

# Challenging Zionism

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## **Abstract:**

**Zionism is not a mere catchphrase. It is an organised and international political movement, with continuing influence on the daily situation in Palestine. Any successful strategy for the liberation of Palestine must confront the reality, not the myth, of Zionism. An end to the conflict in Palestine requires the return of the Palestinian refugees and the dismantlement of the Zionist structure of the state of Israel.**

In 1959, the historian Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, who has just died, opened his book *The Zionist Idea* with the statement "Zionism exists, and it has had important consequences, but historical theory does not really know what to do with it". Nearly half-a-century on, the point is still relevant – Zionism is misunderstood, as much by its supporters as its opponents. But without attempting to understand Zionism, we stand little chance of challenging and defeating it.

Its supporters present Zionism as variously a response to anti-Jewish racism (misleadingly called "anti-Semitism"), as a movement of national liberation, or as the realisation of a Biblical and historical aspiration. All of this is spurious, as we shall see. Many opponents, on the other hand, use the term "Zionism" interchangeably with "racism", even "fascism", without looking at the reality and specificity of the Zionist ideology and movement. By turning the term into a mere catch-phrase for all that is wrong in Palestine, these opponents risk losing sight of the real crimes of the Zionist movement, and thus of failing to address the issues which need to be resolved in order to achieve Palestinian liberation.

Zionism was indeed, in part, a response to 19th century anti-Jewish racism; but it was a misconceived response. Far from an anti-racist response, which would have fought against this racism, and would have demanded the support of others in this fight, the response of Zionism was to accept, even to justify, this racism. Jews, they argued, could not be integrated or assimilated into European societies, hatred of Jews was rational and inevitable, and the only possible response of Jews was to establish their own state, in which there would not be any non-Jews to oppress them.

This acceptance of racism led the founder of the organised Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, to make numerous attempts to negotiate with reactionary European leaders, in order to achieve their common aim of removing the Jews from Europe, and settling them in the Middle East. This set the pattern both for frequent Zionist collaboration with Jew-haters, and for the continuing alliance of Zionism with imperialism.

Although there have, of course, been honourable exceptions, the Zionist movement as a whole has always refused to oppose anti-Jewish racism, and has at times even promoted it. This collaboration has been as characteristic of the Zionist "left" as of the "right". It was so-called "Labour Zionists" who organised the systematic sabotage of the anti-Nazi boycott campaign, in order to transfer German industrial goods to Palestine, while paying for them with the expropriated wealth of German Jews. It

was a "Labour Zionist" leader, Rudolf Kasztner, who was found by an Israeli court to have "sold his soul to the devil" for his collaboration with Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann in suppressing knowledge of the death camps in order to prevent a Jewish uprising in Hungary.

For many of us who identify as anti-Zionist Jews, this betrayal of our struggle against racism, and this willingness to strike deals with the oppressors of the Jews, is as great a crime of the Zionist movement as its dispossession of the Palestinian people. Israel's apologists also like to portray Zionism as a national liberation movement, akin to the many such movements in 19th century Europe. But, although Zionism did grow in the same social and political circumstances, it is in fact very different from European national movements, and even further from the 20th century movements of national liberation in the developing world. In the first place, of course, the Zionists sought to establish a state not where the Jews lived, and had lived for centuries, but elsewhere – and, furthermore, in a land already populated by a people just beginning to express their own national sentiment and to struggle for national liberation.

In these circumstances, a clash between the Palestinian national movement and Zionism was inevitable; and this was one of the reasons why Britain, the imperial ruler in Palestine after World War One, promoted Zionist colonisation. Sir Ronald Storrs, the Military Governor of Jerusalem, noted that the Zionists would form for England "a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism". The Zionists, too, accepted this role; in his book *The Jewish State*, which inaugurated the Zionist movement, Herzl wrote "We should form (in Palestine) a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism". Zionism also differed from other national movements since the national community it purported to represent did not exist, was resident in many countries, and did not identify as a nation. The assertion of Herzl in *The Jewish State* that "We are a people – one people" was a political aim, rather than a statement of fact. Even today, any visitor to Israel can easily see the falseness of this claim; the discrimination faced by Jews of Arab or other non-European origin has been a constant and well-studied feature of Israeli politics and society.

