

## **“THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF PALESTINE”;**

### **A BRIEF ESSAY EXAMINING THE LINK BETWEEN ZIONISM AND THE RISE OF ISRAEL**

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As the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Israel plays out its various narratives on the psyches of both Arabs and Jews, one cannot help but wonder how Theodor Herzl would feel about the current political condition of Israel and the Jewish people. Surely Herzl would be pleased to see that the aspirations of the World Zionist Organization which he pioneered had materialized and that indeed the alleged holy land of the Jews had been reclaimed. After all, his dream of a land where Jews could be self-determinant and could pursue their aspirations freely within the realm of a Jewish identity is now an undeniable truth. Although Herzl did not live long enough to see the official British endorsement of a Jewish homeland in Palestine as outlined in the Balfour Declaration, his unwavering determination and political tenacity lead me to believe that his vision of a future Israel did not rely on the likes of Arthur Balfour but rather, it relied on the persistent and uncompromising philosophy of Zionism. In other words, Herzl did not so much need the British or their authorization to lay the foundations for the state of Israel, rather, his astute foresight to rigorously promote the beliefs of Zionism is what really allowed the Jews to claim Palestine as their new home. The following essay will attempt to demonstrate the correlation between the initial rise and enduring power of Israel with the unyielding, self-righteous nature of Zionism. By focusing on the conception of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) and the events following the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland, I will argue that the signing of the Balfour Declaration was merely a gesture in political posturing not meant to be understood as *permission* to occupy Palestine, but simply to symbolize the graduation from international toleration of Zionism to its public encouragement.

The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel as a national home for Jews is somewhat misleading in that it suggests the conception of Israel as dating back to May 14, 1948 when the young state declared its independence. The belief that Israel as a political entity has only existed since this

date duly ignores that “Israel”, or at least the idea of “Israel” actually came into being at a much earlier stage. Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact birth date for Israel (since its concept has allegedly been around since biblical times), for the sake of this argument, I will conceive of Israel as existing, at least as a serious and significant notion, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Zionist ideology began to socio-economically and politically develop in a substantial manner. Therefore, with the expansion of Zionism came the evolution of Israel.

The beginning of mass Jewish immigration to Palestine began in the early 1880’s for a variety reasons; in search of the idyllic life, to escape growing anti-Semitism, in response to the European desire to deal with the “Jewish problem” and of course, to return to the land many believed was their divine birthright. It is this last reason that characterizes the Zionist movement as so distinct and unfamiliar within the realm of nationalist movements; unlike conventional nationalism where those from the inside seek to expel those from the land whom they deem as the “other”, Zionists were in fact, the ones from the outside coming in to eject the native inhabitants.

The chief objective of the Zionist movement was to further Jewish settlements within Palestine. The aims of the WZO as expressed during the congress meeting in 1897 promoted the “suitable” colonization of Palestine by Jewish agricultural and industrial workers, the organizing and binding both locally and internationally of all Jews through institutions, the strengthening of Jewish nationality and the obtaining of government consent, only when necessary, to achieve Zionist aspirations (Huff 109). Herzl believed that only through securing Palestine could Jewish talents and genius truly develop (Huff 109).

Despite Herzl’s longing to call Palestine his “home”, he had not stepped foot on the land until 1898 In order to broker a deal with the German Kaiser after negotiations with Sultan Abdul Hamid of the Ottoman Empire failed to bring about a legal charter offering immigrant Jews full authority and purchasing rights over the land and its natural resources. His initial impressions of the land and its people were of “poverty and misery [...], a countryside neglected in Arab

fashion” (Khalidi 40). Although his diary illustrates that he took notice of the Jewish monuments like the Citadel of David and the ancient synagogues, he failed to mention any evidence of Palestinian life; simply choosing not to see Palestine or the Palestinians, “I can only compare this anonymous band of bums to a tangle of venomous snakes” (Khalidi 41). By disregarding the Palestinians and indeed vilifying their way of life, Herzl in essence, made the feat of colonization all the more justifiable to ultimately accomplish the Zionist agenda.

In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour gave his signed consent explicitly authorizing the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine on behalf of the British government. Balfour expressed that the British government “favors the establishment *in* Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” though he is careful not to equate the creation of this new home with the literal creation of a new state. The British denied that the intention of the declaration was to found and legitimize a Jewish state however, it is difficult to imagine what other outcome could have possibly been presumed. The fact of the matter was that the British (and needless to say, much of the western world) supported the aim of the Zionists, not out sympathy for their cause, but simply because having a non-Arab state in the heart of the Middle East would benefit their own political objectives. The Balfour Declaration was not a supreme document that sanctioned the creation of Israel; it was simply a nod of approval for what was occurring nonetheless.

The principles of Zionism are ones rooted in exclusion and cultural superiority. Those who adhere to this ideology desire the greatest present and future for their people, like any other nationalistic community. Unfortunately for the Palestinians, the prosperity of the Israelis came at their expense and has resulted in over a half century of suffering, displacement, human rights violations and a social and political epidemic the likes of which may never be resolved. The vision of Israel began to take shape in Basle, Switzerland in 1897 and for the following 51 years, the Zionists lobbied and toiled relentlessly to authenticate this vision. It was not the signing of the Balfour Declaration that granted the Zionists their dream of a Jewish homeland;

rather, it was the perverted understanding that in the realm of realpolitik, states decide the fates of individuals. The Palestinians had nothing to offer whereas the Zionists not only had great financial assets to expend but the priceless resource of being a non-Arab and definitely non-Muslim ally. Sadly, though the era of mandate politics in the Middle East has ended, the ramifications continue to influence and oppress the lives of those who simply did not have the means to control their own destinies.

## WORKS CITED

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