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## Zionism: the End of an Illusion

One of the oddest arguments made by self-declared friends of Israel is that anti-Zionism is a form of antisemitism. That assertion is comprehensible if the person making it believes that God Himself gave the Jews property rights from the river to the sea – but Theodore Herzl and the founders of modern Zionism embraced no such belief. On the contrary, that movement’s largely secularized leadership defined Zionism from the outset as a form of ethnic nationalism – a claim to the same “right of self-determination” as that asserted, say, by the Irish or the Serbs. The argument, therefore, is that it is antisemitic to deny the Jews (considered as an ethnic community, not a confessional group) the same alleged right enjoyed by the Irish and the Serbs. Forgetting for the moment that only a handful of world’s 3,000 or so ethnic peoples enjoy the right to control a nation-state, the question remains: what does Zionism have to do with Judaism?

The answer is to be found in history rather than in sacred texts. The rise of mass-based antisemitism in Europe culminating in the unimaginable catastrophe of the Holocaust convinced many Jews that the alternative to yielding to genocidaires was to fight them, and the best way to fight them was to command the resources of their own nation-state. Israel was conceived of not only as a means of deterring or escaping would-be Hitlers, but also of ensuring that Jews would “never again” go helplessly to their deaths or be forced to beg more secure nations to admit them. If the United States and other wealthy nations had welcomed Jewish refugees and survivors in the 1940s instead of slamming shut their doors, a good deal of the pressure to create a Jewish state might have been dissipated. The fact that they did not – not even in the shadow of the gas chambers – convinced many that they needed to play the nationalist game if they wished to ensure their survival.

This reasoning, however, generated another question . . . and created a dilemma. In the dog-eat-dog world of competing nation-states, nations do not survive and thrive unless they are either isolated and unthreatening or warlike and strong. Given the geopolitical importance of the oil-rich Middle East, the rapid growth of Palestinian and Arab nationalism, and America's imperial ambitions, it was clear even before 1948 that Israel would neither be isolated nor considered harmless. Violent conflicts between Jewish settlers and Palestinians had been endemic since the late 1920s, and not one Arab state accepted the UN's 1947 Partition Plan. Given the intensity of this opposition, how could a state offering Jewish residents and would-be immigrants preferential treatment become sufficiently warlike and strong to survive?

The answer was suggested by the formation of a Jewish Legion in World War I and a Jewish Brigade in World War II that fought in Palestine and Syria as units of the British army. When the U.S. replaced Britain as the region's dominant power, Israel became an American ally and its armed forces de facto extensions of U.S. military power. From 1948 onward no other client state received anything close to the military and civil aid donated by the leader of the "Free World" to Israel. Ironically – and tragically – the state created to establish Jewish independence and security was thus from the outset a neocolonial dependency and imperial outpost of the United States.

This was not a recipe either for internal peace or international security. Since 1945, targeted by rebellious subject peoples and competing great powers, the U.S. has fought five major wars and participated in scores of bloody proxy struggles. According to the Brown University Cost of War project, American wars since the al Qaeda attacks of 2001 have killed 4.5 million people, most of them civilians. In the same period, the State of Israel has fought six interstate wars and three wars in Gaza. It is customary in the West to attribute this persistent insecurity and violence to the malice and fanaticism of Israel's Palestinian subjects and Muslim neighbors – a partisan "explanation" that ignores the Jewish state's neocolonial origins, its expulsion and oppression of Palestinians, and its faithful service to American and European patrons. Whatever the sources of Israeli insecurity, however, the result over time has been to strengthen the position of "hard" vis a vis "soft" Zionists.

### **Zionism: "Hard" and "Soft"**

Since the late nineteenth century, when modern Zionism took form, the attempts to combine Judaism with ethnic nationalism have tended to generate three schools of thought. We can call these Hard Zionism, Soft Zionism, and anti-Zionism.

The Hard Zionist school is currently represented by the Netanyahu regime in Israel – a right-wing ruling coalition that includes the leading Jewish religious parties, parties representing

Israeli settlers in the West Bank, and advocates of annexation of all the Occupied Territories. The perspective that shapes their political views assumes the existence of serious, long-term, irreconcilable conflicts of interests and values between Jews and non-Jews. It also accepts the ineluctable persistence of a neo-Darwinian global environment in which only the most violent groups and nations survive. Since the time of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, founder of this school, the implication has been that Jewish survival requires the existence of a state controlled by Jews and capable of dominating both internal and external enemies militarily.