Because Zionism offered no real resistance to European racism, and instead appealed to a mythical "Jewish nation", it failed to gain the support of most European Jews. Indeed, the first Zionist Congress, in 1897, had to be moved from Munich due to the hostility of the local Jewish community. And, although Zionist parties regularly stood in Jewish communal elections, they were just as regularly humiliated, winning little representation. At a period of increasing pressure and racism, the Jews of Europe preferred the socialist Bund and other parties over the nationalist chimera offered by the Zionists.

Zionism was not even the only national and separatist ideology among European Jews at the beginning of the 20th century. The Autonomist movement, founded by the historian Simon Dubnow, called for Jewish self-rule in areas where large Jewish communities lived, while Herzl's Zionist movement itself split after the rejection of a British proposal to settle European Jews in Kenya; the minority, led by writer Israel Zangwill, established the Jewish Territorialist Organisation, which sought to establish a Jewish state anywhere in the world other than in Palestine. Among the several attempts to establish Jewish political autonomy, it is particularly worth noting the Birobidzhan project for a Jewish Autonomous Region in Siberia, the Galveston

Movement, which settled thousands of Jews in Texas , and the Freeland League, which sought land in Ecuador and Western Australia .

Of course, most of the millions of Jews suffering Tsarist oppression did not attempt, or were not able, to emigrate. Large numbers of Jews joined the socialist parties, such as the Jewish Socialist Bund, the Bolshevik and Menshevik Parties, the Social Revolutionaries and others. And, of the estimated two million who did flee persecution between 1881 and 1914, only about 50-60,000 went to Palestine ; half of these left within a very few years. Zionism offered neither a way to resist racist oppression, nor an attractive alternative homeland.

Unlike the small Jewish communities who had always lived in, or travelled to, Palestine , the Zionist immigrants had a specific political project – the establishment of a Jewish state. They proposed to achieve this through the twin projects of “conquest of the land” and “conquest of labour”. This meant, in effect, the removal of Palestinians from the land, and their exclusion from the economy. As Herzl recorded in his diary “We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it employment in our country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly”. Current Israeli apartheid policies are rooted in the ideology and practice of the early Zionist movement.

The Zionist leadership continued its attempts to form an alliance with the dominant imperial power in Palestine . Herzl met the German Kaiser, the Turkish Sultan, and leading advisers to the Russian Tsar, in order to gain their sponsorship. When it became clear during the First World War that Britain would become the major power in Palestine , the Zionists switched their allegiance. In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour (who some years earlier had brought in the Aliens Act to prevent Jewish immigration to Britain ) issued the notorious Balfour Declaration, supporting “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”.

This Declaration, by the way, was opposed by the only Jewish member of the British government at the time, Secretary for India Edwin Montagu, who wrote a memorandum denouncing “the Anti-Semitism of the Present Government”. On the other hand, it was supported by Minister of Munitions Winston Churchill, who wrote: “among the Jews ... this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing ... Zionism offers the third sphere to the political conceptions of the Jewish race, in violent contrast to international communism”.

At the same time, Britain was sponsoring the Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire , with the promise of freedom and independence. But, behind the backs of both Zionists and Arab nationalists, Britain and France had already reached a secret agreement carving up the Middle East into colonial zones of influence. Whatever cynical use they were prepared to make of both Arab nationalists and Zionists, the imperialists were determined to remain in power in their colonies.

Through the thirty years of British colonial rule, the Zionist movement developed a separate Jewish society and economy (the Yishuv) inside Palestine . They operated under the slogans “conquest of the land” and “conquest of labour” – ie, expropriation and exclusion. Financial, educational, health and welfare, cultural and sporting institutions were established, as well as a strong Zionist military. In some cases, the

Zionists bought land from absentee landlords, and then – in sharp contrast to the accepted practice – evicted the tenants, many of whom had farmed and lived on the land for centuries.

