Nihilism could explain Israel's behaviour in Gaza and Iran

Interview for Elucid, December 2024

Emmanuel TODD
June 17, 2025

I am sometimes criticised for not speaking out enough about the abomination taking place in Gaza. I would therefore like to republish on my blog this text that appeared in December 2024 on the Elucid website. I have not changed my mind on any fundamental issues. I sense the beginning of a small but very insufficient evolution among French Jews.



Picture repurposed from "Il était une fois la famille", Terreur Graphique and Emmanuel Todd, Casterman

Nihilism could explain Israel's behaviour in Gaza

Today we bring you this interview with Emmanuel Todd, originally published on the Italian website Krisis, which has been translated and reworked by the author for Elucid.

Published on 12/01/2024 By Emmanuel Todd

On October 7th, there was a massacre; there is no question about that. But Israel's response in Gaza is carnage, accepted by Western elites. How do you explain that?

➠ **Emmanuel Todd**: In my book, I develop the concept of nihilism, the need to destroy things, people, reality, which in the West results from a void in religion, metaphysics and values. It is a social and historical problem that I study mainly in the United States and also mention in relation to Ukraine.

But since I published La Défaite de l'Occident (The Defeat of the West), the relevance of the concept of nihilism has become increasingly apparent to me in its generality. I have begun to apply it in my reflections to certain attitudes of the French elites, including the totally strange behaviour of President Emmanuel Macron. I apply it to the behaviour of the warmongering section of the German elite, to unlimited immigrationism, and I obviously apply it to events in Israel. I always say 'events in Israel' because, for me, Gaza is part of Israel as an area of political sovereignty. That is why I do not understand commentators who refuse to admit that Hamas is a terrorist organisation. Hamas practises terrorism, but it was born in, and still belongs to, the area under Israeli control. Hamas is an Israeli phenomenon.

In what sense?

➠ Of course, from an anthropological or religious point of view, Hamas can and should be defined as Arab or Muslim. But Gaza is only one component of Israeli sovereign space, as an open-air prison. And from this point of view (that of the prison), Hamas is Israeli. What I mean is that Hamas is obviously a terrorist group, but its terrorism is only one element among others of the overall Israeli violence that has developed throughout history.

But how do you feel when you see what is happening in Gaza?

➠ For me, it's a rather painful subject, one I don't like to talk about, because I am of half Jewish descent, the dominant half of my family. It's true that this family never had any particular connection with the State of Israel. It was a bourgeois family, Israelite as they used to say in France, and above all French patriots. Our family's 19th-century glory was Isaac Strauss, Napoleon III's favourite musician, the man who assembled the collection of Jewish ritual objects formerly exhibited at the Musée de Cluny and now at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme in the Marais. To give a more precise picture of this typical Jewish family: Isaac Strauss is my common ancestor with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lucie Hadamard, Alfred Dreyfus's wife, was a cousin of my great-grandmother. This family, quite characteristically, never took much interest in Zionism. I have never been very interested in it either. That said, militant anti-Zionists have always worried me; I have always considered that an excessive frequency of anti-Zionist statements by any individual probably revealed an underlying anti-Semitism. Beyond opinions and arguments, statistics reveal an obsession that is a dimension of racism.

Basically, I was neither Zionist nor anti-Zionist, but I held the view that it was reasonable to show a minimum of solidarity with the Jewish state. Nazism showed us that, ultimately, we do not choose to be Jewish or not: my maternal family had to flee to the United States during the war. Cousins who did not act with equal caution were deported. Anti-Semitism exists and, as my grandmother used to say, will always exist. So, initially, I had a fairly nuanced attitude. But the behaviour of the State of Israel has become too problematic on a moral level. I still don't like to talk about it, but now I have to.

Why?

➠ Because the State of Israel has gone to extremes in its use of violence. And above all, violence that seems to have no other purpose than itself. That is why I began to think about the behaviour of the State of Israel in terms of nihilism.

Meaning?

➠ Nihilism is a creation of emptiness. In the case of the United States, I examine it mainly at the level of the ruling classes, where I observe a void of values, resulting in an exclusive interest in money, power and war. In the case of the State of Israel, although I have not studied religious beliefs in Israel, I hypothesise that there is also a problem of religious emptiness, despite the presence of ultra-Orthodox groups whose real socio-metaphysical nature deserves examination. American evangelicals pose a different but parallel

problem. As for the American fanatics who support Israel because they believe that enlarging Israel will bring back Christ...

