



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introducing Maximalism: Rethinking Radical Ideological Opposition in Israel and Palestine

Romain Lucas

Laval University & Sciences Po Lyon

ABSTRACT: This article looks at the ideological extremisms guiding radical movements in Israel and Palestine. The ideological frameworks through which political actors in the conflict have been examined look at them individually or by “camp” (i.e. the Israeli camp and the Palestinian camp). This article uses the category of ‘maximalism’ to argue that extremist ideas on both sides feed off each other and should therefore be studied together. Maximalism can be defined as an ideology itself, i.e. a system of ideas that influence the perception and practices of actors, particularly when related to violence to achieve a goal. This ideational and practical whole, associated with terrorism and revolution, needs to be compared to understand the dynamics that emerge.

KEYWORDS: Maximalism, ideology, political violence, territorial struggle, radical movements

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): romain.lucas.1@ulaval.ca

1. Introduction

Over the past thirty years, attempts to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict have failed, leaving increasing room for those opposed to any compromise (Marzano, 2021). The most radical or violent views about how to end the conflict, hitherto somewhat relegated, at least in practice, to the margins, have finally become mainstream, as the October 7th attacks and the following hyper-violent and destructive Israeli reprisal powerfully demonstrate. On the Palestinian side, we have witnessed the rise of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) over the Gaza Strip as well as the loss of legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and its increasingly technocratic government, with Hamas taking up the mantle of the uncompromising resistance actor against the perceived Fatah selling out (Hilal, 2010; Fraihat and Hedaya, 2024). On the Israeli side, successive governments have moved steadily towards the far right, with several religious and secular ultra-nationalist parties becoming crucial political actors

and decision-makers (Bar, 2025) and the whole political system experiencing a drastic democratic backsliding, particularly in the Netanyahu years (Oren, 2025).

This article looks theoretically at the confrontation of growing maximalist ideas in Israel and Palestine. The objective is to define the notion of maximalism and apply it to the two cases, examining the paradoxical similarity of the ideological confrontation between the two camps, as the attack of October 7, 2023, the brutal response to it, the uncontrolled colonization of the West Bank¹ and discourses openly advocating a Greater Israel or the increasingly religious rhetoric in the conflict all show. In fact, the mutual desire to destroy the other now drives many political and military efforts on both sides. But what is Israeli maximalism? What is Palestinian maximalism? How do they respond to each other? And why and how is there a rise in maximalism and ideological confrontation on both sides? The concept of maximalism is introduced in the analysis to refresh the theoretical understanding of the ideological struggle both between and within the two camps. A minimalist/maximalist duality can be distinguished, drawing from the historical experience of the Russian socialist splits of the early 20th century (Hildermeier, 2000). To render the introduction of this theoretical concept empirically valid, the article relies on the public discourse ‘maximalist’ actors hold. These empirical data are collected online, through an analysis of regional and international media, as well as directly from movements via websites or social networks. These data include therefore declarations by politicians, opinion pieces, and publications by civil society groups. They all show how maximalism has taken over.

2. Maximalism: a comparable ideological outlook

The approach presented here is based on assuming that two opposite, but comparable ideologies oppose and feed off each other in Israel and Palestine. These ideologies are not created *ex nihilo*, nor are they born of the radicalism of the other party; they exist independently and feed off each other, as can be detected in the findings of Ridge, Perelman and Belhaj in their respective studies in this special issue. In the Palestinian territories, the struggle is guided by a triptych of ideological frameworks: nationalist, revolutionary and Islamist. This struggle can be described as maximalist in its desire to destroy the State of Israel, and in its emphasis on resistance rather than any other means. This ideological triptych does not bring together three maximalist approaches *per se*, but the combination of these and their use by organizations like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad make it maximalist. In Israel, maximalism is embodied by the action of the army and the government *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian population both in Israel itself and in the Occupied Territories, and by movements of different ideological currents (nationalist, religious, secular), which are part of what Ehud Sprinzak called nearly forty years ago “illegalism” (1986). It took shape in two ways: through increasingly exclusivist nationalism, which culminated with the 2018 Law defining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and through increased colonization, both aimed at strengthening Jewish domination over the entire territory from the Jordan to the sea.

The notion of maximalism originated in the Russian context at the beginning of the 20th century (Hildermeier, 2000) and is part of a long socialist tradition divided between reform and revolution. The notion is little used in the social sciences, either because it has not been sufficiently defined, or because it only responds, as mentioned, to a very precise ideological and geographical context, often rooted in the evolution of the socialist movements of the first part of the 20th century. In the Russian political tumult of 1906, the Socialist-Revolutionary Party split into two entities, the Party of Popular Socialists and the Union of Socialist Revolutionary Maximalists, because of the inability to agree on aims and methods to conquer power. Two programs to do so therefore emerged. The first can be described as

¹ Settlement is uncontrolled and *de facto* uncontrollable, from the Palestinian point of view. From the Israeli point of view, it is an organized and planned state policy.

minimalist insofar as it pacified its struggle to access power and accepted the political institutions in place as a potential conduit. The second programme, the outcome of Viktor Chernov's reflections, was maximalist (Perrie, 1976) both in terms of policy objectives and means to obtain power. Thus, maximalists demanded the complete nationalization of industry and land, with their rise to power being the result of a violent struggle against the ruling class. The maximalist programme also entailed a transitional period of varying length to get rid of bourgeois influence over the institutions of power. The maximalists did indeed take up arms, and their struggle is summed up in terrorism and revolution (Knight, 1979).