Jewish immigration to Palestine grew under the British mandate. In particular, with the accession to power of the Nazis and other anti-Jewish governments in Europe, many Jews – denied entry to Western countries – sought refuge in Palestine . The Zionist movement, in fact, made efforts to discourage Jewish migration elsewhere. Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, later to become Israel's first Prime Minister, notoriously stated in 1938 "If I knew that it would be possible to save all the children in Germany by bringing them over to England, and only half by transporting them to Eretz Israel, then I would opt for the second alternative".

By November 1947, Jews formed 30% of the population of Palestine , and owned 6% of the land. Despite this, when Britain referred the issue to the United Nations (apparently in the hope of receiving international support in suppressing both the Zionists and the Palestinian national movement), the UN decided to partition Palestine, with 55% going to the Zionists, and only 45% to the Palestinians.

According to some experts, even in the area allocated to the Zionists, Palestinians were a majority.

Although the Zionists nominally accepted the partition plan, they were in fact already preparing their war of expansion and expulsion. Over the next year, thousands of Palestinians were murdered in dozens of massacres. The Israeli army had expanded the borders to include almost 80% of Palestine , and some 800,000 Palestinians had been driven into exile. These exiles, and their descendants, now numbering several million, are still denied the right to return to their homes and their land. It is inconceivable that there could ever be a just and viable peace in the Middle East unless these exiles are enabled to exercise their right to return.

Following the war, nearly 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed by Israel , and their ruins incorporated into Israeli Jewish settlements. Any visitor to Israel , who keeps their eyes open, can easily see signs everywhere of this former ownership. But most Israelis, and their supporters, ignore and deny this. One Israeli who did not was the general and politician Moshe Dayan, who told a student audience in Haifa in 1969: "We came to this country which was already populated by Arabs, and we are establishing a Hebrew, that is - a Jewish - state here. In considerable areas of the county we bought the land from the Arabs. Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I don't blame you, because these geography books no longer exist. Not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahalal arose in the place of Mahlul, Gvat in the place of Jibta, Sarid in the place of Haneifs, and Kfar-Yehoshua in the place of Tel-Shaman. There is not one single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population".

The 1948 war was genocidal and brutal, but it was not particularly exceptional in the catalogue of 20 th century horrors. What was unusual was the widespread support for the Zionists, and the abandonment of the Palestinians. The United Nations only voted in favour of the Zionist project after US pressure on small Asian, African and Latin American countries had forced several of them to change their vote. And the Zionist victory in the war was ensured by the massive shipment of arms by Czechoslovakia , then a loyal satellite of the Soviet Union . The West, it seemed, was

unwilling to resettle the Jewish victims of Nazism themselves, and was forcing the Palestinians to pay the price of European racism and genocide.

It should be clear that Zionism cannot be considered in any way an anti-racist movement, or a movement of national liberation. And, at least until the Zionist movement, with the support of its imperialist sponsors, succeeded in implanting the state of Israel on the ruins of Palestine, it was never supported by more than a minority of those identifying as Jews.

These false justifications have been created by the Zionist movement in an attempt to disguise its true nature, as a Western colonial movement operating in the heart of the Arab world. It is important, in fighting this movement, not to fall into the opposite trap, of misinterpreting Zionism as a convenient codeword for all that is wrong in Palestine and the Middle East. Zionism is not all-powerful, it does not govern US foreign policy or control the Western media and economy, it does not have secret agents hidden away in all the seats of power in the world. The argument that it does is as dangerously misleading a myth as the Zionists' own false stories.

In fact, such an argument is an alibi for – and one cause of – the failure of the anti-Zionist struggle. For, if Zionism is indeed so powerful, then it is inconceivable that the Palestinians can defeat it. This argument also serves to marginalise and discredit pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist agitation, by reinforcing the false claim that opposition to Israel and Zionism is equivalent to anti-Semitic hatred of Jews.

