



Israeli youths hold their national flag as they take part in the 'flag march' through Damascus Gate in Jerusalem's Old City during celebrations for Jerusalem Day on May 17, 2015. Credit: AFP

We are in a dangerous situation that can deteriorate into the expulsion of some of the residents of the territories, and even, in the face of serious armed resistance, into acts of mass slaughter.

In recent months we've witnessed a cascade of articles and calls for help by all sorts of learned people on the liberal left crying out that fascism is threatening Israel. Some of them claim that it's already here; others warn that it's about to arrive.

Facing them are others a bit less leftist and a bit less liberal who claim that none of this is true. Israel is a stable democracy that to defend itself from terrorism and regional threats sometimes commits inhumane acts. But other democratic countries have acted similarly during periods of conflict.

During the Cold War, McCarthyism spread in the United States and devoured the world's most stable liberal democracy. During the war in Algeria, the French government was very intolerant toward the supporters of an independent Algeria (professors and teachers were fired), not to mention the brutal policy against the freedom fighters themselves. On October 17, 1961, the French police killed 100 to 200 nonviolent Arab demonstrators in the heart of Paris with hardly a response by the press. It's hard to imagine such an event in Tel Aviv today.

I must reiterate: Analogy is the mother of all human wisdom. Analogy is also the parent of all human folly. There is no science without analogy; no politics of the masses without simplistic, and mostly inflammatory, analogies.

The problem is that all sorts of researchers in political science, sociology and history indulge in baseless historical analogies with scientific certainty. Fascism in Italy was a one-time phenomenon – like many other events in history – even if many people in European countries tried to imitate it without success.

In democratic countries that underwent successful social and national revolutions and the principle of the people's sovereignty was stable, the fascist option has remained marginal and ridiculous. In France, Britain and the United States, fascist movements have failed completely; these countries had no need for them (the anti-Semitic Vichy regime wasn't fascist). Even in Spain, Francisco Franco trampled the fascist Falange without any problem.

True, only in one place did a movement arise that reminds us in many respects of Italian fascism. National Socialism maybe never saw itself as fascism, but the left between the wars insisted on defining it in this way and bequeathed this terminology to the next generations.

Similar aspects between the two movements and regimes stand out that can't be ignored: the forced solution they established in capital-labor relations, the aestheticization of politics, the crude imperialism, the lack of inhibitions. And so the German left, with all its branches, treated Nazism as a local version of fascism.

Yet if nationalism was the most important fuel that fed both fascism and Nazism, the difference between the two phenomena was decisive. Fascist nationalism may have been aggressive and violent, but it was inclusive, political and similar in many ways to French Jacobinism.

Rousseau and Arendt

From the outset, Nazi nationalism was ethnocentric and exclusive. The difference was not just ideological but was translated into a very different praxis. The mass extermination of Jews, Gypsies, Slavs and the mentally ill was planted at the very heart of the unique ethnocentric project. If German Nazism had been identical to Italian fascism from the nationalist aspect, or similar to it, it wouldn't have become a symbol of evil in modern history.

No, the Germans were not more evil, or better, than other peoples. Hannah Arendt's banality of evil is a brilliant distinction that was formulated back in the 18th century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, even if he used different words. Just as there is banality of evil, there is banality of good. The two are dependent on the historical circumstances, and Arendt knew this very well.

She may not have always been systematic in her distinctions, but she was one of the few who studied in depth the 20th century's ideologies on a historical basis, not on the basis of anthropological essentialism. Very few in her generation linked with such sharp intuition modern imperialism, totalitarianism and nationalism.

The banality of evil characterizes the atomization and alienation of the modern world, but it is realized in specific circumstances. To understand this we don't need to learn about Belgian colonialism; it's enough to read Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." There is no need to specialize in the history of the Soviet Union; it's enough to read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. You don't need to be an expert on Nazism, it's enough to read Primo Levi.

Even if sociologist Norbert Elias understood very well that the state's monopoly on violence moderates individual relations, he wasn't aware enough that the state drains and channels this violence outward toward foreign collectives – residents of colonies, enemies of the revolution, or those who belong to another nationality or "race."

Is Israel deteriorating into fascism or beginning to resemble an evil state? This question isn't serious; it's even ridiculous. Even if damage to the freedom of expression can be seen here and there, and even if Jewish ethnocentrism is revealed to be more crude and disgusting every day, it's not fascism and Israel isn't any more an evil state than in the past.

