

Israel: 50 years of conquest

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FE Note: We are publishing this essay to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. It is a substantially revised version of two articles written in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 (“The Israeli Massacre—Peace in Galilee?” FE #310, Fall, 1982 and “Latin American Terror: The Israeli Connection”) that also appeared in FE #310, Fall 1982.

Both were written by David Watson for the special edition which included Fredy Perlman’s “Anti-Semitism and The Beirut Pogrom,” FE #310, Fall, 1982.

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When the founder of organized zionism, Theodore Herzl, proposed to create a European Jewish state in the Middle East as “an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism,” he was acting within a long tradition rooted in the rise of the ancient slave-state empires.

This imperial program became predominant with the rise of capitalism and its expansion first into the heaths of Europe (home of “heathens” to be conquered, Christianized and civilized by the developing state powers across the continent) and later to the other inhabited continents of the world where these civilized men—explorers, missionaries, marauders, and colonizers—spread their empire.

The enterprise which all of these pyramid-builders undertook was and is nothing less than a war upon the wilderness of the other: the subjugation of nature and of “savage” peoples, the ordering and quantification of the universe, the victory of production over idleness, the construction of the Perfect State. The attitude of empire builders is always the same, no matter where they find themselves, in the lushest forest or the most arid desert. It is all “wasteland” to be subdued, dominated, transformed into energy and commodities.

Once embarked upon the imperial project, the Jewish colonists in Palestine—many themselves once members of a little tribe slated for extermination by capitalism’s robot mass-men—embraced all of its attributes. For the zionist settlers, Palestine—in their political mythology a “land without people for a people without land”—was a wasteland and wilderness to be conquered, and the inhabitants would have to submit, go elsewhere, or be annihilated. Their dream of manifest destiny required it, just as the imperial dreams of the Spanish conquistadors, English Puritans, and the Afrikaners had earlier required it.

In his revealing introduction to Yaakov Morris’ book *Masters of the Desert* (1961), Israeli founder and the country’s first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, sums up this spirit of conquest in his discussion of the Negev Desert. “The reclamation of the Negev Desert,” he writes, “has more than local interest, vital as that interest may be to the State of Israel itself. Here, man is faced with a fateful and momentous challenge of nature. To conquer the wastelands, all his will and devotion, labor and energy, time-tested as well as newly invented techniques of science, will have to be employed ... The Negev, in short, is in many respects a small and modest pilot plant in mankind’s over-all battle against the desert regions anywhere.”

Not only does Ben-Gurion repeat the rhetoric of the early settlers of the North American continent, he repeats the formula for his success by drawing a portrait of capital itself: “The contemporary civilization advancing into the Negev embodies many of the characteristics of those which have appeared in the past. It is based as they were

upon a combination of agriculture, industry, mining and international trade, the settlement of large units of population, the combination of settlement and defense. The heritage of the past is here being enriched with the conquests of modern science and technology.” The project of Israeli capitalist development—successful settlement and economic expansion—cannot be achieved, of course, “without the transformation of the facts of nature,” he adds. “Science and pioneering will enable us to perform this miracle.”

All of the elements are present: science and technology, industrialism and trade, urbanism, defense—all summed up in one word: pioneering. Of course the battle of the pioneer Against the wilderness is also a struggle against the human fauna which is inevitably present in it. Here too, the Israeli model follows the general rule, be it in the development of the Negev for economic and military purposes (and a veritable war against the Bedouin tribespeople who have resided there for millennia), or in the conquest of significantly more settled areas, such as the towns, farms and orchards stolen wholesale by the Israeli colonial-settler state. As Ben-Gurion insists, “To maintain the status quo will not do. We have set up a dynamic state bent on expansion.” (See FE note above.)