A radical sense of collective insecurity has always been the driving force of Hard Zionism. Jabotinsky considered the Jews a “race” threatened demographically by intermarriage and social assimilation as well as endangered physically by antisemites. The Odessan leader admired Mussolini’s fascistic militancy, dressed his own militia in brown shirts, and called for creation of an “Iron Wall” of armed force that would protect Israel from inevitable attacks by hostile Arab nationalists. He approved of terrorist violence against the British and the Palestinians, rejected the UN’s partition of Palestine into two states, and scoffed at the idea that Jews and Palestinians could coexist peacefully, unless the latter accepted Jewish supremacy in a single Jewish state. Netanyahu’s father was Jabotinsky’s secretary, and his coalition still follows his ethnic supremacist line.

“Soft” Zionism, on the other hand, reflecting its left-liberal origins, began by expressing a somewhat less intense sense of Jewish vulnerability and a somewhat more sanguine view of the possibility of peaceful coexistence with non-Jews. My own family history reflects this perspective. From their home in a New York suburb, my parents learned about the Holocaust from reliable witnesses, tried vainly to convince other Americans that the slaughter was occurring, then worked passionately to establish a Jewish homeland in Israel. Working with Israeli agents like Teddy Kollek, the future mayor of Jerusalem, my father helped to refit an old freighter renamed the Exodus to transport European survivors to Palestine. In 1948 he ran guns to the Jewish army, the Haganah. He and his comrades insisted that Israel’s real enemy was not the Palestinians or other Arabs, who had been misled by their leaders, but uncaring British colonialists and wealthy, power-hungry sheikhs.

Soft Zionists like my father welcomed the UN Partition Plan and believed that Jewish and Arab workers could live peacefully together under the auspices of a social-democratic regime. Their faith was that Israel could be both a Jewish state and a pluralist democracy and that the need for military dominance would prove temporary. When Palestinians and neighboring Arab nations made war against Israel in 1948, this faith was shaken, but not shattered. During that war, Israeli troops and militias displaced some 750,000 Palestinians

and destroyed more than 500 villages. Arguing (contrary to plentiful contrary evidence) that the refugees had left their lands voluntarily, the new state refused either to readmit them or to compensate them for their losses. Israel's Jewish majority was bolstered over the next two decades by substantial immigration from the Arab world and from Russia – an application of the “right of return” accorded exclusively to Jews. But after the “Six Day War” of 1967, the Israelis again found themselves in control of more than a million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. The question of how Israel could be both a Jewish state and a democracy was again thrown into question, along with the related question of the deep contradiction between militaristic nationalism and Jewish ethics.

The Soft Zionist answer that emerged over the next generation was to advocate a Palestinian state, one that would not threaten Jewish control of Israel either demographically or militarily. A state occupying the West Bank and Gaza Strip (and perhaps East Jerusalem) was always conceived of as a disarmed entity with limited powers that would be compelled as a condition of its existence to accept Israeli military and economic superiority. Not surprisingly, this idea was not popular in the Palestinian “street” or among groups seeking either to gain equality with Israeli Jews or to expel them from the region. Over the next three decades, a substantial majority of Soft Zionists such as Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres therefore alternated between the carrot of peace negotiations (the “two state solution”) and the stick of IDF-led warfare against resisters. Over time, the stick became far more prevalent than the carrot.

The high point of Soft Zionist achievement was the 1993 Oslo Accords in which the Palestinians led by Yasir Arafat and his Fatah organization agreed to recognize Israel and live in peace with its citizens, while the Israelis, led by Labor Zionists Rabin and Peres, agreed to recognize the Palestine National Authority and to permit it to rule the West Bank and Gaza by the year 2000. The Accords raised high hopes but failed to deal with a series of crucial issues, including continued Israeli settlement of the Occupied Territories, an asserted right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the status of East Jerusalem.

