

The Marriage Between Zionism and Imperialism

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Global Research, February 05, 2024

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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The genocide the Israeli army is perpetrating today in Gaza is not a slip-up but the logical offshoot of an imperialist and colonial project established at the end of the 19th century: Zionism. To properly understand what is happening today, it is necessary to understand the origins and stakes of this ideology and movement.

The Jewish Question

Since time immemorial, Jewish people have lived scattered throughout the world. Even centuries before the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman Empire (A.D. 70), 3.5 million Jews lived in diaspora while only half a million resided in Palestine.

The situation of the various Jewish communities in the diaspora was very diverse. Some were prosperous and free. In those regions, Jewish notables even held positions of authority. In others, Jews lived at the bottom of society, were oppressed and were easily the target of antisemitism.

At the end of the 19th century, capitalism was in a serious crisis. Large sections of the population were impoverished. To promote national unity and divert attention from the crisis, the establishment needed a scapegoat, and at that time it was the Jews. There were outbreaks of antisemitism in both Eastern and Western Europe. Tsarist Russia was rocked by brutal [anti-Jewish] pogroms in 1881, and in France there was the Dreyfus affair at the end of the 19th century.

Two answers were formulated during that period regarding this antisemitic wave. For progressive Jews like Karl Marx and Moses Mendelssohn, the battle had to be waged on the

ground against everything that was reactionary. Others, such as Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, chose to flee. According to them, the problems of Jews could only be solved in a Jewish state of their own. That was right away the core of Zionism.

Poor Support Within the Jewish Population

Various locations were initially considered for such a Jewish state, including Uganda, Kenya, Argentina and Palestine. Ultimately the choice fell on Palestine. That country had the advantage that the myths of the Torah could be used to mobilize Jews worldwide. Moreover — as we will see further — this plan had the full support of British imperialism.

Zionism was created by a handful of Jewish intellectuals. It had very little support in its early stages. Fierce opposition to this new ideology came from various Jewish circles. The Reform movement, the Orthodox Jews and the socialist movement which opposed the idea of a Jewish state.

In the 19th century, the Jewish bourgeoisie was for the most part well-integrated into bourgeois society and the capitalist economy. Therefore, they were focused on assimilation rather than segregation. They found the idea of a Jewish state of their own nonsensical; it was not at all in line with their interests. Under the influence of the Communist International, the Jewish workers had little enthusiasm for Zionism.

It was mainly among the petty bourgeoisie and more specifically among intellectuals that Zionism emerged and found a following. The crisis of capitalism hit the middle class hard and within this system there was little perspective for solving their problems.

In summary, in the early years, Zionism was mainly supported by petty-bourgeois intellectuals and represented only a small minority movement within Judaism. Before WWI, the Zionist movement failed to become a major player within Judaism.

The migration to Palestine advocated by the Zionists was equally small. Between 1881 and 1925, nearly four million Jews emigrated from Europe. But only 1% of them sought refuge in Palestine at the time.