## “An outpost of civilization”

Contrary to liberal pro-zionist mystifications that it is only this season’s wave of brutality against the indigent population that squanders Israel’s “moral capital,” the drama of fascist settlers in the West Bank and what is more or less the ethnic cleansing of Arab Jerusalem is no aberration. Israel was established from the beginning on a racist, nationalist ideology of Jewish “manifest destiny.” In this regard, Zionism is an integral part of the nineteenth century development of reactionary nationalist movements—and its revenge. The Jews, stateless, landless victims of every European nationalism, were themselves eventually unleashed on others as an advance guard of imperialism in the Middle East. As the Situationist International commented in 1967:

“Since its origins the Zionist movement has been the contrary of the revolutionary solution to what used to be called the Jewish Question. A direct product of European capitalism, it did not aim at the overthrow of a society that needed to persecute Jews, but at the creation of a Jewish national entity that would be protected from the anti-Semitic aberrations of decadent capitalism; it aimed not at the abolition of injustice, but at its transfer... The success of Zionism and its corollary, the creation of the state of Israel, is merely a miserable by-product of the triumph of world counter-revolution. To “socialism in a single country” came the echo ‘justice for a single people’ and ‘equality in a single kibbutz.’

“It was with Rothschild capital that the colonization of Palestine was organized and with European surplus-value that the first kibbutzim were set up. The Jews recreated for themselves all the fanaticism and segregation of which they had been victims. Those who had suffered mere toleration in their society were to struggle to become in another country owners disposing of the right to tolerate others. The prolonged sleep of proletarian internationalism once more brought forth a monster. The basic injustice against the Palestinian Arabs came back to roost with the Jews themselves: the State of the Chosen People was nothing but one more class society in which all the anomalies of the old societies were recreated...” (“Two Local Wars,” October 1967, in *The Situationist International Anthology*)

The career of Theodore Herzl, founder of the organized world zionist movement, shows clearly the bourgeois nationalist and colonialist nature of Zionism. Herzl spent his life petitioning the various heads of Europe, including Bismarck, British imperialist architect Cecil Rhodes, the Czar of Russia and his pogromist minister Von Plehve, the Pope and the Turkish Sultan for funds and support to create a Jewish settler state in Palestine. Such a project would serve two fundamental purposes: it would siphon off the revolutionary Jewish masses and create a European outpost in the Middle East, where the Zionist state would “form a portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism,” as Herzl put it in his 1896 book, *A Jewish State*.

This imperialist bulwark took the same form in Palestine in relation to the original inhabitants that such projects did everywhere (e.g. South Africa, Rhodesia and the Americas), confirming radical anthropologist Stanley Diamond’s famous definition of civilization, as conquest abroad and repression at home. And the colonization process was the same. Ahad Ha’am, a famous Jewish writer, noted in 1891 on a visit to Palestine, that the Jewish

settlers there “treat the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, deprive them of their rights, offend them without cause and even boast of these deeds; and nobody among us opposes this despicable inclination.”

## Origins of the Zionist state

In 1907, the Hebrew journal *Ha Shiloah* observed, “Unless we want to deceive ourselves deliberately, we have to admit that we have thrown people out of their miserable lodgings and taken away their sustenance.” The German socialist politician Karl Kautsky noted in 1921, “Little more attention was paid to the Arabs than was paid to the Indians in North America.” Employing land purchases from absentee landlords, the Jewish settlers forced small farmers and sharecroppers off land they had inhabited for generations.

At the end of World War I, Palestine was nearly 95 percent Palestinian-Arab, but by 1929, money from Europe, support from Great Britain, and land purchases and provocations had already driven almost 2,000 Palestinian families from their land. By 1940, Yoseph Weitz, head of the Jewish Agency Settlement Department, commented, “Between ourselves, it must be clear that there is no room in this country for both peoples ... the only solution is Eretz Israel [Greater Israel], at least the Western Israel [west of the Jordan River], without Arabs, and there is no other way but to transfer them all—not one village, not one tribe should be left” (cited by Noam Chomsky in his book, *Peace In the Middle East?*). During the 1948 War, three-quarters of a million people were driven from their homes by armed Zionist settlers; the newly formed state quickly employed its Absentee Property Law to dispossess thousands of their land, their shops, and their orchards. Of the approximately four hundred Jewish settlements established after 1948, some 350 were on Palestinian refugee property. Two-thirds of cultivated land was originally Palestinian-owned. As Don Peretz noted in the September 1969 issue of the Israeli magazine *New Outlook*, as a result of the 1948 War:

