

# “The Suicide of Israel,” Anna Foa's Latest Book

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In Vatican media, the interview with the historian of Judaism who addresses various issues between the past and present of the country in the context of the Middle Eastern chessboard

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**It is a book with a strong, provocative, uncomfortable title. A book that sparks discussion. Professor Foa, you have a prestigious past as a university professor of History, at Sapienza University in Rome, and in particular of the History of Judaism. Your latest book, "*Il dottrina della scienza*" (*The Suicide of Israel*) (Laterza 2024, 15 euros), has such a strong title that perhaps it can only be used by those who come from that history and that people. Why do you believe that Israel is at risk of suicide?**

When I speak of suicide, I think first of all of a physical, territorial suicide. That is, I do not believe that Israel will be able to win against all the enemies it finds itself fighting on multiple fronts. Starting with Iran, which remains in the background of the various fronts. Of course, we would breathe a sigh of relief if there were a regime change in Tehran, but I really do not think that the current Israeli prime minister will be the one to bring it about. Not to mention that the idea he has in mind for Israel has many points of contact with certain theocracies. The second level I am referring to is that of political suicide: Israel is isolated from the rest of the world. Antisemitism is growing everywhere, even if in Israel this is of little importance because it concerns the Jews of the diaspora, indeed it prompts this representation of being alone against the entire world pervaded by antisemitism. And then there is also a moral suicide, an ethical suicide. We see with dismay that those who nobly demonstrated every Saturday against Netanyahu and his justice reform are now silent, perhaps because they are still under the trauma of October 7. What is certain is that now the fate of Israel is at stake. And we should not underestimate a climate of internal repression, a tendency towards authoritarianism, which goes hand in hand with war. And which only a very few groups seem to oppose.

**Among the various aspects of your book, the most prominent is the relationship between Zionism and Colonialism, which you analyze from both a historical and current point of view. And you also focus on the anthropological nature of the conflict. The European matrix of Zionism is experienced by the Arabs as an expression of presumed and imposed cultural, civil and value superiority. That is, precisely, colonialist. On the sidelines of an interview with our newspaper, last year the Palestinian president Mahoumud Abbas confided to us that a future of peace would be facilitated by the prevalence of the Sephardic Jewish component in Israel.**

There are historians who even speak of internal colonialism in Israel, in the early years of the arrival of the Sephardic Jews, the *Mizrahim*, from Arab countries or the Near East. The things Abu Mazen told you highlight what a recent historian Derek Penslar writes about the root of the idea of colonialism. Israel's colonialism is not similar to classical European colonialism. There are no states that guide it. It originated more with the purchase of land than with weapons. And Penslar in fact says that the Palestinians speak of colonialism because they perceive that Israel is the bearer of an idea of European supremacy. And this is in fact evident, starting from Ben Gurion's speeches, and, as I was saying, also in the way in which the Jews coming from Arab countries were treated. A bit paradoxically, the Palestinians are then considered by the other Arabs to be a more cultured people, of scholars, writers, poets, young people who go to study in European universities. Perhaps the idea of supremacy arises from the democratic deficit that has always characterized Palestinian institutions. There hasn't been a vote in Palestine for almost 20 years. But if we consider that the elections would probably have brought Hamas to power, we could say that we can also live with a democratic deficit. I think, in relation to your question, that yes, the idea of European supremacy greatly influences the perception of a colonialist Israel. Then in real history there has been no lack of colonialist initiative, starting with the first war in 1948, a 'war of liberation' for the Jews and '*Nabka*' (the disaster) for the Arabs. And nonetheless in 1967 with the colonization of the West Bank and Gaza. I have no doubts in sharing the idea that the anthropological character of the conflict is very important, and too often hushed up in favor of the political or military dimension alone. That overcoming this prejudice could then produce a single state in which the two ethnic groups coexist peacefully seems quite unlikely to me today.

**The book then discusses another major theme, which is the centuries-old plague of antisemitism. An attitude and a practice that have crossed European history, writing terrible and indelible pages in our memory. In the book, you argue that we are increasingly moving towards an identification between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. This is a problem, because every time you criticize the policies of Israel and its government, you risk being accused of antisemitism.**

Yes, it is true. It is an increasingly recurrent attitude, which is expressed in that accusatory phrase 'you are only interested in the dead Jews and not in those still alive,' that is, think of Israel and not only of the Shoah. In truth, even several Jewish intellectuals, both Israeli and American, have denounced the easy and approximate current identification between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Of course, there are relationships between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, but the problem is what is meant by Zionism. Or perhaps by Zionisms, because there are different – and sometimes very different – definitions. Today the equivalence between Zionism and the politics of the government of Israel prevails. Originally, Zionism indicated the aspiration to a state; from the moment the state was created, there exists instead the politics of the state, that is, the politics of Israel. It is true that many expressions of anti-Zionism have taken the form of a deplorable antisemitism, just look at certain slogans of youth demonstrations. And antisemitism is certainly an ugly beast that must be nipped in the bud. However, I believe that even before this nefarious pseudo-ideology, the emphasis should be placed on Gaza, on the too many deaths in Gaza, and even before that on October 7th. It is no coincidence that in Israel we do not talk about antisemitism, we talk about the war. It is a problem that essentially concerns the diaspora. And I say that – perhaps some will not agree with this – if in Europe we talk a lot about antisemitism it is to avoid talking about the war in Gaza.

