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75 years since Israel's foundation: The Nakba and the struggle for Jewish-Arab unity

The 75th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel takes place on May 14. It was officially marked in Israel on April 25, according to the Hebrew calendar, following the annual Memorial Day commemorating those who fought and died in the war that established the state and in Israel's subsequent wars, as well as those on active duty in the service of the state.

The official anniversary was a muted occasion. It was held amid the largest eruption of mass protests by Jewish Israelis in the state's history against plans to curb the powers of the Supreme Court in a constitutional coup by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud coalition government of fascistic religious and settler parties. The scale of opposition to the most far-right government in Israel's history has led to repeated warnings of a descent into civil war, threatening the survival of the state. This has been accompanied by the deliberate stoking of war fever by Netanyahu, targeting the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, Israel's own Arab citizens and neighbouring states, above all Iran and Syria, that support some Palestinian militant factions opposing Israel.



Israelis opposed to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's judicial overhaul plan set up bonfires and block a highway during a protest moments after the Israeli leader fired his defense minister, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Sunday, March 26, 2023. [AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg]

Since Netanyahu and his far-right bloc took office last December, his government has set about consolidating its power at the expense of the judiciary to facilitate the suppression of social and political dissent. The government is seeking to pave the way for the permanent annexation of much of the occupied West Bank and bloody military interventions against not just the Palestinians but also Iran and its allies. Netanyahu's coalition also plans to disqualify Palestinian Knesset members from serving in the Israeli parliament and to ban their parties from standing in elections, permanently disenfranchising 20 percent of Israeli citizens.

This would consolidate the apartheid-style constitutional changes centred on Israel's 2018 Basic Law, the Nation-State Law, enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state. The law proclaims, "The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people." It declares support for the permanent annexation of the whole of Jerusalem "complete and united" as Israel's capital and endorses settlement construction as a "national value." This and the removal of Arabic as an official state language assigns a second-class status to Israel's own Arab citizens, as numerous human rights groups have testified.

The official opposition to these moves is led by a disparate group of bourgeois Zionist parties whose disagreements with Netanyahu reflect concerns that he is endangering the

interests of the state. They are implacably opposed to any linking of the emerging fascist threat in Israel with opposition to the oppression of the Palestinians and Arab Israelis. If a way of opposing the danger of dictatorship and war that would spread beyond Israel-Palestine is to be found, then this is the central issue that must be addressed.

Had Israel accepted the Gregorian calendar, the foundation anniversary would have taken place the day before Nakba Day, marking “the Catastrophe” suffered by the Palestinians and the displacement of most of the Palestinian people before and following Israel’s establishment. Only by examining the relationship between these two events can workers, Jewish and Arab, formulate a political response to the desperate and tragic situation into which Zionism has plunged them both.

The establishment of Israel

The crisis unfolding in Israel is the product of deep-rooted contradictions, political and ideological, within the Zionist state. It is fuelled by the growing divisions between the working class and the ruling elite in one of the most unequal countries in the world. Israel’s foundation was rooted in the catastrophe that overtook European Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the extermination of six million Jews in the Nazi Holocaust following the defeat of the European working class by fascism.



"Selection" of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz, 1944. Almost the entire Jewish community of Hungary, numbering 400,000 people, was gassed in Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

As was explained in a WSWS perspective by Bill Van Auken written in 1998 to mark the 50th anniversary of Israel's founding:

Within Israel's birth and evolution are concentrated the great unresolved contradictions of the 20th century. Its essential origins lie in one of history's greatest crimes against humanity, the Nazi Holocaust. The extermination of six million European Jews was, in turn, the terrible price paid for the crisis of the working-class movement brought on by the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International. Stalinism's crimes and its domination over the workers movement prevented the working class from putting an end to the crisis-ridden capitalist system, which found in fascism its last line of defense.

The defeats of the working class, the crimes of Stalinism and the horrors of the Holocaust created the historical conditions for Israel's creation and the Zionist movement's largely successful attempt, aided both by US imperialism and Stalinism, to equate Zionism with world Jewry. It was a movement and a state founded ultimately on discouragement and despair. Stalinism's betrayals produced disillusionment in the socialist alternative that had exercised such a powerful appeal to Jewish working people all over the world. The crimes of German fascism were presented as the ultimate proof that it was impossible to vanquish anti-Semitism in Europe or anywhere else. Zionism's answer was to get a state and an army and beat the historical oppressors of the Jewish people at their own game...

Their efforts were successful, as Europe's stateless and homeless surviving Jewish population was directed to Palestine for very definite geopolitical reasons. Washington, which had closed US borders to Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, saw the emergence of the Jewish state in the Middle East as an instrument for asserting its own hegemony in the region at the expense of the old colonial powers, Britain and France.

