

The Mythology of Israel

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Israel, The U.S. in Miniature

Much of the population of Israel, no different from people in the United States, denies its past as an invader/settler nation, is oblivious to the suffering which creates its plentitude, revels in self-generated myths of its goodness and bravery, and cannot fathom why such rage is directed at it.

Both nations live in what Noam Chomsky describes as a state of “willful ignorance.” The information readily exists for either people to easily understand their origins and how their country and culture engage the world, but blinders are preferable to many rather than having to face the consequences of what a look at reality would demand of them.

The European invasion and genocidal destruction of the North and South American indigenous cultures, cleansed the continent as part of the importation of a poisonous culture and governmental system that had brought social and ecological wreckage to its homeland. The Israelis, although basing their state on similar land dispossession, are faced with resistance of their victims who remain.

Our coverage includes two essays by Jewish Americans, one which traces the history of Israel from its beginning as a Zionist vision, [this article] the other [An Anti-statist Outlook] looks at the current intifada. Also included in this section is an essay from the Situationist International written at the time of the 1967 war [Two Local Wars]. Though written 35 years ago, it retains its sharp critique.

—FE staff

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My mother was born the same year as Israel, to deeply scarred Jews who had just narrowly survived the butchery of Nazi Poland. She has been an active Zionist all her life. From her I learned that the nation of Israel was mine by birthright; but bad Arabs, Jew-haters, wanted to take it all away.

A lot of people use the previous suffering of European Jews to justify current brutalities by the Israeli government against Palestinians. And some of the more cynical exploiters of Jewish suffering are, unfortunately, mainstream American Jewish Zionist organizations. The Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Congress, and Jewish Federations across the nation have fallen into a lockstep position of pro-Israel-no-matter-what, labeling all critics of Israel as either anti-Semites, or as self-hating Jews.

The very real pain of my family and my people has transmogrified into political and military might, and is being expressed ragefully upon the necks of the Palestinians. It's not easy to admit to yourself, much less announce this to the world.

For years I tried strenuously to ignore the Middle East, focusing my politics everywhere else. But eventually the holes in the “poor, defenseless Israel” story I grew up with became too large to ignore, so I traveled to the West Bank to see for myself.

It was 1999: thirty-two years into the occupation, and just before the start of the second Intifada. All signs pointed to imminent uprising. Four generations crowded into squalid refugee camps with no potable water could look over the barbed wire, up the hill, and see neatly landscaped Jewish-only settlement, patrolled by soldiers carrying American weapons, built on land their families had farmed only fifty or twenty-five years earlier. Israeli soldiers were everywhere, demanding identification papers, refusing passage, spitting curses.

Under the macho exterior, you could see the fear in the soldiers’ eyes. Brutalizing an entire people, trying to make them disappear—it’s scary, dehumanizing work, and I can’t imagine it sits well on their consciences.

This is not an ancient conflict. One hundred and thirty years ago, the tiny piece of land now known as Israel and the Occupied Territories was fairly peaceful. Ninety-six percent of the population was Muslim or Christian. The remaining four percent were Jews. They were all Palestinians, all Semites, and pretty much all got along.

Then Zionism came from late 19th century Europe, bearing with it a distinct taint of the colonialism endemic to that time and place. The Zionists encouraged Jews to flee oppressive conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe and migrate to Palestine with the eventual aim of taking it over completely.

Zionism in practice, is a form of imperialist domination. It was set forth not by the Jews who lived in the Arab world for millennia, but by European Jews. The Zionists did not propose taking a piece of Russia, or, more reasonably still, after the Holocaust, a piece of Germany. Instead, they approached Britain following World War I, asking for one of its colonies on which to create their state. By 1936, Jews made up a quarter of the population of Palestine, and the local people were growing increasingly uneasy about the massive wave of Europeans coming in, buying up the land, and forming armed militias. The Palestinians launched a three-year general strike and revolt against what they perceived to be a threat to their existence.

After World War II, when the full horrors of the Jewish Holocaust were revealed, the world’s sympathy flowed toward the Jewish people. Although the US government knew during the war that European Jews were being massacred, it refused to take in Jewish refugees. After the war, the US absolved its conscience by supporting the creation of a Jewish homeland in faraway Palestine.

The United Nations partitioned Palestine into Palestine and Israel. The Zionists received 56% of the land, despite numbering only a third of the population. The Arabs protested mightily, and war broke out in May 1948. The Zionist army, larger and better equipped than the combined Arab forces, increased Israel’s portion to three-quarters of Palestine.

The 1948 war created 800,000 Palestinian refugees, largely as the result of Zionist “land-clearing operations” like the Deir Yassin massacre, causing thousands of Palestinians to flee their homes in terror. Palestinians refer to the events of 1948 as al-Naqba—the Catastrophe. In 1967, another war, and Israel captured the rest of Palestine, which it occupies to this day.

Although Israeli schoolchildren are taught the myth of “a land without a people for a people without a land,” the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel required a large-scale removal of the existing non-Jewish population. Through the use of intimidation, imprisonment, assassinations, land confiscations, house demolitions, and bureaucratic restrictions of every imaginable kind, this displacement is still underway.