Imperialist and Nazi Support

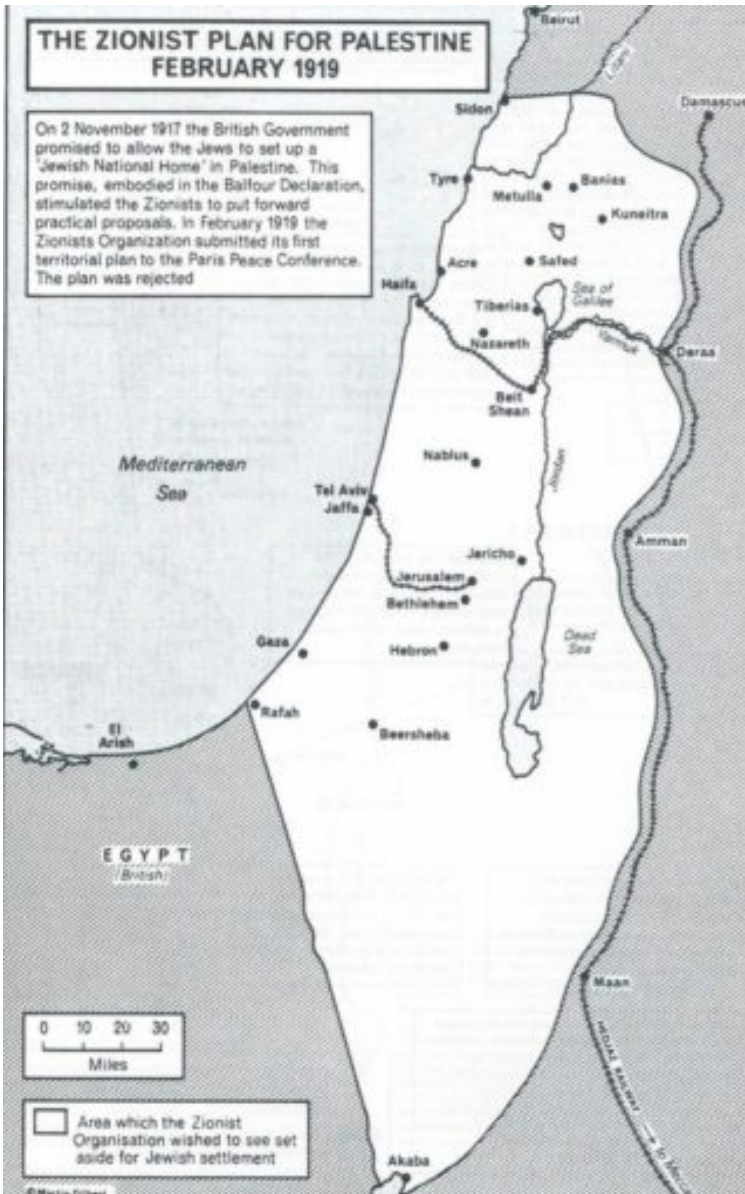
If Zionists received little support from Jewish quarters, they could count on Britain. At the end of the 19th century, imperialism was in full swing and a Jewish state in Palestine suited the British imperialists. There are several reasons for this.

The British wanted control over the Near East. A Jewish state in that region, under British influence, could be very useful in this regard. Palestine is strategically very important because of its proximity to the Suez Canal (opened since 1869), which provides access to the shortest route to Asia. From 1935 onwards, oil played an equally important factor: The oil supply from Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea also passed through Palestine.

At the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was running on its last legs, and in this vacuum there was a real possibility of forming a large and strong Arab state. At the beginning of the 19th century, Egypt's [Ottoman Pasha] Muhammad Ali already attempted to build a strong Arab empire that, in addition to Egypt, also included Syria and parts of Sudan. With the creation of a Jewish state, the British wanted to prevent this.

Finally, with the creation of a Jewish state, the British wanted to prevent France, a major imperialist rival, from seizing this strategic region. Under Napoleon (Bonaparte), France had previously attempted to annex Egypt and Syria.

In 1838, the British opened their first consulate in Jerusalem. The mission included informally encouraging Jews to come to Palestine, promising to protect them. Nearly 60 years before the Jewish Zionists held their congresses, the British not only liked the idea of settling Jewish people here, but had already begun to implement it.



Balfour Declaration expressed British imperialism's plan to divide and conquer in the Palestine region by promoting Zionism.

In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour wrote to Lionel Walter Rothschild, a member of a prominent Jewish Rothschild banking family in Great Britain. [It was] a letter to the Zionist movement, which would go down in history as the Balfour Declaration. In it he stated that the British government was positive about the establishment of a "National Home for the Jewish People in Palestine" and that it will do its utmost to facilitate this project.

The aspirations of the petty-bourgeois Zionists coincided with the geopolitical interests of British imperialism. To a large extent, Zionism is a product of British big business. In any case, without Britain the Zionist project could never have developed or achieved its goals in Palestine.

