

Opinion

Will Zionism survive the war?

As Israel marks its Independence Day, the nation's Zionist ideology faces hard questions.

By Yuval Noah Harari

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A woman stands with an Israeli flag during a two-minute siren in memory of victims of the Holocaust, in Jerusalem, May 6. (Ohad Zwigenberg/AP)

Yuval Noah Harari is the author of “[Sapiens](#),” “[Homo Deus](#)” and “[Unstoppable Us](#)” and a professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

As Israel marks its 76th anniversary this week under the shadow of the Oct. 7 massacre and the Israel-Gaza war, the country's underlying Zionist ideology is being called into question. Various groups distort and weaponize the term “Zionism,” depicting it as a malignant form of tribalism or even racism. To understand current developments in Israel, as well as the country's tumultuous history, it is necessary to clarify what Zionism has really meant over its 150 years of existence.



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Born in the late 19th century, modern Zionism is a national movement similar to the ones that arose during the same period among Greeks, Poles and many other peoples. The key idea of Zionism is that Jews constitute a nation, and as such they have not just individual human rights but also a national right to self-determination. Nothing in this Zionist idea implies that Jews are superior to others, whether they are Greeks or Poles — or Palestinians. Nor does the idea that Jews constitute a nation necessarily deny the existence of a Palestinian nation with a right to self-determination, or the human rights of individual Palestinians.

The equation of Zionism with racism — an allegation that persists long after a 1991 United Nations' resolution revoked a previous resolution to that effect — is therefore not only false, but is itself tainted with racism. Proscribing Zionism implies that Jews can have no legitimate national aspirations, unlike all other peoples. When one of the leaders of the recent protests at Columbia University claimed that “Zionists don't deserve to live,” he was, in effect, arguing that Jews who harbor national aspirations should be systematically killed. When other protesters chanted slogans such as “We don't want no Zionists here,” perhaps they thought they were expressing hostility toward racism, but they were in fact calling for the harassment and expulsion of any Jews who possess national sentiments.

Of course, some Zionists — like adherents of all other national movements — can be racists or bigots. Relations between nations are often fraught with tensions, hatreds and even atrocities, particularly when they have conflicting territorial demands. Almost every national movement in

history has included hard-liners making maximalist demands and moderates willing to compromise. Zionism is no exception.

We cannot do justice here to the many strains that existed within Zionism over the past 150 years, and to the impact that events such as the Holocaust and the various Arab-Israeli wars had on Zionism. What is clear is that over the generations many Zionists *did deny the right* to Palestinian nationhood, and laid claim to the entire land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, as well as to additional territories east of the Jordan, in the Sinai Peninsula and elsewhere.

But other Zionists held much more sensible views, and were willing to settle for far less. David Ben-Gurion and the majority of Zionists embraced in 1947 the U.N. partition plan that mandated the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside a Jewish state. It was Palestinian rejection of this plan that led to the eruption of the first Arab-Israeli War (1948-1949). Between 1949 and 1967, Israel's policy was to achieve peace and normalization with the Arab world based on the 1949 borders, largely renouncing claims to additional territories such as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. During the Oslo Peace Process of the 1990s and in the following decades, the "two-state solution" — which recognizes the Palestinian nation and its right to self-determination — enjoyed widespread support among Israelis. It is still seen by many Zionists as the best way forward, though over the past decade, support dropped from almost two-thirds of Israelis to one-third, according to Gallup polling.

None of this will impress people who argue that Jews have no rights whatsoever in the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. That, however, is a curious argument, given that Jews have had a continuous presence in that land, and a deep cultural and spiritual connection to it, for about 3,000 years. Even if we were to reject all such historical claims, and even if we look back on the Zionist project in the early 20th century as entirely unjustified, the fact remains that as of 2024, there are more than 7 million Jews living between the Mediterranean and Jordan. What should they do? Most of them were born in Israel and are not welcome anywhere else in the world. They now clearly constitute a nation. Denying the existence of these 7 million people or of their national aspirations will lead to further conflicts, with nuclear potential. A peaceful solution can be secured only by recognizing that as things stand in 2024, both Jews and Palestinians deserve to live with dignity and security in their country of birth.

Zionism and the one-state solution

Some argue that the ideal way to secure the rights of both Jews and Palestinians is to establish one democratic state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Supporters of the one-state ideal occasionally single out Zionism as the main or only obstacle to their preferred solution. This criticism, however, is unfair.