By extension, maximalist approaches can be understood, in the social sciences, as ideologies, i.e. systems of ideas that influence the perception of actors, and practices, particularly those linked to violence to achieve a political objective (Van Dijk, 1998). Today, maximalism is still linked to notions of terrorism and revolution and its totalising approach embodied places it in a subversive position vis-à-vis the established order, power, law and all the institutions that tend to preserve the system as it exists. Maximalist approaches can be observed on several occasions throughout history, and the concept can be particularly relevant for studying different contexts at different times. At the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution was marked by splits within the revolutionary forces. The early supporters of Terror wanted to limit the chaos it had provoked initially, believing that the revolutionary effort had gone far enough. The Hebertists opposed this (Furet, 1983) and pursued an ever more radical maximalist objective. The same dynamics can be later observed in Ireland. The Irish Republican Army split into several branches, some of which rejected British treaties and agreements (Perkoski, 2019; Morrison, 2013). This split is in fact historically common among radical and revolutionary groups, between those who want to pacify their struggle eventually and those who want to continue fighting. McAdam et al. (2009) refer to this distinction between those who become institutionalised and those who escalate into violence or further violence.

However, the concept of maximalism is relatively little used to understand the Israel/Palestine conflict. Sprinzak mentions maximalism in Israel to talk about territorial claims across borders (1989). More recently, Perelman used the term maximalism, again applying it to the Israeli political context, to describe a part of the nationalist right (2024). However, the use of the term remains limited in the analysis of the Israeli Palestinian context. Instead, different concepts and expressions are used to define the ideologies that are mobilised in both camps. The notion generally used to study the ideologies and practices of movements we call maximalist is extremism. In a tense political context, a few years after the Oslo Accords (1993), Sprinzak presented the violence within Israel as a form of extremism (1998). Radical Israeli movements, those promoting the colonization of the West Bank or opposed to the peace process like Gush Emunim, literally the Bloc of the Faithful (Newman, 2005; Taub, 2010; Aran, 1994)² or the Kahanist movement, were and still are described as extremist. Likewise, Palestinian nationalist movements are also presented as extremist. Their methods, their ideologies, and/or their understanding of Islam are all given that label and the path Hamas (Trapp, 2018) and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Alhaj and al., 2014) followed seems to illustrate this extreme position. On both sides, militants who use violence to impose their model are reduced to extremism. Factually, this is true. Extremism is opposed to moderation, to the norms that broader society deems acceptable, and to legal and social limits. Thus, talking about extremism is relevant but limited.

Extremism is a radical position in relation to the Other, usually a moderate centre, but the centre moves, evolves and shifts. In Israel, the integration into successive governments of activists formerly presented as extremists has shifted the political centre for instance (Pedahzur, 2012; Perliger & Pedahzur, 2018; Chagnollaude, 2025). This is accompanied by a more general right-wing trend in Israeli politics. The trivialization and integration of the far right into the highest spheres of the state has led to

² *Gush Emunim* was an ultra-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox movement born of the colonization of the Palestinian territories. Although it was never officially disbanded, it ceased to exist in the 2010s.

a shift in Israeli politics and society towards the hard right, disrupting thus the notion of centre or moderate centre. In this situation, where would one therefore locate the ‘centre’ and ‘the extreme’? Thus, the category of maximalism better reflects domestic reality and the reality of the conflict with the Palestinians.

The same can be observed on the Palestinian side. The ‘minimalist’ movements, Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah in particular, collaborate with the state of Israel in the administration of the West Bank, a position, no matter how subordinate, that is moderate in comparison with the ‘extremist’ Hamas. However, the total delegitimization of the PA (Cavatorta and Elgie, 2010), Fatah and their actions (Singh, 2021), particularly since the cancellation of the 2021 elections, means that it cannot be considered a moderate centre to which Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad respond with its own brand of extremism. The latter actors are not extreme because there is no actual centre – the PA and Fatah are perceived to be subjugated to Israel and international donors – and they can be categorised as maximalist. In short, extremism has been subcategorized into two categories: revolution in Palestine, and “illegalism” in Israel. Palestinian maximalism is a revolutionary struggle against occupation. Israeli maximalism is a series of illegal actions carried out by Israeli citizens themselves. Revolution is a rich and widely discussed subject. From Hannah Arendt (1963 and 1970) to Fred Halliday (1974) and Skocpol (1979), the study of revolution reflects the era and geographical context in which it took place. In the case of the Palestinian movements, the revolutionary label can be applied without much difficulty.

Theorists see several elements that characterize the revolution in Palestinians' maximalist action: the will to overthrow the Israeli colonial regime, mass mobilization, mass demonstration and violence to achieve objectives (Goldstone, 1980). This idea found its concrete application in the October 7, 2023 attacks. The violence was aimed at disrupting the system by striking sensitive locations such as military positions, police stations and homes (kibbutzim) as well as terrorising the Israeli population and enthusing Palestinians in a revolutionary effort to achieve political objectives without regards for the opponent and therefore without compromise: a maximalist position. The revolutionary nature of the violence accompanying the actions of Hamas, Islamic Jihad or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is quite clear. The violence was organized and massive and with specific political goals in mind, although violence and revolution must not be confused, and each group mobilizes violence differently. Israeli maximalism differs from the Palestinian one in terms of specific objectives, but not in its fundamental nature. Israel's maximalism of course is not about overthrowing an occupying colonial state, but, rather, to guide the state towards territorial expansion and solidification (The Guardian, 2025, August 8). Whereas Palestinian maximalists want to overthrow the (Israeli) system, Israeli maximalists want to force it to go further (Haklai, 2007) and this is the approach that accompanied the colonization of the West Bank after the 1967 war (Meynier, 2005). Radical movements followed the army in its colonization. They settled in the Palestinian territories, forcing Menachem Begin to protect them and recognize their legitimacy (Perrin, 2000). Sprinzak (1986) describes this approach as ‘illegal’, in reference to the anarchist tradition developed at the end of the 18th century (Imrie, 1994). Whether in Israel or in the settlements, these Israelis transgress the law in pursuit of a maximalist goals, which, much like in the Palestinian case, simply foresee the disappearance of the other through violence.

