The Myth of Israel as a Colonialist Entity: An Instrument of Political Warfare to Delegitimize the Jewish State

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While modern Israel was born in the aftermath of the British Mandate for Palestine, which called for a Jewish national home, its roots preceded the arrival of the British to the Middle East. In that sense Britain was not Israel's mother-country, like France was for Algeria. Indeed, the Jews were already re-establishing their presence independently in their land well before the British and French dismantled the Ottoman Empire.

As time went on, it became clear that the British Empire was not the hand-maiden of Israel's re-birth, but rather its main obstacle. The accusation that Israel has colonialist roots because of its connection to the British Mandate is ironic, since most of the Arab states owe their origins to the entry and domination of the European powers.

The argument that Israel is a colonialist entity is often marshaled to undermine the Jewish state's very legitimacy. It lays at the head of Edward Said's polemical treatment of the Arab-Israel conflict, entitled *The Question of Palestine*, which was published in 1992. The theme has certainly permeated Western academia, almost uncritically. For decades, it has been employed against Israel in one international forum after another.

For example, in 1973, the UN General Assembly gave initial momentum to this idea when it condemned the "unholy alliance between Portuguese colonialism, South African racism, Zionism, and Israeli imperialism." Two years later the Organization of African Unity adopted a resolution at its meeting of heads of state saying that "the racist regime in occupied Palestine and the racist regime in Zimbabwe and South Africa have a common imperialist origin."

The Myth of Israel as a Colonialist Entity

That association of Israel with colonialist regimes set the stage in 1975 for the most insidious resolution ever adopted in the General Assembly against Israel, which stated that Zionism was a form of racism. It helped cement the Afro-Asian bloc behind the resolution and provided momentum for the beginnings of the movement to delegitimize Israel. Even when, in 1991, the General Assembly finally overturned the resolution, comparisons between Zionism and colonialism persisted, arguably becoming even more strident.

The Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Information published a book in 2012 entitled *Terminology in Media, Culture and Politics* which stresses that Palestinians should use the term "colonialism" as part of their verbal arsenal in dealing with Israel. The book warns that using the political lexicon of Israel "turns the essence of the Zionist endeavor from a racist, colonialist endeavor into an endeavor of self-definition and independence for the Jewish people."[1]

The Palestinian Authority text specifically instructs its Palestinian readers never to use the name of "Israel" by itself, but rather the term "Israeli colonialism." In short, the charge of Israel being a "colonialist state" has evolved in recent years into an instrument of political warfare to be used by Palestinians who seek to employ language that they hope will undercut the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

Unlike the charges of apartheid and racism, the tag "colonialist" cannot be refuted simply by looking around modern Israel, where courts, hospitals, and universities serve both Arabs and Jews. It is a historical charge about how Israel came to exist: in effect, it amounts to the claim that Israel was established as an outpost of another distant power imposing itself by grafting an "alien" Jewish population on the territory and its native inhabitants.

In an essay he originally wrote in 1966, before the Six-Day War, that was later published as a book in 1973 entitled *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?*, the French-Marxist historian Maxime Rodinson drew analogies between the Jews in Israel and the French settlers in Algeria as well as the whites in South Africa.[2] But was it a legitimate argument to say that the Jews who returned to their ancient homeland were as alien in their territory as the Europeans who were transplanted and came to settle in Africa and Asia in order to serve the interests of the French and British Empires?

WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN COLONIAL POWERS IN ISRAEL'S ESTABLISHMENT?

The fact is that while modern Israel was born in the aftermath of the British Mandate for Palestine, which called for a Jewish national home, its roots preceded the arrival of the British to the Middle East. In that sense Britain was not Israel's mother-country, like France was for Algeria. Indeed, the Jews were already re-es-

tablishing their presence independently in their land well before the British and French dismantled the Ottoman Empire. For example, the Jewish people had already recovered their majority in Jerusalem by 1863.[3]

Decades later, Britain and the rest of the League of Nations considered Jewish rights in Palestine beyond their power to bestow because those rights were already there to be accepted. Thus in the mandate document, the League of Nations gave recognition to "the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine." In other words, it recognized *a pre-existing right*. It did not create that right. It also called for "reconstituting" the Jewish people's national home. And the rights recognized by the League of Nations were preserved by its successor organization, the United Nations, which in Article 80 of its charter acknowledged all rights of states and peoples that existed before 1945.

Rather than seeing the Jewish people acquiring their status with respect to the territory that was to become Israel because of Britain, the historian Elizabeth Monroe once observed that it was the British who "climbed on the shoulders of the Zionists in order to get British Palestine."[4] What she meant was that Britain might not have received the territory of the Palestine Mandate, which could have become French or part of an international zone, had Britain not backed Jewish national revival, which was an independent force and not a colonial invention. As time went on, it became clear that the British Empire was not the handmaiden of Israel's re-birth, but rather its main obstacle. Moreover, in the years that followed the issuance of the Balfour Declaration confirming Jewish rights to a national home in Palestine, the British systematically scaled back many of the initial rights of the Jewish people which previously had been recognized, putting the Jews in an increasingly conflictual relationship with London.