Though in theory a one-state solution could indeed guarantee everyone's rights, history is unfortunately resistant to mere theory. Many theoretical pipe dreams have proved to be historical nightmares. A communist society looked good on paper, but the attempt to realize the dream in the Soviet Union and elsewhere killed millions. A single Yugoslav state common to

Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosniaks and other ethnic groups also sounded like a great idea, but the reality was not so great. In 2003 the Bush administration imagined it could turn Iraq into a liberal democracy by force of arms, but things did not go according to plan.

Given the complex and violent history of relations between Jews and Palestinians over the past 150 years, an attempt to forcefully impose a one-state solution on these rival ethnic groups could well lead to civil war, ethnic cleansing or the establishment of an Islamist dictatorship. Israelis wary of the one-state solution point out that no nearby Arab country has managed to maintain a democratic order for long — so what are the chances that the hypothetical Arab-Jewish state would be the exception?

If, despite all the difficulties, a single democratic state guaranteeing the freedom, equality and collective rights of Jews and Palestinians could somehow be maintained between the Jordan and Mediterranean, that would not be incompatible with Zionism. During the past 150 years, Zionism was willing to entertain a very wide range of ideas how to guarantee the individual and collective rights of Jews, and some of these ideas were even wilder than the one-state solution. For example, both Theodor Herzl and Ben-Gurion supported a plan for Jewish national autonomy under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire.

It is also noteworthy that in recent years, one important strain of Zionism has loosened its connection with Judaism and moored itself instead in Israeli identity. This type of Zionism is better understood as *Israeli* nationalism rather than Jewish nationalism. All nations are the product of time. Before 1948, there could be no Israeli nation, because Israelis didn't exist. But 76 years of history are enough to create a new nation.

Thus, the Israeli political party Meretz defines itself as a Zionist party that supports turning Israel from a Jewish state into “the state of the Jewish People *and* of all its citizens.” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu famously charged that Meretz supporters and other left-wingers “forgot what it means to be Jewish.” Tellingly, Netanyahu did not accuse them of forgetting what it means to be Zionist. Zionists of the Meretz type may well feel closer to an Israeli Muslim neighbor than to an American Jew who has never set foot in Israel. Conversely, some Zionists might not be Jews at all. There are, for example, Druze citizens of Israel who define themselves as Zionists despite not being Jewish, and there is even a Druze Zionist Movement.

The Netanyahu vision

In recent years, however, Israel has been ruled by governments that turned their back on the moderate forms of Zionism. In particular, the coalition government established by Netanyahu in December 2022 has categorically rejected the two-state solution and the Palestinian right to self-determination, and instead embraced a bigoted one-state vision.

Like the anti-Israel demonstrators around the world, the Netanyahu coalition believes in the slogan “from the river to the sea.” In its own words, the founding principle of the Netanyahu coalition is that “the Jewish people has an exclusive and inalienable right to all parts of Eretz

Yisrael” — Eretz Yisrael is a Hebrew term referring to the entire territory between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. The Netanyahu coalition envisions a single state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which would grant full rights only to Jewish citizens, partial rights to a limited number of Palestinian citizens and neither citizenship nor any rights to millions of oppressed Palestinian subjects. This is not just a vision. To a large extent, this is already the reality on the ground.

Nothing that has happened since Oct. 7 indicates that the Netanyahu coalition has changed its views. On the contrary, the carnage and devastation inflicted on Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip, the killing and dispossession of [Palestinians in the West Bank](#), and the refusal to commit to any future peace plan all indicate that the current Israeli government has no respect either for the individual human rights of Palestinians or for their collective national aspirations.

Some people argue that the Netanyahu coalition’s extremism is the inevitable fruit of Zionism. Yet this is akin to arguing that patriotism inevitably leads to extremism, and that anyone who begins by displaying the national flag at home must end by fomenting hate and violence. Such historical determinism is empirically unfounded and politically dangerous, since it grants extremists a monopoly over people’s national feelings. Patriotism isn’t bigotry. Patriotism is a feeling of love for one’s compatriots, grounded in a deep connection to a national culture and its evolving traditions — which prompts citizens to take care of one another, for example, by paying taxes and financing welfare services. In contrast, bigotry is a feeling of hate for foreigners and minorities, grounded in the conviction that *we* are superior to *them*.

In the immediate Israeli context, failing to separate patriotism from bigotry plays into Netanyahu’s hands and implies that there is no political alternative to the Netanyahu coalition. If Israeli patriotism requires hatred and persecution of non-Jews, then Israeli patriots must go on voting for Netanyahu. Netanyahu himself has been arguing for years that Israeli patriots must support him, but Zionist opposition parties still have a chance to displace him and lead Israel in a more tolerant and peaceful direction.

