

# ISRAEL:

## ITS ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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**Despite Israel's repeated breaches of international law, the Zionist settlements in the West Bank for example, and despite its systematic flouting of United Nations resolutions, such as its continued occupation of South Lebanon, Israel receives unstinting support from the United States, Britain and the European Union as a whole. In this article, EDDIE ABRAHAMS explains why by examining the historical origins and the function of Israel in the Middle East. Israel is no ordinary state. It was artificially created and is externally sustained - to the tune of some \$34bn annually from the USA. It is a racist, colonialsettler state founded by Britain and the USA to safeguard their oil and other economic and military interests in the region.**

## IMPERIALISM & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is most crucial to the USA and Europe for its oil, a source of huge profits for multinational companies. In 1945 a US State Department Memorandum noted that the Middle East was:

'...a place where oil resources constitute a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest prizes in world history.'

Presently the region accounts for 66 per cent of the world's known oil reserves. In comparison the US has only 4%. Saudi Arabia has estimated oil reserves of 252,000m barrels. The US has 35,000m. Is it at all surprising that the predatory powers are determined to dominate the region?

For centuries the Middle East was controlled by the Ottoman Empire. The latter's disintegration in 19th and 20th centuries coincided with the capitalist exploitation of Arab oil. So the European powers moved again to assert their power. After the First World War, a war for the division of the world among the colonial powers, a British General, General Sykes brazenly declared that:

'The French and the British satisfied each other's appetites after the First World War by serving up strips of Arab lands to each other.'

France took Syria and Lebanon. Britain took Iraq and Jordan and in 1922 Britain obtained the League of Nations Mandate over Palestine. The French and British reentered the Middle East at a turbulent time. Oil, with its promise of stupendous wealth, was beginning to flow. But so was the tide of Arab nationalism. The Arab

peoples had fought against Ottoman domination. They were not about to peacefully swap masters and therefore continued their struggle for national independence. In response the European powers began grooming the Zionist movement as a counterweight. They began to sponsor and support Zionist designs for the colonisation of Palestine.

## **ZIONISM/ISRAEL AT THE SERVICE OF IMPERIALIST COLONIALISM**

Long before the creation of the Israeli state on 15 May 1948, a founder of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, said:

'For Europe we shall create there in Palestine an outpost against Asia, we shall be the vanguard of the civilised world against barbarism.'

Herzl went on to explain that:

'England with her possessions in Asia should be most interested in Zionism... The shortest route to India is by way of Palestine. And so believe in England that the idea of Zionism, which is a colonial idea, should easily be understood.'

This then was the explicit function of those who set about building the state of Israel. The British were very quick to pick up the significance of Zionism. Sir Ronald Storrs, British governor of Palestine in the 1930s argued that:

'A Jewish state... could be for England a "little Jewish Ulster" in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism.'

The division of Ireland and the creation of 'Ulster' was, as is well known, a means of securing British domination over Ireland as a whole. Lord Melchet, a leading capitalist and founder of ICI, said in 1937 that:

'The advantages to the British Empire (of a Zionist state) are obvious. The security of... imperial interests can be better assured by a large European (Zionist) population than by the few battalions that can be spared.'

## **THE COLONISATION OF PALESTINE**

In 1882 there were 24,000 Jews in Palestine. The Arab population numbered 450,000. In 1917 there were 60,000 Jews compared to 700,000 Arabs. Arabs owned 91% of the land of Palestine. Jews owned 4%. Others owned the rest. In the following decades this picture is dramatically reversed. Jews constituted 11% of the population of Palestine in 1922. By 1931 they were 17%. In 1936 the figure rises to 28% and in 1943 it reaches 31% of the population. In 1948 750,000 of the 1.3m Palestinians, ie over half the population, was forced to flee to Jordan, Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. In that same year the state of Israel was founded on 72% of the historic land of Palestine.

The process which led to this result was a typical colonial process of settlement requiring the conquest of foreign land and the expulsion of the indigenous settlers. It was a process carried out by means of trickery and deception and, where this failed, by force of arms. The first Zionist settlements in Palestine were funded by the Jewish bourgeoisie through organisations such as the Lovers of Zion formed in 1882, the Palestine Jewish Colonisation Company, formed by Lord Rothschild in 1883 and the World Zionist Organisation founded in 1897.

Zionist settlement began by purchasing land from Arab feudal lords and the expulsion of Palestinian peasants who came with the land. In their stead Jewish immigrants, from anywhere, some fleeing pogroms in Russia, others no more than adventurers from Europe, were put to work on the land. A rigid apartheid regime was at once instituted. Arabs were banned from working on land purchased by the Zionists. There was to be no place in the Israeli state for any Palestinian. A Zionist leader Joseph Weitz was to state:

'Among ourselves it must be clear that there is no place in the, country for both peoples together. With the Arabs we shall not achieve our aim of being an independent people in this country. Transfer the Arabs from here to the neighbouring countries, transfer all of them, not one village or tribe should remain.'