Israel's founding as a Jewish state was only made possible by involving a people who were seeking a safe-haven from persecution and brutality in a great crime—the forcible expulsion of almost a million Palestinians and the seizure of their land in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing.

The founding myths promoted by Zionism include the claims that Jews had returned to their biblical “promised land”, from which they had been expelled 2,000 years ago, and that the establishment of a Jewish capitalist state would provide “A land without people for a people without land”.

This latter claim was a transparent but politically necessary lie.

Following World War II, the newly formed United Nations, successor to the League of Nations that had awarded a 25-year “Mandate” to Britain in 1922 to control Palestine in preparation for independence, proposed the partition of Palestine—reduced in size after Britain’s creation of what is now Jordan—into two separate and non-contiguous Arab and Jewish statelets, with Jerusalem under international control. The reactionary proposal, which was never ratified, sparked the eruption of a civil war between Jews and Palestinians and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war involving Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and other Arab states. The latter followed proclamation of the State of Israel on May 14, following the expiry of the British Mandate. Israel was to take control of over one-third more territory than called for under the partition plan. The Palestinians were largely driven out.

When Israel was founded, Jews made up only one third of the population of Mandatory Palestine, with 1,157,000 Palestinian Muslims, 146,000 Christians, and 580,000 Jews. Two years later, only about 200,000 Palestinians remained in what became Israel. They were to remain under military rule until 1966.



Israeli soldiers in battle with the Arab village of Sassa in the upper Galilee. [Photo by National Library of Israel/digital ID. 990040390490205171/Gideon Markowiz / [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)]

Several thousand Palestinians were killed, while at least 700,000 were driven out or fled, becoming refugees in neighbouring countries where they found shelter in makeshift tent camps. There are at least 31 confirmed massacres. Accounts of atrocities include those at the village of al-Dawayima, where Israeli forces killed children by “smashing their skulls with sticks”, and Saliha, where soldiers executed between 60 and 80 inhabitants by driving them into a building and then blowing it up.

Those Palestinians who were driven out, along with their descendants, were banned from returning to Israel. Their homes and property were seized by the Israeli state. Israel has ever since refused to acknowledge the Nakba and its ethnic cleansing or to accept the Palestinians’ Right of Return, as enshrined in international law and UN Resolution 194 passed in 1948 during the Arab-Israel war.

In contrast, Israel’s 1950 Law of Return and the Citizenship Law of 1952 granted every Jew the right to immediate citizenship on arrival in Israel. In the three years following the war, about one million Jews emigrated, some from the ruins of Europe but mainly from the Middle East and North Africa.

An organically anti-democratic society

From its inception, therefore, Israel, built on the forcible suppression of the Palestinians and at war with its neighbours, was organically incapable of developing a genuinely democratic society. It emerged as a militarised state surrounded by hostile neighbours and based on upholding religious exclusivism. It rapidly developed nuclear capabilities, becoming the heavily funded garrison of US imperialism, with the army serving as the central pillar of society.

The greater Israel’s military and political “successes”, the more surely its rightward and anti-democratic trajectory was confirmed. Once viewed by many as a valiant underdog and home to a population that had suffered terrible historical wrongs, Israel was to become the preeminent military force and sole nuclear power in the region.



Israeli tanks advancing on the Golan Heights, June 1967 [Photo by Government Press Office (Israel) / [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)]

In 1967, with US backing, Israel invaded Egypt, Syria and Jordan, seizing the West Bank of the Jordan River, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip and creating a fresh round of refugees. This conflict gave rise to the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat and an unequal military struggle between Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel's political landscape was transformed, along with economic and social life.

The war and settlement construction heralded the shift to an expansionist "Greater Israel" policy, with a resurgent right wing demanding that the newly occupied territories be brought under Israeli sovereignty as the biblical lands of Samaria and Judea, promised by God to the Jewish people. This necessitated the continued ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians and Jewish colonial-style settlement.

The course was set for the constant eruption of wars, including the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, military aggression against Syria, Lebanon, and Iran and repeated assaults on the essentially defenceless and impoverished Palestinians in the occupied territories that created new waves of refugees and internally displaced people.

Israel's ultra-Orthodox political parties, especially in the context of periodic waves of Jewish immigration, became a powerful force, imposing Jewish religious law in areas previously deemed secular, and determining the formation of governments that became

ever more right-wing. Conflict between secular and orthodox Jews has become a feature of social life in every sphere.

This is what created the basis for the emergence of the fascist tendencies within the political and military establishment. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, “These are the forces that now dictate government policy and threaten not only the Palestinians but most Israelis with brutal repression.”

The decades since the 1970s also saw an extraordinary funnelling of social wealth upwards and the growth of desperate poverty. By 2010, around 20 Israeli families controlled about half the Israeli stock market and owned one in four Israeli firms. Ten business groups, mostly owned by wealthy families, controlled 30 percent of the market value of public companies. Israel boasts 71 US dollar billionaires, 6.7 for every million people, one of the highest per capita in the world, although not all are resident there.



