A Psychoanalytic and Historical Account of the Zionist Psyche

Irem Kepkep[1*]

[1]MSc Political Science

[*]Corresponding author. Email: kepkepirem@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates how Zionist political commitment remains affectively compelling and morally resilient despite sustained exposure to Palestinian dispossession and mass violence. Rather than approaching Zionism only as a geopolitical strategy or settler-colonial formation, the analysis foregrounds its psychic and moral economy: the ways in which historical trauma, redemptive imaginaries, and defensive attachments shape political judgment. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory and critical political thought, the paper conceptualizes the "Zionist psyche" as a historically constituted mode of political self-understanding. It argues that unresolved legacies of Jewish persecution are mobilized to stabilize national identity while simultaneously narrowing the space for moral responsiveness. Within this configuration, Palestinian presence becomes intelligible primarily through threat, and violence is repeatedly authorized as a means of preserving coherence, sovereignty, and historical meaning. By situating this dynamic alongside settler-colonial analysis, the paper shows how psychoanalysis clarifies the affective and justificatory conditions that allow domination to persist even when its consequences are widely visible. The contribution lies in explaining not how violence is produced, but how it is continuously lived with, defended, and reaffirmed.

Keywords

Zionism, Palestine, psychoanalysis, violence, political identity

Introduction

Zionism is widely regarded as one of the most consequential nationalist movements of the twentieth century, achieving the establishment of a Jewish homeland after centuries of diaspora and persecution. This achievement, however, has unfolded alongside the sustained displacement and oppression of Palestinians, a reality whose urgency and visibility have intensified markedly since 2023.

This duality—the triumph of Zionism and the suffering of Palestinians—raises a perplexing question: how do Zionists remain so passionately blind to the moral and ethical wrongdoings of their movement? To critically examine Zionism, this paper posits that it is essential to engage with its internal logic and imaginative framework, understanding why it commands such passionate and seemingly unwavering allegiance. As Jacqueline Rose argues in *The Question of Zion* (2005, p. 13), dismissing Zionism outright is counterproductive and undermines the very critique it seeks to advance. This holds true on three levels: *politically*, dismissing Zionism's strengths risks

overlooking the sources of its enduring influence; *historically*, rejection without engagement fails to grapple with the complexities of Zionism's origins, development, and contemporary relevance; and *psychoanalytically*, direct attacks on Zionist identity often reinforce its psychological defenses, deepening resistance to critique.

In an era defined by the rise of digital media and globalization, where, for the first time in history, war crimes and genocides are broadcast live, Zionists continue to secure substantial support for their cause. That such support persists despite extensive documentation of genocide and war crimes (UNISPAL, 2025; UNOHCHR, 2025), and despite the apparent inability of the international community to meaningfully intervene, warrants sustained academic inquiry into the dynamics of power, narrative authority, and legitimacy in international relations. However, what is particularly intriguing here is the question of how Zionists justify Israel and its actions, even in the context of ongoing, overt genocidal violence in Gaza and the occupied territories beyond. Given the persistent failure of international relations frameworks to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this paper advances a psycho-political analysis of Zionism. Conventional approaches such as realism and liberalism tend to prioritize material power, security dilemmas, and institutional arrangements, while largely neglecting the emotional and unconscious dimensions of political attachment. Constructivist approaches have broadened attention to identity and norms, yet they often treat identity as a discursive product without fully addressing the psychic mechanisms through which identities are defended, stabilized, and rendered resistant to ethical challenge. As Mira Sucharov argues, psychoanalysis offers a valuable lens to complement these approaches, focusing on the role of unconscious desires, emotional legacies, and internal contradictions in driving both individual and collective behavior (Sucharov, 2005, p. 18).

Central to this analysis is the concept of the "Zionist psyche," used here in a strictly analytic and non-essentialist sense. The term does not refer to the psychology of individual Jews, Israelis, or Zionists, nor does it imply a timeless collective character. Rather, it names a historically produced and politically organized structure of subjectivity, constituted through shared narratives, affects, and defensive orientations. This psyche is reproduced through discourse, education, commemoration, and state practice, and becomes particularly salient in moments of perceived threat or moral accusation. It is within this terrain that justification operates.

The guiding research question of this paper is therefore deceptively simple: how does the Zionist psyche justify Israel's actions? To address this question, the paper explores several interrelated issues. How does Zionism repurpose messianic redemption, a concept deeply rooted in religious tradition, to legitimize its project as a secular nationalist movement? In what ways do unresolved Jewish traumas, particularly those stemming from exile, persecution, and the Holocaust, shape Zionist identity and contribute to moral blind spots? Finally, what material consequences follow from these contradictions, especially in Zionism's treatment of Palestinians and the perpetuation of cycles of violence?

The analysis proceeds in four sections. The first situates Zionism within the historical and theological context of Jewish trauma, examining how exile, persecution, and the Holocaust shaped the affective urgency of political Zionism. The second analyzes the emergence of political Zionism and its internal contradictions, with particular attention to the secular reinterpretation and militarization of messianic redemption. The third section employs psychoanalytic concepts, especially splitting and the divided subject, to examine how Zionism manages these contradictions and sustains moral certainty while disavowing violence. The final section considers the political

consequences of these mechanisms, showing how the externalization of threat and dependence on violence entrench instability and foreclose ethical reckoning.