This 'transfer', a veritable genocide, was accomplished with remorseless brutality, especially during the period of the Great Palestinian Uprising and General Strike of 1936 to 1939 and the period from 1943 to 1953.

## BRITISH IMPERIALISM & ZIONISM

During the 1936-39 Uprising and General Strike, British Labour and British imperialism played the decisive role in defending Zionism against the Palestinian people's legitimate aspirations. A Palestinian peasant put it this way:

'The British were the cause of our catastrophe and the catastrophe was Zionism. So we asked the people: who is your first enemy? Britain. The second enemy? Zionism. Why? Because Britain is responsible. Britain protects them and persecutes us.'

In 1917 Britain had issued the Balfour Declaration endorsing the idea of a homeland for Jews with only 'protection for non-Jewish minorities'! But the defeat of the 1936-39 Uprising was the decisive period in the consolidation of Zionism and the development of the nucleus of the Zionist state as a military and economic unit. Such a unit simply would not have emerged without British support. *Ha Eretz*, a prestigious Zionist paper said of the British role during the Uprising:

'Arab military strength was destroyed...and during the same period, the Jews, protected by the British, succeeded in building up their own strength.'

When the uprising began in April 1936 British forces responded immediately by massive repression, dynamiting Palestinian homes, criminalising Palestinian freedom fighters and killing 1,000 people by the end of the year. A British Settlement Police was formed which was in effect a Zionist militia, armed and trained by the British. By 1939 this force numbered 21,500 Zionists and formed the core of the Israeli army. The

British also created the death squads, known as Special Night Squads. British authorities introduced repressive legislation, used to this day by the Israelis, including detention without trial and collective punishment. To counter the effects of the Palestinian General Strike the British systematically nurtured Zionist economic enterprises. When the uprising was finally defeated in 1939, 5,000 Palestinians had been murdered and 15,000 maimed and wounded.

The British labour movement's reaction to the Uprising was typical of its response to all antiimperialist movements. The TUG met and urged the British government:

'...to take all the necessary measures to bring the present disorders to an end.'

It was not for nothing that Golda Meir, herself a future Prime Minister, was to state:

'One of the greatest factors in helping us overcome our initial difficulties was the fact that from the very first, since 1917, we constantly received encouragement from the British labour movement.'

## ZIONIST TERROR

Where trickery or collaboration with the Arab ruling classes didn't succeed in driving the Palestinian peasants from their homes, fascist violence did. The Irgun and Stern Gangs specialised in terrorising Palestinians into fleeing the land. Indeed a systematic strategy of terror was devised in 1948 to drive out 750,000 Palestinians. It was known as Plan Dalet (D). It amounted to organised 'ethnic cleansing'. On 9 April 1948, for example, terrorist killers from Irgun led by Menachem Begin (a future Prime Minister) attacked the village of Deir Yassin and massacred 250 defenceless men, women and children. A witness; Red Cross Doctor de Reynier, said: 'All I could think of was the SS troops I had seen in Athens.' Begin sent his troops a message: 'Accept congratulations on this splendid act of conquest.'

Deir Yassin was no isolated act. In the village of Safsaf, 70 men were blindfolded and shot dead. In Elabun, Zionist commanders lined the inhabitants up in the village square, shouting 'You want to make war, here you have it!' and gunned down 13 people. In Safed, while there were no massacres, captured prisoners were tortured to death. A Zionist witness recalls how she saw an intelligence officer 'beat these (10) wounded men with a hoe until they bled to death.' It was methods such as these that led to the Palestinians' exodus. A 'population transfer expert', one Schechtman, wrote:

'It is difficult to overestimate the tremendous role this list of abandoned property has played in the settlement of hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants who have reached Israel since 1948.'

Indeed of the 370 Zionist Settlements built between 1948 and 1953, 350 were built on land confiscated from the Palestinians to accommodate the 684,000 settlers who arrived in the same period. Meanwhile, since 1948 385 Palestinian villages have been destroyed. Such are the foundations of the Israeli state; a state built on land confiscated from the Palestinians. In 1917, Jews owned but 4% of the land, Arabs 91%. In 1945, three years before the foundation of Israel, Zionists still owned only 14% of the land compared to the 80% owned by the Palestinians. By 1953 the figure was

73% compared to 25%. And after the Six Day war, with the conquest of the West Bank, Zionists controlled 84% to the Palestinians' 14%.