This change was exemplified first in 1922, with the British decision to remove the territory of Transjordan from the area of Palestine that had been allocated for the Jewish national home. It continued to the 1939 White Paper, which significantly curtailed Jewish immigration into Palestine. Ultimately, the British faced an armed rebellion of the Jewish population of British Mandatory Palestine, first led by Etzel and Lehi and then later joined by the Haganah, which would become the basis for the Israel Defense Forces, after Israel's independence.

THE COLONIALIST ORIGINS OF THE ARAB STATE SYSTEM

The accusation that Israel has colonialist roots because of its connection to the British Mandate is ironic, since most of the Arab states owe their origins to the entry and domination of the European powers. Prior to World War I, the Arab states of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan did not exist, but were only districts

of the Ottoman Empire, under different names. They became states as a result of European intervention, with the British putting the Hashemite family in power in two of these countries, Iraq (until 1958) and Jordan.

Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states, meanwhile, emerged from treaties that their leaders signed with British India, which sought to exclude Britain's rivals from acquiring any strategic position in the Persian Gulf, and later access to its oil resources. By means of those treaties, the British recognized the legitimacy of local Arab families to rule what became states like Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar.[5] A similar British treaty with the al-Saud family in 1915 set the stage for the eventual emergence of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Moreover, during Israel's War of Independence, Arab armies benefited directly from European arms and training—and even manpower. As the Arab states became independent, Britain reached special treaties with them, which guaranteed its forces access to a system of bases in Iraq and Egypt, while serving as the basis for supplying weapons and advisors to Arab armies. The Arab Legion initially fought in Jerusalem with British officers, while the skies of Egyptian Sinai were protected from the Israeli Air Force by the Royal Air Force. Indeed, Israeli and British aircraft clashed in 1949.

William Roger Louis, one of the foremost historians of British imperial strategy, uncovered an extremely revealing document from the British Foreign Office that puts into perspective Israel's relationship with the European colonial powers at its birth. In his 1984 book, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951*, he describes a meeting on July 21, 1949, of senior British officials at the end of Israel's War of Independence.

Thus, Sir John Troutbeck, head of the British Middle East Office, said, "We were in a position to control the Arab governments but not Israel." He then expressed fear that "the Israelis might drag the Arab States into a neutral bloc and even attempt to turn us out of Egypt." The original Foreign Office document also expressed concern that the British would lose their airbases in Iraq. In 1956, Israel briefly made common cause with Britain and France against Nasser's Egypt, but this could not alter the fact that, for the imperial powers, Israel was an obstacle, not an outpost.

DENYING JEWISH HISTORICAL ROOTS IN THE LAND

Nevertheless, in recent years, the effort to portray Israel as a colonialist entity has expanded. For many Palestinian spokesmen, in particular, it became important to deny the historical ties of the Jewish people to their land and to portray them as recent colonialist arrivals to the region—in contrast to the Palestinians, who were portrayed as the authentic native population.

This effort reached an audacious peak when Yasser Arafat denied that the Temple had ever existed in Jerusalem at the end of the July 2000 Camp David Summit with President Clinton. Many of his deputies—from Saeb Erekat to Mahmoud Abbas—have since picked up the same theme. Speaking on November 12, 2008, at a UN General Assembly "Dialogue of Religions and Cultures," the Palestinian prime minister, Salam Fayyad, addressed the historical connections of Islam and Christianity to Jerusalem, but noticeably did not say a single word about Judaism's ties to the Holy City.

In a similar vein, Arafat used to tell Western audiences that the Palestinians are descendants of the Jebusites, with ancient roots in the land. But in Palestinian society, one establishes one's status by claiming to be a relative latecomer, whose ancestors were from the Arabian families that accompanied the Second Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab when he conquered and colonized Byzantine Palestine in the seventh century.

No less than Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's successor, has admitted that the Christian presence in the Holy Land preceded the arrival of the ancestors of the present Palestinian leadership. Thus in criticizing Hamas for attacking Christian institutions, Abbas declared in 2007: "One of our oldest churches in Palestine, which stood *long before our arrival* [in the region], was looted and set on fire [emphasis added]." Thus, the argument that the Palestinians are descendants of the ancient inhabitants of what is today modern Israel was even rejected by Abbas himself.[6]

THE JEWISH PEOPLE AS INDIGENOUS

Even at the time of the Arab conquests, the Jews were still a plurality—and, perhaps along with the Samaritans, a majority—in the land, six hundred years after the Romans destroyed their ancient Temple and dismantled the Second Jewish Commonwealth. This emerges from Professor Moshe Gil's monumental 800-page *A History of Palestine: 634–1099*.[7] There is a common misconception that following the Great Revolt against the Roman Empire in 70 CE, and especially after the Bar Kochba Revolt in 135 CE, the Jews were exiled and their presence was negligible.