This paper seeks to engage two key audiences. For readers who are broadly uncritical of Israel and Zionism, the analysis aims to expose the injustices and systemic violence produced through the justificatory mechanisms examined here, thereby challenging dominant narratives of moral righteousness. In developing this critique, I drew inspiration from a psychoanalytic insight articulated by Rose, namely that "the path to transformation lies first and foremost in knowing yourself" (Rose, 2005, p. xx). As Sucharov similarly argues, this approach is not merely diagnostic but also carries transformative potential. By confronting its internal contradictions and unacknowledged traumas, Zionism may open the possibility for ethical reckoning and renewal (Sucharov, 2005, p. 20).

At the same time, for readers who are already critical of Zionism, the paper offers an account of *how* and *why* Zionist justifications persist, illuminating the internal logic and affective investments that sustain them. This task is neither simple nor politically neutral. As Michael Rustin observes in relation to contemporary debates on Gaza, even the act of calling for contextual understanding has become grounds for denunciation, such that "the idea of seeking understanding was being attacked" (Rustin, 2024, p. 402). In highly polarized contexts, identities often internalize what Rustin calls "beliefs in the unqualified virtue of the collectives to which they belong," rendering ethical questioning "deeply threatening" rather than reflective (2024, p. 403). Therefore, I do not wish to underestimate the difficulty of holding critique and understanding together, as I insist on its necessity. As Rustin cautions, "to achieve a place for a psychoanalytic dimension in thinking about political issues calls for great patience and determination" (2024, p. 403). Yet without some capacity to understand how moral certainty is defended and sustained, critique risks hardening polarization rather than opening the conditions for ethical reckoning. Thus, in this paper, I proceed from the conviction that without such reckoning, no durable prospect of peace is conceivable.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is concerned with the problem of justification rather than the structure of domination itself. More specifically, it addresses how political identities sustain moral coherence and affective attachment in contexts where violence is visible, contested, and extensively documented. The analytic focus is not on explaining the operation of power or the mechanics of political violence, but on understanding the conditions under which such violence remains ethically intelligible and resistant to disruption for those who support or identify with it.

Psychoanalysis is employed here as an interpretive framework because it addresses dimensions of political behavior that remain largely invisible in conventional approaches to international relations. As Mira Sucharov argues, introducing psychoanalysis into IR can be understood as "the next logical step for a relatively young discipline that seeks to understand why political actors behave the way they do" (Sucharov, 2005, p.17). What psychoanalysis offers, she notes, is "a coherent theory of behavior incorporating three elements that have mostly been invisible in international relations theory: emotion, the unconscious, and the possibility for actors' own cognitive and emotional insight to be a source of behavior change" (Sucharov, 2005, p. 18). Rather than assuming that political identities are internally coherent, this framework foregrounds the persistence of dissonance between

action and self-understanding. As Sucharov (2005, p.19) explains, "the concept of the unconscious… can illuminate the question of why an individual experiences a sense of dissonance when her actions do not conform to her identity". The analytic focus of this paper is therefore not on the resolution of ethical contradiction, but on the ways in which such contradiction generates an ongoing internal crisis that must be defensively managed in order to preserve moral self-certainty and political allegiance.

The psychoanalytic framework adopted in this paper draws on a limited set of concepts selected for their relevance to the management of ethical contradiction within political identities. These concepts are not introduced as exhaustive explanations, but as analytic tools that provide a vocabulary for examining how instability, guilt, and moral tension are organized and contained at the level of political subjectivity. Taken together, they enable an analysis of how violence can be both enacted and disavowed, and why ethical challenge is frequently experienced as existential threat rather than as grounds for reflection.

First, the paper draws on Melanie Klein's concept of splitting, understood as a basic psychic strategy for coping with contradiction and anxiety (Klein, 1946). Klein theorized that the ego tends to fragment experience into "good" and "bad" objects as a way of managing anxiety, a configuration she described as the *paranoid–schizoid position*. This anxiety functions defensively, protecting the ego from what Klein conceptualized as the destructive force of the death drive (Walker & Loughran, 2020, p. 10). At its most elementary level, splitting thus describes the tendency to divide the world into morally "good" and "bad" parts in order to preserve psychic stability. For example, an individual may sustain a self-image of care or innocence by locating blame, danger, or wrongdoing exclusively in an external other, rather than confronting incompatible qualities within the self. When applied to collective or political identity, splitting refers to the organization of moral perception into rigid binaries that allow incompatible evaluations to coexist without being reconciled. In this paper, splitting serves as an analytic tool for examining how ethical conflict is contained rather than resolved, and how moral coherence is preserved even when actions generate profound contradiction.

Second, the analysis is informed by Jacques Lacan's notion of the divided subject[1], which conceptualizes subjectivity as fundamentally non-coherent rather than internally unified (Lacan, 1964 [1998]). As Dylan Evans summarizes, for Lacan "the subject is fundamentally split, alienated from himself, and there is no escape from this division, no possibility of 'wholeness' or synthesis" (Evans, 1996, p. 9). In simple terms, the divided subject describes the condition in which a person can sincerely articulate a coherent story about who they are, what they value, or why they act, while remaining shaped by unresolved anxieties, losses, or desires that do not fit neatly into that narrative. Lacan explicitly rejects what Evans calls "the most cherished illusion of psychology," namely "the unity of the subject," insisting instead that the subject is "irremediably split or 'barred'" (Evans, 1996, p. 156). As Lacan argues, "the relation of the subject to the Other is entirely produced in a process of gap," such that the subject itself is constituted through division (Evans, 1996, p. 72; Lacan, Seminar XI). Applied at the level of political identity, this concept allows for an understanding of how stable narratives of moral purpose and legitimacy can be sustained alongside persistent unease, guilt, or tension. Political identities, from this perspective, are not internally consistent wholes but formations that depend on the ongoing management of contradiction. For the

[1] The prevalent term in the literature is "split subject," but to avoid potential confusion with the concept of "splitting," I will use the term "divided subject" for clarity.

purposes of this paper, the divided subject provides a framework for analyzing how political identities are actively maintained through defensive practices that hold contradiction in place, rather than resolving it.