**Former Israeli President Rivlin, in a speech a few years ago, said that the tribes of biblical origin have returned to Israel, that is, that Israeli society is increasingly multifaceted, if not divided. In your book, you write that the tribes, after all, have always been there; they have just changed. No longer just the division between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, but now also the religious and messianic nationalist settlers, and then the ever-increasing presence of the *haridim*. The whole world has changed in recent years, but society has changed more rapidly. And perhaps this is the main reason for this crisis. What is your opinion on this change? Why has religion assumed such a strong, decisive weight, even in politics?**

First of all, we must distinguish the religiosity of the *haridim* from that of the religious nationalists who claim to act on God's motivation, realizing the will of the Lord. [This was] claimed by Baruch Goldstein, a serial killer, guilty of the massacre of Hebron in 1994, or his inspirer Rabbi Meir Kahane. Or that settler Yigal Amir who killed Rabin in 1995. It is an exacerbation of religion, but strictly connected to nationalism. In reality, the historical right, both Zionist and Israeli, even in its most radical components, did not have these kinds of religious characteristics. This religious drift, heir of Yabotinsky's revisionist Zionism, was in reality born only after 1967. That is, after the intoxication that followed the conquest of Jerusalem, and the arrival of the settlers called to settle in the Occupied Territories. We have all seen these settlers in the occupied West Bank, with crocheted kippahs and

machine guns slung over their shoulders, who, often backed by the military, lord it over and commit violence. It is frightening that after October 7, the government distributed thousands of automatic weapons to them. They now number 700,000, and with the two ministers Smotrich and Ben Gvir they influence the government's decisions because without their votes Netanyahu would not have a parliamentary majority. They are destined to grow in number and influence, because, unlike what happens in Tel Aviv, they have many children.

**This process reached a turning point in 2018 with the approval of the constitutional law called 'basic law' (Israel does not have a constitution, but has 14 laws of constitutional rank; ed.), which established the Jewishness of the state of Israel. A law that in the West did not receive the attention it was due because of the risks and implications associated with it.**

Exactly. First of all, the role of the Arabic language has diminished. Previously, Israel had three official languages, Hebrew, Arabic and English: now Hebrew has been given precedence. Secondly, the characteristics of democracy have changed, in the sense that Israel becomes a state only partially democratic for non-Jewish citizens. Therefore, for Israeli citizens who are Arab and Muslim, or Christian or Druze. Arab-Israelis had already suffered severe limitations to their citizenship in the period from 1948 to 1967. Of course, it cannot be defined as an apartheid regime. It is common for you to go to an Israeli hospital and find a Palestinian head physician. But this is in Israel, but if you go to the West Bank you actually find a regime that is very close to apartheid. One thing, which I find absurd, and which seems to have been emulated by Italian fascism, is the institution of confinement. That is, that 'administrative detention' for which one can be arrested for an indefinite period of time, without having a trial, and without having committed a crime, but only for the possibility that one could be committed based on your political beliefs. And let's not talk about the conditions of detention. Because even in Israel – as in other countries, perhaps Christian, Muslim, or Hindu – the idea of the legitimacy of revenge, as a surrogate for justice, has been gaining ground. The original idea of the war in Gaza was the legitimate idea of self-defense and the neutralization of Hamas. But it lasted two weeks. After that, revenge prevailed, which is still tragically ongoing.

**You spoke earlier of the worsening violence unleashed by the settlers. The government seems to support them to the point that the official nomenclature no longer speaks of the 'West Bank' or 'Transjordan' but of 'Samaria' and 'Judea'. The biblical terms that evoke the aspiration to Eretz Israel, Greater Israel. The massive presence of settlers makes it difficult today to imagine the creation of two states with the '67 borders. But even the option of a single state in which the two peoples can peacefully coexist seems, after October 7, pure utopia.**

The one-state solution had only recently emerged. Supported by the world of humanist Zionism. Today it is absolutely unthinkable due to the wave of hatred that has been unleashed on both sides. I continue to think that the only option is that of two states. I do not think that a free Israel, still democratic, free of fear and anguish, can exist without the presence of a Palestinian state on its borders. Of course, this requires a change of leadership also on the Palestinian side. Before October 7, there was talk of it, the names of Barghouti and others were mentioned. Now those theories are silent. The only words that count are those of war.

**As Vatican media we try to support the reasons of those who suffer and to echo the words of Pope Francis who continues to recall the opportunity of "honorable compromises and honest negotiations." But we live in a world that seems deaf to these appeals. An ideal and creative proposal of diplomacy for peace is missing.**

Without peace, we cannot rebuild the immense destruction that appears before our eyes today. Which is not only material destruction, but the laceration of spirits wounded by violence and death. But there is no other way. And it will take many years to repair these wounded and violated souls: generations.

**This is an essential point: when you walk the streets of Jerusalem you breathe this mutual hostility at every step, at every glance. If the Oslo Accords failed it is also due to this: they remained agreements between political elites, never metabolized by the two societies. The 2% of Christians who live in the Holy Land stand out for being the only ones who speak of peace. Israeli president Herzog in an interview with our newspaper said that Christian schools are excellent because they teach peace to young people.**

Yes, I remember visiting a school run by nuns in Jerusalem years ago and I had the same beautiful impression of a place of dialogue, respect and peace.

**One last question: in our work in Israel we register a lively dialogue between different positions that we do not find in the Jewish world of the diaspora, with few exceptions. Just as the free and intelligent observations that we find in the Israeli press, in *Haaretz* or in the *Times of Israel*, it is more difficult to find them in the Italian media.**

*Haaretz* is a valuable newspaper to understand what is really going on. Yes, the European diaspora, and the Italian one in particular, prefers to remain silent and support Israel for better or for worse. It insists on the danger that Israel is under, and not on everything else, that is, on an absurd war. And it does not even minimally take into account the suggestions that also come from within Israel. What I regret is that this promotes antisemitism. Because it cannot be that criticizing the government of Netanyahu, Ben Gvir and Smotrich is considered an expression of antisemitism. Because if everything is antisemitism, in the end nothing is antisemitism.