Furthermore, substantial sectors of both communities, increasingly influenced by politicized religious organizations and leaders, opposed the agreement and rejected further efforts to compromise. Between September 2000 and February 2005 some 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis died in an uprising that Palestinians called the Al-Aksah Intifadah. While organizations like Islamic Jihad and the Fatah Martyrs Brigade organized suicide bombings in Israel, militant Zionists multiplied settlements on the West Bank and vowed never to leave “Judea and Samaria.” One such ultranationalist, Baruch Goldstein, assassinated 29 Muslim

worshippers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in 1994, and another, Yigal Amir, assassinated Prime Minister Rabin a year later.

One year after that, Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister, marking the beginning of the end of Soft Zionist hegemony in Israel. He would rule again from 2009-2021 while the movement of settlers into the West Bank became a flood, and would end by forming the most extreme right-wing government in Israel's history. In practice, Zionists of both schools accepted Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" principle, which seemed to them the only way to secure the existence of a secure Israel with a permanent Jewish majority. Simultaneously, Palestinian groups were learning not to trust liberal Zionist professions of belief in a two-state solution or the bona fides of the Palestine Authority (PA), whose governance activities on the West Bank seemed little more than a fig leaf for expanded Israeli settlement and harsh security measures. Each side blamed the other for the failure of previous negotiations, and the trust that had once persuaded some members of elite groups to deal with each other nonviolently was dissipated.

Netanyahu's attempt to keep the Palestinian movement divided by supporting the PA's authority on the West Bank directly and Hamas' rule in Gaza indirectly backfired spectacularly on October 7, 2023. Even so, Israelis traumatized by Hamas' violence, including almost all the Soft Zionists, united behind his regime's determination to uproot and destroy that organization completely, even if this meant massive destruction of the civilian population. A wave of revulsion against Israel's indiscriminate violence in the U.S. and other nations endangered President Joe Biden's chances to be re-elected in November 2024 and led him to blame the Netanyahu regime for using "disproportionate" force and failing to recognize the need for some sort of postwar Palestinian state.

Although this prescription has a "Soft Zionist" ring, the new state Biden and Secretary of State Blinken have in mind seems virtually identical to that earlier proposed by the Trump administration and its chief Middle East spokesperson, Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. This would be an entity backed and financed by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, ruled by the PA or some equally conservative elite, disarmed, pacified, and committed to helping advance U.S. regional interests against the "Resistance Front" led by Iran and Hezbollah. The "two-state" solution thus becomes part of a "two-bloc" solution for the Middle East, with the Americans controlling the wealthier, more powerful bloc. What sort of state or regional arrangement the Palestinians of Gaza or the West Bank might themselves want was not – and is not – considered a relevant matter.

The repetitive pattern here seems unmistakable. United States rulers maintain their hegemony in the region by all means necessary, handsomely rewarding states and groups that cooperate and conducting covert or overt warfare against those that resist. When Hard Zionist policies do not provoke serious internal rebellions or interstate wars, the Americans are happy to support leaders like Netanyahu, who treat the Palestinians as “unpeople.” But when Hard policies produce uprisings or wars that destabilize the region, U.S. leaders, whether Republicans or Democrats, make a Soft Zionist U-turn.

This is exactly what the Clinton Administration did in 2000, when Bill Clinton attempted to hammer out a two-state agreement between Israel’s Ehud Barak and Palestine’s Arafat. Those who blame the Palestinians for the failure of this effort do not understand (or don’t want to) that what such deals actually offer is what Rashid Khalidi calls a “one state, multiple Bantustan” solution. The Jewish state defined and defended by Zionists of either school always retains absolute military, technological, and economic superiority over any projected Palestinian entity. The Palestinian statelet is therefore designed to function, in effect, as an administrative subdivision of Israel and an imperial outpost (allied with other satellites) of the United States. Little wonder that so many Palestinians opt instead for a “single state” solution that would compel the Israelis either to treat them as equals or publicly abandon their democratic pretenses.

The situation recalls a vastly more ancient conflict that I wrote about in a book called *Thus Saith the Lord: The Revolutionary Moral Vision of Isaiah and Jeremiah* (Harcourt, 2006). There I described the “soft” imperialism of Cyrus the Great, who liberated the nations made captive by Babylon, allowed Jewish exiles to return to Israel, and promised the world a new era of peace and justice under Persian rule. What a guy! The prophet Isaiah of Babylon was so impressed by Cyrus that he declared him to be God’s Messenger. Even before the Persian leader died, however, it was clear that his empire would have to be maintained by massive force. Cyrus’s successors were Darius and Xerxes, “hard” imperialists who “pushed the boundaries of the empire deeper into Asia and Europe but found themselves trapped in an increasingly brutal struggle to maintain control over their restive, far-flung subjects” (p. 160). As the Prophets recognized, the dream of a just and stable world at peace could never be realized by power-hungry empire-builders.

