

The Collapse of Zionism

BY [Charles Krauthammer](#)

May 29, 2000, Vol. 5, No. 35

The most improbable story of the twentieth century is the return of the Jews to sovereignty in their original homeland. The establishment of a Jewish state after two thousand years of dispersion and powerlessness is an idea that just a hundred years ago, at the founding of the Zionist movement, seemed delusional. The only thing more improbable is this: That after merely fifty years of independence, the Jews of Israel would tire of it, lose faith in the enterprise, and forfeit their redemption. As things are progressing now, the collapse of Zionism may be the story of the twenty-first century.

For the last twenty years, Israel has been in retreat. One can make reasonable strategic arguments for some or all of the specifics. But the fact of retreat is undeniable. In the south, Israel gave up Sinai, three times the size of Israel, for a cold and hostile peace with Egypt. In the north, Israel is in the midst of a retreat from Lebanon that will leave its northern cities vulnerable to terrorist attack for the first time in a quarter century.

Israel has already conceded to Syria the entire Golan Heights. The only thing that keeps Israel from carrying out this withdrawal is Syrian insistence on making it as humiliating as possible. Syria refuses to offer the minimal courtesies in negotiations or the minimal gestures toward real peace. Even Israelis on the left, such as the novelist Amos Oz, have come out against a deal with Syria and against Israel's abject negotiating stance. Assad, said Oz, is "demanding not just peace, and not even just the Golan, but that Ehud Barak should go to meet him dressed only in his underwear, with his hands raised in surrender, and, if at all possible, wearing a bandanna on his forehead inscribed with the motto 'Israel sucks.'"

And on the most important front, on the Palestinian front, Israel has been engaged for seven years in a thinly disguised unilateral withdrawal. The Palestinians have not tempered their demands one iota since 1993. All the while, Israel has been ceding territory, authority, and legitimacy, while violating its own "red lines" on everything from final borders (the Jordan Valley is for the first time on the block) to a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. Just last week, Arafat instigated widespread rioting to remind Israelis that the military option is his to exercise whenever he wants. How did

Prime Minister Barak respond? Even as Palestinian police were firing live ammunition at Israeli soldiers, he got his cabinet to approve the transfer of three villages in the Jerusalem area as a show of goodwill.

Some call such displays of magnanimity a sign of maturity. Another word for it is demoralization. In a recent essay in *Commentary*, Daniel Pipes pointed out the remarkable asymmetries, moral and material, in the Middle East today. On the surface, Israel has the appearance of a powerful, almost invincible, Middle East presence. It has a vibrant democracy, a highly developed economy, and continued technological superiority. (It is, for example, one of the world's Internet powers.)

Israel's Arab neighbors have none of these, but they do have will. Indeed, a half-century into their struggle with Israel, the Arab will to prevail is more powerful than ever. True, paper treaties have been signed. But the animus toward the very existence of the Jewish state has grown deeper, finding religious sanction in fanatic Islamicism and becoming the staple of official propaganda and popular culture. The Israelis, war weary and desperate for peace, willfully overlook these signs and search endlessly for just the right negotiating formula, just the right territorial concession, just the right dose of placation to bring them an illusive final peace.

The retreat is not just territorial. Israel's physical withdrawal is an epiphenomenon, a surface manifestation of a far more profound withdrawal: psychological and, ultimately, ideological. The territorial retreat tries to grapple (however mistakenly) with the question of how a Jewish state can survive; the ideological retreat raises serious doubts about why a Jewish state should survive.

These doubts, and the relentless attempt by Israel's intellectual elites to instill them in the mainstream of Israeli culture, have been chillingly catalogued in a new book by Yoram Hazony. *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul* lays bare the debate that has been raging in Israel -- in Hebrew, and thus beyond the ken of most Western observers -- about the necessity, indeed the morality, of a state that defines itself as Jewish.

Hazony is the young head of the Shalem Center, a Jerusalem think-tank that publishes the intellectual journal *Azure*. He's also a leading Israeli neo-conservative (an admittedly small group), and he begins his book with a review of those voices in high Israeli culture -- writers, artists, philosophers -- that question the entire Zionist enterprise. He then offers a history of Zionism, probing into the great divisions between the followers of Theodore Herzl and those who opposed the idea of an exclusively Jewish state. In the last part of *The Jewish State*, Hazony tries to trace the influence of these early opponents on contemporary "post-Zionism."