3. Maximalism in Israel/Palestine

In Israel and Palestine, the concept of maximalism reflects both ideology and practice. The maximalist approaches, while different in their specificities, are the most ambitious, and are not limited to simply claiming territory. Maximalism can thus be understood as a combination of ideas and practices, in other words, a conceptual whole. Political ideologies are usually studied through two dimensions: goals and methods (Baradat and Phillips, 2016). Goals answer the question “how should society work?” and, by

extension, “how should the situation be?”. Methods discuss the most appropriate ways to achieve the ideal arrangement. Goals and methods are the general indicators of a comparative approach to violent and revolutionary dynamics (Feierabend and al., 1973). At this stage, the maximalism in Israel and Palestine can already be defined. Israeli maximalism encompasses all nationalist, religious and colonial projects that seek to extend Israeli territory and Jewish domination far beyond the borders of 1949 or 1967. In turn, Palestinian maximalism refers to all projects aimed at the destruction of the State of Israel and the creation of a Palestinian territory, at least on the current Occupied Palestinian territories and on the entire 1948 Israeli territory. We then seek to understand the similarities between these two maximalisms and how they feed off each other. But before that, an aside is in order. The symmetrical and comparative analysis of the two maximalisms in Israel and Palestine should in no way mask the asymmetrical and colonial reality of the Israeli Palestinian context (Khalidi, 2020). Since the failure of the peace process, which we date back to 1993³, there has been a rise in radicalism on both sides. Rather than studying them separately, the idea here is to study them jointly, to confront, oppose and better understand them.

Leaving normative considerations aside, a maximalist framework is apt to better understand the evolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict because it offers, on the one hand, the possibility of emphasising the scientific relevance of maximalism applied to a contemporary context and, on the other, to look at the local actors in Israel/Palestine through an innovative framework. Maximalism is the right concept to evoke two confronting violent ideologies in the region not only because they actually are built on a mirror image of each other, but also because it explains the symmetrical political and ideological evolution within each camp. In the Occupied Palestinian territories, the maximalist/minimalist dichotomy can be seen both before and after the Oslo Accords. Like the socialist militants who chose the path of reform rather than revolution in Europe in the previous century, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its movements, led by Yasser Arafat, opted for dialogue. They recognized the state of Israel and agreed to abandon violence. Their struggle no longer focused on eliminating the rival state, but on developing a Palestinian state coexisting with a Hebrew state. They therefore took the ‘minimalist’ route to ensure the partial success of their struggle, which entailed a compromise, no matter how problematic. Conversely, other movements reject the peace agreement, but they do not reject it simply because they have doubts about its viability, although they do have such doubts. They reject the peace process because it means fundamentally abandoning the struggle against the occupier and thus abandoning Palestine, in their view, as the article by Abdessamad Belhaj in this special issue makes clear. They have refused to give up the fight against Israel and believe they have stayed true whereas, according to them, the PLO has sold out, as the work of Sbeih Sbeih and Martin Kear in this special issue also suggests. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad⁴ and other local organizations (ACLED report, 2023; Hatuqa, 2023) share a maximalist project, despite their ideological disagreements.

In Israel, the dichotomy is not as clear but can nevertheless be detected. As Ehud Sprinzak puts it, the State of Israel has long been presented as a democratic island in the middle of an authoritarian ocean (Sprinzak, 1998). What Ehud Barak, prime minister and military leader, described as “a villa in the middle of the jungle” (The Times of Israel, 2021, March 8). The opposition between the path of peace and the violent, radical path might have been less perceptible in the past and the minimalist/maximalist dichotomy therefore more diffuse, but over time Israeli maximalism has emerged forcefully and is

³ Choosing 1993 as a turning point shows that failure was not an accident but a predictable outcome, built into the very design of the peace process. It also allows us to view subsequent developments (the failure of Camp David, the Intifada, the blockade of Gaza, etc.) as consequences of an asymmetrical negotiating framework established in Oslo.