Zionism does indeed exist, on an international level. It is not, however, a secret cabal; it is an open and recognised institution. The World Zionist Organisation, with its headquarters in Jerusalem, is a large and well-funded body, with quasi-governmental powers in the state of Israel. Its 35th Congress, to be held in Jerusalem in June 2006, will discuss calls for a "struggle against assimilation" (of Jews into their own societies), for legislation around the world to outlaw anti-Zionism, and for "the nations of the world to act aggressively and immediately to remove the Iranian threat".

These proposals, and the many calls for Israel to act to encourage (Jewish) immigration and to deter (Jewish) emigration, are secondary to the main role of the WZO and its affiliated bodies, which is to act as a sub-contractor to the state of Israel in discriminating against non-Jews. This, indeed, is the real role of the Zionist movement. Israel, which describes itself as "a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state", is reluctant to discriminate openly and directly against its Palestinian citizens, who form some 20% of the population. In fact, only one Israeli act – the 1950 "Law of Return" granting citizenship to Jews – explicitly privileges Jews only. Other acts rely on the Law of Return itself, or use deliberate circumlocutions.

But the Zionist bodies, which have no such pretensions, are free to discriminate.

Indeed, they are obliged to do so. According to the constitution of the World Zionist Organisation, "Every Jew who has reached the age of eighteen years and who is member of a body affiliated to the World Zionist Organization shall be entitled to vote in elections to Congress". No hypocrisy there – only Jews can vote. The Jewish National Fund, a British-registered charity which administers "state land" in Israel, is bound by its statutes to use its funds for "purposes which are beneficial to persons who are of Jewish religion, race or origin". So it would be a breach of its charitable registration for the JNF to act in a non-racist way!

When administration of "state land" was transferred to the Zionist bodies in 1952, it was with the specific intention to discriminate and to deceive. Introducing the 1960

Knesset debate on the Basic Law: Israel Lands, the religious affairs minister Zerah Warhaftig, stated

"What we want is difficult to define. We want to make it clear that the land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel . The 'people of Israel ' is a concept that is broader than that of the 'people resident in Zion ', because the people of Israel live throughout the world. On the other hand, every law that is passed is for the benefit of all the residents of the state, and all the residents of the state include also people who do not belong to the people of Israel , the worldwide people of Israel .... There is therein a very significant legal innovation: we are giving legal garb to the Memorandum of Association of the JNF ... As for the JNF, the legal innovation is enormous; it gives legal garb to a principle that thus far was incorporated only in the JNF's Memorandum".

The land referred to as "state land" is for the most part the land of the Palestinian people, removed from them by a combination of military force and legal trickery. All land belonging to the Palestinian refugees has been declared state land, and thus made available to Jews only. In addition, Israel has created the anomalous status, unknown elsewhere in the world, of "present absentees" – Palestinian citizens of Israel whose land was, at any time in the 1948 war, under control of the Arab armies. Their land, too, has been declared abandoned and taken over by the state, even though the owners live in some cases only a few metres away.

Even those Palestinians who remained on their land, under Israeli rule from the start of the war, have found much of their land removed by legal chicanery. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was common practice for the Israeli army to declare land belonging to Palestinian citizens as a "closed military zone", and to deny access. Then, after a few years, the ministry of agriculture would declare this to be "uncultivated land", and thus subject to seizure by the state – which would, of course, hand it over to the Zionist bodies for development and administration. By a combination of such force and trickery, Palestinians, even if they were citizens of the state of Israel , have been systematically deprived of their land and resources. The role of the Zionist bodies is to disguise this discrimination from the eyes of the casual observer.

Although the ostensible purpose of the Law of Return is to grant Jews immigration rights to Israel , it actually is used in many other ways. By referring to this law, other parliamentary acts can discriminate without using explicit racist language. Many welfare benefits, for instance, are paid to "those eligible for citizenship according to the Law of Return", ie Jews only. A recent example of this secondary use of the Law of Return was provided by the newspaper Ha'aretz, which last February published a photo of the signpost next to one of the checkpoints in the West Bank . The sign read: "This crossing is for Israelis only... 'Israeli': a resident of Israel , a resident of the area who is an Israeli citizen [ie, a settler] or is entitled to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return".