“Whole Arab cities—such as Jaffa, Acre, Lydda, Ramle, Baysan, and Maida—338 towns and villages, and large parts of others, containing nearly a quarter of all buildings standing in Israel during 1948, were taken over by new Jewish immigrants. Ten thousand former Arab shops, businesses and stores were left in Jewish hands as well as some 30,000 acres of groves that supplied at least a quarter of the new state’s scarce foreign currency earnings from citrus. Acquisition of this former Palestinian Arab property helped greatly to make the Jewish state economically viable and to speed up the early influx of refugees and immigrants from Europe.”

Israeli military leader Moshe Dayan observed afterward, in 1969, “There is not a single Jewish settlement that was not established in the place of a former Arab village.” By 1958, a quarter of a million acres of land had been expropriated from Palestinians who had remained in Israel. This same genocidal, culturcidal policy remains in operation today.

Zionist propaganda, on the other hand, has always portrayed Palestine as an uninhabited desert before the arrival of the Jews, a racist-nationalist mystique typified, for example, by the notorious declaration made by the American-born Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, who declared, “It is not as though there was a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.” In reality the Zionist invaders “made the desert bloom” by stealing the villages, orchards, gardens and pastures from their original owners—a desert that had been in bloom for centuries. The well-known, often-repeated tale among Palestinians of a grandparent, or uncle or aunt, who went into exile carrying a few seeds from the family garden, is testimony to the world and the dreams the people driven from their homes left behind.

## A Palestinian state?

Zionist ideology exploited the legitimate desires of the Jewish people to escape the cauldron of violence and extermination in Europe that brought about the annihilation of millions of their brethren. The ghastly irony of the search for security in the creation of a national state on plundered lands was that such a situation was bound to create greater and greater dangers and insecurities with higher stakes at every turn. Not only did Zionism become the blighted mirror image of all the oppressive national state ideologies which immiserated and murdered the Jews,

it set the stage for never-ending insecurity within a garrison state constantly threatened by surrounding hostile nation-states which saw it as an incursion into their own national or Pan-Arab designs.

Zionism also generated another wave of victims, its own demonized outsiders, who will continue to challenge the legitimacy of Israeli manifest destiny as long as they exist as a people, however dispersed and despised they may be. The efforts of these new victims of diaspora to return to and regain their ancestral lands have at times been peaceful, at times violent, sometimes reasonable and other times murderous. The colonial hubris of the Israeli state and betrayals by the neighboring reactionary Arab regimes gave birth to a Palestinian nationalist movement which became the mirror image of Zionism, similar in its nationalist ideology, its dependence on various nation-states for support, and its methods of military struggle and terrorism. Eventually, two national movements came to face each other, arms in hand: one powerful, with an army and police and nuclear arsenal, and the backing of the world's most powerful imperialist nation; the other outgunned, betrayed by all its backers, marginalized and desperate.

Of course, media images and Zionist propaganda notwithstanding, Palestinians have overall been far more the victims of terror and violence than the perpetrators in this feud. To give a couple of examples, when Palestinian Black September commandos took Israeli athletes hostage in Munich during the 1972 Olympics, a shootout ensued with West German police in which the Palestinians and eleven Israelis were killed. The Israeli state immediately carried out reprisal air raids against Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon which killed three hundred people. While 192 Israelis were killed during the Palestinian Intifada on the West Bank, more than 1300 Palestinians were killed by Israeli soldiers and settlers.