⁴ Founded in 1981 and inspired by the Iranian revolution, Palestinian Islamic Jihad focuses on armed struggle. It does not have the political impact of Hamas. Islamic jihad rejects compromise with Israel, wants to destroy the Jewish state and advocates guerrilla warfare to achieve this.

illustrated in different ways. First, we need to distinguish state maximalism from civil or paramilitary maximalism. Then we need to separate the various maximalist currents in the population, according to their objectives, aims, methods and ideological foundations. The ambiguity surrounding the minimalist/maximalist opposition in Israel is based first and foremost on the common heritage of the different currents. This heritage is that of the Kach party founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane, and the Jewish Defense League. Kahane is the author of the infamous book *They Must Go* (1981), in which he advocates the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. The Kach was an Israeli political party, and the JDL is an international movement. Both are or have been classified as terrorist organizations in the USA and Canada (Shah, 2005) and banned in Israel after the 1994 Hebron Massacre (Weinberg and al., 2008). Today, some of the party's former members and supporters are in the Knesset or are ministers like Itamar Ben-Gvir. To this end, they have founded the Otzma Yehudit party, literally "Jewish Power"⁵. Other heirs of Kahanism are also activists in Lehava, which stands "For the Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land"⁶ and anti-assimilation and anti-Arab movement. Still others claim to be Kahanists through the Hilltop Youth movement and the colonization of the West Bank⁷. These three examples illustrate that Israeli maximalists play on the ambiguity between electoral competition - the legitimate conquest of power through elections - and illegality and rebellion against Israeli laws deemed moderate or minimalist. Israeli maximalisms are numerous and take several forms cross-cutting the religious/secular divide, from Nachala⁸, which demands the total conquest of the Palestinian territories, to more secular projects promoting the expulsion, segregation or rejection of Arabs. These secular tendencies, from Ayelet Shaked's New Right (HaYamin HeHadash) party to the Tsomet party⁹, are a minority among the most radicals, but their voices carry weight and speak to the greatest numbers (Shindler, 2018). These different forms create confusion. Maximalism is revolutionary by nature, but the relationship to the electoral system in Israeli maximalism is atypical. Israeli maximalists play on the institutional system to advance ideas that are usually excluded from it¹⁰. If Palestinian maximalism

⁵ Founded in 2012, the Otzma Yehudit party won its first Knesset seat in 2021 and entered in a coalition government in 2022. The party has 7 MKs in the 25th Knesset. Led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, it advocates total annexation of the West Bank, the expulsion of "disloyal" Israeli Arabs (Haaretz, 2022, August 16) and the complete Judaization of the state. It uses the electoral process to legitimize a project based on Jewish superiority. See: <https://otzma-yeudit.co.il/>

⁶ It was founded in 2005 by another Kahane disciple, Benzi Gopstein, It violently opposes mixed marriages, social contacts between Jews and Arabs, and the integration of non-Jews. *Lehava* does not participate in elections, but harasses and intimidates Arabs violently. See: <https://lehava-us.com/>

⁷ The Hilltop Youth is an informal group, bringing together extremist young settlers setting up illegal outposts in the West Bank. They reject the authority of the Israeli state if it puts the brakes on colonization and uses violence against Palestinians and the security forces. Their project is inspired by radical messianism and embodies active illegalism. The Hilltop Youth was at the heart of the violence in Huwara in February 2023. when in response to the assassination of two Israelis, they attacked and rampaged through the village of Huwara (NBC News, 2023, February 27).

⁸ *Nachala* represents religious Zionism, with the aim of reconciling the realization of Zionism with the main foundations of the Torah. Founded in 2005 by *Gush Emunim* leaders, *Nachala* helps young settlers building new illegal Israeli outposts in the West Bank. Shortly after the October 7 attack, *Nachala* proposed a plan for the recolonization of Gaza, believing it to be the only way out of the conflict (The Jewish Press, 2024, January 5).

⁹ New Right and *Tsomet* call for a strong Jewish state, without compromise with the Palestinians. They represent non-religious nationalist currents advocating annexation and ethnic separation. They use the legal and electoral framework to promote structural segregation.

¹⁰ For example, the ultranationalist activist Bezalel Smotrich, now a minister, can directly threaten the Prime Minister and force him to occupy Gaza (The Times of Israel, 2025, April 23). However, it is important to mention that maximalist ideas have now penetrated certain parties such as Likud, which is not simply under the influence of maximalists but willingly plays their game (Shindler, 2001).

wants to overthrow the system, Israeli maximalism wants to adapt it. Thus, participation in the electoral game can retain a maximalist perspective to the extent that it helps to change the rules.

Following a reflection on the definition of maximalism in the literature and an application of the concept to the case study, several points can be made. First, there is a context of similarity that justifies the comparison. Both maximalists are opposed to or, better, they are not against peace per se, but against peace if it involves some kind of compromise. They are in favour of peace if the enemy is destroyed. Ben-Gvir proposes peace but makes it conditional on the deportation of all the Palestinians from Gaza (The Times of Israel, 2024, May 14). He is thus not proposing peace, but instrumentalizing it for the benefit of the project he is promoting: eliminating non-Jews from the ‘natural’ land of Israel. This is rather similar to Netanyahu’s concept of peace, which he makes clear in his book *A Durable Peace*, when he proposes the idea of making peace with the Arab world without making any concessions on Palestine (2000). Second, the actors of non-peace are today in power, and the children of this generation are in combat. In an article published in 2003, Robert A. Pape’s seminal work on Palestinian suicide attacks explained the return of violence in the Palestinian territories through the failure of peace processes. His approach to questions of occupation, resistance and national identity is pertinent, but so is the temporality he proposes. He focuses on the period after the failure of the peace process and explains that it shaped new dynamic patterns of violence in individuals (Pape, 2003). In 2025, more than thirty years after Oslo accords, we see the results of the post-process period in Palestinian and Israeli maximalism. Those involved on both sides, both politically and militarily, are in their thirties¹¹. They were born after the failed attempts at peace and have known nothing but confrontation and colonization. In the context of Israel’s war in Gaza, the phenomenon of a new generation of IDF fighters can be mentioned. Whereas in the past, soldiers came from all walks of life to serve their country, today many of them come directly from Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Settlers are now more heavily represented in the fighting units, whereas previously these units tended to be made up of Israelis from the Zionist left and the kibbutz¹². A similar trend can be observed among Palestinian fighters from refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank. This can be seen in the emergence of major local movements such as Tulkarm Brigades or Jenin Brigades (ACLED report, 2023). The children of a generation that has not been allowed to think about peace are now confronting each other, and the maximalism that guides them needs to be studied. Third, these militant generations are the descendants of the “spoilers” who undermined the peace process to begin with (Stedman, 1997; Pearlman, 2009). In the 1990s, in Palestine, those who had seen their parents suffer expulsion and colonization took advantage of the OLP’s loss of influence to organize a new generation of activists outside of the exclusive organization that had represented Palestinians across the world. Pearlman (2009: 97) refers to a “new generation of nationalist activists raised under occupation and politicized in Israeli prisons, Palestinian universities, and the network of political and civic organizations flourishing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.” In Israel, comparable dynamics emerged. New generations of Zionist militants – many of them from the United States like Baruch Goldstein (the author of the 1994 Hebron massacre) – had emerged at the same time to help disrupting the peace process. Today, it is the descendants of that generation of spoilers who are pursuing maximalist objectives in Israel and Palestine. But what are the goals? And what are the methods? Are their ideologies and practices similar, and how do they feed off each other?