A multitude of recent concepts must, despite their metaphysical pretensions, be interpreted as components of a zero state of religion, the term religion being taken here in its classical monotheistic sense—Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. I am now referring, in my analyses of the historical present, not only to zero Catholicism and zero Protestantism, but also to zero Judaism. Soon, no doubt, zero Islam. It is almost easier for me to formalise the deficit of real religious values in Israel because I have in my hands the book by my ancestor Simon Lévy, Chief Rabbi of Bordeaux, 'Moses, Jesus and Muhammad and the Three Great Semitic Religions' (1887), which gives me direct family and printed access to what the Jewish religion is in terms of values. The West has now reached a zero stage of religion, which explains American and European nihilism. The same historical logic applies to Israel. What the behaviour of the State of Israel evokes for me, as a hypothesis, is a nation which, deprived of its socio-religious values (zero Judaism), fails in its existential project and finds its raison d'être in the exercise of violence against the Arab or Iranian populations that surround it.

War as an end in itself?

➠ I would apply to the State of Israel the same interpretation that I apply in my book to Ukraine. I explained that Ukraine was a state in decay before the war and that everyone had been surprised by the military energy of the Ukrainians, by their ability to defend themselves. In reality, Ukraine found its raison d'être in the war against the Russians. And indeed, everything in the attitude of the Ukrainians is determined by Russia, but in a negative way. Eliminate the Russian language, fight the Russians, subjugate the Russian populations of Donbass. But beware: I am a researcher, so these are hypotheses that I am formulating for Israel. I have the impression that the Israeli nation has lost its meaning for itself and that the practice of violence, which was once a necessary military means of guaranteeing the security of the state, has become an end in itself.

I can see possible objections to my hypothesis, such as the high fertility rate of the Israeli population, and not only among the ultra-Orthodox, even if their case is extreme. The age of nihilism in the West is accompanied by very low fertility rates and a difficulty for populations to reproduce life. But the logical constellation of 'zero religion/nihilism/violence/war/fertility' is a very broad field of socio-historical investigation that would deserve a comprehensive approach. There are religions of war, which is unfortunately a fairly common human activity from a historian's point of view. I can easily imagine low- and high-fertility nihilisms in the future. Low fertility is characteristic of all of East Asia, particularly China, a region of the world that, at first glance, does not seem to me to be affected by nihilism, but rather content to take off economically.

So, in your opinion, a spiral of violence has been triggered in Israel with no other concrete objective than to perpetuate itself?

Exactly. What surprises me is that Western elites always say, 'Israel has the right to guarantee its own security.' They speak as if Israel's behaviour were essentially rational, with this objective of security. But I don't see it that way at all. What I see is the need to do something. And that something is war.

And what a war...

➠ When I look at the videos posted on social media by IDF soldiers in Gaza, I think they evoke nihilism rather than a war with a rational purpose. You see, I said that I didn't like thinking about Israel. But if I start thinking about it, I try to do so dispassionately and without thinking solely in terms of morality. When it comes to the current situation, I can be outraged; I am a human being like everyone else. I could simply say that what the Israelis are doing in Gaza is monstrous. It is monstrous. But what interests me here is the future. So I wonder if those who see this as horrific realise that this is only the beginning of the horror and that things will get worse. A cycle of violence has been set in motion, and there is no reason to believe it will stop. The need for the State of Israel (with a Jewish population of 7 million) to wage war on Iran (with a population of 90 million) is something surprising. If we adopt the hypothesis of nihilism, we find part of the answer.

Meaning?

➠ Let's make a 'rational' intermediate hypothesis, albeit a violent one. To define a rational objective, we could say that one of Israel's goals is to create a global conflagration so that, in the general chaos, it can suddenly, brutally and completely empty Gaza and the West Bank.

But it wouldn't end there...

➠ Exactly. The war would continue, in what direction I do not know. Because behind this behaviour, I believe I perceive the fact that the State of Israel has lost its original identity. I sense a void. For some time now, I have sensed in the individual assassinations of senior figures and leaders of the opposing forces a need to kill that has no real strategic interest. Perhaps in the unconscious depths of the Israeli psyche, being Israeli today is no longer about being Jewish, it's about fighting the Arabs. I am partly Jewish, perhaps, I'm not at all sure, but I'm also not sure that the majority of Israelis are still Jewish.

In what sense are you not sure you are Jewish?