There is a lot at stake here, not just for Israel, but for Jews all over the world. If Netanyahu and his political allies cement their hold over Israel, it would spell the end of the historical bond between the Jewish people and ideas of universal justice, human rights, democracy and humanism. Judaism would instead make a covenant with bigotry, discrimination and violence. Jews in London and New York might wish to argue that they have nothing to do with Israel, and that what happens in the Middle East doesn’t represent the true spirit of Judaism. But they would be in an analogous situation to British and American communists in the 20th century, who tried in vain to argue that what Joseph Stalin was doing in the Soviet Union wasn’t *really* communism.

The main problem for non-Zionist Jews is that, unlike Buddhism or Protestantism, Judaism is a collectivist rather than individualistic religion, and building the state of Israel has been the most important collective enterprise of the modern Jewish people. If Israel is conquered by bigotry, it would become the face of Judaism worldwide.

What Titus knew

The victory of the Netanyahu coalition and its bigoted worldview would have consequences not just throughout space, but also throughout time. For starters, it would retrospectively alter the meaning of the entire history of the state of Israel. Herzl, the founding father of modern Zionism, identified bigotry as an existential danger to Zionism already more than a century ago. In his 1902 book "The Old New Land," in which Herzl envisioned the future state of Israel, he prophesied the rise of an imaginary party, led by Rabbi Geyer, that claims that Jews are superior to non-Jews and deserve special privileges. Herzl's book warned readers that Geyer is "a blasphemer," deviating from Jewish values.

Herzl severely criticized the idea that Jews are superior to other humans and deserve special privileges in the future state. His envisioned state was meant to serve as a national home for the Jewish people, but to give equal rights to all its inhabitants. Herzl wrote, "We do not ask to what race or religion a man belongs. If he is a man, that is enough for us." Herzl feared that if Jews were tempted by Geyer's ideas, this would destroy their state. The duty of the Jews, Herzl wrote, is to support "liberality, tolerance, love of mankind. Only then is Zion truly Zion! ... But if you choose a Geyer man, you will not deserve to have the sun of our Holy Land shine upon you." This was Herzl's prophecy in 1902.

If Netanyahu's bigoted vision vanquishes Herzl's Zionist ethos, it would alter the meaning not only of the modern state of Israel, but also of thousands of years of prior Jewish history. Two millennia ago, religious zealots inflicted a terrible catastrophe on the Jewish people. Out of religious fanaticism, they rebelled against the Roman Empire. The legions of Vespasian and his son Titus defeated the Jewish zealots, conquered one city after the other, and finally surrounded Jerusalem in a ring of steel. The moderate Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai decided to escape the besieged city. To elude the Jewish fanatics, who would have killed him on the spot, he hid himself inside a coffin. According to Jewish lore, after exiting the city, Ben Zakkai prophesied that Vespasian would become emperor of Rome. The general was overjoyed by the prediction, and agreed to fulfill any request Ben Zakkai made. The rabbi asked Vespasian to spare from destruction the small town of Yavneh, and to allow Ben Zakkai to establish there a center of Jewish learning. The Roman general agreed.

Vespasian indeed became emperor, and left Judea to assume power in Rome. His son Titus was left behind to besiege Jerusalem, which he conquered and burned to the ground. Ben Zakkai went to Yavneh, and he and the entire Jewish people embarked on a unique historical journey — a journey of learning. Judaism renounced the burned temple, the bloodthirsty temple rituals and the zealots who ignited the flame of rebellion, and instead became a religion of learning. Jews lived in Yavneh, and learned. They settled in Cairo and Baghdad, and learned. They settled in Vilna and Brooklyn, and learned.

After 2,000 years, Jews from all over the world returned to Jerusalem, ostensibly to put into practice what they had learned. What great truth, then, did Jews discover in 2,000 years of study? Well, judging by the words and actions of Netanyahu and his allies, the Jews discovered what Vespasian, Titus and their legionnaires knew from the very beginning: They discovered the thirst for power, the joy of feeling superior and the dark pleasure of crushing weaker people under their feet. If that is indeed what Jews discovered, then what a waste of 2,000 years! Instead of asking for Yavneh, Ben Zakkai should have asked Vespasian and Titus to teach him what the Romans already knew.

If Jews have learned anything over the past 2,000 years that Titus didn't know, now is the time to show it.