

ISRAEL'S HISTORICAL ROOTS AND THE MORAL DECLINE OF THE WEST

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Benjamin Netanyahu's government has responded with extreme rhetorical and military harshness to the brutal Hamas attack inside southern Israel on October 7, 2023. The Israeli army has so far killed more than 21,000 people in Gaza – including 8,800 children —. However, Western leaders and media have all too often given the impression of blanket support for the indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza. European leaders' equivocation over the Israeli onslaught against Palestinians is undermining the EU's "principled" stand on Ukraine and standing in the Global South. It is also fuelling populism and threatening democracy in Europe.

“**W**e are sons of light, they are sons of darkness”. Thus, the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu summed up his view of Israelis and Palestinians in a state broadcast in early November 2023, a month after the brutal Hamas attack inside southern Israel had claimed an estimated 1200 lives and 240 hostages, many of whom are still held by Hamas. His peers in government were equally uncompromising. The deputy speaker of the Knesset, Nissim Vaturi tweeted that Israel should “Burn Gaza now, nothing less!” (The Times of Israel 17th November 2023) while the minister of Heritage, Amihai Eliyahu suggested Israel could “drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza” (The Times of Israel, 5th November 2023).

Such harsh words have surprised some western observers. Yet, anyone familiar with the context in which the state of Israel was created by the United Nations in 1948 will not be surprised. “Israel had been established by Jews from Europe and prided itself on being part of the West, of what was at the time commonly called the *Free World*. It saw itself and presented itself to the rest of the world, as an island of democracy in a sea of authoritarianism.” These words from Avi Shlaim, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at Oxford, in his book “Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab Jew” (2023), are drawn from a biography which is a reflection on the “other victims of Zionism”. It refers to these Jews who were exiled “from their old Arab homelands where they were well integrated and transplanted to Israel, to serve as a subaltern class of the Hebrew settler nation” in the words of Moshe Machover, founder of the radical organisation Matzpen which disappeared in 1983. The flourishing Jewish community of Bagdad, which Avi Shlaim brings back to life so vividly, has all but vanished. So have the Jewish communities in other Middle East

countries and across North Africa. An exception confirming the rule is the small community founded after the second destruction of the Temple in 79 AD that remains around the Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Jerba.

From its very birth in late 19th century Vienna, Zionism emphasized the historic connection of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland in the Middle East but it spawned a state whose cultural and geopolitical orientation identified itself exclusively with the West. When they reached Israel in the 1950s, members of these Jewish communities from Arab countries found the new state “despised Arabic (as) the language of ‘the enemy’... One key factor which shaped my early relationship to Israeli society [was] an inferiority complex. I was an Iraqi boy in the land of the Europeans”, writes Avi Shlaim, reflecting many other Sephardic (Arab) Jews’ feelings *vis a vis* the Ashkenazi Jews from Europe who dominated the Zionist movement and the new state.

The efforts Israel has made over the decades to redefine its ethnic cleansing of the Arab population of Palestine in 1948 as being a consequence of the Arabs voluntarily departing from their homes appears to have paid dividends. Israelis succeeded in undermining the accusation that their state was built on the foundations of what some observers consider to be a crime against humanity.

The Palestinians, 700,000 of whom were forced out of Israel after 1948 and the broader Arab world, regarded Israel as an extension of European colonialism. It was *in* the Middle East but not *of* it. David Ben Gourion (Israel’s first prime minister) referred to Israel’s immigrants from the east as “savage hordes”. Another purveyor of this arrogance was foreign minister Abba Eban, who stated that “the goal must be to instil in them a ‘Western spirit’, and not let them drag us into an unnatural Orient”.

The Israeli establishment has always regarded the creation of the modern state of Israel as compensation for the Holocaust – one of the greatest crimes in history. This makes Israel an extension of the West and a reliable ally. It is a paradox of history that Israelis feel closer to European countries who for centuries practised a virulent form of antisemitism which culminated in the Holocaust, than Muslim countries who afforded them the status of *dhimi*, or protected minority and never demonised them however violent relations could be at times.

As Vichy France stripped French Jews of their nationality in 1940, Algeria’s *ulamas* preached respect for their Jewish brothers and told Muslims not to acquire any Jewish properties that might have been spoliated by the

French. Algeria was then part of France. King Mohamed V of Morocco, then a French colony, refused to play the Vichy game. Thousands of Jews were helped by their Muslim brothers as the Nazi general Erwin Rommel retreated across Tunisia, another French colony, after his defeat at the hands of Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery at El Alamein in the Libyan desert. The risk of Tunisian Jews being deported to concentration camps in the winter of 1942- 1943 was real. The monarch Moncef Bey and the leader of the nationalist Neo Destour party Habib Bourguiba would have no truck with Nazi ideology and practises. Breathing life into an almost forgotten world will not bring that world back. That is true of Bagdad as it is of Cairo and Tunis.

The West's equivocation on Gaza exposes a global order facing mutiny over its domination of the international discourse. The US double standards on Israel plays into a dangerous game, in which the EU follows suit.

One of the greatest paradoxes in Israeli politics since the 1970s is that Sephardic Jewish votes have underpinned the hold on power of the right-wing Likud and its successive leaders from Menachem Begin to Benjamin Netanyahu. Likud's leadership has always been Ashkenazi and its neoliberal economic policies have never served the interests of the underprivileged sectors of society. Shlaim argues that "Sephardic Jews brought with them to Israel a deep hatred and mistrust of the Arabs and therefore naturally gravitated towards the overtly nationalistic, Arab scorning parties of the right". According to him, Menachem Begin was one of the first Israeli politician to resort to the manipulation of anti-Arab feelings, even if the tactic was not a monopoly of the Israeli Right.

Since the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, Western leaders and media have all too often given the impression of blanket support for the indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza. The critical Israeli daily *Haaretz* has been much freer and more daring than its western counterparts. The efforts Israel has made over the decades to redefine its ethnic cleansing of the Arab population of Palestine in 1948 as being a consequence of the Arabs voluntarily departing from their homes appears to have paid dividends. Israelis succeeded in undermining the accusation that their state was built on the foundations of what some observers consider to be a crime against humanity. Yet today the transfer of the Palestinian population out of Gaza is being openly discussed as an official solution by the most senior Israeli leaders and former officials.

The West's equivocation on Gaza exposes a global order facing mutiny over its domination of the international discourse. The US double standards on Israel plays into a dangerous game, in which the EU follows suit. As David Levy notes: "For much of the Global south and in many cities in the West, Palestine now occupies a symbolic space. It is a line of avatar of a rebellion against western hypocrisy, against an unacceptable global order, and against the post- colonial order." In February 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West rediscovered itself and was proud of how it

responded, with unprecedented solidarity, to Vladimir Putin's aggression. The liberal order, tattered by defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq had revived itself. Two years later, such pride died in the ruins of Gaza.

It is also worth noting that massive American, French and British arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies have hugely increased instability in Yemen and Soudan, thus encouraging Iran to build up proxy forces, notably in Lebanon and Yemen and further eroding EU and US influence in the broader Middle East. These very same weapons are also destabilising Europe. This growing instability is all to the benefit of Russia and China: the West seems to have turned shooting oneself in the foot into an art form.

Recent history lies at the root of the widespread feeling of a "decline of the West" and its inevitable consequence, the rise of right wing populism. If Western leaders cannot stand up to the values which underpin the world they built after 1945, if they are tempted to consign to the dustbins of history the ideas of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" inherited from the French Revolution and just race to sell ever more weapons to despotic regimes, why should their own voters, let alone people across the world, believe in them?