

## **ZIONISM, THE JEWISH STATE, AND THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT**

A position statement by Palestine Solidarity Committee - Seattle

**Israel's escalating demand to be recognized formally as a "Jewish state" necessitates examination of the role that Zionism and the quest for a Jewish state have played in the conflict.**

### **ZIONISM: BEGINNINGS**

By the 1800s, Jews in Europe had been subject to centuries of persecution: pogroms, apartheid and ethnic cleansing all over Europe. Even before the mass killings of Jews in Russia and the murder of six million Jews in World War II, the pattern was apparent. In the 1800s, some Jews in Central Europe concluded that one reason Jews were so consistently persecuted was because they were always a landless minority in someone else's country, with no power to prevent them from being scapegoated when things went badly in that host country. The world was being divided up into nation-states, mostly by European powers, and those European Jews developed the idea that the only way for them to escape this consistent regular persecution was to have a nation-state of their own, with their own army, their own flag, and their own power. This was the Zionist movement.

**Zionism began as a national liberation movement for European Jews**, which is why it still has a hold on some hearts and imaginations.

Zionists considered several possible places for a nation-state, including Uganda and Argentina, but quickly settled on what was then called Palestine. As far as many people knew, Palestine was a desert country only crossed by caravans on their way to somewhere else. So Zionists developed their famous slogan: for them, Palestine was "a land without a people for a people without a land".

However, Palestine was not mainly desert country, and by the 1800s there were hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Muslims, Palestinian Christians, and a small minority of what were then called Palestinian Jews. Most of those people, including most of the Palestinian Jews, didn't approve of this Zionist plan because it looked like another European colonial movement. As Zionists in Europe became more aware that their chosen land was already populated, they were faced with the founding dilemma of Zionism: how can a Jewish majority democracy be established where Jews are only a small minority? As a result, **the language of Zionism became the language of displacement**, of finding the ways to get rid of the indigenous majority population.

*"We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border... both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly."* -- Theodore Herzl, 1895

## **ZIONISM, LIBERATION, COLONIALISM AND RACISM**

In many ways, Zionism was a progressive, socialist, even utopian liberation movement. At the same time, **Zionists from the start allied themselves not with forces of liberation but with the colonial European powers.** Zionists didn't call for a free Poland or for equal rights for Jews in Europe; nor for the most part did they call for a free Palestine with Jews allowed to live there. There was already a Palestinian national liberation movement, struggling for independence from the Turkish Ottoman Empire, but Zionists did not ally themselves with that liberation movement. Instead, they approached the colonial powers of the time -- Turkey, then Britain and France -- and suggested that European Jews would become the new occupying power in Palestine and would represent European interests in the region. The founding document of Zionism, *Der Judenstaat/The Jewish State* by Theodore Herzl, stated that a Jewish state would be "*a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism*". From the start, Zionism was not simply an immigration movement, but rather a plan to escape powerlessness in Europe by establishing power over a non-European place and people.

**Zionism furthermore shared the European tendency to ignore and dehumanize non-Europeans,** to ignore the needs or even existence of indigenous non-European populations. Calling Palestine a land without a people was only the most overt demonstration of that racism and colonialism. Zionists have used many of the same rationales that were applied by European colonialists to Native Americans and other indigenous peoples: *there weren't enough of them to matter, they weren't using the land properly, there were more of us, we needed it, they were savages, they were unworthy, we made their lives better, we brought them civilization, we had a manifest destiny, it was God's will, it was history's will, we were stronger and we took it and therefore it was inevitable,* and -- most importantly -- *the fact that they resist us proves that they're unworthy savages, driven by hatred or religion or just savagery.* There had been a thousand years of anti-Arab racism to draw on in Europe and Zionism continued to maintain that image of savage Arabs who were uncivilized because they resisted a European incursion.

## **THE ARITHMETIC OF ZIONISM**

The simple arithmetic was that **Jews were a small minority in Palestine, and no Jewish**

**majority state would have been possible without what was then called “transfer”,** which we would now call “ethnic cleansing”. The indigenous majority could not be accepted as equals. As a result, the ongoing contradiction of Zionism has been the attempt to maintain its moral and progressive self-image while relying for its existence on the driving out, imprisoning or disappearing of the existing indigenous majority.

From this point of view, the appropriate question is not why Palestinians resist, but rather: why should Palestinians have agreed to their own displacement? Zionists were openly declaring their plan to found a Jewish state that would by definition privilege Jews and discriminate against everyone else. **European Jews, no matter how persecuted, had no moral or legal right to displace Palestinians, nor did Palestinians have any moral or legal reason to accept their own displacement.**

In any case, Palestinians were never asked. Zionists and European powers were united in ignoring the wishes of indigenous peoples. Palestinians therefore resisted; violence escalated; and from the start, neither side refrained from attacking civilians. The myth of Zionist purity of arms has no basis in fact. Zionists early on threw bombs into Arab marketplaces and committed other acts of terrorism.

The 1947 UN partition plan proposed in General Assembly Resolution 181 was thus not the offer of a country to Palestinians, but rather an offer by a Euro-American-dominated organization to give a majority of the Palestinian homeland to a minority Jewish population -- at a time when European Jewish refugees were being turned away from Britain and the US.

The ethnic cleansing of 1947-49, when over 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed and more than 800,000 Palestinians were driven out of historic Palestine, was therefore the partial fulfillment of what had been the open goal of Zionism from the start. **Israel’s refusal to let Palestinian refugees return, plus the continued conquest of Palestinian land, destruction of Palestinian infrastructure and livelihood, expansion of Israeli settlements, and entrenchment of Israeli control over more and more of Palestine and Palestinian lives are all part of the ongoing ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, without which there would be no Jewish state.**

### **THE DEMAND FOR A JEWISH STATE**

**The recently re-asserted demand that Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state can therefore be understood as part of this pattern.** Israel is a nation with Jewish and Palestinian citizens, though Palestinians and other non-Jews do not have full equality and are subject to a wide variety of systematic discriminations. To declare Israel a state of all

its citizens would be a step toward equal rights. To declare Israel a Jewish state, on the other hand, is to define the nation not by citizenship or nationality but by ethnic group and even religion. **A Jewish state is -- by definition -- a place where Jews have special status that others do not: an ethnic supremacist state.** Such a state does not merely encourage apartheid, but *is* apartheid, by definition, and Palestinians have no moral or legal reason to accept that.

Furthermore, Palestinians -- counting those inside Israel, those under Israeli occupation, and just a small fraction of those refugees waiting to return -- are still the majority population in what was historic Palestine. Israel's attempt to establish a Jewish majority on all or most of historic Palestine can only be created and maintained by continued ethnic cleansing combined with the imprisonment of Palestinians on smaller and smaller reservations.

### **ZIONISM AS THE ROOT OF CONFLICT**

**The racism and colonialism of the Zionist movement, with its quest for an ethnic supremacist state, remain the fundamental causes of the current conflict. As long as the needs and aspirations of one people are valued above those of other peoples -- as long as one people is allowed to impose apartheid, imprisonment and ethnic cleansing on another -- there will be no equal rights and therefore no end to the conflict.**