Were there fewer attacks on innocent non-Jews during the 1948 war than today? Did the horrible murder of 47 residents of Kafr Qasem in 1956 take place under a right-wing government? Are the positions of the communities that don't accept Arabs so different from those of the kibbutzim that since the beginning of Zionist settlement have refused to accept a single Arab?

Did the Zionist left that established the country and was forced by a UN decision to grant equal citizenship to the conquered Arabs in 1948 not impose a military government on them for 18 years that canceled civic

equality? Can one seriously compare the attacks on liberal pluralism today to the limited space of pluralism and tolerance under David Ben-Gurion in the 1950s?

Is the left-wing Zionist settlement on the Golan Heights different in principle from the right-wing settlement in the West Bank? Is Sgt. Elor Azaria, who killed an already wounded assailant lying on the ground, really different from Avraham Shalom, the Mapai head of the Shin Bet security service who gave the order to kill in cold blood two wounded and subdued Palestinians in the 1984 Bus 300 affair?

Tales from the Zionist left

I don't have unambiguous answers to some of these questions or to many others. As I have said, every analogy in political history may be necessary but at the same time is almost always insipid and flawed. The Zionist left will say we must judge periods of nation-building by those in which the nation is already established, strong and stable. It's possible to justify this.

But the Zionist left doesn't understand that from the viewpoint of the other, the non-Jew, nothing has changed in principle. The Zionist enterprise was from the start an enterprise of ethnocentric and exclusive settlement. For 130 years this settlement has been carried out without a break (between 1948 and 1967 it was carried out inside Israel's borders and was conducted under the slogan "Judaization of the Galilee" or "Judaization of the Negev").

This doesn't mean we should morally judge every stage of the settlement process identically, but we can understand the historical phenomenon in which we exist only when we understand it as one continuous process. To reach a compromise on 1967, it's essential to understand 1948.

The reasons for the rout of the Zionist left are numerous and diverse, and it's not possible to discuss them all here. I'll mention just a few.

The Zionist left based its settlement not just on the tragic necessity of history; after Europe and then Arab nationalism spat us out and the United States locked its gates, we had no other choice. This sort of claim could not be a national myth to rally around. So the left based itself on a theological-mythological book (which was welded into historical lies on a forced mass exile 2,000 ago). This granted legitimacy to settlement and dispossession.

Zionism may have needed to kill God to become an active national movement, but the lack of the ability to define the secular Jew forced it time after time to retreat and cling to the Jewish religious tradition. This is the reason it has never separated religion and state and has deposited into the hands of the rabbis all family law and signs of collective identity.

In addition, the "historic right" touched more on the Old City of Jerusalem, Hebron and Jericho than on the narrow area between Ashkelon and Acre. How is it possible to suddenly limit this right to only the Green Line's borders? Here, among other things, lie the sources of the decisive historic revolution and the drifting from the old synthesis between nationalism and socialism to the winning combination of nationalism and a renewed and refreshing Jewish religion.

In the end, the socialist Zionist settlers weren't any more moral than the kippa-wearing right-wing settlers of today. They were much more hypocritical, and this difference is important. If hypocrisy is a gesture the bad make to the good, it could under specific historical conditions be a restraining factor. Today there is a feeling that this restraint is disappearing. The evil is shown in its full public glory, and nothing is left but to accept it more and more.

Today this hypocrisy has been forced to retreat because of the transparency, among other reasons. In 1948 cameras could not be found in every Arab village whose residents were forced to flee. We don't have pictures of the massacre in Deir Yassin nor of the collective act of killing in Kafr Qasem. In the Bus 300 affair

journalists' cameras were already present, which the sophisticated Avraham Shalom did not take into account. In the Elor Azaria story the video cameras were already present.

Today they are present at almost every demonstration, every terrorist attack, and almost every act of injustice (the terrorists in Europe act in order to achieve striking pictures). It's hard for words to contradict the pictures. All that's left is to surrender and accept the existence of the evil.

Because there is no danger of fascism, is the situation good? No. We are in a dangerous situation that can deteriorate into the expulsion of some of the residents of the territories, and even, in the face of serious armed resistance, into acts of mass slaughter.

This labyrinth that Israel has fallen into in this stage of settlement, which began in 1967, seems to lead to a dead end. It doesn't seem any political force exists that can rescue it from the situation. All that's left is to hope the world will save us from ourselves.

Shlomo Sand, who teaches history at Tel Aviv University, is the author of "The Invention of the Jewish People."