

Historical Analysis: Zionism and Israel

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Zionism

The term Zionism is derived from the word Zion that in the Hebrew language and cultural-historical tradition of the Jews refers to the citadel (acropolis) of the city of Jerusalem as well as to the Kingdom of Heaven. From the matter of politics, Zionism refers to the political-national movement of the European Jews in the very late 19th century for the very purpose to re-create a Jewish homeland in the form of a nation-state in the Middle East – Israel.[i]

This Zionist movement was to a great extent expressed as a consequence of the European (mostly West European) anti-Semitic (better to say anti-Judaic) sentiments and politics that the (West) European Jews were experiencing for centuries.[ii] Zionism as a political-national movement was formally initiated by Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) at the World's Zionist Conference in Basle (Switzerland) or the First World's Zionist Congress held from August 29 to 31st, 1897 attended by 208 delegates and 26 representatives of the press.[iii]

Th. Herzl was born in Budapest. He was an assimilated Jew who became a journalist in Vienna and was the Paris correspondent of the newspaper *Neu Freie Presse* in 1891–1895. *The Dreyfus Affair* which started in December 1894 found his interest in anti-Semitism and how to solve the Jewish Question. He published the book in German *Der Judenstaat* in 1896 in which he claimed that the creation of the Jewish nation-state in Palestine can be the only effective response to centuries of European anti-Semitism. He devoted the rest of his life to the propagation and realization of this idea and for that purpose, he established the World's Zionist Organization (the WZO), which was convened at the First World's Zionist Congress in Switzerland in 1897.

From the end of the 19th century onward, (basically after 1897) there have been organized attempts to persuade the European Jews to emigrate to the Land of Israel or known as Palestine. However, it was not at first unquestioned that the Jewish nation-state had to be in

Palestine exactly. For example, Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952) who became the first Israeli President, was quite influential in the process of creating this political task. He became very much encouraged by the declaration of the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour (the Balfour Declaration) in the form of the letter sent on November 2nd, 1917 to Lord Rothschild as the UK favored the establishment of a Jewish nation-state exactly in Palestine/Israel. After WWI, the European Jews continued to emigrate to Palestine in rather small numbers and, therefore, the Jewish state of Israel might have been for a very long time away to be established if not happened the holocaust of the Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators from 1933 to 1945, which, in fact, morally gave the legitimization to the idea of Israel to Jews and non-Jews (the Palestinians) alike as the only solution where the Jews might feel safe from the persecutions and exterminations.[iv]

The 1917 Balfour Declaration

1917 Balfour Declaration



Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930)

Foreign Office,
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country"

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A. J. Balfour' with a flourish at the end.

The 1917 Balfour Declaration is the name given to the UK's pledge to support the creation of the Jewish nation-state in Palestine. It was contained in a letter of November 2nd, 1917 from Arthur James, 1st Earl Balfour and Viscount Traprain (1848–1930) to the chief British Zionist, Lord Rothschild. The declaration is considered to be one of the most significant and influential Zionist documents ever written. In fact, the letter-declaration urged that the Jewish nation-state had to be established in Palestine without any prejudice to the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish people, i.e. the Muslim Arabs or the Palestinians as known today. Nevertheless, this statement from the letter represented a crucial contradiction in the UK's policy for the very reason at the same time London had pledged to recognize the leaders of the Arab uprising as the rulers of Palestine which at that time was part of the Ottoman Sultanate.

The Balfour Declaration was, however, confirmed by the Allies, and became the foundation of the British Mandate for Palestine that was given by the League of Nations in 1920. The roots of the future political problems of the UK in the Middle East were subsequent attempts by London to reconcile the Balfour Declaration with promises to the Arab Palestinians. Lord Balfour was at the time of issuing declaration the UK's Foreign Secretary in Lloyd George's wartime cabinet. Later, he was a prominent British representative at the Paris Peace Conference after WWI and a participant in the 1921–1922 Washington Conference. As Lord President of the Council from 1925 to 1929, he was a very strong supporter of the concept of dominion status, and the Statute of Westminster of 1931 owed much to him.

Establishment of the Zionist Israel

The very idea of returning the Jews to Palestine, wherefrom they became dispersed throughout Europe and Asia since 70 A.D., had been alive in some form for many centuries of their almost 2.000 years of the diaspora (from 70 to 1948). The idea became seriously revived at the very end of the 19th century as modern Zionism, in response to a revived wave of pogroms in East Europe followed by anti-Semitism in West Europe, especially in France after the Dreyfus Affair[v] but in Germany and Austria-Hungary too. The founder of modern Zionism, Th. Herzl claimed that peaceful and harmonious coexistence between the Jews and non-Jews already was proven impossible and therefore, the Jews could only be free from discrimination, persecution, and pogroms in their national state – Israel in Palestine.