A homeless man in Israel in 2006. [Photo by charcoal soul/Flickr / [CC BY-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/)]

At the opposite pole, Israel today ranks second only to the US as the most unequal among the Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. It has the third highest poverty rate in the OECD, behind Bulgaria and Costa Rica. Its poverty rate is almost double the OECD average. Poverty now impacts more than 27 percent of all Israelis and more than a third of all children, with over 10 percent (312,000 families) facing severe food insecurity. This prompted mass protests in 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring—a precursor to the political unrest that has now erupted against Netanyahu’s judicial reform.

The false promise of Oslo, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority

The constant feature of Israeli life has been the grotesque treatment of the Palestinians. No official move to end this conflict has changed political realities. The much-heralded 1993 Oslo Accords brought an end to the almost six-year Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation. But its terms, determined by Israel, set a trap for the Palestinians. It offered the mirage of a “two state solution”, which in fact consisted of a mini-bifurcated and non-contiguous Palestinian statelet alongside Israel. In return, Arafat and the PLO agreed to recognize Israel, guarantee its security and renounce the armed struggle for Palestinian liberation.



Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas, United States President George W. Bush, and Ariel Sharon, Red Sea Summit, Aqaba, June 2003

Ignoring the Nakba, the Right of Return, the position of Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian entity, and the future of the Zionist settlements, Oslo established the Palestinian Authority (PA). A nominal government in waiting, it had no control over its borders, with supposedly full jurisdiction over Gaza and just 18 percent of the West Bank (Area A), and joint jurisdiction with Israel over 22 percent (Area B). Fully 60 percent of the West Bank (Area C), home to most of the settlements, remains under Israeli military control.

Its central function was to police Palestinian opposition to Israel, with Prime Minister Yitzakh Rabin hailing the fact that the PA “will allow no appeals to the Supreme Court

and will prevent the Israeli Association of Civil Rights from criticising the conditions there by denying it access to the area.”

Even this caricature of a state was an anathema to Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu and their Likud Party. They cheered on the crowds baying for the blood of Rabin, just days before he was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli fanatic in November 1995. At Camp David in the summer of 2000, Labour Prime Minister Ehud Barak made clear that a proposed withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and Gaza would leave the Palestinians just 15 percent of original Palestine. Arafat refused to sign, and the “peace process” was at an end. This was exemplified by Sharon’s provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount compound and the eruption of a second intifada.



Yasser Arafat in 1997 [Photo by National Library of Israel/digital ID. 990040390490205171/Gideon Markowiz / [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)]

Thereafter, all the Zionist parties put forward policies aimed at countering the “demographic problem” and expanding control over West Bank.

Today, there are approximately equal numbers of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians living in Israel-Palestine, with the Palestinians soon set to become the majority. Moreover, if the State of Israel was measured by the reality of the population whose fate it determines, it would include not only the 9.3 million Israelis living within its internationally recognised pre-1967 borders, of whom 2 million are Palestinians, but also around 5.4 million Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian territories captured in the 1967 Arab Israeli war who live under Israeli military rule.

Thus, soon, demography and attrition will lead to a territorial area/state with a Muslim majority and a Jewish minority. Zionism's only answer to what it sees as an existential threat is war and ethnic cleansing. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in December 2002 declared that Palestinians must be driven out of the occupied territories to make way for Jewish settlements, while Netanyahu thundered, "We are going to cleanse the whole area..."

Sharon used the second intifada as the justification for building the Separation Wall between Israel and the West Bank with the backing of Labour. In the process, Israel permanently seized up to 18 kms of land inside the West Bank, including the major settlement blocs, taking 9 percent of the territory and isolating around 30,000 Palestinians on the Israeli side and 230,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem on the West Bank side. Israel's control over the western aquifer, courtesy of the Separation Wall, and 80 percent of the West Bank's groundwater has led to a chronic and artificial water crisis for millions of people and a drastic reduction in the amount of irrigated agricultural land, from 14 percent before 1967 to less than 2 percent today.

All this was deemed legal by Israel's vaunted Supreme Court.



Art depicting slain Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, West Bank separation wall in Bethlehem, 2022 [Photo by Dan Palraz / [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)]

Gaza was further isolated in 2005 under Sharon’s disengagement plan, aimed at securing US approval for settlement expansion and consolidation in the West Bank. When Hamas seized control of the enclave in 2007, Israel’s containment strategy turned into a full-scale economic blockade. In the process, the West Bank has been transformed into an impoverished ghetto and Gaza into a prison.

Neither Zionism nor Arab nationalism but socialist internationalism!