¹¹ In the Gaza Strip, for example, 68% of the population is under thirty. The median age is 19.5. See PCBS data - Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. In Israeli settlements on the West Bank, the median age is 19.8. This compares with 30.3 in the rest of the country. See Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. (February 4, 2025).

¹² A demographic response can also be provided. Military service is compulsory, and the number of settlers has increased and therefore the number of settlers in the army increased.

4. A territorial struggle

Territorial control is the first and most obvious objective for maximalists on both sides. Territory is the land on which society can settle once the maximalist project is complete. While this first objective is obvious, it is not easy to achieve nor to ensure that it corresponds to a shared understanding of it (Yiftachel, 2002; Newman, 2001). In Hebrew, *Eretz Israel*, literally the Land of Israel, is a biblical reference geographically more extensive than Mandate Palestine as verse 15:18 in the book of Genesis states¹³. Including several Jewish kingdoms from different periods, principally the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah, *Eretz Israel* represents the largest biblical territory (Sprinzak, 1991; The Times of Israel, 2024, January 8; Haaretz, 2024, April 11). The boundaries of this territory vary according to the passages in the Jewish Pentateuch. In all cases, the present-day West Bank is included. It makes up what maximalists and activists for Greater Israel call Judea and Samaria. For its part, the Gaza Strip is not always included. The territory is not absent from the biblical narrative but is, in the texts, the territory of the Israelites' enemies. To establish a Jewish state in *Eretz Israel*, any means are not only necessary but inherently good because of the value of the ultimate outcome, no matter how violent. In 2014, for example, a cell of the Hilltop Youth movement was apprehended by the Shin Beit (Israeli intelligence service) because it planned to attack Arabs in the West Bank in what was called a Revolt. The discourse the cell employed is particularly interesting. In documents recovered during the searches, mention is made of the Revolt's means to an end. It says that "if those non-Jews don't leave, it will be permissible to kill them, without distinguishing between women, men and children." However, "non-Jews" are not invited to leave; in fact, they must be prevented from leaving to be eliminated (The New York Times, 2024, May 6), presumably to ensure that there would be no future claim to return. This example illustrates the extreme violence that accompanies the territorial goal, which is so important that no form of violence is unthinkable. Although confined in the past to small groups with little political traction, this maximalist discourse with a maximalist goal underpins the current Israeli government's actions and permeates broader society. According to the news agency JNS (Jewish News Syndicate), 59% of Israelis supported the resumption of the war in March 2025 after a two-month long truce. In the same poll Netanyahu emerges again as the most popular candidate for the post of prime minister if elections were held (JNS, 2025, March 25). In her contribution to this special issue, Hannah Ridge clearly shows the seemingly permanent shift in Israeli public opinion about the rights Arabs in Israel and in the Occupied Territories should not have.

In the first few decades of the struggle, Palestinian demands were not deemed messianic and were couched instead in the language of anti-colonialism. Under the influence of Hamas and other Islamist movements, Palestine is now considered by some as a *waqf*, an endowment from Allah, which has profound implications for what kind of territorial compromise can be reached, at least from a rhetorical perspective. Although the frame of anti-colonialism has remained, the religious dimension of the struggle, as Belhaj shows in his article in this special issue, makes it particularly unyielding to compromise. Both views of Palestine and how to reclaim the territory were maximalist, but one contained the seed of minimalism, while the other not so much. For a long time, the maximalist Palestinian struggle was based on the territory of Mandate Palestine, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) laid its claims to it until it accepted compromised and adhered to the peace process a few years later¹⁴. For its part, in its 1988 Covenant (*mythaq*), Hamas refrained from specifying the geographical contours of Palestine (Legrain, 2020). There are many reasons for this, but the refusal to

¹³ "On the same day the Lord made A covenant with Abraham, saying: To your descendants I have given this Land, from the river of Egypt to the Great River, the River of Euphrates" *Genesis 15:18*.