Importantly, the psychoanalytic framework is introduced to engage an analytic problem that remains under-theorized within structural accounts of domination. Settler-colonial theory has been indispensable in explaining the material and demographic logics through which domination is produced and sustained, capturing how dispossession is normalized and how political projects orient themselves toward elimination and replacement (Veracini, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). Yet while such frameworks explain how domination operates and persists, they are less equipped to explain how it remains morally intelligible and affectively defensible for those who enact or support it, particularly under conditions of extensive visibility and critique. The psychoanalytic framework intervenes at this justificatory level, complementing structural diagnosis by examining the moral and affective labor through which domination is rendered livable.

The analytic focus of this paper is therefore not the structure of domination itself, but the resilience of its justification. This case is also analytically distinctive from many settler-colonial formations insofar as Zionist political identity is centrally structured by collective memories of persecution and genocide, rather than merely accompanied by narratives of vulnerability. Historical Jewish victimhood, culminating in the Holocaust, functions not as a secondary legitimating discourse but as a constitutive moral foundation of political self-understanding. This produces a distinctive paradox: a political project that enacts displacement and dehumanization while understanding itself as a necessary defense against precisely such forms of violence (against itself). Explaining how past victimhood becomes a resource for present justification requires an analytic lens attuned to contradiction, defense, and moral self-preservation, which is why a psychoanalytic framework is particularly valuable here.

Analysis

1. Historical Formation of the Zionist Psyche

1.1 Exodus, Redemption, and Theology of Exile

The story of Exodus and exile has deeply shaped Jewish cultural and spiritual identity, embedding itself into the collective memory and theological worldview of the Jewish people over millennia. More than a historical account, the Exodus serves as a spiritual archetype of redemption, resilience, and divine intervention. It reflects a central theme in Jewish theology—the recurring cycle of suffering, exile, and eventual deliverance through divine will. This narrative has profoundly influenced the Jewish perception of exile as both a punishment for sin and a divine test, with redemption symbolizing the ultimate restoration of the covenant with God (Shimon, 2019).

In Jewish religious thought, exile is understood not just as a historical experience but as a deeply rooted theological reality. The destruction of the First and Second Temples, followed by centuries of diaspora, solidified the concept of *galut* (exile) as a recurring, divinely ordained chapter in Jewish history. Rabbinic interpretations frame exile as a form of divine discipline—a process intended to purify the Jewish people and prepare them for ultimate redemption (Elior, 2004). This framing imbues the concept of return to Israel with a deeply spiritual significance. The land of Israel is not just a geographical homeland but a sacred space where divine promises are fulfilled, making the return a metaphysical act of restoring order to a fractured relationship with God.

At the heart of Jewish theology lies the belief in *messianic redemption*—a vision where a divinely chosen Messiah will guide the Jewish people back to Israel, restore their sovereignty, and bring about an era of universal peace and justice. This ideal is deeply intertwined with *apocalyptic thinking*. Apocalyptic thinking frames history as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, culminating in divine resolution. In Jewish tradition, this vision often includes the ingathering of exiles, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the establishment of divine justice (Marx, 2013). The apocalyptic framework provided a sense of hope amid suffering, casting historical traumas as preludes to an eventual divine fulfillment.

1.2 Pogroms, Anti-Semitism, and Political Urgency

As Rose puts it, "Zionism arises on the back of European anti-Semitism, on the one hand, and the pogroms of Eastern Europe on the other. As well as being fueled by the birth of nineteenth-century nationalism, the drive to Jewish self-determination must be understood as the response to that history" (Rose, 2005, p. 127). The trauma of pogroms in 19th century Eastern Europe left an indelible mark on Jewish communities and played a pivotal role in shaping early Zionist thought. In addition to the devastation of Jewish lives, the tenuous hope that assimilation or coexistence in the diaspora could provide lasting security was shattered by waves of anti-Semitic violence, particularly in the Russian Empire. Early Zionist leaders drew directly from the experience of these pogroms to articulate the urgency of their movement. Writers like Leo Pinsker, in his influential pamphlet *Auto-Emancipation* (1821-1891), described anti-semitism as a deep-seated, almost pathological condition in European societies, positing that the only remedy was the establishment of a Jewish homeland where Jews could take control of their destiny. Similarly, the advocacy of Theodor Herzl emerged against the backdrop of such violence, with Herzl seeing the pogroms as evidence of the failure of emancipation and the need for a national solution.

1.3 The Holocaust and the Demand for a "New Jew"

The Holocaust, as the most devastating chapter of Jewish suffering in modern history, holds a profoundly complex and emotional place in the Zionist psyche. It heightened the urgency for establishing a Jewish homeland, redefining Zionism as a moral imperative for survival. The collective grief of the Holocaust was intensified by feelings of shame and helplessness, as many saw the Holocaust as a grim symbol of Jewish vulnerability and passivity in the face of persecution. It was perceived by the Yishuv (the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine) as a profound affront, much like the pogroms that came before it (Rose, 2005, p. 137).