The Zionist's strategy during the 1948-53 period was accurately described by Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, and anticipates much of Zionist strategy today:

'The strategic objective was to destroy the urban community, which were the most organised and politically conscious sections of the Palestinian people. This was not done by house to house fighting inside the towns and cities, but by the conquest and destruction of the rural areas surrounding most of the towns.. Deprived of transportation, food and raw materials, the urban communities underwent a process of disintegration, chaos and hunger which forced them to surrender.'

Such were the circumstances of the creation of the Israeli state, a state more or less imported into the Middle East by imperialist money and British arms.

## ZIONISM ON THE REGIONAL STAGE

From the moment of its foundation in 1948, Israel set about playing its assigned role in the Middle East: attacking Arab nationalist and revolutionary movements which threatened imperialist control of the region's oil. In 1956 Israel joined the AngloFrench invasion of Egypt that failed to overthrow Gamal Abdul Nasser's government which nationalised the Suez Canal. The 1967 Six Day War constituted yet another orchestrated offensive against a rising tide of Arab and Palestinian nationalism. Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. Despite repeated UN resolutions it has refused to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and is intent on integrating them into a 'Greater Israel'. In 1982 Israel launched a massive invasion of Lebanon, butchering 25,000 people, to destroy an alliance between Lebanese and Palestinian revolutionary forces. Besides such major operations Israel has launched military expeditions against almost every other Arab country.

Within Israel itself, Zionism maintains a regime of discrimination and oppression against Palestinians. Since 1948, 80 per cent of Arab land in Israel has been confiscated. 92 per cent of the land of Israel is reserved for Jews only Palestinians cannot buy, rent or lease in these areas. In the face of incontrovertible evidence, the UN in 1975 passed Resolution 3397 which '*determines* that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.' Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and as a result of Zionist and US pressure, this resolution has now been withdrawn. But Israel's character remains unchanged.

## ...AND ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Israel plays its reactionary role beyond the boundaries of the Middle East. It functions as a substitute US military force. Whenever the US has political difficulties in supplying antidemocratic or fascist regimes with guns, bombs and torture equipment, Israel, with US financial support, fills the breach. Not surprisingly, Sam Nujoma, when leading the struggle for Namibian independence, said: 'Israel is an enemy of the African people.'

In 1948, D F Malan, founder of apartheid South Africa, a virulent antiSemite and open Nazi sympathiser, was the first head of state to visit Israel. In 1979 Israel Aircraft Industries built an electrified fence on the AngolanNamibian border to thwart Namibian

guerrillas. In the same year Israel and apartheid South Africa jointly developed an atomic bomb. During the height of the struggle to isolate South Africa, Israel was apartheid's main arms supplier. Between 1970 and 1979 South Africa purchased 35 per cent of all Israel's weapon sales.

Just to list some of the countries to which Israel has supplied military aid highlights its role: Thailand, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, the Lebanese Phalange, Zaire, Liberia, Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. During Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza's last year in power, US President Carter cut off overt aid to his regime. Israel took up the slack supplying 98 per cent of Somoza's arms. Israeli arms were also used by the fascist Pinochet regime and a special agency of the Israeli Ministry of Defence collaborated with the Chilean junta in suppressing popular and democratic opposition.

## ISRAEL'S ROLE TODAY

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the retreat of Arab nationalist and revolutionary movements has not reduced Israel's importance for the US. In 1993 a Pentagon document argued that the US:

'intends to retain the preeminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests but those of our allies and friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations.'

To this end the US is expected to:

'maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from ever aspiring to a larger regional or global role.'

In the Middle East the mechanism for sustaining US predominance is Israel. Indeed Israeli strategists present Israel 'as a figurative home port' for the US in a 'in a sea of regional crisis'. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and in anticipation of increased political instability US-Israeli collaboration has grown. The US has also sponsored an alliance between Israel and Turkey as an axis to guard against upheaval in the Middle East and in order to project its influence into the resourcerich exSoviet central Asian states. According to the *Financial Times*, recently signed agreements between Israel and Turkey, besides sharing intelligence and training to 'combat terrorism', also 'opened up a route into central Asian markets for Israeli companies.'

The British state, also struggling to secure its portion of influence in Middle East, is increasing its collaboration with Israel. British and Israeli governments plan to begin regular 'strategic dialogue' to develop military cooperation against 'rogue states'. According to *The Guardian*:

'The two countries already cooperate, but the dialogue is intended to upgrade the exchanges and encourage closer relations between their respective defence industries and intelligence services.' (23 November 1996)

## US DOLLARS SUSTAIN RACIST ISRAEL

Israel can sustain its regional and international role only as a result of a massive infusion of US dollars. Israel is sustained almost entirely by imperialist money. Each year hundreds of millions of dollars are given to Israel. Since its foundation Israel has received more than \$45bn in economic and military aid. From 1983 onwards it has received between \$34bn a year. More recently it has received \$5bn a year in addition to \$10bn in loan guarantees. All this aid has no strings attached. Israel is also the highest per capita recipient of US aid.

