly vulnerable. When Israel did not like the election of Hamas in 2006, it laid siege to Gaza, limiting access to food, medicines, work etc. Israeli officials were openly admitting they were putting the Gazans “on a diet” while having to “mow the lawn” from time to time, subjecting the Gazans to violent “pacification”.

The 16 years of siege intensified anger, frustration and despair leading to the Hamas attack. In response, Israeli used drones, missiles, and aircraft to continue what used to be done with rifles and machine-guns. The death rate has increased, but the goal of terrorizing Palestinians into submission has remained the same. The name of the current onslaught on Gaza is “Iron Swords”, aptly reflects the Zionists’ century-old choice to live by the sword

rather than coexist with the Palestinians on equal terms. Ein berera, “we have no choice”, the common Israeli excuse for unleashing violence, is therefore misleading.

Impunity and Impotence

Israel has enjoyed a large degree of impunity, with dozens of UN resolutions simply ignored. Only once, in the wake of the 1956 Suez War, was Israel forced to give up territorial conquest. This happened under a threat coming from both the United States and the Soviet Union. Since then, Israel has relied on firm U.S. diplomatic and military support, which has become more brazen with the advent of America’s unipolar moment after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This support is now embodied in the supply of American munitions for the war on Gaza, in the presence of U.S. Navy vessels protecting Israel from third parties and in the U.S. vetoes at the Security Council. Israel and the United States are joined at the hip. Europe, while being more critical of Israel rhetorically, closely follows the U.S. line just as it does in the Ukraine conflict. In both conflicts, European chanceries appear to have abdicated independence and, possibly, ability of action.

Israel’s impunity also reflects impotence of the rest of the world. While Muslim and Arab governments decry and protest Israel’s assault on Gaza, none has imposed or even proposed economic, let alone military, sanctions. Fewer than a dozen of countries has suspended diplomatic relations or withdrawn diplomatic personnel from Israel. None has broken relations. Russia and China, along with most of the Global South, express their dismay at civilian casualties in Gaza but they too stop short of going beyond words.

The double standard of the Western reactions is obvious. Drastic economic sanctions imposed on Russia contrast with the generous supply of arms and at best verbal pleas for moderation in response to the Israeli actions in Gaza. In just a few months, the IDF surpassed Russia’s almost two-year record in the Ukraine with respect to the volume of explosives dropped, the number of people killed and wounded, and the civilian/military ratio among the casualties. Western sermons about inclusion and democracy are unlikely to carry much weight in the rest of the world. Palestinian lives do not really matter to Western governments.

This lackadaisical reaction to the massacres in Gaza contrasts with the indignation they provoke in the population in much of the world. Massive demonstrations call on governments to stop the violence. In response, most Western governments have strengthened measures to restrict freedom of speech. Opposition to Zionism has been declared antisemitic, the most recent such measure is the equivalence between anti-Zionism and antisemitism decided by the U.S. Congress in December 2023. Accusations of antisemitism are leveled at students, often Jewish, who organize pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Televised debates as to what constitutes “genocidal antisemitism” on elite university campuses divert attention from what looks like a real genocide in Gaza. Antisemitism serves as Israel’s Wunderwaffe, its ultimate weapon of mass distraction.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been banned in several European capitals where commercial or cultural boycott of Israel has been made illegal. This pressure from the ruling class, including courts, police, corporate media, employers, and university administrations, creates a powerful sense of frustration among the rank-and-file. Shortly after attacking Gaza in 2009, and over sharp criticism of its treatment of the Palestinians, Israel was unanimously accepted into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), made

up of some 30 countries that boast democratic structures of governance. Former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper, while still in office, placed solidarity with Israel above Canada's interests to the point of claiming that his government would support Israel "whatever the cost."

Support for Israel, tending to increase with income, has become a class issue. It serves as another reminder of the growing estrangement between the rulers and the ruled, the proverbial One Per Cent and the rest. It remains to be seen if popular frustration with the hypocrisy of governments in their support for the war on Gaza may one day result in political change that would begin to dent Israel's impunity.