Jewish writers such as David Grossman and Sara Roy suggest that it is not solely the Holocaust itself but the shame surrounding it that profoundly distorts the nation's psyche (Rose 2005: 139). Grossman writes about the "*cruelty*" the Yishuv displayed toward Holocaust survivors, as though both the event and their survival were sources of collective shame (Grossman, 2003, p. 13). This discomfort was echoed decades earlier by Ben-Gurion, who, just before the outbreak of World War II, stated: "We are choking with shame about what is happening… We do not belong to that Jewish people. We do not want to be such Jews." (as cited in Segev, 2000, p. 395). The sentiment reflects a deeper historical pattern, as Bernard Lazare wrote to Theodor Herzl in 1899: "[W]e die from hiding our shames" (as cited in Wilson, 1978, p. 245). Sara Roy also poignantly reflects on her childhood in Israel, writing, "Most painful to me was the denigration of the Holocaust and prestate Jewish life by many of my Israeli friends. For them, these were times of shame, when Jews were weak and passive, inferior and unworthy, deserving not of our respect but of our disdain" (Roy, 2003, p. 206) The internal shame and pain associated with victimhood

fueled an unrelenting drive for sovereignty and survival, where acts of ruthlessness reflected the depth of this underlying trauma (Rose, 2005, p. 137).

As Jewish thinker David Hartman writes, “Many dreamed of a new Jew, a transformation of the Jewish psyche. The return to the land was envisioned not only in terms of physical safety but also as a healing process that would liberate Jews from the negative self-image they internalized during centuries of oppression and powerlessness” (Hartman, 2008). My analysis, therefore, focuses on the feelings of shame and guilt, particularly how the shame tied to Jewish persecution in Europe influenced the repurposing of messianic redemption narratives within political Zionism. In the next section, I explore how these narratives gave rise to contradictions in the Zionist psyche, leading to the construction of defense mechanisms that Zionism uses to justify itself.

2. Emergence of Political Zionism and Its Contradictions

2.1 Messianism and Political Zionism

Hartman explains, “The Exodus story served as a key paradigm of Jewish historical hope by emphasizing that despite the utter helplessness of the community, the Jewish people could rely on the redemptive power of God. Zionism taught that only if Jews were to take responsibility for their future would history change. This stood in sharp contrast to the Biblical belief that Jews were not the masters of their own history. (Hartman, 2008). For many ultra-Orthodox communities, this shift represented a break from traditional Jewish law and a form of sacrilege, as the state of Israel was established without divine intervention. To understand the ideological tensions within Zionism, it is crucial to examine the role of messianic redemption narratives and how their reinterpretation embeds contradictions into the Zionist project.

2.2 Religious Zionism and Divine Mediation

Messianism has consistently shaped and inspired the development of Zionism, casting its influence over the founding of the state of Israel (Rose, 2005, p. 8). Religious Zionism views the return to the Land of Israel as a fulfillment of divine prophecy and a step toward messianic redemption. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a key figure, believed that even secular efforts to build the state were part of God’s plan for redemption (National Library of Israel, 2019). Within this strain of Zionism, The Messiah remained a key figure, and human actions were understood as being guided by divine intervention. Although Rabbi Kook's interpretation of messianism caused controversy within ultra-Orthodox groups and exposed yet another aspect of Zionism's contradictions, my analysis will concentrate on the contradictions found in secular Zionism, particularly in its rethinking of the messianic redemptive narrative.

2.3 Secular Zionism and the Militarization of Redemption

Secular Zionism reimagined messianic redemption by replacing divine intervention with human agency. The collective efforts of the Jewish people to establish a state became the ultimate redemptive act, aligning with modern nationalist ideals of self-determination and sovereignty. In this reinterpretation, nationalism became the "*new messiah*," with the state of Israel assuming the “*sacred aura*” once reserved for divine fulfillment (Rose, 2005, p. 8). Furthermore, this led to the militarization of redemption, where the strength of the Jewish state—demonstrated through military power and territorial expansion—became central to ensuring survival and achieving its

redemptive mission. During pivotal instances, often triggered by generational and political upheavals concerning the Arabs, Zionism abandoned the prospect of coexistence. Instead, it adopted a defensive posture that evolved into a more "*belligerent identity*", further entrenching militarization as part of its vision of redemption[2] (Rose, 2005, p. 147). Hartman argues that embedding messianism within the nation's political framework poses a significant threat to Israel (Hartman, 2000, p. xi). To ensure its survival, he argues, Israel must move away from redemptive messianic aspirations and adopt the pragmatic, incremental approach of political negotiation and compromise (Rose, 2005, p. 8).

Thus, redemption took on the character of historical revenge, aiming to reverse centuries of Jewish suffering and persecution. As Dan Bar-On draws on the writings of Yosef Brenner, Zionist thinkers reimagined Jewish identity by envisioning a "*new Jew*" with "*strong hands,*" to be a stark contrast to the "*weak hands*" they associated with the vulnerability of diaspora life (Bar-On, 2006, pp. 102–103). However, this shift created a paradox: the "strong hands of the new Jew" were now breaking the bones of Palestinians, who became stand-ins for the European persecutors of the Jewish past. The very mechanism (redemption) intended to heal its psyche, perpetuated the trauma it sought to resolve.