Zionism as the movement and political program achieved finally its fundamental task in May 1948 when Israel as the Jewish nation-state was established which recognized in its Law of Return the right of all Jews to live in Israel. From that time onward, Zionism is understood as a reference for support for the continued existence of the state of Israel.[vi]

Undoubtedly, Zionism was an ideological-political form of Jewish nationalism and was recognized as such by the OUN. However, like many different forms and expressions of nationalism across the globe, Zionism historically was tolerating very deep ideological diversity as, for instance, it is possible to be a religious or secular Zionist and to believe either in capitalism or socialism in Zionist Israel.[vii]

After the First World's Zionist Congress in 1897, many Jews began to emigrate to Palestine. At the same time, the WZO was working to convince the world's opinion and influential politicians of the very necessity of the creation of the Jewish state in Palestine. However, Palestine was already occupied when the Jewish emigration and settlement began but populated by Arab people, the Palestinians for centuries. They have been, for the most part, forced into exile by a form of settlement that became, in fact, a military conquest.

In essence, it is a very problematic question of the Zionist-Jewish legitimacy of a national claim to the land which dates back to a dispersion of the Jews in 70 A.D. under the Roman Empire. However, there are historians who have even claimed that the European Jews are not, or at least for the most part of them, descended from the Jews of Palestine, who btw have not been the original inhabitants of the land. They claim that most European Jews were originating from Caucasus tribes who converted to Judaism under the Late Roman Empire.[viii]

In 1917 the WZO urged the Government of the UK to set up a Jewish Legion which helped rid Palestine of the Ottoman administration. The Jewish Legion was, in fact, a number of military

units formed in 1917 to assist the British to expel the Ottoman authorities from the “Promised Land”.

One battalion was recruited in the UK, another in the USA, and others in Egypt and Palestine, joining Allenby in his advance into the Ottoman Sultanate.[ix] After WWI, many of the members of the Jewish Legion, like Ben-Gurion and Eshkol, proceeded to form the Haganah (Defense) – A Jewish defense force in Palestine established in 1920 as a secret organization for the very purpose to defend Jewish settlements from the Arabs. Nevertheless, the Haganah was very soon accepted and used by the British authorities in Palestine as an auxiliary police force which was under the control of the General Federation of Jewish Labor (Histadrut). During the Arab-Jewish clashes in 1936–1939, it acquired a General Staff and developed close cooperation with the Jewish Agency.[x] In WWII, the Haganah contributed to the British 8th Army, but, however, was as well as involved in organizing illegal Jewish immigration from Europe. The organization condemned the terrorist activities against the Brits and Arabs by Stern Gang and Irgun, and when the Brits have been preparing to leave Palestine in 1947, the Haganah took on the defense of Jewish Palestine against the Arab troops committing at the same time and war crimes but, in essence, it formed the foundations of the army of the new state of Israel.[xi]

When the Balfour Declaration to establish an independent Jewish state of Israel failed after WWI, the Zionist WZO was working further on the Jewish emigration into Palestine and succeeded to win from the local British authorities extremely important concessions related to the self-administration via the Jewish Agency. In the beginning, the newly arrived Jewish settlers lived peacefully with the genuine Arab population but soon, as the Jewish influx continued, the Arabs started with sporadic attacks against the Jewish immigrants. Tensions between the Arabs, the Jewish immigrants, and the British administration in Palestine arose in the 1940s when around 100.000 new Jewish settlers illegally arrived in Palestine.

Finally, in 1947 it was clear that the UK cannot solve the Palestinian problem in the form of its promise to create independent states for both Jews and Arabs and, therefore, returned its mandate to the UN, which recommended the partition of Palestine between the Jews and genuine Arabs. Formally, on the foundation of such a UN plan, a Zionist Ben-Gurion[xii] issued a declaration of Israel’s independence on May 14th, 1948 (the Nakba Day for the Arabs) on the day of British withdrawal.

The greater portion of Palestine became the Jewish state of Zionist Israel, most of the rest was amalgamated with Transjordan to become Jordan, and the Gaza Strip was occupied by Egypt.

During and after the fighting in 1948, around 70% of the Arab Palestinians left their homes and became refugees in Jordan, Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon.[xiii] Nevertheless, today, the overwhelming number of Israeli Jews are descendants of the Jewish immigrants to Palestine after the First Zionist Congress in 1897 differently to all Arab-Palestinians who are native of Palestine.[xiv]

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Notes

[i] See more in [Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, New York: Perseus Books, 2017].

[ii] About European anti-Semitism, see in [Albert S. Lindemann, Richard S. Levy (eds.), *Antisemitism: A History*, Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2010].

[iii] About Theodor Herzl's visions about Israel, see in [Shlomo Avineri, *Herzl's Vision: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State*, New York: Blue Bridge, 2013; Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*, Whithorn, UK: Anodos Books, 2018].