As PLO columns were being evacuated from Beirut after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and terror bombing of its capital in 1982 Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin declared to a group of American Jews in Jerusalem, "Very soon the fighting will be finished, and then perhaps that famous verse from the Book of Judges will be brought into realization: 'There shall be peace in the land for forty years.'" But neither the Israeli military "final solution" of the Palestinian problem in Beirut nor the peace treaty with Arafat more than a decade later have resolved the fundamental conflict. During the 1980s the Palestinian popular resistance that became the Intifada, much of it outside official PLO control, forced the Israeli state to the bargaining table as no terrorism or guerrilla warfare had. But a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza under the present configuration of power can be little more than an exploited, repressive, militarily regulated reservation for cheap labor under the domination of Israel and perhaps Jordan. Indeed, since the signing of the sham peace, the Israeli state has failed even to comply with a minimum of its agreements, and has used the accords with the PLO to continue its consolidation of "Eretz Israel," while the PLO proto-state fiasco has rapidly been reduced to the status of a corrupt ghetto administration subservient to its Israeli oppressors and squeezed from the other extreme by an increasingly furious Palestinian population.

Some wit recently remarked that the Israeli-Palestinian debacle has become the longest lasting crisis in modern history, but it's a crisis unlikely to go on forever. In 1970, Nathan Yalin-Mor, a member of the Zionist terrorist Stern Gang in the 1940s who later became an advocate of Arab-Jewish reconciliation, observed, "A new selling out of the Palestinian people would amount to planting a time bomb to explode after a few years." While Israel maintains military superiority and the support of the U.S. military machine, Chomsky's warning in 1976 in *Peace in the Middle East?* remains valid: "In general, each military success simply reconstitutes the struggle at a higher level of military force ... a higher level of potential danger to all concerned. From the Israeli point of view, this is a losing strategy. Israel can win every conflict but the last." The last, unfortunately, is likely to be a social and ecological catastrophe for the region, perhaps for the whole planet. Israeli writer Uri Avneri's warnings made thirty years ago in his book *Israel Without Zionists* (1968) come to mind in the midst of the Iraqi standoff, Iran's efforts to modernize and nuclearize, and Israel's shadowy nuclear security state: "Nuclear weapons, missiles of all types, are nearing the Semitic scene," Avneri wrote; "... if the vicious circle is not broken, and broken soon, it will lead, with the preordained certainty of a Greek tragedy, toward a holocaust that will bury Tel Aviv and Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem."

## Breaking the circle

An increasingly lunatic Israeli nationalism has finally become a grotesque reflection of the anti-semitic fascists who set out to annihilate Jewry earlier in this century. If humane elements desirous of peace and reconciliation

remain in Israeli society (some of them courageous activists for peace who have faced murder and violence for their work), the Israeli right is little different from the fascist Serbs lately slaughtering Kosovans in their crusade to preserve their own mythic locus of national origin. Some fundamentalist Israeli rabbis openly argue that driving out and exterminating non-Jews, including women and children, is sanctioned in Jewish scripture. “Death to the Arabs” is a common chant at the rallies of the Israeli far right, and fascist settlers have made a shrine of the grave of mass murderer Baruch Goldstein, an American rabbi who slaughtered more than fifty Arabs as they prayed in a mosque in Hebron in 1994.

While an exterminist mentality is common on the right, the mainstream is little better. Israeli courts recently approved the holding of hostages randomly taken by the Israeli military in Lebanon to be traded later, and the Likud cabinet refused to pursue an investigation of widely acknowledged Israeli military massacres of unarmed prisoners during the 1956 and 1967 wars. Israeli General Eitan, who was implicated in the 1956 massacre of Egyptian prisoners, and who now is a leader of a right wing party, has likened Palestinians on the West Bank to “cockroaches in a bottle,” and Menachem Begin called Palestinian fighters “beasts walking on two paws.” Such remarks prompted Israeli peace activist Gideon Spiro, who refused to serve in the reserves in Lebanon and the West Bank, to warn against the “process of dehumanization and fascistization” of Israeli values. The Muslim fundamentalist suicide bombers are a distorted mirror image of their Zionist oppressors (and in fact serve the interests of the intransigent Zionists who look for every excuse to sabotage any kind of peace with justice for the Palestinian people).