The central contention of post-Zionism is that the idea of a Jewish state -- with its unique calendar, flag, anthems, rhythms, ethos, and history -- is atavistic, a throwback to the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century that begat, among other things, fascism and Nazism. In the modern world of the Internet, the global economy, European integration, and growing transnational interdependence, this ethnic particularism is

hopelessly retrograde. The advanced peoples of the West are surrendering sovereignty. Israel should, too.

There is something wildly out of place about this idea. This is all well and good for Liechtenstein. Unfortunately, however, the neighborhood in which Israel finds itself shows no sign of giving up nationalism, particularism, or religious fanaticism to join the global bandwagon. No matter. The post-Zionists are morally offended and aesthetically appalled by the grubbiness of their neighborhood and the brutal provincialism of their compatriots. One leading Israeli poet, Dalia Rabikovitch, parodies the longing for the Return in early Zionist poetry with this twist on the twenty-third psalm:

As for me,

He maketh me lie down in green pastures

In New Zealand. . . .

Truehearted people herd sheep there,

On Sundays they go to church

In their quiet clothes.

No point in hiding it any longer:

We're an experiment that didn't turn out well,

A plan that went wrong,

Tied up with too much murderousness.

Aesthetic revulsion is compounded by a profound moral guilt about the Israeli experiment. In *The Jewish State*, Hazony highlights how much Israeli cultural production focuses on the original sin of Israel's founding and how the "new historians" consciously subvert traditional Zionist history with a version that places blame for the suffering and dispossession of Palestinians on Jewish aggression, terror, and hunger for power.

But the new historians are hardly content with exposing original sin. They insist on the view that Israel has lived in sin ever since. Take, for example, the Six-Day War. If ever there was a just war, a war of self-defense, it was Israel's war of June 1967 when its existence was threatened -- indeed, its eradication promised -- by the ring of states led by Egypt. President Nasser ordered U.N. troops out of the Sinai, where they had been acting as a buffer to guarantee Israel's security after its withdrawal from the Sinai in 1957. He blockaded the Straits of Tiran, cutting off Israel's southern access to the sea -- an internationally recognized act of war. He massed a hundred thousand troops, concluded defense pacts with Jordan and Syria, and waited -- either for war, or for Israel to collapse

under the weight of mobilization. (A country with a very small standing army cannot function when its entire male population is at the front.) Israel struck on June 5 and won the war.

Now, observe how this is portrayed in the modern ninth-grade history textbook issued by the Ministry of Education. There's no mention of the closing of the Straits of Tiran. No mention of the blockade. No mention of the expulsion of the U.N. troops from the Sinai. No mention of the military pacts among the countries ringing Israel. What single military event is mentioned as precursor to the war? Israel shooting down some Syrian jets on the northern border in May.

The textbook is full of other such travesties. The previous textbook had a map of Israel at the time of the War of Independence with arrows marking the invasion routes of the five Arab countries that attacked the infant state. In the new textbook, the map has no arrows coming in, just arrows going out representing Palestinians fleeing the country.

Another striking omission is any mention of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This might seem merely odd, unless one understands that anti-nationalist intellectuals deplore the glorification of that World War II uprising as a fetishistic celebration of the Jew as fighter, and thus symbolic reinforcement of Israeli militarism.

What does post-Zionism mean in practice? It means that Israel should be not a Jewish state, but a "state of its citizens," a democracy like any other with no particular commitment to the survival or advancement of any one culture or people. Thus the most fundamental law in the Israeli canon, "the Law of Return" that guarantees refuge and citizenship in Israel for any Jew in the world (and which David Ben-Gurion considered the most important law of the land) is under attack for being nationalist, particularist, even racist. A democratic state, it is said, would have no such ethnic tests.

Nor is it just the Law of Return. Respected public figures, writes Hazony, have advanced the demand to de-Judaize the flag (with its Star of David) and the national anthem (Ha-Tikvah, "The Hope," which speaks of the Jewish longing to return to the homeland), and drain school curricula, the army, and the constitution of their distinctive Jewish national character. "The Jews living in Israel are now being asked not only to give up on geographical territories. We must also implement a 'redeployment' -- or even a complete withdrawal -- from entire regions in our soul," writes the celebrated Israeli author David Grossman. And what does this psychic withdrawal, this Reformation, mean? "Giving up on power as a value. On the army itself as a value. . . . Refining a new existence for ourselves. One which is no longer drenched to the point of suffocation with the myth of our exile from the land, or with the myth of Masada, or with a one-dimensional lesson of the Holocaust."