But it was not just from British imperialism that the Zionists were looking for support. For example, German Zionists concluded various cooperation agreements with the Nazis. Wealthy German Jews could emigrate to Palestine together with [some of] their capital. With that Jewish-German capital, the Zionists in Palestine were able to develop the economic infrastructure to receive Jews from Germany. In return, the German Zionists broke the boycott that most Jewish organizations in Europe and the U.S. had declared against trade in German goods.

In Palestine, the Jewish Agency set up a commission to investigate the problems of the Jews in Germany. David Ben-Gurion, [who became] Israel's first prime minister, wrote about this at the time: "It is not the task of the committee to advocate for the rights of the Jews in Germany. The committee should only be interested in the problem of German Jews insofar as they can emigrate to Palestine."

It was thanks to those agreements that German Jews "constituted the super-top class in Israel" at that time.

After WWII, the role of patron and facilitator would mainly be taken up by the United States with Europe as a junior partner.

Colonial Project

The Jews may have been people without a country, but Palestine was certainly not a country without people. At the end of the 19th century, almost half a million Palestinians lived between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. To turn the area into a "Jewish" state, it was necessary to remove the Indigenous population.

In other words, the project advocated settler colonialism, similar to what Europeans had previously done in South and North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

All projects of settler colonialism are driven by the so-called "logic of elimination," which is the logic of making the native population disappear as much as possible. The history of the above shows that this logic inevitably leads to dehumanization, disenfranchisement, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

From the beginning, the Zionists' objectives were clear, although they did not openly state them at first. In 1895, Theodor Herzl wrote 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. (...) Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly."

And it was not just words. The Zionists bought up as many pieces of land as possible, built their own parallel state structure and set up militias.

Gradually, the Zionist leadership showed less diffidence and came out openly in favor of an

exclusive Jewish state. In 1940, Josef Weitz, head of the Colonization Department of the World Zionist Organization no longer beat about the bush: "It must be clear that there is no room in the country for both [Arab and Jewish] peoples. (...) If the [Palestinian] Arabs leave it, the country will become wide and spacious for us. (...) There is no room here for compromises.

"There is no way but to transfer the [Palestinian] Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, to transfer all of them, save perhaps for [the Palestinian Arabs of] Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the old Jerusalem. Not one village must be left, not one [Bedouin] tribe."

The charter of the Likud, Netanyahu's party, also leaves little to the imagination. It states: "The right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is eternal and indisputable" and "between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty."

We are dealing here with unadulterated settler colonialism, which incidentally fitted in perfectly with the spirit of the epoch, which was characterized by the colonization drive of European countries. At the end of the 19th century, almost all uncolonized areas in Asia and Africa were overrun and colonized.

For example, in 1870 only 10% of Africa was owned by European powers; this rose to 90% in the period before the First World War. At the Berlin Conference (1885), Africa was simply divided among the European colonizers.

Zionism fits into that picture and can, in other words, be regarded as the last European colonial project.

Two-state Solution?

The aggressive colonial character immediately became clear with the proclamation and formation of the Jewish state in 1948. This was accompanied by the Nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic): a mass slaughter of the Palestinian population, the destruction of 500 villages and the deportation of approximately half of the Palestinian population. A United Nations resolution provided for the return of all expelled Palestinians, but this was never complied with.

From then on it was a matter of striving for the smallest possible number of Palestinians in the largest possible annexed area. The 1967 Six-Day War quadrupled Israel's territory. It occupied the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula (returned to Egypt in 1979), the West Bank (including eastern Jerusalem) and the Golan Heights (taken from Syria).

The Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 were a further consolidation of the colonial project. These agreements were intended to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They provided for so-called Palestinian self-government and would pave the way for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

But that self-government was a joke. In fact, this "two-state solution" was nothing more than a diversionary tactic that allowed Israel to continue dispossessing Palestinians. Peace was just a pretext for Israel to buy time and continue building Jewish settlements.

And that happened. Half a million settlers now live in the occupied West Bank and that number is constantly increasing. The lives of the Palestinians are made as difficult as possible: they are humiliated, harassed and robbed. Thousands of them, including children,

have been kidnapped and spend years in prisons in Israel.

