

OPINION

Between land and ideology: An interview with Dr. Emmanuel Navon

Political scientist discusses the Israel-Palestine conflict. By Jayendrina Singha Ray, guest columnist.

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Dr. Emmanuel Navon, an Israeli political scientist and author of “The Star and the Scepter.” (Courtesy photo)

Two words that sum up the Israel-Palestine War are land and ideology.

Whose land? Whose ideology? There are two separate narratives of origin and ownership to answer these questions: one version establishes Jewish habitation in the region from 1st century; the other version expounds that it originally belongs to Palestinian Arab people. Ideologically, the versions differ too — one leans towards the history of Judaism in the region that pre-dates the Ottoman rule from the 16th to the 19th century, and the other begins with the history of Islam, in the

and any peace remains impossible in a region that has historically been home to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

I interviewed Dr. Emmanuel Navon, an Israeli political scientist and author of “The Star and the Scepter,” to find answers to some questions that have resurfaced on social media in the aftermath of Oct. 7, 2023.

Jay: Many subscribe to the narrative that Israel is a colonial state that has been victimizing Palestinian Arab people. The narrative is so strong that the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7, or those preceding it, seem insignificant in comparison to the rhetoric of colonization. Is this narrative of the colonial state accurate or does it tell the partial truth because it is a reading of history from the period around 1917 (The Balfour Declaration) to 1948 (The formation of the State of Israel)?

Emmanuel: I am interested in facts, not in “narratives.” Whoever subscribes to the narrative you describe is either a propagandist or ignorant. Colonialism consists of conquering other people’s lands. This is how empires were formed. The three-thousand-year-old history of the Jewish people is a history of struggle for freedom and of rebellion against empires. We fled the Egyptian empire to achieve self-determination and we were later colonized by the Babylonian empire which took away our freedom. We fought Greek colonialism to preserve our identity, and later became a province in the Roman empire. The heroic struggle of the Jews against Roman imperialism was documented by Flavius Josephus in The Jewish War. We lost our sovereignty again in 70 CE, and our land was colonized by others – including Arab conquerors in the 7th century. They are the colonizers. The Arabs also colonized North Africa, imposing Islam and the Arab language on local populations. Since the exile by the Roman empire in 70 CE, Jews never lost the hope of returning to their land and of recovering their freedom. Jews returned to their land in small numbers throughout history and started to immigrate in larger numbers towards the end of the nineteenth century. The land was desolate and mostly empty, as described by Mark Twain in his 1869 book Innocents Abroad. The historical land of Israel (still called “The Jews’ land” in Norwegian) had been renamed Palestine by the Romans. Under the Ottoman Empire, there was no “Palestine” but administrative districts (called “Sanjaks”) and a sparse population composed of Arabs, of Bedouins, Druze, Jews, etc. There certainly was no “Palestinian Arab People” (an invention of Soviet propaganda from the 1970s). After World War One, Britain and France divided the Middle East along arbitrary borders and created “mandates.” Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Syria are all colonial inventions. The right to national self-determination was recognized as universal after WW1 – a right that applies to all nations, including the Jewish nation. The Arabs enjoyed that right with over a dozen of states after WW2. The Jews achieved their own national-self-determination in 1948 after a harsh struggle against British imperialism and Arab colonialism.

Jay: The Israel-Palestine region appears to the outsider as one where individuals are conditioned to think of their identity on the basis of the dehumanized “Other.” Al-Regeb’s reference to Jews as “filthy animals,” “Brothers of apes and pigs,” and calls for the “annihilation of polytheists and atheists” echoes in certain ways the othering in the Israeli PM’s remark on the Israel-Hamas conflict as a “struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle.” What are your thoughts on this mutual hatred in the role of identity-formation in this region?

Emmanuel: Let’s talk about the facts. The Israeli residents of the kibbutzim bordering Gaza used to donate money to their Palestinian neighbors, to host them in their homes, to invite them to their family events, and to drive them to Israeli hospitals for medical treatment. The same Palestinians gave Hamas a detailed description of Israeli homes and villages for the onslaught of October 7. During that onslaught, Hamas terrorists burnt people alive, butchered children in front of their parents and parents in front of their children, raped women and then cut them into pieces, beheaded people, and committed such atrocities that there are still many body parts that are unidentified. There is no mutual hatred here. The hatred is one-sided. And there is no equivalent between calling Jews “filthy animals” and “brothers of apes and pigs” and saying that we are fighting darkness and barbarity.

Jay: The Covenant of the Hamas states: “the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf [Trust] upon all Muslim generations till the day of Resurrection ... Nationalism, from the point of view of the Islamic Resistance Movement, is part and parcel of religious ideology. There is not a higher peak in nationalism or depth in devotion than Jihad when an enemy lands on the Muslim territories. Fighting the enemy becomes the individual obligation of every Muslim man and woman ... giving up any part of Palestine is like giving up part of its religion.” Land and ideology also form the foundations of the early Zionists like Theodor Herzl who said, “Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland... We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.” Do you think land and ideology are the key reasons behind the Israel-Palestine conflict? If yes, how do you see ‘s great divide being mitigated?

charter says: “The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight Jews and kill them. Then, the Jews will hide behind rocks and trees, and the rocks and trees will cry out: ‘O Moslem, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him.’” These are calls for genocide. The Hamas charter is also full of anti-Semitic slur. Article 22 of the Charter relates to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion as a true document, and it blames the Jews for the French Revolution, for the Communist Revolution in Russia, and for the two World Wars. You do mention some of the articles that forbid compromise with the Jews. This is why the Arab leadership has always rejected territorial compromise, while the Jewish leadership has accepted it for the sake of peace and coexistence. Indeed, all eight territorial compromises of the past eight decades have been rejected by the Arabs and accepted by the Jews: the Peel plan of 1937, the UN plan of 1947, the autonomy plan of 1979, the Camp David proposal of July 2000, the Clinton parameters of December 2000, the Olmert proposal of 2008, the Kerry proposal of 2014, and the Kushner plan of 2020.