Israel is a state without borders. Geographically, it has expanded with military conquest or colonization. The Zionist movement and successive Israeli governments have taken great pains never to define the borders they envisage for their state. Israeli secret services and the army pay no heed to borders, striking targets in its neighboring countries at will. This borderless character is also embodied in Israel's claim that it belongs to the world's Jews rather than to its citizens. This leads to the overt transformation of Jewish organizations around the world into Israeli agents. This is particularly the case in the United States. Israeli agents, such as AIPAC, ensure Israel's interests in elections on all levels, from school boards to the White House. Israel has even played the legislative against the executive branch in Washington. Yet this unabashed political interference attracts a lot less criticism in mainstream media than the alleged meddling of China or Russia. Israel also intervenes in the political process of other countries.

Conflict Between Jewish and Zionist Values

Zionism has provoked controversy among Jews from its very inception. The first Zionist congress in 1897 had to be moved from Germany to Switzerland because German Jewish organizations objected to holding a Zionist event in their country. The Zionist argument that the homeland of the Jews is not the country, where they have lived for centuries and for which many have spilled their blood in wars, but in a land in Western Asia. For many Jews, this message bears disconcerting resemblance to that of the antisemites who resent their social integration.

Initially irreligious, Zionism transforms spiritual terms into political ones. Thus, 'am Israel, "the people of Israel", defined by their relationship to the Torah, becomes ethnicity or nationality in the Zionist vocabulary. This prompted the prominent European rabbi Jechiel Weinberg (1884-1966) to emphasize that "Jewish nationality is different from that of all nations in the sense that it is uniquely spiritual, and that its spirituality is nothing but the Torah. [...] In this respect we are different from all other nations, and whoever does not recognize it, denies the fundamental principle of Judaism."

Another reason for Jewish opposition to Zionism has been moral and religious. While prayers for the return to the Holy Land is part of the daily Judaic ritual, it is not a political, let alone a military objective. Moreover, the Talmud spells out specific prohibitions of a mass move to Palestine before Messianic times, even "with the accord of the nations". This is why the Zionist project with its addiction to armed violence continues to repel many Jews causing them embarrassment and even revulsion.

True, the Pentateuch and several of the books of the Prophets, such as Joshua and Judges, teem with violent images. But far from glorifying war, Jewish tradition identifies allegiance to

God, and not military prowess, as the principal reason for the victories mentioned in the Bible. Jewish tradition abhors violence and reinterprets war episodes, plentiful in the Hebrew Bible, in a pacifist mode. Tradition clearly privileges compromise and accommodation. Albert Einstein was among the Jewish humanists who denounced Beitar, the paramilitary Zionist youth movement, today affiliated with the ruling Likud. He deemed it to be “as much of a danger to our youth as Hitlerism is to German youth”.

Zionism vigorously rejects this “exilic” tradition, which it deems “consolation of the weak”. Generations of Israelis have been brought up on the values of martial courage, proud of serving in the military. Zionists regularly refer to their state as a continuation of biblical history. The idea of the Greater Israel is rooted in the literal reading of the Pentateuch. Zionism demands total commitment and brooks little opposition or criticism. The passion of the Zionist commitment has led to assassination of opponents, pitched fathers against sons, splitting Jewish families and communities. The historian Eli Barnavi, former Israeli ambassador in Paris, warns that “the dream of a ‘Third Kingdom of Israel’ could only lead to totalitarianism”. Indeed, many Jewish community leaders, undisturbed by the specter of “dual loyalty”, insist that allegiance to the state of Israel must prevail over all others, including allegiance toward their own country.

The Zionists, whether in Israel or elsewhere, have long claimed to be “the vanguard of the Jewish people” with Zionism replacing Judaism for quite a few Jews. Their identity, initially religious, has become political: they are supporters and patriots of Israel, “my country right or wrong” rather than adherents of Judaism.

