

Zionism - a Colonial Movement



Palestinians flee from Gaza's beaches onto boats during the Palestinian Nakba, 1949. (Photo: UNRWA)

In order to understand the arguments about Zionism, we need to start with its history.

Motivated by prejudice and pogroms, particularly in Tzarist Russia, the First Zionist Convention took place in Basel, Switzerland in 1897 and adopted the Basel programme.

“Zionism aims at establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine.”

In the proposed means to achieve this aim nothing was said about the indigenous population but the attitude of the Zionist leaders was clear - it was a colonialist project.

Theodor Herzl, widely regarded as the founder of political Zionism, wrote in his diary:

“We must expropriate gently the private property on the state assigned to us. 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... Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly. Let the owners of the immovable property believe that they are cheating us, selling us things for more than they are worth. But we are not going to sell them anything back.”

Herzl's view was echoed by other leading Zionists of the time and throughout the period of Zionist colonisation.

At the time Jews were 10% of the population, mainly living in peace with their neighbours. A worldwide campaign encouraged Jews to emigrate to Palestine. The vast majority of Jews who left their country of origin, saw their destiny in the USA. Zionism was a minority political movement and emigration to Palestine was low until the 1930s when rising European antisemitism and the horrors of Nazi Germany led to a huge increase. ►

Israeli Palestinian MPs letter to the Guardian, 2 Sept 2018

“...Palestinian citizens of Israel have yet to experience a single day of equality, de jure or de facto – to say nothing of the millions of Palestinians under military occupation in the West Bank, under siege in the Gaza Strip, and the 6 million in exile abroad, prevented from returning to their homeland simply because they are not Jews. As part of the Palestinian people, this has been our lived experience of the Zionist movement since day one.

The Netanyahu government has made it abundantly clear that Palestinians will never have a state of their own, and that they will never be allowed equality inside Israel.

As long as efforts to curb anti-Jewish sentiment in the UK are focused on combating the disparagement of Jews merely for their membership in a minority group, they have our full support. But when some try to force the Labour party into using as its litmus test a definition of anti-Semitism that goes far beyond anti-Jewish animus to include anti-Zionism, we must raise our voices and decry these efforts...”

Racist Institutions

The Jewish National Fund was founded in 1901. One of the key organisations of Zionist colonisation in Israel, from its very beginnings the JNF was dedicated to 'redeeming' the land of Palestine for Jews and Jews only. It originally purchased land from primarily absentee landlords for Jewish settlements. The Palestinian inhabitants were thrown off.

After 1948 the JNF took control of 2 million dunums (1 dunum = 1000 square metres) of confiscated Arab land, raising its land holding from 1 million which it had bought pre-1948 to over 3 million dunums.

In 1967 the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, passed the Agricultural Settlement Law which prohibited the sub-leasing of land to non-Jews on pain of a fine. In other words it is a criminal offence to lease JNF lands in Israel to non-Jews.

In December 1920 the Histadrut was formed as the General Confederation of Hebrew Labour by the two main labour Zionist parties, Hapoel Hatzair (Young Workers) and Achdut Ha'Avodah (Union of Labour). From its inception it excluded Arab labour and thus rejected worker solidarity in favour of national exclusivism. Every member had to pay two compulsory levies: (1) 'For Jewish Labour' — funds for organizing pickets, etc. against the employment of Arab workers, and (2) 'For Jewish Produce — for organizing the boycott of Arab produce.' Representing the settler Jewish working class, it was the key Zionist organization responsible for the formation of the Israeli state. Its primary role was not the defence of its members' wages and conditions but the colonisation of Palestine.

Self Determination for the Palestinians

At the start of World War I Britain offered to provide arms and money for an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire and in return to assist in the creation of independent Arab states in the Fertile Crescent (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine) and the Arabian Peninsula. The revolt started in 1916 and played a significant role in the British and French victory.

Britain then betrayed its former allies. The Balfour Declaration was a public statement issued by the British government in November 1917 announcing support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. The reasons for this included the hope of financial aid from American Zionists and the encouragement of Jewish immigration to Palestine rather than Britain. (Lord Balfour, in common with most of the British ruling class was anti-Semitic). The Mandate given to Britain by the League of Nations, which included the Balfour Declaration, had a central purpose – to deny the Palestinians their right to self-determination by direct British rule.

During the 1920s and 1930s, opposition to the Mandate by Muslim and Christian Palestinians resulted in numerous conflicts with Jewish settlements. Reports in the "British Mandate: A Survey of Palestine", produced in 1946, repeatedly identified anger at the denial of independence for the Palestinians and fear of economic and political subjugation by the Jewish immigrants.

The decisive conflict, starting in 1936, was in effect a small scale war against the British, who were aided by the Zionists. After three years 5,000 Palestinians were dead. Their leaders were exiled and all Palestinian paramilitary units dismantled. This left the Palestinians defenceless when facing a later Zionist onslaught.

Israel born in Terrorism and Violence

After World War Two there was a sharp rise in Zionist attacks in Palestine, which was still administered by Britain, in an attempt to put pressure on Clement Attlee's Labour government to allow the

creation of a Jewish state. The Stern gang and Irgun, led by Menachem Begin (a future Prime Minister of Israel), carried out bomb attacks, kidnappings and murders. The worst attack was a bomb placed in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in July 1946, which killed 91 people and injured 46 more. The targets of this violence and terrorism were not just British police officers and soldiers but Palestinians and Jews who opposed the Zionists' plans.

The Zionist attacks were successful in forcing the British government to announce, in February 1947, that it would give up its mandate on May 14 1948 and hand Palestine to the United Nations. The UN General Assembly voted in November 1947 to divide Palestine into two states: a Jewish state (56%) and an Arab state (43%), with Jerusalem becoming an international zone.

However, it was clearly envisaged that the 'Jewish State' would be a binational state – containing 405,000 Arabs as well 499,000 Jews – with equal rights for all citizens. At this time the population of Palestine was 1,269,000 Arabs and 608,000 Jews, with the Jews having acquired by purchase 6-8% of the total land (about 20% of the arable land).

The partition, opposed by Arab countries and the Palestinians, was pushed through, particularly by US coercion.

Plan Dalet

This partition plan did not satisfy the Zionists' project of a demographically Jewish state. Towards the end of 1947 the Zionist leadership under Ben Gurion – later the first Prime Minister of Israel - developed Plan Dalet. This aimed to secure the borders of Israel by cleansing, expelling and destroying Palestinian towns, villages and urban neighbourhoods. The plan was implemented by Zionist armed forces. Between March 30 and May 15 1948, 200 villages were occupied and their inhabitants expelled. During these actions massacres took place, such as that of over 100 Palestinian civilians in Deir Yassin. Palestinian towns such as Haifa, Tiberias and Safod fell into Zionist hands. Over 250,000 Palestinians were expelled. All this took place before the armies of neighbouring countries could intervene. Britain had 70,000 troops whose obligation was to keep the peace and defend civilians. They failed.

By the time of the armistice agreement with surrounding Arab countries in 1949 over 700,000 Palestinians – half the population - had been ethnically cleansed, and Israel now occupied 78% of Mandate Palestine. This was the Palestinian Nakba. Despite their right under international law and UN resolutions these refugees were never allowed to return. Ethnic cleansing of non-Jews became a permanent feature of Israel and continues to this day both in Israel and the occupied territories.

Those Palestinians who were left in Israel were subject to military rule until 1966. Even now they are not treated as equal citizens.



Palestinians carry placards 'The nation-state law is apartheid' at a 30,000 strong protest in Tel Aviv, August 11, 2018.