¹⁴ PLO abandoned its maximalist territorial struggle over the whole of Ottoman Palestine in the late 1980s. We might mention the Palestinian Declaration of Independence proclaimed in Algiers (Algeria) in 1988. This was the first official declaration of a Palestinian state coexisting with an Israeli state.

be confined within the British or Ottoman colonial framework may explain it. In 2017, in the Document (*wathiqah*) clarifying the Covenant, Hamas agreed to set out the contours of Palestine, but still refused the colonial and historical references. It is important to note, however, that during these years of vagueness, Hamas regularly used the expression “From the River to the Sea” in its official communiqués, suggesting that the maximalist objective had not been abandoned. This claim was particularly striking during the attack on October 7, 2023. In Gaza or the West Bank, violence is usually targeted against the occupying forces or Israeli cities. But the violence of October 7, by its sheer scale, has an important territorial dynamic. It was a Palestinian incursion into the territory claimed by the maximalist movements. But the demarcation of territory is also a source of tension between Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In 2017, Hamas referred to the 1967 borders, otherwise a Palestine that did not extend from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. Islamic Jihad protested this (Al Jazeera, 2017, June 5).

Thus, the notion of territory is essential. In Israel and Palestine, maximalist ideologies are guided on both sides by the desire to liberate and settle a territory occupied by a people who are perceived not belong there, hence the feeling of frustration (Feierabend and al. 1973). The discourse on both sides is not based on the same perception or the same temporalities and certainly not on the same resources, but the foundation remains the same. The land is occupied, and if it is occupied, it is ‘our’ duty to liberate it. The first similarity is then that of the territoriality of the struggle.

5. An existential and ideological struggle

The liberation of occupied territory is conducive to building a society on specific foundations, although the respective maximalisms are not unitary on this point. The Palestinians discuss several crucial aspects, including the place of religion, which today has a central role in the struggle. The Israelis too find it difficult to agree on the ideological project to be applied and religion is also central to these debates and the arguments between religious and secular maximalisms are particularly intense. While they all agree on the need to colonize West Bank or, recently, on the need to destroy and re-occupy Gaza, Israeli maximalists for instance do not agree on the ultimate purpose of these projects. In both camps, the protagonists have different types of maximalism when it comes to what happens after victory. This drives some of their internal confrontations. Maximalism is then no longer a project for building a society but simply becomes driven by the desire to destroy the other first and foremost, with discussions about what the newly liberated society would look like postponed until victory.

The existential struggle of a whole people

The two maximalisms share several characteristics. Among them, the notion of existence as the main objective. Through maximalist ideology, Palestinians and Jews militate to preserve their existence. But this existential sentiment is not a maximalist characteristic. It is a feeling that animates the entire population, and maximalist projects make use of it. Existence, beyond being the fact of existing as humans, peoples or nations, represents any means of ensuring life from a material point of view. This means that existence becomes the justification for organizing, defending or using violence. From the earliest Israeli Arab confrontations, the question of existence has been raised regularly. With the outbreak of the Second World War and the birth of the State of Israel, the issue took root in both camps. The Israeli narrative built on the memory of European trauma, as the state became a refuge for the Jewish people (Graetz, 2002). Its existence can no longer be threatened if it is able to provide for its own government and security. Today, the existential nature of Israeli actions is more a matter of perception than of actual threat. Rationally, Jews living in Israel are no longer threatened in their very existence, but massacres perpetrated against the Jews are a historical fact inseparable from the people's thinking (Graetz, 2002) and it explains the perception of being under constant existential threat. At a

Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem in May 2024, Netanyahu declared: “we will defeat our genocidal enemies. Never again, now!” Referring to the war being waged in Gaza against Hamas, Netanyahu constructed his speech on such historical memory and the existential threat, which is not simply linked to October 7th, but is inherently tied to the existential threat of genocide. In turn this justifies, in his speech, the most violent response possible (The Times of Israël, 2024, May 5). Palestinian struggle is a direct response to the former. Ottoman, then British occupation, confrontations, massacres and, finally, the *Nakba*, challenge their right to exist freely on the land they inhabit (Kimmerling, 2009). In post-October 7 speeches, this existential aspect is put forward by Hamas. In his speech on March 8, 2024, Abu Obeida, spokesman for the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, accused the “criminal enemy” of producing a “real Nazi holocaust” against Palestinians once again. The genocidal reference and the existential threat justify the means through which Palestinians should respond. In the same speech, he explained that “rights cannot be taken except by arms and force!” The existential threat is presented as a justification for violence against others. To protect one's existence, one must strike as hard as possible. This does not mean that the two maximalist perspectives – Israeli and Palestinian – are necessarily morally equivalent given the power imbalance, but they are rhetorically and in practice the mirror image of each other.

The ideological struggle of a radical minority

Israelis and Palestinians know how threatened their people are or have been. This existential fear is therefore not unique to maximalist trends, but maximalists use and inflate it to go further. In addition, maximalist movements are also ideological in nature. In Israel and Palestine, these actors originally sought to influence and disrupt the quest for a compromise, and they have increasingly succeeded in doing so. With the development of Hamas in the Palestinian territories and the far-right coalitions in Israel that Netanyahu built, the most radical ideologies have never been so present, let alone at the same time.