Generationally, Israel appears an exception among the wealthy countries. With every generation Israelis become more combative and anti-Arab. While in other countries young Jews are usually less conservative than their parents and embrace ideas of social and political justice, young Israeli Jews defy this trend. Israeli education inculcates martial values and the belief that, had the state of Israel existed before World War II, the Nazi genocide would never have taken place. What sustains the fragile unity of the non-Arab majority is fear: a siege mentality that most frequently takes the self-image of a virtuous victim determined to prevent a repetition of the Nazi genocide. The memory of that European tragedy has become a tool of mobilizing Jews to the Zionist cause. Its political utility is still far from exhausted.

Use of the genocide to foster Israeli patriotism has been unflagging since the early 1960s. After an air show in Poland in 2008, three Israeli F-15 fighter jets bearing the Star of David and piloted by descendants of genocide survivors overflowed the former Nazi extermination camp while two hundred Israeli soldiers observed the flyover from the Birkenau death camp adjacent to Auschwitz. The remarks of one of the Israeli pilots stressed confidence in the armed forces: “This is triumph for us. Sixty years ago, we had nothing. No country, no army, nothing.”

State schools promote the model of a fighter against “the Arabs” (the word “Palestinian” is usually avoided), glorifies military service turning it into an aspiration and a rite of passage to adulthood. No wonder that Hamas and, by extension, all the Gazans, are often referred to as Nazis. Dozens of Israeli officials and public figures have openly incited genocide of Palestinians: dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza, flattening it into a parking lot, etc. Israeli political scientists have pointed out that civic religion provides no answers to questions of ultimate meaning, while at the same time it obliges its practitioners to accept the ultimate sacrifice. Civic space in Israel has become associated above all with “death for the

fatherland.”

Elsewhere in the world, the Hamas attack has galvanized the Zionist commitment under the slogan “We stand with Israel!”. Massive and organized efforts are made to fight the information war. Israeli officials rely on a network of powerful supporters, including executives of high-tech companies, who make sure that the internet amplifies pro-Israel voices and muffles or cancels pro-Palestinian discourse. Censorship leads to self-censorship because pro-Palestinian involvement impedes job prospects and threatens careers.

However, unlike Israelis, diaspora Jews become less and less committed to Jewish nationalism with every generation. Growing numbers of young Jews refuse to be associated with Israel and choose to support the Palestinians. The systematic AI assisted massacre of Palestinians in Gaza has swollen their ranks, particularly in North America. Most spectacular protests against Israel’s ferocity have been organized by Jewish organizations, such as Not in My Name and Jewish Voice for Peace in the United States, Independent Jewish Voices in Canada, and Union juive française pour la paix in France. Prominent Jewish intellectuals denounce Israel and are found among the most consistent opponents of Zionism.

Albeit incongruently, these Jews are accused of antisemitism. Even more incongruently, the same accusation is hurled at ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists. While Israel’s claim to be the state of all Jews exposes them to disgrace and danger, many Jews who support the Palestinians rehabilitate Judaism in the eyes of the world.

The Samson Option

Since its beginning, critics of Zionism have insisted that the Zionist state would become a death trap for both the colonizers and the colonized. In the wake of the ongoing tragedy triggered by the Hamas attack, these words of an ultra-Orthodox activist spoken decades ago sound prescient:

“Only blind dogmatism could present Israel as something positive for the Jewish people. Established as a so-called refuge, it has, unfailingly been the most dangerous place on the face of the earth for a Jew. It has been the cause of tens of thousands of Jewish deaths ... it has left in its wake a trail of mourning widows, orphans and friends.... And let us not forget that to this account of the physical suffering of the Jews, must be added those of the Palestinian people, a nation condemned to indigence, persecution, to life without shelter, to overwhelming despair, and all too often to premature death.”