This dynamic left Zionism's future haunted by the unresolved traumas of its history. Jewish pain and humiliation, instead of being reconciled, were sublimated into the nation-building project (Rose, 2005, p. 130) and, as I will argue later, projected onto Palestinians. The secularization of messianic ideals created spiritual and cultural tensions within Zionism. Historically, Jewish thought emphasized humility, moral responsibility, and reliance on divine justice. As Rose (2005, p.70) draws from Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's suggestion, this created an identity crisis within the Zionist psyche, where the inability to integrate one's actions with one's moral identity mirrors the psychoanalytic failure to reconcile the self.

3. Psychoanalytic Interpretation

Thus far, I have argued that Jewish suffering was sublimated into the project of nation-building. I have also demonstrated how internal contradictions—reflecting anxieties which are rooted in feelings of fear, shame, and guilt—have made this psyche inherently unstable. The question that follows these assertions is, then: how has the Zionist project, despite these contradictions, remained so successful and attracted such strong support? To answer this question, which is key to my central research question, I will deploy the psychoanalytic concepts of splitting and the divided subject.

It is essential first, to conceptualize the psychoanalytic frameworks of splitting and the divided subject. Splitting, as described by Melanie Klein (1946) is a defense mechanism through which the psyche manages internal contradictions by dividing experiences or perceptions into binary opposites—good versus bad, self versus other. The divided subject, a central concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis, refers to the inherent tension within an

[2] One clear example of this is Plan Dalet, implemented by the Haganah in March 1948. Framed as a defensive strategy, its execution involved the occupation of villages, forced expulsions, and acts of violence such as the Deir Yassin massacre, contributing to the mass displacement of approximately 700,000 Palestinians during the Nakba. For more discussion on other instances, see (Khalidi, 1988; Morris, 2004; Pappé, 2006).

individual or collective identity that arises from unresolved conflicts between the conscious and unconscious mind (Lacan 1964 [1998]).

3.1 Splitting as a Defense Mechanism

Zionism's contradictions, particularly those that came about with the nationalist framing of redemption, introduced a profound split within its psyche. This split, as Edward Said notes[3] in *Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims*, manifests as "extraordinary unevenness between care for the Jews and almost total disregard for non-Jews" (Said, 1979a, p. 29). Said (1979a, pp. 30; 32) explains that the Zionist movement, while serving as an emancipatory project for Jews, has relied on a bifurcated design that prioritizes Jewish welfare at the expense of Palestinian existence. On one side lies Jewish self-love and joy, articulated in the devotion to the redemptive mission of building a Jewish homeland. On the other is the subjugation and colonization of Palestinians, framed as necessary for survival.

Rose expands on Said by describing splitting as delving into the "most resistant and self-sabotaging psychic territory," where a people can simultaneously exhibit "love and lethality" (Rose, 2007, p. 197) Splitting functions as a mechanism of validation for Zionism. By emphasizing the division between Jews and non-Jews, Zionism fortifies Jewish identity, elevating its achievements as acts of redemption and survival. However, this same process also justifies the exclusion and displacement of Palestinians, framing their resistance as a threat to the Jewish redemptive mission.

3.2 Fragile Certainty and the Work of Moral Self-Preservation

The final point I want to emphasize here is that the conscious defense mechanism of splitting is a response to the unconscious anxieties and contradictions in the Zionist psyche. What makes splitting particularly robust is its self-reinforcing nature. Each instance of opposition or resistance, whether from Palestinians or external critics, strengthens the binary framework. Instead of prompting introspection, these challenges are absorbed into the narrative of survival, further entrenching the division between self and other. It is my contention that the conscious narrative of liberation and survival in Zionism is deeply intertwined with an unconscious awareness of guilt and the recognition of violence against Palestinians. This unconscious guilt stems from Zionism's suppressed acknowledgment of its own historical traumas and anxieties, creating an internal dissonance. On the conscious level, the Zionist psyche emphasizes liberation and survival, cultivating a self-image of moral purpose and legitimacy. Yet, beneath this idealized perception, on the unconscious level, lies unresolved trauma and guilt that challenge the coherence of this narrative.

To manage this dissonance, the Zionist psyche externalizes its anxieties, framing Palestinians as existential threats and rationalizing violence against them as necessary for survival and redemption. This process not only preserves the narrative of moral righteousness but also deepens the psychological split between the "good" Jewish self and the "threatening" Palestinian other. The resulting divided subject, split both within its conscious self-image and by the tension between its conscious and unconscious dimensions, encapsulates Zionism's internal struggle to reconcile its redemptive mission with the ethical and psychological costs of its actions. To illustrate this claim, consider the use of humiliation as a deliberate weapon of war against Palestinians—a tactic that, while pervasive

[3] He uses the term "bifurcation", which Rose then advances into the psychoanalytic concept of splitting

throughout the history of the occupation, has reached unprecedented levels since Israel's intensified genocidal campaign began in 2023[4]. Humiliation has long been a defining feature of Palestinian existence under Israeli occupation, evident in daily indignities like invasive military checkpoints, land confiscations, and home demolitions (Lacey, 2011). In this way, the violence inflicted on Palestinians becomes both a reflection of unresolved internal tensions and an attempt to suppress the recognition of these suppressed feelings. In dialogue with Said, Rose writes, "[Zionists'] most exultant acts towards –and triumph over– indigenous people expose them to the dangers they most fear" (Rose, 2007, p. 197).