Gil's work clearly refutes this misunderstanding of Jewish history. He not only quotes Christian and other sources establishing that a substantial Jewish population remained, his research leads him to conclude that "The Jewish population residing in the country consisted of the direct descendants of the generations of Jews who had lived there since the days of Joshua bin Nun, in other words for 2,000 years."[8]

The Jewish population in Palestine began to diminish in response to severe laws established by its new Islamic rulers who imposed special taxes like the *jizya* (poll tax placed on non-Muslim individuals) and the *kharaj* (land tax) that made land ownership impossible. But much of the physical destruction of significant numbers of the remnant of the Jewish community occurred, according to Gil, as a result of the First Crusade in 1099 and the European occupation of Palestine in the decades that followed.

Nevertheless, the attachment of the Jewish people to their historic homeland continued and they made every effort to return over the centuries. After the defeat of the Crusader Kingdom, three hundred rabbis from Britain and France immigrated to Palestine in 1211. The pace of Jewish immigration from Spain and Italy increased to such an extent that Pope Martin V (1363–1431) forbade ship owners and sea captains from transporting Jews to the Holy Land in 1428.

With the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, a whole wave of Jewish immigration followed to the Ottoman Empire, in general, and to Palestine, in particular, after the Ottomans conquered it in 1517. There was a revival of Jewish life in Safed and Tiberias in the sixteenth century, symbolized by the grant given to Don Joseph Nasi by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent to settle Jews in Tiberias and in surrounding villages in 1561. A study of the Ottoman census figures found that there were thousands of Jews living in the villages of the Galilee in the early sixteenth century, while by 1567, Jews constituted the majority of the population of Safed. There were still a few families that could trace their origins to the Second Temple period.[9]

By the early nineteenth century, new waves of Jewish immigrants returned to their land, often motivated by strong messianic beliefs rather than by any colonialist theories. There was a shared belief among many Jews in the diaspora that the Hebrew year 5600 (1840) was to be the date of Israel's redemption. It is not surprising to find that according to several reports, the Jewish community in Palestine doubled between the years 1808 and 1840.[10]

In a transparent publicity stunt in February 2010, foreign activists went to the West Bank village of Bil'in and convinced Palestinian demonstrators to paint themselves blue so that they would look like the colonized people from the popular science-fiction film *Avatar*, thereby reinforcing the Palestinian narrative before the mass media that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was between an indigenous Arab people and recent Jewish arrivals.

Yet, ascertaining the truth has never been the objective of those trying to paint Israel with a colonialist brush. The restoration of the Jewish population to what became Israel was a historical process that began centuries before the British arrived. The purveyors of this narrative have been determined simply to conclude that the Jews came as an alien force to British Mandatory Palestine, to advance

European imperial interests, rather than see them as a people recovering their historical homeland, where they had deep, indigenous roots.

NOTES

1. Itamar Marcus and Nan Jacques Zilberdik, "Official PA Terminology Guide: Instead of 'Terror' Say 'Resistance,'" Palestinian Media Watch, June 19, 2012.

2. Maxine Rodiason, *Israel: A Colonial Settlers State?* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973). See also, Rashid Khalidi, "The Colonial Foundations of Israel," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Summer 1974.

3. British Consular Report 1865, "Report on Commerce of Jerusalem during the Year 1863," Foreign Office Records, FO 195/808, British National Archives. See also Dore Gold, *The Fight for Jerusalem: Radical Islam, the West, and the Future of the Holy City* (Washington: Regnery, 2007), p. 290.

4. Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East* (London: Chatto and Wyman, 1963), p. 38.

5. Under these treaties, the Arab Gulf states surrendered their external sovereignty to the British government. The first such agreement was signed with the al-Khalifa of Bahrain on December 22, 1880. See Document 141, "Agreement Between Great Britain and the Shaykh of Bahrayn," J. C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record, Volume 1, 1535–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 432.

6. "Abbas Speech: This Is a Struggle between the National Project and the Emirate of Darkness," *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch, June 22, 2007.

7. Professor Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine: 634–1099* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8. Gil, p. 2.

9. In 1567–8 there were 14,376 residents in Safed, of which 5,451 were Muslims and 8,925 were Jews. See Harold Rhode, *The Administration and Population of the Sancak of Safed in the Sixteenth Century*, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University, 1979, p. 171. In the villages of the Galilee, as well as in Jerusalem, there were Jews known as *Must'arabim*, who lived in these areas prior to the influx of Jews from Spain and Portugal and were understood by rabbinic leaders to be descendants of the Jewish community from the time of the destruction of the Temple. See Minna Rozen, "The Position of the Musta'rabs in the Inter-Community Relationships in Eretz Israel from the End of the 15th Century," *Catherda* (October 1980) Hebrew.

10. Arie Morgenstern, *Hastening Redemption Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 51.