Israeli maximalism is distinguished from Palestinian maximalism by the greater plurality of its actors. But whether ultra-nationalist, ultra-Orthodox or both, Israeli maximalists advocate colonization, the denial of existence to Palestinians, ultra-violence to achieve this and to eliminate the Arabs seen as obstacles to the ‘redemption’ of the land. This is how some interpreted Netanyahu's speech to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) when he referred to Amelek (MidEast Journal, 2024, February 26¹⁵). This first ideological factor can be grouped behind the idea of Jewish supremacy. The concept did not originate in the post-1993 period; it was already at the roots of the Zionist project (Pappe, 2002). Beyond the common perception of Palestinians, several ideological distinctions can be made between Israeli maximalists. For ultranationalists, the state of Israel has a divine mission, even if its current form is imperfect. For the orthodox maximalists, the state itself is a problem. This distinction is made above all in settlements. The former are accompanied by the state to carry out the colonial project, while the latter believe in their messianic character¹⁶ and are, on the contrary, in permanent confrontation with the state because it does not act sufficiently strongly to conform to the messianic message (Algemeiner, 2020, August 28). While they all agree on the divine nature of the Land of Israel, they argue over ideology, and none of them can assert themselves.

For its part, Palestinian maximalism manages to share a relatively unified discourse. It appears less divided than Israeli maximalism. In a 2010 interview, Mousa Abu Marzook, first chairman of the Hamas

¹⁵ The statement shocked public opinion because of Netanyahu's implicit call for genocide. It was on this basis that South Africa took legal action against Israel. The Prime Minister's Office ultimately explained that the PM was referring to another biblical passage (The Israel Democracy Institute, 2024, January 25).

¹⁶ Messianism is recognized by all, but the ultra-Orthodox have an extremist interpretation (Algemeiner, 2020, August 28). The state is not a divine gift but an obstacle.

Political Bureau, explained: “Islam is a self-engine ... against oppression and occupation, and against all the features that oppress people and offend them ... Islam is a strong engine for people to refuse oppression, occupation, discrimination and so on” (Dunning, 2015: 284). Clearly, Hamas has succeeded in imposing an near-ideological monopoly based on Islam. For Hamas, Palestine is a *waqf* and the Palestinians cannot negotiate the land that is theirs, that of Ottoman Palestine “from the river to the sea.” Despite all this, there are some ideological differences. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, for example, do not agree on the Palestinian political system, while the latter advocating a total rejection of democracy.

In comparing the ideology of Israeli and Palestinian maximalism, the former appears divided, while the latter is unified. Hamas has succeeded in imposing itself in the context of PLO's loss of power and prestige, rendering its actions legitimate among ordinary Palestinians due to its focus on resistance rather than appeasement, as Martin Kear illustrates in detail in his contribution to this special issue. Israeli maximalism, on the other hand, although united behind anti-Arab sentiment, cannot impose yet a unified vision. Perelman however shows that the maximalists, and more generally the Israeli nationalist right, are increasingly homogeneous (2024), as the religious character of the struggle seems to become ever pervasive. This makes the two maximalisms converge, as they rely both have a religious dimension and increasingly so insofar as they justify their violence on the basis of the gift that God has given their people and that should not be abandoned. Since it was God who gave them exclusive rights to the Land, then absolutely everything must be done to respect God's word, including the use of violence.

6. Violence fuels violence

The methods used to achieve maximalist goals prevent actors from rethinking them because of the cycle of violence they are willingly trapped in. The ideological and practical model developed over at least the last thirty years now prevents turning back. Once launched, the maximalist approach cannot be reversed. Only victory - and in this case, the annihilation of the other side - is an acceptable way out of conflict. Aggression responds to frustration (Feierabend and al., 1973). This idea partly explains the war that began in Gaza in 2023. For the Israeli maximalists within and outside the state, only the eradication of Hamas and thereby of all Palestinians – “there are no innocent civilians in Gaza” (ISD, 2025, July 24) – is the acceptable outcome, one that the state not only accept, but pursue. The Palestinian maximalist approach is similar. Only a second huge blow against Israel, and then a third and so on, can obtain political results and constitute an appropriate response to the violence that befell Gaza after the first blow on October 7, 2023, as Belhaj's work in this special issue confirm. The maximalist actors on both sides though have never able to carry out their maximalist plans completely and they therefore tend to seek a military violent escalation to solve the problem once and for all. This belief in total victory allows maximalist actors comes from past failures to compromise. In fact, the failure of peace process has been accompanied by a slow and inevitable progression of maximalist movements, both in Israel and Palestine (Signoles, 2005). Maximalist movements on all sides took advantage of the problems that affected the peace process and efforts to prevent their takeover have been limited. Hamas won in the Gaza Strip in the early 2000s, and violent movements in and around the organization were able to expand rapidly. At the same time, the Israeli settlers' withdrawal from Gaza spawned a new generation of systemic frustration. Since then, every crisis has been an opportunity to advance a maximalist position a little further. In a report published in December 2024, the Israeli NGO Peace Now presented the number of new settlements established each year in the West Bank: 7 in 2022, 31 in 2023 and 60 in 2024, after the attack on 7 October 2023 (see Peace Now's count, 31/12/24).

