



معهد مواطن للديمقراطية وحقوق الإنسان
Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights

أبجديات تحررية فلسطينية

Palestinian Emancipatory Alphabets

Zionism

Author: Ellan Pappé

Updated on: 6 September 2021

Keywords:

Today, “Zionism” is primarily associated with the Jewish political movement that colonized Palestine. However, the term “Zionism,” the noun “Zion,” and the adjective “Zionist” have historically been far more varied in their applications. It was a term used for instance in Victorian Britain to refer to a more pious Christian way of life (and not succumb to the hedonistic Hellenistic way of life) and later on as a metaphor for an ideal society by white settlers arriving in American in the 17th century.

These are all anecdotal pieces of information about Zionism, and yet ones to recall, as it is not a term that makes a certain ideology acceptable or not, but rather its intent and orientation. Since the mid nineteenth century when we refer to Zionism, we talk about the movement that colonized Palestine, created the state of Israel and became the Jewish state’s hegemonic ideology.

Thus, the Zionism we encounter today has its origins in the Protestant and Evangelical worlds, on both side of the Atlantic, when already in the 16th century, their leaders promoted the idea of the “return of the Jews” to Palestine as part a divine scheme that would precipitate the second coming of the messiah, the resurrection of the dead and the conversation of the Jews to Christianity or their barbecuing in Hell. The motive was both a wish to see the end of time but also anti-Jewish, a wish to get rid of the Jews in Europe and North America. There is always a connection between Western anti-Semitism that received the Jews as aliens and the support of their transfer to Palestine. We now know that these ideas influenced the early Jewish thinkers of political Zionism emerging in Europe in the late 19th century and became the hegemonic ideology of Israel.

As a Jewish project it was first a reaction to anti-Semitism that grew in central and eastern Europe in the mid-19th century and more importantly out of a belief among one should say a minority of Jews at the time, that redefining Judaism as nationalism rather than as a religion will solve the “Jewish problem”. Once this particular small group of activists nationalised Judaism, Palestine for them became the destination as they turned the holy land that appeared in the bible into an ancient homeland that had to be redeemed. Frustrated assimilated Jews, such as Theodore Herzl who were not accepted by the non-Jewish society as equal, were also fascinated by this vision of a new Jewish homeland built in the land of the bible with the help of European Imperialism (here the older notions of Christian Zionism and more modern modes of anti-Semitism provided a lobby for these ideas among the British policy makers who would play an important role in making this vision a reality in Palestine).

Although the movement founder Theodor Herzl considered places such as Uganda as possible destinations, when he realized he could not galvanize the European governments to support the plan of making Palestine a Jewish homeland (as had been stated in the first Zionist congress in Basel Switzerland in 1897), many other Zionists singled out Palestine as the only place to fulfil their aspirations. They considered Palestine to be their ancestral homeland, taken by force by the Romans, In the spirit of romantic nationalism, they argued that their nation would only thrive there. Pragmatically, they accepted help from willing international power and persuaded a fifth of the world’s Jews that the colonization would redeem their lost homeland.

Until the end of the First World War, Palestine was under Ottoman rule; colonization was thus undertaken incrementally, in disguise and with enormous obstacles. Many who arrived before 1917 (when, for strategic, pious Christian, and anti-Semitic reasons, the British occupied Palestine) soon departed. Those who remained became the core group from which the future Zionist leadership in Palestine—and later Israel—would emerge.

The implementation of the Zionist project resulted in incremental dispossession between 1918 and 1948. Ethnic cleansing of the native people of Palestine began in 1948 when Zionist forces expelled half the population and demolished half of the country’s villages and towns. For Palestinians, Zionism therefore was (and remains) an ideology that negates their existence.

In theory, Zionism still denotes the desire to bring all the world’s Jews to Israel, and the Law of Return grants citizenship to any Jew arriving in Israel. In practice, however, various religious trends (such as Reform Judaism) were not recognized as religiously abiding; similarly, ultra-Orthodox Jews who do not believe the Jews can return without God’s will are marginalized and alienated. Nonetheless, since the second world war, most Jews regarded Zionism as an insurance policy—an ideology that would provide them escape in time of trouble. Only in

recent years has a strong anti-Zionist impulse found expression in Jewish communities who realize that this policy demands unconditional support for Israel.

Initially, the adjective “Zionist” denoted anyone with full right to be part of the project of Israel. Being a Zionist meant that one regarded Israel (which, after 1967, included the whole of historical Palestine) as the Jewish homeland and nation state. Zionism dictated that the symbols of the state be Jewish and its laws Halachic; it equated citizenship with religious identity. However, one fifth of Israel’s citizens were Palestinians who could not be Zionists or accept the Zionist narrative. The people in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip were living in regions that some Zionists believed were Israel. The Zionist desire not to grant them either citizenship or independence left their fate unresolved. As people around the world watched the brutal repression of Palestinian resistance movements, “Zionism” became equated with Israel’s policies of destruction and annihilation.

As ideology, Zionism could not save Israel from the need to choose between democracy and ethnic supremacy. And though Western political elites cynically accepted Israel’s claims to being a Jewish democracy, the general public did not. When it became clear that the majority of Israeli Jews preferred an ethnic state to a democratic one, Israel’s legitimacy came into question. Zionism’s international reappraisal was triggered by the challenging power of the Palestinian narrative. This narrative influenced Jewish Israeli dissidents who became “post-Zionist.” With time, however, the older term “anti-Zionist” replaced “post-Zionist” as Jews realized that reconciliation required the redistribution of resources, land, and privileges.

The Israeli academic, political, and military establishment reacted by becoming “neo-Zionists.” Deserting attempts to reconcile democratic values with Jewish ethnicity, they declared their wish to maintain a racist ethnic state in historical Palestine. Despite this development, and despite the famous UN resolution of 1975, Western political elites still refuse to accept that *Zionism is racism*. Moreover, efforts to associate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism have gained some traction. However, this trend is changing, and many Jews now view Zionism as an unacceptable political position and question its equation with Judaism.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Palestinian scholars, especially those working closely with the PLO research Centre in Beirut in the 1960s were the first to depict Zionism as a settler colonial movement. Settler colonial movements are different from classical colonial movements as they have no mother country and they do not return to their original homelands once the Empire collapses. Neither are they interested in exploiting the native population, as classical colonialism did, but they wish to remove the indigenous population, appropriate its history and erase it from historical memory. This was done to the native Americans in North America and

to Aboriginals in Australia among many other case studies. In order to implement such an idea, the settlers dehumanize the local people and perpetrate crimes such as genocide and ethnic cleansing.

In recent years, this paradigm was adopted by many scholars in the world, including in the West. It is more common nowadays to see reference to Zionism as settler colonialism and to the Palestinian resistance as anti-colonialist than ever before. Of course, Israel does all it can to equate such a framing with anti-Semitism, but to no avail. Time will tell whether this important development in the production of knowledge on Palestine would have an impact on the reality on the ground.