The most fundamental aspect of the conflict between Netanyahu’s governing coalition and the opposition bloc is their agreement on all fundamentals. It is not an abstract love of “democracy” but intransigent advocacy of Zionism and the social interests of the Israeli bourgeoisie that has set the protest leaders against the assault on the Supreme Court.

Unindicted war criminals such as opposition leader Benny Gantz and Netanyahu's rebellious Defence Minister Yoav Gallant fear that Netanyahu and his fascist backers, in pursuing an escalated agenda of ethnic cleansing, a religio-cultural offensive and legal manoeuvres to save Netanyahu from jail, are undermining the bogus "democratic" cover provided by the Supreme Court and the judiciary over decades of relentless attacks on the Palestinians.



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, left, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, second left, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, third left, former Prime minister and leader of the opposition Benjamin Netanyahu, fourth left, and other dignitaries attend a memorial ceremony in Jerusalem, Israel, Sunday, June 20, 2021. [AP Photo/Abir Sultan/Pool Photo via AP]

Destabilising Israeli society by handing the initiative to Jewish supremacist and religious reactionaries has undermined support for Israel the world over, including the Jewish community in the United States, the largest in the world, which rests in part on Washington and Europe's capitals portraying Israel as the Middle East's "sole democracy". It has gravely undermined efforts to portray opposition to Zionism as a form of "left anti-Semitism" that holds Israel up to standards not expected of similar "liberal democracies" and makes a false equivalence between Israel and South Africa under apartheid.

Above all, this threatens Washington's aggressive military policy in the region where Israel acts as its attack-dog in pursuit of its geostrategic interests.

Domestically, though the agenda of the protest movement is presently dictated by the Zionist bourgeoisie and draws social support from sections of the urban middle class, political upheaval risks an explosion of social struggles against the repression of democratic rights and the economic policies of austerity needed to pay for the occupation and war and to enrich Israel's oligarchs.

Zionism—promoting a state based upon religio-cultural identity and a supposed common national interest for all Jews—has long formed the basis for opposing not only the defence of Palestinian rights, but any assertion of the independent social and political interests of Jewish workers.



Histadrut headquarters in Tel Aviv [Photo by צילום:ד"ר אבישי טייכר / [CC BY 2.5](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/)]

The Histadrut trade union federation emerged as a state institution, controlling Israel's service sector, its largest conglomerates, national bank and health and medical institutions. Economic liberalisation and privatisation saw its membership collapse without global precedent, from around 1.8 million (then 85 percent of the workforce) in 1983 to less than 200,000 today. All but excluding Arab and migrant workers, its call for a general strike

during the mass protests was carried out in coordination with Netanyahu to combat the danger of strikes developing outside of bureaucratic control.

Labour Zionism, the founding ideology of the Israel state, has suffered a worse collapse than its trade union arm, as its socialist pretensions have been shipwrecked by the realities of a state and society based on capitalism and sectarian religious exclusivism.

The political and social turmoil wracking Israel on its 75th anniversary confirm that the conditions exist to fight for a revolutionary socialist alternative. But as long as the basic tenets of Zionism are not challenged, then the crisis of bourgeois rule will be resolved on the basis of a further lurch rightwards.

Most dangerous of all, the escalating political crisis is leading to an ever-sharper turn towards the military repression of the Palestinians and the stoking of war with Syria and Iran. With Israel occupying a central role in US imperialism's military drive to secure global hegemony, stretching from the de facto war with Russia in Ukraine to China, the threat of a war engulfing the entire Middle East grows ever nearer.

The Zionist utopia of a national state in which the Jews of the world could find sanctuary has led instead to a headlong descent into police state forms of rule, the emergence of fascism, the eruption of civil war and war with the Palestinians and Israel's Arab neighbours. The way forward lies in unifying the working class, Jewish and Palestinian, in a joint struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

Jewish workers faced with the far-right threat must make their watchword Marx's declaration that "A nation that enslaves another forges its own chains." And for Palestinians too, there must develop a profound understanding that there is no national capitalist road to liberation from oppression, as the entire post-colonial history of the Middle East and Africa, as well as that of the Palestinian Authority, has demonstrated.



Leon Trotsky at his desk in Prinkipo

A genuine revolutionary alternative must be based on the theory of permanent revolution. In the imperialist epoch, Trotsky explained that the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations, associated in an earlier period with the rise of the bourgeoisie, can only be achieved only through the independent political mobilisation of the working class, acting on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Transcending all national divisions, workers must fight for the United Socialist States of the Middle East, freed from the predatory interests of the imperialist powers and transnational corporations. Built on the essential principle of equality for all the region's peoples, this would guarantee a democratic and prosperous future for all, based on the use of the region's vast natural resources to meet essential social needs.

This requires the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel, Palestine and throughout the region to provide a socialist revolutionary leadership.

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