What we see today is that violence fuels violence. After the second Intifada (2000-2005), organized and unorganized militant structures in Israel, such as *Zo Artzeinu* (This is Our Land)¹⁷ (Shaw-Smith, 1994) or Price tag attacks¹⁸ (NBC News, 2015, August 1), justified their return to violence by pointing to Palestinian violence. In response, the Palestinians suggest that it was Baruch Goldstein, a disciple of Meir Kahane and member of the Jewish Defense League and the Kach party, who inaugurated the cycle of reciprocal violence after the Oslo Accords (1993) by attacking the Ibrahimi Mosque (Cave of the Patriarchs) in 1994. At the same time, Palestinian movements, and Hamas in particular, were becoming increasingly powerful and relevant in their struggle. The Oslo Accords were accepted by the PLO, and their minimalism became a stick with which to beat the PLO because they did not improve the Palestinian situation, quite the contrary. This gave voice to those who accused it to have betrayed the historic struggle to annihilate Israel or at least see the claims to Palestinian statehood partially satisfied. Worse, the PLO and the PA have been held responsible for increasing colonial violence on the part of both the settlers and the Israeli Army. Turning back is incredibly complex, as maximalist movements would rather be eliminated than recognize the other's right to exist.

This response to violence with violence, and the impossibility of turning back, creates particularly complex problems. In the case of the colonization of the West Bank, for example, there is no turning back. The decolonization of the Palestinian territories would lead to waves of violence so great that Israel would not countenance it, because an Israeli potential civil war to give the Palestinians back their land is not even a remote possibility. In fact, there currently is a concomitance between civil and state maximalism in Israel. Both are looking in the same direction. The civilian maximalists have fully integrated government and decision-making institutions, whereas they had always been formally rejected. Even in the case of sovereignty recognised for the Palestinian territories, Israeli civil maximalism would prevent decolonization. This illustrates the inability of maximalists to temper their actions, to back down or to admit the necessity to compromise with the other. As Meir Kahane used to say, “it is either they or we” (The Guardian, 2025, March 25). If this scenario sounds fictitious, its fictitiousness also illustrates the full victory of maximalism over Israeli policy. Palestinian maximalism has also reached the highest levels of political power. The de-legitimisation of the PLO, and Fatah in particular, has been accompanied by popular support for Hamas, which has remained faithful to its original maximalist identity to fight for the creation of the State of Palestine and against the state of Israel.

7. Conclusion

The way in which the two maximalisms are opposed to each other while being the mirror image of each other invites us to think about the ideology/utopia dual. Karl Mannheim is the pioneer in this field (1929). His thinking, often contrasted with that of Ernst Bloch (1918), suggests that ideology cannot be understood without integrating the fundamental role of utopia. For Mannheim, as for Ricoeur (1976), ideology and utopia are forms of “transcendence of reality”, in the sense that they are both “incongruous with social reality”. What distinguishes them, then, is the temporality that drives them. Ideology focuses on the past, sometimes on preserving it despite an outdated model (Geoghegan, 2004). Utopia, on the other hand, is transcendent in its orientation towards the future. The Marxist influence of the distinction

¹⁷ Founded during the peace process negotiations, *Zo Artzeinu* is a little-known organization that has focused on the struggle against peace with the Palestinians. During the negotiations, the movement advocated civil disobedience. Today, the movement is attached to *Zehut*, a right-libertarian and nationalist political party.

¹⁸ The “price tag” attack policy (*Tag Mekhir* in Hebrew) is the name given to attacks and acts of vandalism committed mainly in the occupied West Bank by young extremist Israeli settlers. These methods are officially rejected by the authorities, by Netanyahu, and even by the settlers.

is obvious, as is the relationship to dialectical history and the vision of modernity. When applied to this study, these reflections highlight a particular articulation of ideology and utopia. Both camps are driven by an “outdated” past with no real contemporary meaning, and by an idealistic but unrealistic future. At its core, preventing the other from existing is first and foremost to prevent peace. If both sides camp on ideological and utopian positions - outdated and unrealistic, according to Mannheim - peace is impossible. Once again, the colonization of the Palestinian territories is a good example. Colonization is not acceptable. It is a fact on which almost the entire international community agrees. But decolonization is also impossible. Peace is obviously desirable, but maximalism prevents its application.

The notion of maximalism thus stands out as a refreshing tool offering a new reading of the situation. Maximalism presents itself first and foremost as an internal split, a debate within the same ideological camp. It pits moderation against a ‘revolutionary’ pursuit. Maximalism then presents itself as a position in relation to the other. The force it opposes is necessarily greater and stronger, which feeds its revolutionary goal and method. But as we have seen, this is not always verifiable. The similarity between maximalism in Palestine and maximalism in Israel offers an original comparison of an atypical situation. It does not, however, exclude the many differences. Palestinian maximalism is above all revolutionary, challenging the status quo and aiming to overturn established norms. Israeli maximalism seeks to force the State to go further, to accompany the Jewish people towards a goal. But its revolutionary character is still present.

There are not one, but several forms of maximalism; in other words, systems of ideas that influence the perception of actors and practices in the conduct of a totalising project. This maximalist project, its goals and methods, involve the rejection of international norms, peaceful solutions and minimalist positions. A minimalist dynamic would see compromises made on both sides to establish a lasting peace, but today, the maximalist project is influencing militant and organizational reflections. It disrupts the whole political game and makes future discussions impossible.

Maximalist approaches on both sides have a goal: is to establish an exclusive society. This goal however is prevented by the other group, leading to the perception of the impossibility of ‘preserving’ their existence on the territory both claim. The methods through which maximalism is expressed differ because achieving the goal depends on unequal resources.

If these approaches are both opposed and similar, this raises one question: wouldn't the preservation of the existential character that prevails in both struggles be ensured by mutual recognition?

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AUTHOR’S INFORMATION

Romain Lucas is a PhD student in Political Science at Laval University (Canada) and Sciences Po Lyon (France). His work focuses on MENA studies and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and covers themes such as state formation, revolutionary processes and nationalist movements.