

# Israel and the Dangers of Ethnic Nationalism

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An interview with Jonathan Cook

*Jonathan Cook has covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the past 12 years.*

*Extracts from this interview with Joseph Cotto.*

Cotto: What sort of general impact would you say Zionism has had on the Middle East?

Cook: Zionism was a reaction to the extreme ethnic nationalisms that dominated – and nearly destroyed – Europe last century. It is therefore hardly surprising that it mirrors their faults. In exporting to the Middle East this kind of nationalism, Zionism was always bound to play a negative role in the region.

Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism, developing the concept of a Jewish state in response to the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe in the late nineteenth century. One notorious incident that appears to have shaped his views was France's Dreyfus affair, when a very assimilated Jewish army officer was unjustly accused of treason and then his innocence covered up by French elites.

The lesson drawn by Herzl was that assimilation was futile. To survive, Jews needed to hold firmly on to their ethnic identity and create an exclusivist state based on ethnic principles.

There is a huge historical irony to this, because Europe's ethnic nationalisms would soon end up tearing apart much of the world, culminating in the expansionary German war machine, the Second World War and the Nazi death camps. International institutions such as the United Nations and international humanitarian law were developed precisely to stop the repeat of such a cataclysmic event.

Once in the Middle East, Zionism shifted the locus of its struggle, from finding a solution to European anti-semitism to building an exclusive Jewish homeland on someone else's land, that of the Palestinians. If one wants to understand the impact of Zionism in the Middle East, then one needs to see how destabilising such a European ideological implant was.

The idea of ethnic-religious supremacism, which history suggests is latent in many ethnic nationalisms, quickly came to the fore in Zionism. Today, Israel believes in:

- \* segregation at all levels – made concrete in the separation wall across the West Bank;
- in ethnic exclusivism – Palestinian citizens inside Israel are even denied an Israeli nationality;

- a kind of national paranoia – walls are built to protect every border;
- but at the same time, and paradoxically, a refusal to define those borders – and with it a craving for expansion and greater “living room”.

All of this was predictable if one looked at the trajectory of ethnic nationalisms in Europe. Instead, we in the West see all this as a reaction to Islamism. The reality is we have everything back to front: Zionism, an aggressive ethnic nationalism, fed reactionary forces in the region like political Islam.

Cotto: If Israel adopted its pre-1967 borders, would this, in your opinion, contribute to the peace process?

Cook: Of course, it would. If nothing else, it would show for the first time two things: one, that Israel is prepared to exhibit good faith towards the Palestinians and respect international law; and two, that it has finally decided to define and fix its borders. Those are also two good reasons why I don't think we will see Israel adopt such a position.

There is a further, implicit question underlying this one. Can a Palestinian state on 22 per cent of historic Palestine, separated into two prison-cantons with limited access to the sea, be a viable state?

No, I don't think it can – at least not without remaining economically dependent on Israel and militarily vulnerable to it too. That, we should remember, also appears to have been the view of the international community when it tried to solve this problem more than 60 years ago. The United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 gave the Jewish minority 55 per cent of historic Palestine to create a Jewish state, while the Palestinians, the majority of the population, received 45 per cent for an Arab state.

One doesn't have to believe the partition plan was fair – as most Palestinians do not – to understand that even the Western-centric UN of that time did not imagine that a viable state could be created on 22 per cent of Palestine, or half of the “Arab state” it envisioned.

That is why I have long maintained that ultimately a solution to the conflict will only be found when the international community helps the two sides to find common ground and shared interests and to create joint institutions. That might be vaguely termed the one-state solution, but in practice it could take many forms.

Cotto: It is often noted that Palestinians live in far more impoverished socioeconomic conditions than Israelis do. From your standpoint, can this be attributed to Israeli aggression?

Cook: In essence, it is difficult to imagine it could be attributed to much else, unless one makes the racist assumption that Palestinians or Arabs are naturally lazy or incompetent.

In terms of Israel's greater economic success, there are several factors to take into account. It receives massive subsidies from the US taxpayer – billions of dollars in military aid and other benefits. It has developed very lucrative hi-tech and homeland security industries, often using the occupied territories as laboratories for it to test and showcase its weapons and surveillance systems. It also benefits from the financial connections it enjoys with worldwide Jewry. Just think of the property market in Israel, which is artificially boosted by

wealthy US and European Jews who inject money into the economy by buying an Israeli condo.