So it goes to this day. Hard and soft varieties of ethnonationalism are opposite sides of the same coin – or, if you like, different gears of the same engine. Their common purpose, like that of a “hard cop” and “soft cop” working over a suspect to obtain a confession, is to maintain a dominant elite’s supremacy and control. When one approach doesn’t produce the

desired result, the other is called into play; in either case, the unruly suspect is condemned for refusing to accept the inexorable demands of superior power.

Zionism as currently defined connotes Jewish supremacy in Israel, Israeli supremacy in Palestine, and American supremacy in the region. This compels those who advocate the equal dignity of nations and the global solidarity of peoples to move beyond both “hard” and “soft” Zionism in order to embrace a more humane – and more Prophetic – perspective. Call this viewpoint anti-Zionist, post-Zionist, or better yet, radical humanist; whatever the label, it calls us to move beyond the current system of endemic violence to create a world in which the massacre of ethnic enemies and oppression of subject peoples is *never* permitted – not even to save one’s own group from an alleged threat of extinction.

### **The day after the Gaza War – and beyond the Jewish State**

Left-liberal “labor Zionists” were still ruling Israel in 1958, when I made my first visit to that country with a group of fellow college students. Liberal or not, most Israelis talked proudly about the Sinai War, a military adventure in which the Israeli Defense Forces, abetted by British and French troops, invaded Egypt and seized the Suez Canal to prevent Egypt’s President Nasser from nationalizing that valuable piece of European-owned property. Meanwhile, the Labor Party leaders whom we met informed us that Israel’s great challenge was to remain culturally European and to avoid becoming a “Levantine state.” After a week of listening to this sort of propaganda, we went to Hebrew University to hear the philosopher Martin Buber denounce the Sinai War, criticize Israeli racism, and call for establishment of a “binational” state in which Jews and Palestinians would share power with each other and make peace with their neighbors.

The audience for this talk was very small – ten American students, their two supervisors, and a smattering of people from Hebrew University. Even so, the author of *I and Thou* told us he was glad to speak to any audience, since most Israelis considered his views utopian and disloyal. I vividly remember his aura of wise compassion (which I felt much later in the presence of the Buddhist sage, Thich Nhat Hanh), his impassioned defense of the Palestinian refugees’ right to return to their homeland, and his sadness at being ignored or disrespected by his fellow Jews. I had no clue then but discovered fifteen years later, in Congressional hearings on U.S. intelligence activities chaired by Senator Frank Church, that our leaders on this tour had been dispatched by the C.I.A. to report on the activities of “oppositionists” like Martin Buber.

Was Buber a Zionist? Certainly, when that term did not imply the existence of a state owned and operated by Jews in their own interests, but embraced the idea later summarized by

Edward Said as “one state for two peoples.” Buber’s inspiration was neither the hard nationalism of right-wing nationalists like Jabotinsky nor David Ben-Gurion’s slightly softer version, but the ideas of the “spiritual Zionist” known as Ahad Ha-Am (Asher Ginsberg), who insisted that Palestine was never an “empty land” and declared that it must be shared with existing Arab residents. Buber insisted that Palestine should become a state in which a Jewish community (NOT a “Jewish state”) could live in peace and security with its Palestinian neighbors under a constitution designed to recognize the integrity and equal rights of each community. Like Ahad Ha-Am, he believed that a nation-state devoted to defending Jewish supremacy against all competitors would inevitably deform Judaism and generate violent resistance.

Others both in Palestine and North America had reached similar conclusions, although for different reasons. Reform Jews organized by Rabbi Elmer Berger and his American Council for Judaism argued that Judaism was a religion, not a political or cultural community, and that Zionism obstructed Jewish assimilation into their own (true) national cultures. At the same time, Jews belonging to certain devoutly orthodox sects asserted that a Jewish state was a contradiction in terms, since a political body ruled by God’s law and pursuing justice and peace could not exist until the start of the Messianic age.