3.3 Avoidance of Self-Reflection

Thus, in its attempt to manage the dissonance within its divided subjectivity, splitting allows the Zionist psyche to sustain internal contradiction while foreclosing the possibility of self-reflection. This foreclosure is not incidental but necessary. As I have argued, the Zionist project emerges as a response to historical trauma saturated with anxiety, shame, and guilt, yet the political realization of its reparative fantasy –sovereignty and redemption secured through force– generates new ethical contradictions that threaten the coherence of Zionist identity itself. To reflect upon these contradictions would be to acknowledge not only political violence but the failure of the very project meant to restore moral dignity. Self-reflection thus becomes psychically intolerable, insofar as confronting moral contradiction would dissolve the justificatory ground that sustains Israel's capacity to frame its genocidal violence as necessary, defensive, and morally coherent.

In *Towards a new psychoanalysis of violence in Israel–Palestine* (2025), Khan and Orang clarify why this impasse produces hardening in lieu of ethical reckoning. They argue that Israel's colonial formation generates a crisis that cannot be acknowledged without destabilizing the political subject, such that "the suicidal impulse begets a social order that ensures that opposition is directed against an externalised other rather than against itself" (Bronstein, 2016, cited in Khan & Orang, 2025, p. 11). Here, the "suicidal impulse" does not refer to literal self-destruction, but to the psychic danger posed by self-recognition. In this account, anxiety, guilt, and fear do not lead inward toward reflection but are structurally redirected outward. Taken together, this suggests that the Zionist psyche is not merely unstable, but unstable in a specific way: its political identity depends on the sustained erosion of its own ethical capacities. Because Zionism's coherence hinges on the refusal to recognize Palestinian humanity, it must also foreclose the forms of empathy, moral reflexivity, and ethical responsiveness that would make such recognition possible. The erosion of the Zionist psyche's humanity is therefore not a tragic by-product of crisis but a functional requirement of political coherence. These capacities – empathy, moral reflexivity, ethical responsiveness– must be progressively sacrificed precisely because they would enable self-implication.

Avoidance of self-reflection is further consolidated through the projection of internal contradiction onto Palestinians. As Khan and Orang argue, "both the Israeli repression and the internal punitive response to that repression are projected upon the Palestinians through extreme violence as a way to silence the screaming of the lack" (2025, p. 11). Violence thus functions not only as domination but as psychic anaesthesia, muting the conditions under which ethical awareness could emerge. It is in this sense that humanity—understood here as the capacity to recognize the other as morally significant—is not lost despite the crisis, but through the attempt to survive it. As Rose incisively observes, "So fervently has it nourished the discrimination between Jew and non-

[4] For more recent and escalated evidences on this, see (Abdu 2023; Arnout 2024)

Jew, the rationale of its dispossession of the Palestinian, that, while it may have seized the earth, it has also snatched the grounds for understanding from beneath its own feet" (Rose, 2007, p. 196). This psychic displacement prepares the ground for the political logic examined in the following section, where the externalization of internal contradiction is organized as security discourse, threat perception, and sustained violence against Palestinians.

4. Dependence on Violence and Its Political Consequences

4.1 Externalization of Threat

I have explained extensively that the redemptive mission of Zionism was framed as an act of historical revenge, seeking to transform the historical vulnerability of the Jewish people into strength and sovereignty. Netanyahu himself recognizes the tension inherent in this mission. In his chapter titled *The Question of Jewish Power*, he explicitly addresses this issue, writing: "for the Jews even reimplanting an understanding of the elementary need for military power entailed a bitter battle to overcome the entrenched view that Jews ought to have nothing to do with armies" (Netanyahu, 1993, p. 371). This transformation, as I have shown, was rooted in the belief that survival necessitated cruelty, and this cruelty would be enacted on the land of Palestine. In the words of the Zionist Organization in 1922[5], "We owe it to ourselves to be cruel… Let us once master the situation and we will be able to say: let the massacres happen, but we, we save the Yishuv before all else, we uphold its future because today it is in the Yishuv, and only there, that the destiny of our people is alive" (Bensoussan, 2002, p. 781).

Thus, the establishment of Israel as the embodiment of the redemptive mission created a dynamic where any resistance from the native Palestinian population was perceived as an existential threat—precisely the kind of threat from which Zionism drew its legitimacy. Buber anticipated this paradox in 1948, warning in *Zionism and 'Zionism*' that "unruliness directed outwards inevitably brings on unruliness directed inwards" (as cited in Rose, 2005, p. 71). Buber argued that injustice directed outward toward the Arab population would not only harm Israel—asking pointedly, "What nation will allow itself to be demoted from the position of majority to that of minority without a fight?"—but would also destabilize the internal cohesion of the Zionist project (Buber, 1944, as cited in Rose, 2005, p.71). Instead of ensuring its future, Israel's reliance on outward aggression, he warned, would sow the seeds of internal turmoil, ultimately eroding its ethical and moral foundations. His insight underscores an important point: criticizing Israel does not mean denying its genuine threats. However, violence, once directed outward, inevitably returns to haunt its source. In psychoanalytic terms, this reflects a failure of projection; by seeing its adversaries exclusively as external, Israel was inadvertently cultivating deep internal harm. As Edward Said writes in *The Question of Palestine*, "Everything that did stay to challenge Israel… was viewed not as something there, but as something outside Israel and Zionism bent on its destruction—from the outside" (Said, 1979b, p. 89).

4.2 Palestinians as the Constitutive "Other"

[5] Bensoussan references the *Minutes of the Zionist Organization, May 8, 1922*, held at the Zionist Central Archives in Jerusalem

What followed Buber's assertion, was of course, the casting of the Palestinians as the existential "Other" within their own lands. This dynamic was shaped by the splitting within the Zionist psyche, which prioritized "care for the Jew and a total disregard for the non-Jew" (Said ,1979a, p. 29). As Buber first predicted, and as Said later observed, this division rendered Israel's image overwhelmingly negative in the eyes of the Arab world, where it was seen as an entity designed primarily to exclude or dominate Palestinians (Said, 1979a, pp. 32–33). Consequently, once Palestinians were framed as existential threats to the Zionist project, acts of cruelty against them could be rationalized as historical necessities—indispensable to securing Jewish survival and fulfilling the redemptive vision embedded in Zionism.