But equally importantly – as a just-published report from the World Bank concludes – it has prospered by plundering and exploiting Palestinian resources. The World Bank argues that Israel's de facto annexation of 62 per cent of the West Bank, known as Area C in the Oslo Accords, has stripped any nascent Palestinian state of almost all its resources: land for development, water for agriculture, quarries for stone, the Dead Sea for minerals and tourism, etc. Instead these resources are being stolen by more than 200 settlements Israel has been sowing over the West Bank.

Israel also exploits a captive, and therefore cheap, Palestinian labour force. That both benefits the Israeli economy and crushes the Palestinian economy.

Cotto: Some say that Israel's settlement policies directly encourage violence from Palestinian militants. Do you believe this to be the case?

Cook: Yes, of course. If you came armed with a gun to my house and took it from me, and then forced me and my family to live in the shed at the end of the garden, you could hardly be surprised if I started making trouble for you. If I called the police and they said they couldn't help, you could hardly be surprised if I eventually decided to get a gun myself to threaten you back. If, when you saw I had a gun too, you then built a wall around the shed to imprison me, you could hardly be surprised if I used the tools I had to make primitive grenades and started lobbing them towards the house. None of this would prove how unreasonable I was, or how inherently violent.

Cotto: Many claim that, if Israel were to shed its Jewish ethnocentrism, Muslims and others nearby would adopt a more favorable opinion of it. Do you agree with this idea?

Cook: Ethnocentrism for Israel means that the protection of its Jewishness is synonymous with the protection of its national security. That entails all sorts of things that would be considered very problematic if they were better understood.

Israel needed to ethnically cleanse Palestinians in 1948 to create a Jewish state. It needs separate citizenship and nationality laws, which distinguish between Jews and non-Jews, to sustain a Jewish state. It needs its own version of the "endless war on terror" – an aggressive policy of oppression and divide and rule faced by Palestinians under its rule – to prevent any future internal challenge to the legitimacy of its Jewishness. It needs to keep Palestinian refugees festering in camps in neighbouring Arab states to stop a reversal of its Jewishness. And it has had to become an armed and fortified garrison state, largely paid for by the US, to intimidate and bully its neighbours in case they dare to threaten its Jewishness.

Ending that ethnocentrism would therefore alter relations with its neighbours dramatically.

It was possible to end similar historic enmities in Northern Ireland and in South Africa. There is no reason to believe the same cannot happen in the Middle East.

Cotto: If Israel were to cease being an ethnocentrically Jewish state, do you think it would be able to survive?

Cook: Yes. Israel's actions have produced an ocean of anger towards it in the region – and a

great deal of resentment towards the US too. And that would not evaporate overnight. At a minimum there would be lingering distrust, and for good reason. But for Israel to stop being an ethnocratic state, it would require a serious international solution to the conflict. The international community would have to put into place mechanisms and institutions to resolve historic grievances and build trust, as it did in South Africa. Over time, the wounds would heal.

Cotto: In the event that Israel were to end its ethnocentrically Jewish policies, do you believe that Islamist militants would hold less of a grudge against the Western world?

Cook: The question looks at the problem in the wrong way in at least two respects. First, Israel's ethnocentrism – its exclusivity and its aggressiveness, for example – is one of the reasons it is useful to Western, meaning US, imperialism. Reforming Israel would indicate a change in Western priorities in the region, but that does not necessarily mean the West would stop interfering negatively in the region. Reforming Israel is a necessary but not a sufficient cause for a change in attitudes that dominate in the region.

Second, many Islamists, certainly of the fanatical variety, are not suddenly going to have a Damascene conversion about the West because Israel is reformed. But that should not be the goal. Good intentions towards the region will be repaid in a change in attitude among the wider society – and that is what is really important. When George Bush and his ilk talk about “draining the swamps”, they are speaking only in military terms. But actually what we should be doing is draining the ideological swamp in which Islamic extremism flourishes. If the Islamists have no real support, if they do not address real issues faced by Arab societies, then they will wither away.

Cotto: What do you think the future of Israel holds insofar as Middle Eastern geopolitics are concerned?

Cook: That is crystal ball stuff. There are too many variables. What can be said with some certainty is that we are in a time of transition: at the moment, chiefly economic for the West and chiefly political for the Middle East. That means the global power systems we have known for decades are starting to break down. Where that will ultimately lead is very difficult to decipher.

*Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is [www.jonathan-cook.net](http://www.jonathan-cook.net).*

*Extracts from this interview with Joseph Cotto were published in several articles by the Washington Times Communities website.*

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