The fate of the colonized is, of course, incomparably more tragic than that of the colonizer. Palestinian citizens of Israel face systemic discrimination while their kin in the West Bank are subject to repression from both the Israeli military and their subcontractors in the Palestinian Authority. Arbitrary detention without trial, dispossession, checkpoints, segregated roads, house searches without warrant and more and more frequent death at the hands of soldiers and settler vigilantes have become routine on the West Bank. Palestinians in Gaza, even prior to the operation Iron Swords, lived isolated on a small territory, with their access to food and medicine strictly rationed by Israel. Even peaceful protest would be met by lethal fire from Israeli soldiers sitting on the other side of the barrier. There was little work and no prospects for the future. The pressure cooker was ready to explode as it did on October 7.

Since then, thousands of Gazans have been killed and wounded by one of the

most sophisticated war machines in the world. This provokes more anger and hatred among the Palestinians both in Gaza and the West Bank. Israelis find themselves in a vicious circle: chronic insecurity inevitable in a settler colony reinforces the Zionist postulate that a Jew must rely on force to survive, which in turn provokes hostility and creates insecurity.

Over two decades ago David Grossman, one of the best-known Israeli authors, addressed the then prime minister Ariel Sharon known for his bellicosity:

“We start to wonder whether, for the sake of your goals, you have made a strategic decision to move the battlefield not into enemy territory, as is normally done, but into a completely different dimension of reality — into the realm of utter absurdity, into the realm of utter self-obliteration, in which we will get nothing, and neither will they. A big fat zero....”

Critical voices within and particularly outside Israel call on the Israelis to recognize that “the Zionist experiment was a tragic error. The sooner it is put to rest, the better it will be for all mankind.” In practice this would mean ensuring equality for all the inhabitants between the Jordan and the Mediterranean and a transformation of the existing ethnocracy into a state of all its citizens. However, Israeli society is conditioned to see in such calls an existential threat and a rejection of “Israel’s right to exist”.

The settler colonial logic radicalizes society in the direction of ethnic cleansing and even genocide. No Israeli government would be capable of evacuating hundreds of thousands of settlers to free space for a separate Palestinian state; the chances of giving up Zionist supremacy in the entire land are even lower. Only strong-armed international pressure may make Israel consider such a reform.

More probably, however, Israel will resist such pressure and threat to resort to the Samson Option, i.e., a nuclear attack on the countries endangering “Israel’s right to exist”. In this worst-case scenario, Israel would be annihilated, but those who put pressure on it would also suffer enormous casualties. Obviously, no country in the world will run the risk of a nuclear attack to free the Palestinians.

Pressure is more likely to come from the public but largely misdirected at local Jewish communities, almost all of them associated in the public mind with Israel. While these Jews, even the most Zionist, have never influenced Israel’s policies towards the Arabs, they have become easy scapegoats for Israel’s misdeeds.

American politicians seem to agree. President Trump referred to Israel as “your state” when addressing a Jewish audience in the United States. President Biden said that “without Israel, no Jew anywhere is safe.” Israeli leaders appreciate such conflation between Judaism and Zionism, between Jews and Israelis. These conflation boost Zionism, feed antisemitism and push Jews to migrate to Israel. This is a welcome prospect for the country, which these new Israelis will strengthen with their intellectual, entrepreneurial, and financial resources as well as supply more soldiers for the IDF.

Despite the opprobrium and public denunciations, Israel appears immune to pressure from the rest of the world. Israeli disdain for international law, the United Nations and, a fortiori, to moral arguments is proverbial. “What matters is what the Jews do, not what the gentiles say”, was Ben-Gurion’s favorite quip. His successors, a lot more radical than Israel’s founding father, will make sure that the tragedy of Gaza does not lead to any compromise

with the Palestinians. The Israeli mainstream mocks or simply ignores well-intentioned pleas of liberal Zionists, an endangered species, to “save Israel from itself”. However counterintuitive today, only changes within Israeli society may shake the usual hubris. In the meantime, Israel will continue to defy the world.

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By **Yakov M. Rabkin**

The author examines a variety of Judaic scholars whose views, however diverse, reflect the supremacy of Torah ethics over nationalism.

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