Martin Buber, on the other hand, was neither an assimilationist, a Messianist, nor a nationalist. In his view and that of a group of intellectuals including Hebrew University president Judah L. Magnes and Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, what was needed was a democratic state whose constitution would recognize the communal interests of Jews and Palestinians and their common interests as workers. By the time I met Buber, his organization, “Unity” (Ichud), had already been bypassed by the Zionist party and rejected by an increasingly nationalist Israeli public. Later, the binational idea was embraced by thinkers and activists ranging from Hannah Arendt and Edward Said to Tony Judt but was opposed both by Zionists and by Palestinian nationalists aiming to construct a single state in which their constituents would constitute a majority.

Even so, the conflicts of the past two decades, culminating in Israel’s catastrophic war on Gaza, have breathed new life into the idea. That war has delegitimized the Jewish state by revealing the genocidal implications of Zionism. But it also reminds us that militant ethno-nationalism on the part of any group determined to dominate all others leads in the direction of ethnic cleansing and genocide. For further discussions of issues relating to bi-nationalism, see the work of Georgetown University law professor [Lama Abu-Odeh](#) and that of Bashir



Bashir and Leila Farsakh of the Open University of Israel (*The Arab and Jewish Questions*, Legend Press, 2020).

Whether the future of Palestine involves the creation of two states or a single state, and whether the constitution of that state is binational or unitary, it seems clear that Israel as currently structured must be radically transformed. But the fate of this land, and, indeed, that of the entire region, has never been a matter to be decided by its inhabitants, either Jewish or Muslim. The imperial powers' control of the region, originally challenged by Arab revolts against the British and French, has been maintained and even strengthened by American/European wars and machinations. From the 1958 U.S. invasion of Lebanon to two wars against Iraq, intervention in the Syrian civil war, overthrow of the Libyan state, covert warfare against Iran, and all-out support for Israel in a dozen regional conflicts, the United States has not ceased to wield its military power to decide who rules and who serves in the Middle East. Equally influential are the bribes in the form of civil and military aid packages that keep obedient leaders in power and marginalize their opponents, and the diplomatic maneuvers that provide temporary settlements favorable to U.S. interests, such as the Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel.

As a result, to define the current struggle in the Holy Land as an "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and to speculate about possible forms of settlement on "the day after Hamas" grossly misconceives the real situation, which is that of imperial proxy warfare. The much-publicized differences of opinion between Israel's Netanyahu regime and America's Biden administration are purely tactical (and have not prevented Democratic as well as Republican leaders from inviting Netanyahu to address the U.S. Congress.) These leaders' strategic goals – the maintenance of U.S. hegemony and Israeli military superiority in the region – remain unchanged. But if the imperial system in the Middle East is a *source* of violent conflict, which seems undeniable, how can one talk seriously of a peaceful "day after" that leaves this system in place?

Understanding the connection between imperialism and war in the Middle East, the late Johan Galtung, one of the founders of peace studies, argued that peace in the region did not depend on a "two-state solution" but on a "six-state solution" — the establishment of an autonomous regional organization able to stand up to the U.S. and to make collective decisions in its members' interests. The guiding principle, in his view, was to connect any possible peace plan for Palestine and Israel to an effective diminution of American power to enable local parties to decide their own fates. A similar argument has been made more

recently by Kaye and Vakil in “Only the Middle East Can Fix the Middle East: The Path to a Post-American Order.”

If the American role in creating, exacerbating, and perpetuating the Israel/Palestine conflict is not recognized – that is, if we buy into the fantasy of noble imperialism and the *pax americana* – the “day after” solutions now being retailed by will prove equally illusory. Each day that the slaughter in Gaza continues makes it clearer that Zionism can never again command the loyalty of Jews dedicated to peace and justice or anyone else committed to the development of a human community. It is long past time for American Jews to get rid of the Israeli flags that so often stand on the *bimas* of their synagogues and temples. But the American flags standing there should also be eliminated. Realizing the vision of a human community – the vision of prophets from Isaiah to Marx – means transcending all forms of ethno-nationalism that stand in the way of human development. The point is not to deny one’s ethnic and cultural heritage but to overcome the fixation on national (and in America’s case, imperial) identities and to move ahead, out of the flames of the present holocaust, toward species-consciousness.

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