

The Collapse of Zionism

By Ilan Pappé

Hamas's assault of October 7 can be likened to an earthquake that strikes an old building. The cracks were already beginning to show, but they are now visible in its very foundations.

More than 120 years since its inception, could the Zionist project in Palestine – the idea of imposing a Jewish state on an Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern country – be facing the prospect of collapse? Historically, a plethora of factors can cause a state to capsize. It can result from constant attacks by neighbouring countries or from chronic civil war. It can follow the breakdown of public institutions, which become incapable of providing services to citizens. **Often it begins as a slow process of disintegration that gathers momentum and then, in a short period of time, brings down structures that once appeared solid and steadfast.**

The difficulty lies in spotting the early indicators. Here, I will argue that these are clearer than ever in the case of Israel. We are witnessing a historical process – or, more accurately, the beginnings of one – that is likely to culminate in the downfall of Zionism. And, if my diagnosis is correct, then we are also entering a particularly dangerous conjuncture. **For once Israel realizes the magnitude of the crisis, it will unleash ferocious and uninhibited force to try to contain it, as did the South African apartheid regime during its final days.**

1.

A first indicator is ***the fracturing of Israeli Jewish society***. At present it is composed of two rival camps which are unable to find common ground. The rift stems from the anomalies of defining Judaism as nationalism. While Jewish identity in Israel has sometimes seemed little more than a subject of theoretical debate between religious and secular factions, **it has now become a struggle over the character of the public sphere and the state itself. This is being fought not only in the media but also in the streets.**

One camp can be termed the 'State of Israel'. It comprises more secular, liberal and mostly but not exclusively middle-class European Jews and their descendants, who were instrumental in establishing the state in 1948 and remained hegemonic within it until the end of the last century. Make no mistake, their advocacy of 'liberal democratic values' does not affect their commitment to the apartheid system which is imposed, in various ways, on all Palestinians living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. **Their basic wish is for Jewish citizens to live in a democratic and pluralist society from which Arabs are excluded.**

The other camp is the 'State of Judea', which developed among the settlers of the occupied West Bank. It enjoys increasing levels of support within the country and constitutes the electoral base that secured Netanyahu's victory in the November 2022 elections. Its influence in the upper echelons of the Israeli

army and security services is growing exponentially. **The State of Judea wants Israel to become a theocracy that stretches over the entirety of historical Palestine.** To achieve this, it is determined to reduce the number of Palestinians to a bare minimum, and it is contemplating the construction of a Third Temple in place of al-Aqsa. Its members believe this will enable them to renew the golden era of the Biblical Kingdoms. **For them, secular Jews are as heretical as the Palestinians if they refuse to join in this endeavour.**

The two camps had begun to clash violently before October 7. For the first few weeks after the assault, they appeared to shelve their differences in the face of a common enemy. But this was an illusion. The street fighting has reignited, and it is difficult to see what could possibly bring about reconciliation. The more likely outcome is already unfolding before our eyes. **More than half a million Israelis, representing the State of Israel, have left the country since October, an indication that the country is being engulfed by the State of Judea. This is a political project that the Arab world, and perhaps even the world at large, will not tolerate in the long term.**

2.

The second indicator is *Israel's economic crisis*. The political class does not seem to have any plan for balancing the public finances amid perpetual armed conflicts, beyond becoming increasingly reliant on American financial aid. In the final quarter of last year, the economy slumped by nearly 20%; since then, the recovery has been fragile. Washington's pledge of \$14 billion is unlikely to reverse this. On the contrary, the economic burden will only worsen if Israel follows through on its intention to go to war with Hezbollah while ramping up military activity in the West Bank, at a time when some countries – including Turkey and Colombia – have begun to apply economic sanctions.

The crisis is further aggravated by the incompetence of Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who constantly channels money to Jewish settlements in the West Bank but seems otherwise unable to run his department. The conflict between the State of Israel and the State of Judea, along with the events of October 7, is meanwhile causing some of the economic and financial elite to move their capital outside the state. Those who are considering relocating their investments make up a significant part of the 20% of Israelis who pay 80% of the taxes.

3.

The third indicator is *Israel's growing international isolation*, as it gradually becomes a pariah state. This process began before October 7 but has intensified since the onset of the genocide. It is reflected by the unprecedented positions adopted by the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court. Previously, the global Palestine solidarity movement was able to galvanize people to participate in boycott initiatives, yet it failed to advance the prospect of international sanctions. In most countries, support for Israel remained unshakable among the political and economic establishment.