➠ The core of my family, as I said, belongs to the old French Jewish, Israelite community, but it is a family with mixed marriages since the interwar period. I have a Breton grandfather and an English grandmother. Born in 1951, I was baptised and churches are more familiar to me, to say the least, than synagogues. Catholic universalism, in its secularised (zombie) republican version, probably defines me better than belonging to the chosen people. However, my two fundamental values, children and books, are two anchors that are more typically Jewish than Catholic. And as for feelings of marginality and anxiety, no problem…

If I had to define myself by a category, I would refer to Riccardo Calimani's The History of the Venice Ghetto, a book that describes the trial of a Marrano. In the usual Christian conception, a Marrano is a Jew who has been forcibly converted or who has converted to save himself, but who, deep down, has remained Jewish. In reality, this is not the case. We see clearly in this trial that the Marrano is a person who, deep down, no longer knows who he is. This man no longer knows whether he is Jewish or Christian. That's

exactly how I feel. I could say that there are times when I think I'm Jewish, but I have to admit that I feel very comfortable when I enter a church, where I always make the sign of the cross when I walk down the central aisle. When the Israeli operation against Gaza began, I was reading the memoirs of my grandmother, my mother's mother.

Jewish?

➠ Absolutely. During the war, she was a refugee in the United States with her parents and two children. Although her husband, a communist intellectual from Brittany, was killed in the Dunkirk pocket, the family's life in the United States, especially my mother's, was a happy one. They lived in Hollywood, where my grandmother worked as a film dubbing artist. Her memoirs mention an ageing Buster Keaton and Clark Gable, who wasn't all that handsome. My mother was a teenager in Hollywood. There are worse places to live. In fact, her life there, which she spoke of with nostalgia, seems to have been wonderful. It was an obvious but difficult choice for them to return to France as soon as their country was liberated. They found their house devastated, occupied by "good" French people. They got it back. All the valuables had been stolen. Above all, they had to count the members of their family who had been deported and died in the camps. They were a bourgeois French Jewish family who had seen the Holocaust up close, and for whom the name Auschwitz took on its true meaning. This is what I happened to be reading when the bombing of Gaza began. And I asked myself: what is the connection between the State of Israel and my family's history?

Yes, what connection was there?

➠ In his memoir, The World of Yesterday, Austrian writer Stefan Zweig talks about the unpleasant surprise of the Viennese Jewish bourgeoisie, who overnight found themselves assimilated with the Jews of the shtetls of Eastern Europe. They discovered that, in the minds of the Nazis, they were all the same. Long after the war, my family made ironic and self-critical jokes about the time when we foolishly referred to the newly arrived Polish Jews as 'those who embarrass us'. A lesson learned from history. Still, I sometimes wonder if, as a child of Saint Germain-en-Laye, I don't unfortunately retain something of that pre-war bourgeois Israelite blindness when I think about the ethnic or racial resentments of Alain Finkielkraut or Éric Zemmour.

Enough joking. Back to the conclusion. Ultimately, it is not up to us to decide whether we are Jewish or not. It is those who persecute us who decide in the last resort. This was probably the basis of my attachment to Israel in the past. For a while, I kept this reasonable attachment, but to be honest, it was never enthusiastic. I have never been to Israel and it is likely that I will never go. My second spiritual home is Italy.

I think that today we are approaching a moment of separation, in which many Jews in the diaspora will lose their sense of connection to Israel. This phenomenon began in the United States, perhaps because the American Jewish community is massive, autonomous, and located in the most powerful country in the world. In France, on the other hand, nothing of the sort is noticeable. An attitude like mine is not even in the minority; it is insignificant. In France, as far as I can judge without serious research, both among Ashkenazim,

who originate from Eastern Europe, and Sephardim, who originate from the Mediterranean, solidarity with Israel remains intact. From my point of view, they are a little morally backward.

The same thing is happening in Italy.

➠ I believe the problem is that the Jews or the people like me who do not know what they are, the Marranos (in the historically accurate sense of the word), do not realise that their dilemma is going to be even more painful in the future. Because, as I said earlier, the situation in the Middle East is going to get worse.

Beyond the intrinsic dynamics of violence, a demographic analysis allows us to understand why the far-right radicalisation in Israel is a continuous and necessary process in the historical sense. People who emigrate to Israel (not all of whom are Jews, incidentally) are attracted by the violence that is now a constituent element of the national system. On the other hand, the people who emigrate, who leave Israel for North America, Europe, Russia or elsewhere, are those who aspire to a peaceful, normal, sensible life for themselves and their children. This means that the proportion of violent people in Israel is inevitably increasing. A similar phenomenon occurred with the emigration of part of the middle classes from Yugoslavia before the inter-ethnic civil war, and from Ukraine, of course, before the rise of Russophobia. So, we are only at the beginning.