Through such aid Zionism has built for imperialism one of the most powerful military machines in the world; it has also secured for imperialism a powerful and loyal social base. Through financial assistance it has bound the majority of Israel's population to imperialism by giving most Jewish citizens an imperialist standard of living amidst a sea of regional poverty. It has created a national labour aristocracy in the region conscious that its privilege depends on its loyalty to the US, to capitalism and imperialism. This privileged stratum of Zionists is no different from the privileged whites of South Africa who for years served to sustain the barbarism of apartheid. Indeed all the vicious and brutal racism of apartheid's white minority is mirrored in Israel's Zionist population and acquires its sharpest expression among those colonial settlers directly engaged in robbing Palestinians of their land. It is through such robbery that the Zionist population, even in the midst of severe economic crisis, can sustain a privileged and comfortable existence.

## THE DESTRUCTION OF PALESTINE

Having colonised and absorbed the majority of Palestine the Zionists are working to destroy the last hope of an independent Palestine. Since 1967 they have seized control of 70 per cent of the land and by means of apartheidlike legislation systematically undermined the possibility of an independent Palestinian agriculture and economy. On land requiring intensive water irrigation, Palestinians have virtually no rights to dig new wells. Water from existing Palestinian wells are also siphoned off to irrigate land confiscated by colonial settlers. Today some 320,000 settlers, who account for only 13 per cent of the population, consume 80 per cent of the West Bank's water.

The 'peace process', if anything, has further weakened the Palestinian economy. Today there is no free passage between the supposedly autonomous regions of Gaza and the West Bank. All commercial traffic between these areas is in Israeli hands. Repeated closures of the border are devastating the Palestinian economy.

For example, with trucks halted for days, it is cheaper for West Bank traders to import tomatoes from Spain than from Gaza. Palestinian trade with Israel has been severely curtailed. Repeatedly, Palestinian produce is left to rot at Israeli roadblocks and prohibitions are imposed on importing raw materials into areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

Meanwhile the tide of Zionist colonisers keeps flowing into the West Bank. According to *Nekuda*, a Zionist settler publication, their numbers have increased by some 50 per cent since the signing of the peace accords'. Today these fullyarmed settlers occupy some 130 settlements dotted around the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Strategically placed, with state funded programmes for massive expansion, these settlements, together with Israeli army roadblocks, have ensured that the major Palestinian population centres are reduced to isolated clusters, cut off from each other and

dependent entirely on Israeli authority. A system of 58 roadblocks prevents Palestinians from travelling from the south to the north of the West Bank. Meanwhile, East Jerusalem is being ethnically cleansed of Palestinians. According to the *Financial Times*:

'Israeli governments, whether led by Labour or Netanyahu's Likud, have... used housing and zoning policy, and discrimination over resident permits, to create a Jewish majority in the eastern quarters and make it impossible for Arab residents to build enough to house their expanding families.'

By 1994 Palestinians were already a minority in East Jerusalem.

The signing of the latest stage of the peace accords in January have only strengthened the hand of Israeli colonialism. The *Financial Times* noted that the Israeli government's securing of an extension to the Oslo II timetable:

'will mean the Israelis will remain in control of the rural areas of the West Bank, continuing to surround Palestinian towns with Israeli troops and expanding Jewish settlements further, so that in effect they renege on the Oslo accords.' (8 January 1997)

Declared as a major step forward, the Hebron agreements merely put another nail in the coffin of an independent Palestinian state. Professor Steinberg of Israel's Bar Ilan University stated that:

'Netanyahu has managed...to reduce the amount of territory to be returned to the Palestinians by being able to designate the military locations which will be excluded from the troop redeployment.'

Thus by the 'final status talks' to settle 'all matters' relating to Israel's future borders, the status of Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements, the four million Palestinian refugees and the future of the Palestinian Authority, the Zionists will have all the cards stacked in their favour. The Palestinians will have no power, economic, military or political, as a counterweight to the massive military, economic and social reality of some 500,000 settlers the Zionist state hopes to place in the occupied territories by the end of the century. Effectively Palestine will be rubbed off the world map.

The Palestinian people, whatever the agreements Yasser Arafat is striking with the Zionists, will not silently acquiesce to this genocide. The uprising of September 1996 was a harbinger of their anger and their determination to resist. Since then there has been an increase in the number of armed attacks against Zionist settlers. And after the signing of the Hebron agreements all commentators have noticed not a diminution but an increase in tension. The Palestinians are literally fighting a life and death battle for their future. In this battle we know which side we are on.