[iv] Holocaust as the term originally denotes a victim who has been burnt completely. After 1945, the term is used to describe the Nazi genocide of the Jews in concentration and death camps (the most notorious was Auschwitz) during WWII [Jan Palmowski, *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History From 1900 To the Present Day*, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 277]. For example, today, September 23rd, is a National Memorial Day for the Genocide of the Lithuanian Jews (in 1943). During WWII, the Jewish Ghetto was formed in Vilnius' Old Town (Jerusalem of the North) on September 6th, 1941. It is estimated that approximately 50.000 Vilnius' Jews found themselves in the ghetto out of the pre-war 60.000 Jews. The ghetto was divided into the Small and the Large Jewish Ghettos. The Small Ghetto was liquidated in October 1941 while the Larger Ghetto on September 23rd and 24th, 1943 [Karolina Mickevičiūtė, *Vilnius: A Guide Through The City*, Vilnius: Briedis, 2016, 94]. As a matter of fact, a herald of the future Jewish state and founder of the Zionist political movement and the World Zionist Organization, Theodor Herzl visited Vilnius in 1903 where he met the local Jewish society at the venue of the Great Charity, the General Prayer Board of the Great Synagogue [Irina Guzenberg, *Vilnius, Sites of Jewish Memory: A Concise Guide*, Second Edition, Vilnius: Pavilniai Publishers, 2019, 29]. Almost all Vilnius' Jews from the ghetto have been executed in the High Ponary Forest nearby Vilnius. See more in [Piotr Niwiński, *Ponary: The Place of "Human Slaughter"*, Warszawa: Legra, 2015]. About the Vilnius' Ghetto, see in [Arūnas Bubnys, *Vilnius Ghetto 1941–1943*, Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2018].

[v] The Dreyfus Affair was a crisis that shook French politics and society to their foundations in 1894–1899. The affair started in December 1894 when Captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935), a Jewish officer from Alsace on the General Staff of the French Army, was officially convicted of treason by a military court for passing on military secrets to the Germans. Nevertheless, the Dreyfus Affair revealed the deep anti-Semitism in French society. About the case, see in [Ruth Harris, *Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France*, London: Penguin Books, 2011].

[vi] About the connection between Zionism and Israel, see in [Yotav Eliach, *Judaism, Zionism and the Land of Israel: The 4,000 Year Religious, Ideological, and Historical Story of the Jewish Nation*, Published in the USA: Dialog Press, 2018].

[vii] See more in [Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism: From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel*, New York: Random House, 2003].

[viii] About the general history of Jews, their culture and religion, see in [Дејвид Ц. Голдберг, Џон Д.

Рејнер, *Јевреји: Историја и религија*, Београд: CLIО, 2003].

[ix] About the legion, see in [Martin Watts, *The Jewish Legion during the First World War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004].

[x] The Jewish Agency was an organization that was created by the UK for the sake to deal with its Mandate given by the League of Nations and to represent the Jews from Palestine. The agency was established in 1929 but, in fact, it was operating from 1920. Half of its membership was composed of the Palestinian Jews and another half of the Jews coming from outside Palestine, nominated by the Zionist WZO. It means that the Zionists had an extremely influential political role in Palestine immediately after WWI. The Jewish Agency was responsible for: 1) establishing kibbutzim settlements; 2) the Jewish immigration, investment, and economic and cultural development of the Jewish Palestine, and 3) representation of the Jews in the international sphere. In practice, the Jewish Agency provided its leaders like Ben-Gurion or Eshkol with administrative and diplomatic experience which they used when they took over the Government of Israel in 1948. After the proclamation of the independence of Israel in May 1948, the Jewish Agency lost its administrative and domestic political functions but continued to exist as an international body keeping links with the global Jewish community which would assist Israel in matters of finance or immigration, for instance. About the Jewish Agency, see in [Jewish Agency, *The Story of the Jewish Agency for Israel*, Jewish Agency American Section, 1964].

[xi] About this organization, see more in [Munya Mardor, *Haganah: A Firsthand Account of the Jewish Underground Army in Palestine*, New American Library, 1966].

[xii] David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) was Israeli PM in 1948–1953 and 1955–1963. He was born in Russian Poland and as a Zionist emigrated to Palestine in 1906. In 1935, Ben-Gurion became a Chairman of the Jewish Agency and, therefore, effectively became a leader of the Jewish community in Palestine. He organized the influx of Jewish large refugee movements, which, in fact, made a Jewish state of Zionist Israel to be more viable and more inevitable. He was part of the Israeli Government till 1963. Under his administration, Israel succeeded to survive (with crucial US' support) the initial threat to its existence, when it was attacked by its Arab neighbors. About Ben-Gurion, see in [Tom Segev, *A State at any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019].

[xiii] Geoffrey Barraclough (ed.), *The Times Atlas of World History*, Revised Edition, Maplewood, New Jersey: Hammond, 1986, 285.

[xiv] About the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, see in [Dov Waxman, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019].

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