French and Italian Jews will be confronted with an increasingly obvious gap between traditional Jewish values and the behaviour of the State of Israel. The time to choose will come. Especially since the French population in general, and not just those of Muslim origin, will increasingly judge Israel for what it is, regardless of the memory of the Holocaust. Admittedly, Western elites, European far-right activists and American evangelical Republicans have an active and sometimes frenzied sympathy for Israel. If we think about it for three minutes, it is not illogical that in this age of zero religion and the cult of inequality, the classes and groups that were once anti-Semitic are now taking a positive interest in the State of Israel, which has become far-right.

But I believe that ordinary people judge and will increasingly judge Israel reasonably, and therefore harshly. Of course, European Islamophobia, a result of immigration, is currently creating a kind of smokescreen. In France, for example, there are anti-Muslim or anti-Arab sentiments that may suggest to some hotheads a connection between Israel's struggle and the 'values of the Republic,' as they say nowadays. However, I believe that the majority of French people will be able to distinguish between the situations and judge what is happening in the Middle East independently of our own social problems. We are, after all, in the country of human rights. We have other things in France besides Islamophobia. Soon, it will no longer be enough to protect Israel (relatively) from a simply human judgement.

This is also true in Italy…

There is a real divide between the media and politicians on the one hand, and ordinary people on the other, on many issues, particularly Israel, in France, Italy and elsewhere. I think this is a subject I will work on. When I intervene in public debate, it is because, as a researcher, I feel I see something that others do not. I do not consider myself more moral than others. For example, in my book on the war in Ukraine, I feel that

I have understood things that others have not seen. But I have not worked on Israel. I will certainly not write a book on the subject, it would be too painful. But I will undoubtedly work on the question for myself, so as not to die ignorant. I would like to find new explanations. I have two working hypotheses on Israel, which I have already outlined. The first is that of nihilism due to the loss of meaning in Israeli society, the meaning of its history. The second, which is a consequence of the first, is the hypothesis that the situation will get even worse.

How do you plan to analyse the situation in Israel?

➠ We will have to address the question of what is happening in Israel within a general sociological framework. I will repeat what I outlined at the beginning of the interview. This is the fundamental problem. It deserves to be repeated. One of the concepts that I systematically develop in my book, in order to understand the crisis in the United States and the passivity of Europeans, is the concept of 'zero religion'. I distinguish three stages of religion. The first is an active stage, when people are believers, go to mass or service on Sundays, or observe the Sabbath. The second is a 'zombie stage,' during which people are no longer believers, but religious values survive or are reincarnated in a secular form. In this phase, substitute political ideologies flourish: the ideal of the Nation, the French revolutionary ideal, English progressive liberalism, socialism, communism, Nazism... Then comes the zero stage of religion, in which neither individual morality of religious origin nor the structuring of society by religious morality exists anymore. I apply this concept to the entire Western world. And of course, it also applies to the State of Israel.

And how do you plan to proceed?

The State of Israel was born out of a religious question. Judaism was initially simply an active religion, practised by believers. Then came the decline of belief, as in the Christian world, and the emergence of a zombie Judaism, in which one could remain Jewish, with the feeling of being Jewish, individually and collectively, without believing in God. I found at the beginning of notebooks written by my great-great-grandfather Paul Hesse during the First World War the introductory sentence '…I, a Jew by race and a freethinker by belief…'. Zionists were often secular, they did not define themselves as believers. I hope I am not making a factual error here. I am not an expert on the subject. I am doing my research on the spot. So, I am beginning to wonder whether Zionism does not simply fall into the category of the zombie stage of religion.

But as far as the current State of Israel is concerned, I wonder whether it has not largely reached the zero stage of religion. This zero stage could explain nihilism. There remains, as I said, a problem to be solved, which concerns the segment of very religious Jews, who in my opinion represent something that is no longer traditional Judaism, the rabbinical Judaism we knew. I am not in a position to define its nature, because I have not yet done the research, although I feel that it is no longer Judaism in the classical sense. The subject is technically fascinating because of the initial heterogeneity of the Israeli population: originating from Eastern Europe, the Arab world, and later from Russia, with ancient minority groups from Iran or Kerala, and more recent arrivals from the United States or France. The question 'Who became what?' opens up a fascinating matrix of internal religious developments within Israel.

In any case, you know that the founding fathers of the State of Israel said: 'God does not exist, but he gave us a state.'

➠ Yes, yes. Let's say that this is a zombie phrase. And that would confirm the hypothesis of Zionism as a 'zombie stage' of religion. But what is dizzying is the hypothesis of zero religion, because it would mean that Israel is no longer a Jewish state. Not to mention that the disappearance of real Jews in no way implies the disappearance of anti-Semitism in the West and elsewhere.