In this context, the **recent ICJ and ICC decisions – that Israel may be committing genocide, that it must halt its offensive in Rafah, that its leaders should be arrested for war crimes – must be seen as an attempt to heed the views of global civil society, as opposed to merely reflecting elite opinion.** The tribunals have not eased the brutal attacks on the people of Gaza and the West Bank. But they have contributed to the growing chorus of criticism levelled at the Israeli state, which increasingly comes from above as well as below.

4.

The fourth, interconnected indicator is ***the sea-change among young Jews around the world.*** Following the events of the last nine months, many now seem willing to jettison their connection to Israel and Zionism and actively participate in the Palestinian solidarity movement. Jewish communities, particularly in the US, once provided Israel with effective immunity against criticism. The loss, or at least the partial loss, of this support has major implications for the country's global standing. **AIPAC can still rely on Christian Zionists to provide assistance and shore up its membership, but it will not be the same formidable organization without a significant Jewish constituency. The power of the lobby is eroding.**

5.

The fifth indicator is ***the weakness of the Israeli army.*** There is no doubt that the IDF remains a powerful force with cutting-edge weaponry at its disposal. Yet its limitations were exposed on October 7. Many Israelis feel that the military was extremely fortunate, as the situation could have been far worse had Hezbollah joined in a coordinated assault. Since then, Israel has shown that it is desperately reliant on a regional coalition, led by the US, to defend itself against Iran, whose warning attack in April saw the deployment of around 170 drones plus ballistic and guided missiles. **More than ever, the Zionist project depends on the rapid delivery of huge quantities of supplies from the Americans, without which it could not even fight a small guerrilla army in the south.**

There is now a widespread perception of Israel's unpreparedness and inability to defend itself among the country's Jewish population. It has led to major pressure to remove the military exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews – in place since 1948 – and begin drafting them in their thousands. This will hardly make much difference on the battlefield, but it reflects the scale of pessimism about the army – which has, in turn, deepened the political divisions within Israel.

6.

The final indicator is ***the renewal of energy among the younger generation of Palestinians.*** It is far more united, organically connected and clear about its prospects than the Palestinian political elite. Given the population of Gaza and the West Bank is among the youngest in the world, this new cohort will have an immense influence over the course of the liberation struggle. The discussions

taking place among young Palestinian groups show that they are preoccupied with establishing a genuinely democratic organization – either a renewed PLO, or a new one altogether – that will pursue a vision of emancipation which is antithetical to the Palestinian Authority's campaign for recognition as a state. They seem to favour a one-state solution to a discredited two-state model.

Will they be able to mount an effective response to the decline of Zionism? This is a difficult question to answer. The collapse of a state project is not always followed by a brighter alternative. Elsewhere in the Middle East – in Syria, Yemen and Libya – we have seen how bloody and protracted the results can be. In this case, it would be a matter of decolonization, and the previous century has shown that post-colonial realities do not always improve the colonial condition. Only the agency of the Palestinians can move us in the right direction. **I believe that, sooner or later, an explosive fusion of these indicators will result in the destruction of the Zionist project in Palestine. When it does, we must hope that a robust liberation movement is there to fill the void.**

For more than 56 years, what was termed the 'peace process' – a process that led nowhere – was actually a series of American-Israeli initiatives to which the Palestinians were asked to react. Today, 'peace' must be replaced with decolonization, and Palestinians must be able to articulate their vision for the region, with Israelis asked to react. **This would mark the first time, at least for many decades, that the Palestinian movement would take the lead in setting out its proposals for a post-colonial and non-Zionist Palestine (or whatever the new entity will be called).** In doing so, it will likely look to Europe (perhaps to the Swiss cantons and the Belgian model) or, more aptly, to the old structures of the eastern Mediterranean, where secularized religious groups morphed gradually into ethnocultural ones that lived side-by-side in the same territory.

Whether people welcome the idea or dread it, the collapse of Israel has become foreseeable. This possibility should inform the long-term conversation about the region's future. It will be forced onto the agenda as people realize that the century-long attempt, led by Britain and then the US, to impose a Jewish state on an Arab country is slowly coming to an end. It was successful enough to create a society of millions of settlers, many of them now second- and third-generation. But their presence still depends, as it did when they arrived, on their ability to violently impose their will on millions of indigenous people, who have never given up their struggle for self-determination and freedom in their homeland. In the decades to come, the settlers will have to part with this approach and show their willingness to live as equal citizens in a liberated and decolonized Palestine.