From a radical perspective, however unrealistic, none of the basic realities has changed since *The Bulletin for Jewish-Arab Cooperation* (cited by Chomsky) pointed out in 1948 that “... the only alternative to a war between nations is not a static peace ... but a war between classes, between ruled and ruler, of the Jewish and Arab workers and peasants against the two upper classes, against the fascist parties of both nations, and the British or other outside interests that want to control the area.” What might have been possible in 1948, or in 1967, or in 1982, when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was protested by a significant section of the Israeli population and the country was divided dramatically over the issue of making peace with Palestinians, seems even more remote today, as the West Bank settlement crisis deepens and the Israeli bulldozers continue their work in Arab East Jerusalem, and nationalist maniacs continue their hideous projects of mutual annihilation.

The history of Jewish presence in Palestine is undeniable; no one who loves human freedom could ever deny their right to travel and to settle there out of a centuries-long yearning to return to the sacred places of their ancestral memory and their traditions. But the desire to return to one’s ancestral homeland is not the same as the desire to construct a national state upon lands wrested from another people. Only in a world with open frontiers and the abolition of the nation-state and its border police, a world of free passage without necessity of passport and papers, can national conflict be resolved and a fabric of cooperative human communities be established, and fratricidal conflict prevented. Thus, peace will come not with the (inevitably temporary) triumph of the various regional enemies or with the construction of separate rival states, but through the destruction of all national states and the mutual recognition by Israeli Jew and Palestinian Arab, and of all the peoples of the Middle East, of the humanity and the legitimate aspirations of the other.

In Palestine-Israel, this means as fundamental precondition the abolition of Israel’s repellent institution of ethnically-based citizenship, as well as respect for the inalienable prerogative of Palestinians, not just Jews, to return to their ancestral homeland. The Palestinians are, after all, descendents of the original pagan tribes of the region before the biblical exodus from Egypt, and, as Arabs, have dwelt there for more than thirteen centuries. Their rights to the places now claimed by Jews as promised by ancient tradition not only date from ancient history but from living memory.

There is also the distinctly forbidding question of the lands stolen at least since 1948—a question not resolved in monetary, but in human, personal and communitarian terms. A section of the Jewish labor movement in Palestine understood this in its 1924 declaration (cited by Chomsky), “The main and most reliable means of strengthening peace and mutual understanding between the Jewish people and the Arab people ... is the accord, alliance, and joint effort of Jewish and Arab workers in town and country.”

Such a perspective of reconciliation based on justice seems manifestly impossible today—so much blood has been shed, so many crimes committed, so many lasting hatreds sown. And the situation holds little promise for a humane solution to the conflict in the foreseeable future.

## **Thugs Who Currently Rule**

The thugs who presently rule in Jerusalem enjoy widespread support for their unyielding, arrogant campaigns, and are being attacked from their narrow right by those who would push them further into genocide. The Palestinians, on the other hand, are more destitute and desperate than ever, and increasingly captive to the most authoritarian, fundamentalist and militarist tendencies in Palestinian society, tendencies aligned with some of the most brutal and despicable political currents and regimes in the world today.

Yet, however impossible it may seem, only a radical break can transform unending national conflicts into class war against the capitalist nation states; otherwise the situation will only worsen until all contending parties succumb to their mutual destruction. The road ahead is unclear, but protagonists and victims must find a way to move beyond the fatal cycle of conquest and war. To do any less will be to accept the inevitability of the most dire and tragic of consequences.

In his essay on the Negev, Ben-Gurion declared, "If the State does not put an end to the desert, the desert is liable to put an end to the State." But the State devours itself, and ultimately life along with it. Its desperation portends its approaching collapse. The desert they are making in the name of their peace cries out in agony. Can a different vision, and real peace, emerge?

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