

The Zionist Idea Has Never Been More Terrifying than It Is Today

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On this seventy-first annual commemoration of Palestine's Jewish-state Nakba, let's resolve not to continue to oversimplify things.

Whether you believe the American rabbi and historian Arthur Hertzberg's assessment of the Zionist idea as "unprecedented ... an essential dialogue between the Jew and the nations of the earth", rather than a matter between Jews and God, or you believe the assessment of Ass'ad Razzouk, researcher and contributor to the PLO Research Center's 1970 Arabic translation of Hertzberg's book, that Zionism, at its heart, emerged naturally from Jewish religious sources and is thoroughly influenced and motivated by traditional Jewish religious ideas, both conscious and unconscious, the fact remains that there exists a complex picture of the relationship between Judaism and Zionism.

To Palestinians, the intersection between Judaism and Zionism has always been considered the most dangerous aspect of Israel's existence as a Jewish state in Palestine today.

The focus today among the international activist community advocating for Palestine is on Zionism's modern European political and ideological roots, a focus that represents Zionism as no different from any other form of European colonialism, as a settler-colonial movement foreign to the Middle East.

This "narrative", if you will, has made great inroads in concentrating international attention, especially through the human rights formulations of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. But I believe, by itself, such a theoretical framework for the Palestinian decades-long struggle for justice and liberation is insufficient to effect change, not only because of the ongoing complicity of Western powers in the Nakba, but also because, by itself, this narrative cannot sufficiently move the hearts and minds of Israelis and Jews worldwide.

Only a resurgence of the progressive and developed principles of Reform Judaism, as expressed in a series of rabbinical conferences in German lands in the 1840s and in the U.S. in the second half of the 19th century, will have the necessary ideological power to defeat Zionism.

Upon the partitioning of Palestine and the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state, Herzl's expectation that rabbis would devote their energies in the service of Zionism came to fruition; Zionism has long gained the great masses of religious Jews around the world and "redirected their love of Zion from its spiritual and longing sense and its traditional

supplicatory character” to political Zionism, as Ass’ad Razzouk expressed it in his book *al-Dawla wa-l-Din* (Religion and the State).

The Reform Judaism movement, a modern historical development of Judaism, arose early in the 19th century, in reaction to changing conditions in Europe that overthrew oppressive medieval laws against Jews. The movement, among whose requirements was the repudiation or disavowal of Jewish nationalist aspirations, aimed to accommodate the beliefs and religious practices of Judaism to the new liberal and enlightened age in Europe and in the U.S.

Reform Judaism addresses both the Zionist idea of the historical inevitability of a Jewish state resulting from antisemitism and other external factors, as well as the messianic idea resulting from religion and religious texts—the book of Exodus and the belief in the advent of the messiah. Reform Judaism disrupts the conception, so useful to Israel, that Zionism is heir to a long uninterrupted Jewish history. It also opens up the door for the universal application of the supposed values of modern (i.e., political) Zionism—namely, individual liberty, national freedom, economic and social justice, i.e., the door for the Palestinian people that Zionism slammed shut against them in their own homeland.

Many Jews (as well as Evangelical Christians) understand Israel’s 1967 occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a wonderful, almost miraculous restoration of Jewish sovereignty over ancient religious sites. To Reform Jews worldwide who had been shaken out of their optimistic, universalist stance after the Holocaust, the war of 1967 also brought Israel close to home to Canadian, American (and other) Jews around the world, through “ethnic pride”. The Naksa, as Palestinians call the war, fed the “Jewish identity” side of Reform Judaism, destabilizing the balance this reform movement was trying to uphold, at its inception, in the “interplay between universalism and particularism”, an interplay that, to Palestinians, means having one’s cake and eating it too.

Reform Judaism has now reached its 200th anniversary. Can the Reform movement, not Zionism, finally satisfy Jewish religious and identity needs in a way that swings the interplay between the universal and particular in Palestinians’ favor? In ‘History of Reform Judaism and a Look Ahead: In Search of Belonging’, Rabbi Lawrence A. Englander (Canadian) writes:

Two hundred years ago, one’s personal identity was essentially defined through one or two primary groups to which one belonged—usually country and religion. Today, identity is more fractionalized and complex, determined by such factors as country, language, gender, profession, socioeconomic status—and religion. Each of these components make up our identity like pieces of a pie.

The PLO charter declares Judaism as a religion and not “nationalism”, and describes Jews as “citizens of the states to which they belong ... not a single people with a separate identity.” These definitions of Judaism and Jews play an important role in the rhetorical battle against Zionism. In the 1964 and 1968 PLO National Charters, the words Muslim or Islam don’t appear.

Palestinian nationalism is universalist in nature, encompassing both Muslims and Christians—as well as indigenized Jews pre-1948. And even though the multiplicity of religions within a single national movement does not abolish concerns or religious

communal interests from the national agenda, such concerns can be addressed rationally within the context of one secular and democratic state. The Palestinian will for national liberation is not disconnected from religious impulses. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are explicitly religious and function as a response to the judaization of Jerusalem, in particular.

The Palestinian understanding of Zionism as a movement at the heart of which lies religious, messianic interests and myths (as documented and argued prolifically by the PLO Research Center in Beirut) has long been silenced or attacked in scholarly debate and blurred by contemporary politics as going against the secularist claims of Zionist leaders, but it provides us with an important insight. Ignoring it or refusing to engage in it dismisses a vital context of the Palestinian struggle and forms an insurmountable obstacle to the formation of a secular democratic state in all of Palestine, the only remaining viable solution to Israel's aggression on the Palestinian people.

Christians who now embrace Zionism (some as a result of funds and gifts received from Zionists) abdicate true Christian values, as do Jews who call for Jewish nationalism on a secular (political) or religious basis and embrace a mythical "birthright" in Palestine.

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