Khan and Orang offer a psychoanalytic account that clarifies why this externalization becomes structurally necessary. Drawing on Sheehi, they argue that "the Palestinian object has been ingested into the Zionist self in order for it to be expelled in the service of creating the 'new Jew'" (Sheehi, 2018, p. 309, cited in Khan & Orang, 2025, p. 11). Here, "ingestion" refers to the way Palestinian presence –historical, material, and symbolic– is taken up internally as a reference point against which Zionist identity defines itself. Palestinians are thus not external from the outset; they are constitutive of the Zionist self-understanding, but only insofar as they can later be expelled.

This expulsion is central to the production of the "new Jew": sovereign, militarized, and no longer marked by the vulnerability associated with diasporic Jewish life. Yet, as Khan and Orang note, this figure is inherently unstable. The logic of the "new Jew" does not resolve historical trauma but intensifies it, such that "it is now Israel that lives in terror of the persecutory reality it has created, a reality that designates all possible forms of danger and harm as originating in the narrative of the single enemy– the Palestinian" (Khan & Orang, 2025, p. 11). In this configuration, diverse sources of anxiety– political, moral, and historical– are collapsed into a single external figure. Palestinians come to embody threat itself.

To further clarify the psychoanalytic dimension at work here, Khan and Orang cite Saketopolou, who draws on a tradition shaped by Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly as developed through Laplanche's account of constitutive incompleteness, alongside Glissant's notion of opacity (Khan & Orang, 2025, p. 12) Within this framework, what they describe as "lack" refers to the impossibility of complete coherence, mastery, or moral certainty (Saketopolou, 2023, p. 135). Psychoanalysis understands subjectivity as necessarily marked by such incompleteness, while Glissant emphasizes the ethical necessity of accepting what cannot be fully known or mastered. For Israel, however, this lack is not only the general human condition of vulnerability, but the specific historical and political fragility of its claim to coherent ethno-national identity—particularly in light of Palestinian indigeneity (Khan & Orang, 2025, p. 12).

Rather than confronting this fragility, the Zionist psyche externalizes it. As Khan and Orang argue, the defensive structure that emerges "is not only bound to expel every perceived threat or form of 'difference' but is also psychically compelled to create the purported threat and difference" (2025, p. 11). Threat is thus not simply perceived or reacted to, but actively produced. This helps explain why Palestinian resistance is interpreted not as a response to dispossession, but as confirmation of an ever-present danger, and why violence persists even when it undermines security or stability. In this way, the Palestinian "Other" becomes indispensable to the maintenance of Zionist identity, setting the conditions under which violence itself can be framed as necessary, defensive, and ultimately redemptive.

4.3 Violence as Redemptive Necessity

The externalization of threat analyzed in the preceding sections culminates in a political condition in which violence becomes the primary means through which Zionism sustains its redemptive promise. Once Palestinian presence is fixed as an existential danger and Zionist identity is stabilized through opposition to that danger, violence assumes a constitutive role. Redemption, which had historically been understood as a divine or spiritual horizon, is reconfigured as something that must be continually enacted through territorial expansion, military strength, and domination. Violence thus comes to function as proof of sovereignty, moral legitimacy, and historical survival.

In this configuration, violence is no longer oriented toward resolution. Rather than securing peace or eliminating threat, it operates as a repetitive political practice that temporarily reassures the Zionist subject of its coherence. Each assertion of force confirms the narrative of survival and necessity, even as it generates new conditions of instability and resistance. The result is a self-perpetuating cycle in which violence validates the conditions that make further violence appear unavoidable. What is sustained through this cycle is a fragile sense of moral and political certainty. Rose aptly points out in *The Question of Zion*, "when suffering becomes an identity, it has to turn cruel in order to be able to bear, or live with, itself (the cruel ironies of history take on another sense)" (Rose, 2005, p. 115).

Limitations, Discussion, and Future Directions

This paper has advanced a psycho-political analysis of Zionism by examining how historical trauma, redemptive narratives, and defensive psychic mechanisms converge to sustain moral certainty amid ongoing violence. While this framework yields important insights, it also raises theoretical and political limitations that warrant clarification.

A first potential objection is that this analysis risks re-centering the perpetrator by focusing on the Zionist psyche rather than foregrounding Palestinian suffering and resistance. This concern is especially salient given a long tradition of colonial critique that has privileged the subjectivity of the colonizer (Khan & Orang, 2025, p.2). The present focus, however, is not intended to displace Palestinian perspectives, but to interrogate the justificatory mechanisms through which their dispossession is rendered politically sustainable. Domination persists not only through force, but through moral narratives and affective investments that neutralize ethical challenge. Examining these mechanisms is therefore a necessary complement to, rather than a substitute for, centering Palestinian experiences.

This concern also intersects with Khan and Orang's critique of Jacqueline Rose (Khan & Orang, 2025, p.3). While Rose emphasizes contradiction, ambivalence, and self-sabotage within Zionist identity, Khan and Orang caution that such an emphasis risks framing the erosion of humanity as an inward psychic tragedy, rather than as a process materially enacted upon Palestinians. This paper seeks to mitigate that risk by showing that the foreclosure of empathy and ethical reflexivity within the Zionist psyche is inseparable from its outward realization in dispossession, dehumanization, and violence.