Post-Zionism aches for freedom -- a new, quite un-Zionist kind of freedom: freedom from myth, freedom from chosenness, freedom from history, and, above all, freedom from power. Power is corrupting. The post-Zionists prefer incorruptibility. They yearn not for Zion, but for the purity that Jews enjoyed before they reacquired sovereignty. As

one leading Hebrew University professor said decades ago in opposing Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion: "We are burying a dream, . . . the dream of a land of Israel, the state of the pure and the moral."

Over the last seven years, this quest for the pure and the moral has found expression in Israeli diplomacy and government. Of course, those in power are hardly going to call openly for the Jews to give it up unilaterally. How then to attain purity? The most ingenious solution to this conundrum comes from the architect of the Oslo accords, Shimon Peres.

Peres has discovered that power as traditionally understood does not matter anymore. In his astonishing 1993 book *The New Middle East*, he declares that "the traditional concept of national defense, which depends mainly on military and weapons systems . . . has changed." How? "The physical considerations of the traditional strategy -- natural obstacles, man-made structures, troop mobilizations, location of the battlefields -- are irrelevant." Or as he told the army's head of intelligence in a cabinet meeting: "There is economics and the military, and only a country which goes over to economics will win. Choosing between ten army emplacements and ten hotels, the ten hotels also constitute security. I'm for the European model, which emphasizes economics."

These statements would boggle the mind coming from anyone. But coming from the man who was only a few years ago at the helm of a besieged country, they are particularly ominous. Peres sees the Middle East as some sort of Benelux, where harmony and tolerance prevail, where power and weaponry are obsolete.

A lovely dream. And quite mad. The first problem is that Israelis seem to be the only people in the region who believe it. And it takes more than Jews to tango. Egypt has built a massive American-supplied military. Syria is trying to negotiate a huge new weapons deal with Russia. Iraq and Iran are acquiring weapons of mass destruction and missiles aimed at Israel. Syria already has missiles tipped with poison gas. Lebanon's Hezbollah vows to fight the Jews until Jerusalem is liberated. And the Palestinians have been building up their forty-thousand-man "police force." Its mission is not the arrest of burglars.

The idea that the Arabs have transcended the need for and use of power is simply delusional, as is the idea that they are prepared to enter into a kind of European Union with Israel. When the next war comes, when Arab tank forces come rolling through the Jordan valley (that Israel will have given up to Arafat in the current peace negotiations), we will see how much protection will be afforded Israel by its Maginot line of five-star hotels.

Peres's vision is not just geographically but historically adrift. Europe does represent a different model of co-existence. But that came only after the nations of Europe spent the better part of five hundred years in almost constant warfare with each other. The Middle East is where Europe was a few centuries ago -- with very young and unstable nations still violently contending for primacy and power. Forget about Israel. Look at Iran-Iraq,

Iraq-Kuwait, Syria-Lebanon, Syria-Iraq. Where in the Middle East do you find any model for Benelux?

Even assuming the Arabs were, inexplicably, to fall into line with this fantasy, what kind of vision is this new Middle East? During millennia of exile, the Jews of Persia and Babylon, of Poland and Spain, of Baghdad and indeed Belgium, dreamed and struggled and died for a return to Zion. So they could become Belgians?

The fundamental idea of Zionism was for the Jews to once again enter history as actors, not just as acted upon. And that meant acquiring sovereignty and power, and exercising both on behalf of the Jewish people. This idea is now under attack within Israel itself. Where did this loss of will come from? Why the loss of faith in the necessity, the legitimacy, indeed, the glory of a reconstituted Jewish commonwealth?

Hazoni attributes this ideological collapse to the intellectual influence of a small group of universalist German-Jewish professors who dominated the Hebrew University, which in turn dominates cultural life in Israel. Best known of these is the philosopher Martin Buber, who opposed the establishment of the Jewish state at the time and, in Hazoni's view, never reconciled himself to the reality of Jewish power. Hazoni traces the intellectual influence of these professors through their students, and their students' students, on Israel's small but powerful intellectual elite.