But that is nothing compared to the Gaza Strip. There, [2.2 million] residents have been subjected to a complete blockade since 2007 and the strip was reduced to a concentration camp.

Today, only a tiny part of the original Palestine remains.

Completion or End of Zionist/Imperialist Project?

The surprise attack from Gaza and the subsequent siege of the Gaza Strip are a turning point in the Zionist project. A return to the previous state of affairs is impossible.

The Israeli army is indulging in primitive and barbaric violence based on the most modern technology, including artificial intelligence. Officially, the goal is to eliminate Hamas. But the severity and ruthlessness of the operation reveal that this is an excuse to make the area uninhabitable and to deport the population completely.

According to the anti-Zionist philosopher Moshé Machover, who is himself Jewish, living in Israel, that plan has been in existence for a long time. In 2014 he said: “[The Israeli regime is] actually waiting for a time when they can be permanently expelled to neighboring countries. That will only be possible during a full-scale war and I fear that Israel is prepared to provoke it.”

Several plans have already been leaked to deport the entire population of Gaza abroad. Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter openly speaks of “a new ‘Nakba.’”

There is no doubt, the current war is fully in line with the old Zionist dream of ruling over the region from “the sea to the Jordan.”

The imperialist backing of that dream was also made abundantly clear when, shortly after October 7, U.S. and European leaders rushed to Tel Aviv to support the Israeli government. The U.S. also immediately sent two warships, loads of ammunition and provided \$14.5 billion in aid.

Why Israel is so important to the U.S. is clearly stated by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the politically inconsistent nephew of President John F. Kennedy: “Israel is critical to the U.S. The reason it’s critical is because it’s a bulwark for us in the Middle East. It’s almost like having an aircraft carrier in the Middle East. It’s our oldest ally, for 75 years.”

But, for so much savagery, the Zionists pay a price. As Lebanese anthropologist Leila Ghanem puts it, Israel is gradually becoming “the most hated country in the world.”

Since the start of the war, millions of people worldwide have taken to the streets against the genocide in Gaza, trade unions have stopped arms deliveries, and Israeli officials and soldiers have been charged in international and national courts. The improved relations that Tel Aviv had with countries in the region are at risk.

For people of the Global South, the Zionist project is an anachronism of our times and has no future. The “Israeli exception” must end. The oppressed Palestinian people, subject to terror but resisting this “last colonial project,” have acquired great symbolic value [for people who confront imperialism].

As a result of what is happening in Gaza, [former U.S. President Barack] Obama warns of a new wave of antisemitism. It is the irony of history: Zionism, which wanted to be a solution to antisemitism, is now itself the cause of antisemitism.

Imperialism is also in bad shape. The de facto support for the horror in Gaza unmasks the rhetoric about human rights and democracy. The contrast with which the West dealt with Russia after the invasion of Ukraine versus its support for Israel today could not be greater.

The war against Gaza is accelerating the tilting North-South relations. The West is becoming increasingly isolated and has definitively lost its credibility among the countries of the global South.

I would like to end with the words of Leila Ghanem: “The battle for Gaza is the battle of all of us. ... The words of Miguel Urbano still resonate in my ears: ‘Where imperialism concentrates its military, political, economic and media forces, those who confront it do so in the name of all humanity.’ The fall of Gaza will be the fall of all of us in the face of capitalist barbarism. The merit of this solidarity is to have pointed the finger at our class enemy.” (workers.org)

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This article was originally published on [Workers World](#).

*Marc Vandepitte is a Belgian anti-imperialist, contributor to *Investig’action*, *rebellion*, *Solidaire* and other magazines. He contributed this article to the Jan. 21 Lenin Centennial meeting in New York City. Register [here](#) for the centennial.*

Featured image: Statue of the founder of Zionism Theodor Herzl, unveiled in 2012 at the Mikveh Israel synagogue in Tel Aviv. It is called “Herzl meets Emperor Wilhelm II”

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