A second objection may hold that settler-colonial theory already accounts for Zionism's legitimacy and persistence, rendering psychoanalytic analysis unnecessary. This paper does not dispute the explanatory power of settler-colonial frameworks in identifying logics of elimination, replacement, and territorial permanence. Rather than revisiting those claims, the present analysis takes them as given and asks a subsequent question: why these logics continue to command moral allegiance and emotional investment among those who enact or support them, even when their consequences are widely documented and contested. Psychoanalysis is mobilized here not to replace structural accounts, but to clarify how ethical contradiction is lived with– how guilt, anxiety, and ambivalence are organized, displaced, and neutralized such that domination remains politically sustainable.

Relatedly, a third objection concerns the risk of psychologizing violence that is structurally produced by colonialism, militarism, and imperial power. Following Khan and Orang (2025, p.3), this paper treats psychic dynamics as socially overdetermined rather than individually produced. The "Zionist psyche" refers not to individual psychology, but to a historically constituted structure of political subjectivity shaped by institutions, narratives, and state practices. Psychoanalysis helps clarify the affective and moral conditions under which structural violence becomes necessary, legitimate, and self-reproducing.

Even if the analytic value of psycho-political interpretation is granted, a more troubling question remains. Rustin asks, "How, for example, might any interpretative intervention now be made in the context of the war in Gaza or Ukraine that any of the conflicting parties might listen to?" (Rustin, 2024, p. 403). The analysis advanced here suggests a sobering response: where political identity is sustained through the foreclosure of self-reflection and the externalization of contradiction, interpretative interventions are likely to be experienced not as invitations to understanding, but as existential threats. In such contexts, critique does not fail because it is incorrect, but because it collides with psychic and political structures that cannot accommodate ethical implication without destabilization.

This does not render interpretative work futile. Rather, it clarifies its limits. Psycho-political analysis may function less as a tool of immediate persuasion than as a diagnostic intervention. The analysis here aims to illuminate why appeals to law, evidence, or shared humanity so often fail, and why cycles of violence persist despite overwhelming critique.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the interpretive nature of psychoanalytic analysis. While this paper does not offer causal proof, it provides a framework for understanding patterns of justification and moral stabilization. Future research could empirically examine how these mechanisms manifest in political rhetoric, education, media discourse, and institutional practice. Such work would refine, challenge, or substantiate the claims advanced here.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper set out to examine why Zionist political identity remains so steadfast, even as the world bears witness to the devastation carried out under the banner of Jewish sovereignty. Inspired by the work of Said (1979a; 1979b) and Rose (2005), I approached Zionism not simply as a historically formed structure of attachment—one that must be understood from within if its justificatory power is to be meaningfully challenged.

Through a historical analysis informed by psychoanalytic insight, I traced Zionism from its roots in Jewish trauma to its contemporary political expression. I showed how theological narratives of exile and redemption, intensified by pogroms and the Holocaust, shaped Zionism's affective urgency and moral self-understanding. These histories were sublimated into the nation-building project, casting sovereignty as both survival and redemption. As the analysis demonstrated, this transformation embedded a profound paradox at the heart of Zionism: a project that seeks to heal historical vulnerability through force inevitably generates new ethical contradictions that threaten its own moral coherence.

The psychoanalytic framework developed in this paper clarified how these contradictions are managed rather than resolved. Drawing on concepts such as splitting and the divided subject, I argued that Zionism sustains moral certainty by externalizing threat and foreclosing self-reflection. Ethical challenge is repeatedly experienced not as an existential danger to political identity itself. In this sense, the persistence of justification rests on defensive mechanisms that render moral implication psychically intolerable. This deadlock results in rigidity rather than ethical reckoning, as Khan and Orang's intervention (2025) makes clearer: violence becomes a means of stabilizing coherence in the face of contradiction, even when it undermines the conditions of peace and survival.

The political consequence of this dynamic is the fixation of Palestinians as the constitutive "Other" through whom Zionist identity is secured. Acts of domination are thus continually reframed as defensive necessity, and violence comes to function not merely as an instrument of control but as a recurring reassurance of moral and political legitimacy. Far from resolving insecurity, this logic entrenches cycles of aggression and resistance, deepening both internal instability and external devastation.

I want to conclude where I began: with the insistence that critique requires understanding, even– and especially– where understanding is resisted. As Said writes in *Bases for Coexistence*, "There is suffering and injustice enough for everyone. But unless the connection is made by which the Jewish tragedy is seen to have led directly to the Palestinian catastrophe by, let us call it 'necessity' (rather than pure will), we cannot co-exist as two communities of detached and uncommunicatingly separate suffering" (Said, 1997).

Conflict of Interests

The author discloses that they are a member of the editorial team of the *Amsterdam Journal of Social Sciences* (AJSS), which may constitute a potential conflict of interest in the publication process. To mitigate any risk of undue influence or power imbalance, the author fully complied with all journal policies and submission criteria. The manuscript was handled independently and subjected to AJSS's standard double-blind peer review procedure, with all editorial and evaluative decisions made without the author's involvement.

To ensure transparency, readers with concerns regarding potential conflicts of interest may contact the journal directly. Upon request, the journal can provide documentation of the peer review process associated with this submission. Inquiries may be directed to Luka Verhovnik at luka.verhovnik@student.uva.nl.

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