There is no place for Palestinians in the Jewish state of Israel. Well, almost none.

Under Israeli occupation, there have been virtually no employment opportunities for Palestinians. However, Israel found a use for them: working undesirable, low-wage, no-benefit jobs in Israel. But after the 1993 Oslo Accords, the lives of Palestinians under occupation became tightly regulated by the Israeli military, and they were restricted from getting into Israel proper. So, Israel began to import hundreds of thousands of overseas contract workers from throughout the Third World to do its unpleasant work. Israel is very American that way.

There were even plans afoot to create a number of export processing zones in Occupied Palestine where the impoverished, virtually imprisoned populace could again make themselves useful, assembling luxury items for Israel and the rest of the First World. Its slogan was going to be Peace Through Profits, but the current Intifada has scuttled the capitalists’ big plans.

The Palestinian people, chased out by the Zionists, used as political pawns by Arab governments and ignored by the rest of the world, began to organize a resistance movement after the 1967 war. Known as fedayeen, young guerillas, men and women, carried out daring operations such as commando raids against the Israeli army and the infamous plane hijackings.

Many fedayeen considered themselves engaged in the same struggle against imperialism and racism as the Black Panthers and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. Abu Iyad, one of the leaders of al-Fatah (Yasser Arafat's organization), expressed in a 1970 interview, the readiness of al-Fatah to fight alongside oppressed people, including Jews, anywhere in the world.

By 1987, after twenty years of military occupation, the Palestinian people rose up en masse in a spontaneous rebellion known as the Intifada. Almost everybody participated in protest strikes. Young people threw stones at Israeli tanks and soldiers patrolling their towns and refugee camps. The struggle raged for years and tens of thousands of Palestinians were shot by Israeli soldiers.

The situation did not settle down until the 1993 Oslo Accords which created the Palestinian Authority (PA) to manage several small Palestinian autonomous areas within the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinians accepted Israeli sovereignty over 78% of pre-1948 Palestine on the assumption that they could soon make their state on the remaining 22%. The most sensitive issues, such as Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, the status of Jerusalem, and the right of return for refugees were deferred until 1998. Meanwhile, more of Occupied Palestine was to be turned over to the Palestinian Authority.

Many Palestinians had high hopes, feeling that the end of the hated occupation was finally in sight. But instead, since Oslo, Israel has doubled the area of its settlements, confiscated an additional 80,000 acres of Palestinian land, and demolished thousands of Palestinian homes. Massive bypass roads built for exclusive Israeli use have carved Palestinian territory into smaller and more isolated segments. The fundamental issues like statehood, continued to be put off. As more military checkpoints were built, and a permit system put in place, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza found Israeli control tightening around them.

No more brutality in our name

During the course of all this, the Palestinian Authority was becoming something of a subcontractor of the occupation. Previously, the Israelis would detain and torture suspected Palestinian militants. With the PA established, they began turning some of that dirty work over to the Palestinians which began building prisons and establishing its police force. In the West Bank and Gaza, crowded areas beset by massive poverty and unemployment, the PA was one of the few providers of employment and quickly became mired in nepotism and corruption.

Although the PA receives vastly smaller amounts of money than Israel does, it has been largely dependent on US aid to survive. During a 1999 visit, I heard rumors of a CIA station inside the Bethlehem PA headquarters.

The continuing Israeli brutality and land-grabbing, coupled with a healthy mistrust of their own leadership structure, left the Palestinian people justifiably on edge. Ariel Sharon's provocative march in 2000 on the al-Aqsa Mosque provided the spark for the second Intifada which is still raging with no end in sight.

Mainstream Jewish organizations attempt to portray worldwide Jewry as united in support of Israel. But there is a sizable and growing Jewish movement to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

In Israel, groups like the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, Rabbis for Human Rights, and Women for Women Political Prisoners have long been working to oppose Israeli human rights violations. And since the start of the new Intifada, a petition by Israeli reservists who are refusing to serve "beyond the 1967 borders to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people" has been steadily growing; many of the signatories currently sit in military prisons. And, recently in Tel Aviv, 100,000 Israelis rallied to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

In the US, which sends over \$8 million each day to Israel's military, the Palestinian liberation movement is gaining momentum, too. Arab and Arab-American groups have long been active on this issue, and have recently been joined by a great many others. A number of radical Jewish, anti-Zionist groups have sprung up in major cities, including Jewish Voices Against the Occupation here in Seattle. There are ongoing boycotts of Israeli products, and

organized campaigns to end US military aid to Israel. Mock checkpoints and refugee camps have been erected in cities to demonstrate the reality of the occupation.

Of course, criticism of Israel must take a cue from Abu tyad, and always be coupled with an intolerance of anti-Jewish prejudice. This is not, after all, a conflict over religion, but over power, over land and nationalism. All Jews, and all Americans, have a responsibility to be active and vocal in the movement for justice for Palestinians. We can tolerate no more brutality in our name.

Related

See response in Letters, FE #359, Winter, 2002–2003.



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