Now, it is true that David Ben-Gurion and his Labor Zionists were more interested in concrete than culture. Farmer-soldiers are not very given to philosophy. They were too busy creating facts on the ground -- an army, a new economy, a government, a state -- to bother very much with ideas. They did leave that field open to their ideological enemies in the academy.

Nonetheless, to blame the collapse of Zionist will on the professors is to give them too much credit. There are more parsimonious explanations.

One is simple exhaustion. It's not the professors but the people who are tired of the price of Jewish power. It is the people who agitated for retreat from Lebanon and the territories, in search of respite. It is they who have suffered not just war but isolation, reprobation, often vituperation from everywhere -- including their erstwhile friends in the West. They are tired of being outcasts. They are tired of the hard life of sustaining the Zionist vision.

Who can blame them? They have fought five wars in fifty years. They look across the ocean and see their fellow Westerners -- and their fellow Jews -- living prosperous and serene, while Israelis get buses blown up at home and lose sons in an endless guerrilla war in Lebanon. Beginning with the War of Independence when Israel lost one percent of its population (the American equivalent would fill fifty Vietnam memorials), Israel has been bleeding for half a century. It is hard to blame a people who have endured so much for so long. To maintain Jewish independence in a hostile Arab sea requires enormous

determination. Israelis have been fighting for three, often four generations. How many generations can sustain a pioneer spirit?

Another explanation, fuller than Hazony's, would situate Israel within the broader intellectual context of the West. In their anti-nationalism, anti-patriotism, cosmopolitanism, and distrust of power, Israeli intellectuals are no different from their counterparts in America, Britain, France, and the rest of the West. Indeed, Israelis are just catching up with deconstructionism and multiculturalism, with Lacan and Foucault. Modern Israeli art and dance and theater offer almost comical attempts to imitate the nihilism of the Western avant-garde. Post-Zionism is really just Western counterculturalism applied to the Jewish Question.

But that Western style of counterculturalism has far more serious consequences in Israel than anywhere else. The West is rich, secure, and dominant enough to play at cultural revolution. It can afford the luxury of oppositional and subversive elites. The tragedy for Israel is that it does not enjoy such luxuries. It lives on the edge. It has no buffer zone, geographic or ideological.

The worst disaster suffered by the United States in the last half-century is Vietnam. Yet within a few years, America had cauterized the wound and recovered. Israel cannot so easily shrug off catastrophe. It has no safety net. It has real enemies standing at the gates. If the army issues a code of conduct with no mention of loyalty to the Jewish people, that will have consequences. If its young people are brought up to believe that the Six-Day War -- and thus the acquisition of the occupied territories -- was anything but defensive, that will have consequences. If the Supreme Court begins striking down laws that shape the Jewish character of the state (such as the Law of Return) in the name of universal democratic principles, that will have consequences.

The West can indulge visions of its own corruption and moral bankruptcy without risking extinction. For Israel, such visions are mortally dangerous. They are already having their effect in culture, law, and diplomacy. The most dangerous threat to a political entity is demoralization, for before the Fall -- of the ancien regime in France, of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, of the Soviet empire in Russia -- comes the loss of faith in one's own mandate from heaven.

In an interview last year, the leading Palestinian author and activist Edward Said ruminated about the prospect of eliminating the Jewish state. "We must find freer, more creative, more inventive means. . . . I am speaking of a cultural battle. . . . Israeli historians themselves . . . are in the process of reconsidering Zionist myths. We must use the contradiction and dissent that exist in the heart of the Israeli population." Said opposed the Oslo accords and broke with Yasser Arafat over them. He believes that there is no armed solution for achieving Palestinian goals. But he does hold out one hope, the hope that within Israeli society there are now voices that understand the true nature of the Jewish state and will seek its liquidation through internal transformation. "Do you think the Israelis will renounce Zionism one day?" the interviewer asked. "Some have begun to

speak of it," Said replied. "I think that the most intelligent among them are in the process of realizing that, despite their incredible power, their situation is untenable."

Israel's enemies see the future, a future Israelis themselves may now be creating: a world without Zionism, a world without Israel.

A contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD, Charles Krauthammer is a syndicated columnist for the Washington Post and an essayist for Time.

Copyright 2010 Weekly Standard LLC.

Source URL:

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/011/046zjsve.asp>