

# Modern zionism and the arab-israeli conflict



## **Executive Summary**

The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians was a consequence of one of the most glorious and creative movements of the last century: modern Zionism. A hundred years ago, some of the most vital elements in the Jewish community all over the world attempted to join the modern world by rejecting the passivity of their ancient messianic religion.

The Zionists thought that Jews would achieve a kind of redemption by ceasing to be different from and persecuted by the nations of the world. Somehow, they thought, the inevitable discomforts and conflicts with the Arabs would be resolved. The Jews would find peace and acceptance in the land where their ancestors had once fashioned their religion and culture. But it was not to be. Instead, from its very beginning to this very day, Zionism has confronted a century of war.

This paper discuss the issue of Jews on the land of Palestine is very complex. The nationalists believe that the Jewish people will be endangered unless their base is re-established in their ancient homeland. Thus neither group can ever grant the ultimate Palestinian demand that the Jews cease their aggression and go elsewhere. Modern Zionism began with the vision of a "normalized" Jewish people, a nation among nations that would be part of the world as of right. The most important Jewish demand is therefore that at the end of the peace process, the Arabs agree that the Jews' existence in the region is permanent and can never again be questioned.

## **The Relevancy That Zionism Possess in the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

The conflict between Zionism and the Arab states has been the focus of international attention since the end of World War I. It was a subject of major concern to the old League of Nations; after World War II, it was one of the first disputes in which the United Nations (U. N.) was involved. For many years, it was a factor in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West. (Smith, 1992) More than half a dozen special U. N. organizations have been created to deal with the situation. (Reich, et al., 1996)

The conflict has centered on the struggle between Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, and Arab nationalism for control of Palestine. (Yonah, 1973) It has involved not only the Jewish and Arab inhabitants of Palestine but also their respective supporters around the world, that is, both Jewish and non-Jewish advocates of a Jewish state and the 21 members of the Arab League and their supporters throughout the Islamic and many Third World nations. (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998)

Palestine did not exist as a separate political entity until Great Britain took over the country at the end of World War I. From 1517 until 1918, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998) Prior to the Ottoman era, the country had a lot of rulers. Jewish, and later Zionist, claims to Palestine derive from biblical accounts of ancient Hebrew tribes and Israelite kingdoms that existed in the country. (Smith, 1992)

Palestine is also important to Christianity and Islam. Jesus Christ was born and died in Palestine and lived most of his life there. Palestine became an Arab and Islamic country some 1,300 years ago when tribes from the

Arabian peninsula conquered it during their sweep through the Middle East after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. (Freedman, 1979)

The Arab-Israeli conflict originated in the contest among European powers to control the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire. Just at the time that Arabs began to develop their own sense of nationalism, they found their dreams contested by European ambitions and by the counterclaims of the new Jewish nationalist movement that arose in Europe. In addition to fearing European colonialism, residents of Arab provinces began to fear the Zionist movement. (Smith, 1992)

A sense of Jewish nationalism was emerging in Europe in the 1880s, in reaction to deep-seated anti-Semitism and to the difficulty that Jews faced assimilating into European society. Zionists felt that Jews could not be fully accepted in Europe and that they needed to rule their own independent state. Although Zionism attracted limited support in the formative period, Jewishimmigrationto Palestine from 1882 to 1914 increased the number of Jewish residents from 6 percent to 10 percent of the population there. (Smith, 1992)

The World Zionist Organization (WZO), founded in 1897 (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998), assisted immigrants and bought land with the aim of creating a Jewish state in Palestine. When the Palestinian residents protested against these political aims, the Ottoman rulers tried to restrict Jewish immigration and purchase of land. (Neff, 1995) This Jewish nationalism clashed with the nationalism of the Palestinian Arabs, who comprised 90 percent of the residents. (Smith, 1992)

The Arabs' bitterness over the Palestinians' fate began to be matched by Zionist hostility to British rule at the end of the 1930s. (Neff, 1995) Although the official Zionist leadership decided not to engage in armed struggle against British rule while Britain was fighting Hitler's Germany, some Zionist splinter groups waged a campaign of terrorism against the mandatory administration, even during World War II. (Davidson, 1996) After the war ended, official Zionist-British relations in Palestine deteriorated into a tense, and sometimes violent, confrontation. (Freedman, 1979)

World War II led to a groundswell of support in the United States and Europe for a Jewish state, as a result of shock at the Nazis' near annihilation of European Jewry. (Smith, 1992) Zionists hardened their political position, insisting that the Jewish state must encompass all of Palestine because that state would serve as the haven for world Jewry. The war also created a massive problem of displaced persons in Europe, over one hundred thousand of whom were Jews.

Zionist leaders pointed to the legal barriers hindering the immigration of Jews to the United States and other countries, and strongly supported the recommendation of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946 that those one hundred thousand Holocaust survivors settle in Palestine. (Smith, 1992) The loss of Palestine embittered Arabs against the European colonial powers that had carved up their land and aided Zionism. (Yonah, 1973) But the defeat also led to self-criticism. Arab peoples denounced their rulers for corruption, and Arab soldiers denounced their military officers for incompetence. (Wagner, 2003)

The Zionist character of the state of Israel has remained the major cornerstone of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict since 1948. (Gilland, 2003) As such it must be understood if any meaningful, fair and just solution to the conflict is to be considered. The Zionism of Israel's character has remained primarily a secular Jewish nationalism; by definition, it has to do with the Jewish people. (Sternhell, 2004)

The Palestinian position has never really been faced by the Israelis and their supporters throughout the world. Zionists, both in Israel and abroad, are essentially Westerners who believe that problems have rational solutions and that age-old religious or nationalist quarrels can ultimately be solved by compromise. (Lesch & Tschirgi, 1998)

Zionism has been a great success and a great failure. (Gilland, 2003) The success is the creation of a viable Jewish State with a population that includes almost half the world's Jews. (Mattair, 1992) The failure is that it has provoked Arab enmity to such a degree that a military defeat of Israel would be followed by a second Holocaust. (Rees, Hamad & Klein, 2003) Israel was established in order to provide a haven from persecution but has become the country in which Jews run the highest risk of death by violence.

Golda Meir believed that a peace agreement with the Arabs cannot be achieved until the neighboring States have become democracies. (Salt, 2002) This view may well be correct, but efforts to achieve a modus vivendi between Israel and the Arabs must be resumed when the latter have ceased to believe that their aims can be achieved by terrorism. (Mezvinsky, 2003) Undoubtedly, Zionism possess a great relevancy in Arab-Israeli conflict. However, no lasting peace will be possible until the Palestinian Arabs have

abandoned the aim of destroying Israel by creating an Arab majority in that country by insisting on the return of the refugees and their descendants and the majority of Palestinian Arabs have become citizens of Arab countries.

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