Jay: In 1967, the Arab League, signed the “Three Nos” agreement — “no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel and no peace with Israel.” How does this agreement color the modern-day relations Israel shares with its Arab neighbors?

Emmanuel: Back then, Arab states still thought they could defeat and destroy Israel. It is only thanks to Israel’s resilience and deterrence that six of them gave up and signed a peace agreement: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan (the latter has been swept by civil war since announcing its attention of normalizing ties with Israel). Saudi Arabia was about to officially normalize its relations with Israel as well, but the process was temporarily suspended by October 7 and the war. As Iran is building a coalition of failed states and of armed militias, Israel and its Arab partners are working together to build a more stable and a more prosperous Middle East.

Jay: The Israel-Palestine Conflict brings to light several kinds of overt and covert warfare tactics—those ranging from Israel’s open use of weapons against Hamas hideouts to Hamas’s covert wars from its underground tunnel network. Watkins and James in their 2016 article in *The Journal of Strategic Security* observe that, “A dominant narrative that seems to underlie Hamas’ decision to construct these resource-intensive tunnels is the power imbalance between Hamas and the IDF. This decision to engage in tunnel construction is often justified by Hamas ... as a means of leveling the playing field.” Can you shed some light on these methods of warfare and your thoughts on using a tunnel network to level the playing field? Additionally, how do the geo-political relations of Israel and Palestine with the US, Iran, and Arab neighbors like Lebanon affect these modes of warfare?

Emmanuel: There was no need for Hamas to “level the playing field” since Israel was not at war with Gaza before October 7. Israel completely withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005. It removed all its troops and civilians and uprooted Jewish cemeteries. Even after evacuating the Gaza Strip, Israel continued to provide that territory with electricity and water supplies, and to grant working permits to Gazans. It is Hamas that planned war after seizing power in 2007. Gaza could have become a Singapore or a Monaco. After all, billions poured from Qatar. Instead, Hamas turned the territory into a huge military base with the purpose of implementing the Hamas Charter. Instead of investing those billions in hospitals, schools, research, and other sources of growth and development, Hamas invested the money into tunnels, missiles, and advanced weapons supplied mostly by Iran. The purpose of those tunnels is to protect Hamas leaders from Israeli retaliations at missiles intentionally shot by Hamas at Israeli civilians. Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzouk admitted in an interview to *Russia Today* on 27 October 2023, that the tunnels in Gaza were built to protect Hamas leaders and troops, not to protect civilians. The purpose of those tunnels was also to invade Israel and capture Israelis. Hezbollah has been using the same tactics at Israel’s northern border. Hezbollah has built a state-within-a-state in Lebanon under Iran’s aegis. It has amassed a huge arsenal of about 150,000 missiles directed at Israel, and it controls southern Lebanon, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Iran’s strategy is to attack Israel simultaneously on different fronts via its proxies: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, Hamas in Gaza and in the West Bank, and the Houthis in Yemen. It also tries to build nuclear weapons with the objective of destroying Israel, which the Mullahs see as the condition for the coming of the twelfth Iman.

Jay: Historically, why have so many attempts at peaceful resolutions to the Israel-Palestine conflict (Camp David Accord, Oslo Accords, Two-State solution, etc.) consistently failed? What does the slogan “from the river to the sea” refer to, and if realized what are the possible implications of the idea for both Jews and Palestinian Arabs in the region?

Emmanuel: Those attempts have failed because the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) has always considered agreements with Israel as a temporary truce to achieve the “phased plan” adopted in Cairo in 1974. The “phased plan”, inspired from the Vietnamese communists, consists of establishing a military presence in any territory evacuated by Israel to progressively improve the chances of attacking and defeating Israel. Arafat declared after signing the Oslo accords in 1993 that he was implementing the “phased plan” of 1974. And, indeed, within five years of signing the second Oslo agreement in 1995 (after which Israel withdrew from the Palestinian cities and towns), Arafat launched a war (renamed “Intifada”) in the fall of 2000 after spending five years building a military arsenal in Gaza and in the West Bank. Since the Palestinian leadership uses Israeli concessions not to make peace but war, no wonder the “peace process” leads to more terrorism. The

purpose has always been to eliminate Israel – from the river to the sea – and, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. The implication is the elimination of the Jews, a historically lethal obsession that has failed for the past three thousand years, and that will continue to fail.

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Dr. Jayendrina “Jay” Singha Ray’s research interests include postcolonial studies, spatial literary studies, British literature, and rhetoric and composition. Prior to teaching in the U.S., she worked as an editor with Routledge and taught English at colleges in India. She is a resident of Kirkland, Washington.



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