There has been much discussion recently about whether the term "apartheid" is an accurate description of Israel 's practices. Those who agree include Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Willie Madisha, president of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and Jeff Halper of the Israel Committee Against House Demolitions. An important dissenting voice is veteran anti-Zionist activist Dr Moshé Machover, who argues that "Zionist policy is far worse than apartheid" and that a far better parallel is the treatment of Native Americans. Whatever the term used, the reality is that

Palestinians, including those who are citizens of Israel , are systematically and deliberately discriminated against by the state of Israel , often acting at arms length through the Zionist bodies. This discrimination is a product of – indeed, the very purpose of – the Zionist project of creating a Jewish state in Palestine .

Zionism is a racist ideology and practice. It has led to the exile and dispossession of the Palestinian people; it has betrayed the struggle of the Jews against European racism; and it has colonised the Jewish institutions as effectively as it has colonised Palestine . There can be no prospect of peace in the Middle East without taking action to remove the Zionist structure of the state of Israel , and to undo its dire effects on the peoples of the region.

The proposed “two state solution” is in fact no solution at all. Even if Israel were prepared to withdraw from all of the territories it occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, to close all of the illegal settlements, and to permit the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with its own army and air force (and all Israeli governments have repeatedly stated that they have no such intention), this would leave unresolved the twin problems of the Palestinian exile, and the racist nature of the Israeli state itself. Although we of course must demand an immediate, total and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from all of the territories occupied in 1967 (including the Syrian Golan Heights), we do not pretend that this alone is enough to put an end to a century-old conflict. Without a return of the Palestinian refugees, and the abolition of the entire framework of discrimination, the region will face more generations of bloodshed.

But this does not mean, as Israel 's propagandists claim, that supporters of Palestinian rights wish to “drive the Jews into the sea”. Whatever the circumstances and merits of the establishment of the state of Israel over the ruins of Palestine , we must recognise that there now exists an Israeli Jewish community, which cannot simply be uprooted. This would not only be unjust; it would set in motion a further cycle of dispossession, and another bitter war.

Anti-Zionists offer instead a positive vision of a future unitary, democratic and secular Palestine, the return of Palestinian refugees, the dismantlement of the Zionist structure of the state of Israel, and full and equal rights for Palestinians, Israeli Jews, and all other people living in the whole of Palestine. We recognise that the most damaging effect of the Zionist project was not the partition of the land of Palestine , but the partition of the Palestinian people. This has led to the formation of several Palestinian communities, with differing short-term interests. The current discussion around Mahmoud Abbas' call for a referendum on recognition of Israel is a symptom of this division, which must be transcended in order to resolve the conflict.

Palestinian geographer Salman Abu-Sitta has shown quite convincingly how the bulk of Palestinians can be enabled to return to, or close to, their former homes, without requiring a further mass uprooting of Israeli Jews. Other experts have shown how the resources of the region can best be used for the benefit of all of the people of the region in the context of a unitary Palestine ; particularly if they are no longer diverted to the ongoing war.

Palestinians living in exile need and deserve the right to return home. Palestinians in the 1967-occupied territories need the end of Israeli occupation. Palestinian citizens of Israel need to be regarded and treated as equal human beings, rather than as barely-tolerated third-class residents. Israeli Jews need an end to the constant fear and insecurity resulting from Israel 's unremitting hostility to its geo-political milieu.

And Jews around the world need to rid themselves of the Zionist incubus, which threatens to replace all that is positive in Jewish culture with a chauvinist loyalty to the government and policies of the state of Israel .

Identification of, and unremitting struggle against, Zionism, is key to all of this. It should become a priority for all anti-racists, all anti-imperialists, and all supporters of Palestinian rights, to build a massive campaign against Zionism, and to make the term, and the reality, as unacceptable as apartheid was twenty years ago. In order to do this, we need to understand and fight the Zionist reality, not the myths promoted by Zionists themselves and by too many would-be anti-Zionists.

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