



Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel

Liberals and Zionism

Dr Colin Shindler

The Distortion of Zionism

Zionism is often seen by the left in perjorative terms today. Yet more often than not, such prejudice is based on ignorance rather than knowledge and understanding. Significantly, Peace Now, the grassroots mass movement which has a long history of protest against support for the settlements is never characterised as 'Zionist' even though it proclaims such an affiliation. Yossi Beilin, the architect of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the Geneva Agreement (2003) unequivocally states that he is a Zionist.

Members of 'Courage to Refuse' - the conscripts who refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza during the current Intifada similarly do not disavow Zionism. Yet there are quarters in which Zionism is seen as synonymous with occupation, violation of human rights and military aggression, rather than the legitimate expression of a desire for Jewish statehood, on an equal footing with all the other nationalities and nation states.

Today, Zionism has even become the starting point for conspiracy theorists. Zionism has been deemed responsible for orchestrating events, ranging from the massacre of children in Beslan to the claims in the Iranian press that 'Zionist intelligence services' were behind the July 2005 bombings in London. Included in these catastrophes is the exodus of Arabs from Palestine in 1948 - often described as a preordained outcome as a consequence of Zionist ideology.

The early Zionist pioneers had believed, perhaps naively, that Jews and Arabs could somehow cooperate for the benefit of all. The rise of Arab nationalism and the violence it propagated left no place for any sort of meaningful compromise. Indeed, it conditioned many Jews to believe that the conflict was being reduced to a zero-sum game - a question of them or us. While the Jews were divided on the question of partition of historic



Destruction of childrens' house - Kibbutz Yad Mordechai 1948

Palestine into two states, the Arabs were united in their rejection of it. The de jure recognition of a State of Israel by the United Nations and the formal declaration of Independence in May 1948 were immediately followed with an invasion of Israel by all its Arab neighbours. The unpredictability of conflict took over with terrible results.

Today, Israeli Jews are depicted as well-to-do white Europeans and the Palestinian Arabs as the exploited and dispossessed of the Developing World. This polarised attitude extends to any proper consideration of Zionism. The very idea that Zionism was never monolithic does not occur to its detractors. Some Zionists believed that it should imitate Sinn Fein. Some looked to Marx, some to God. Some preferred to follow Tolstoy and work the land.

Zionism sought to create a place where Jews could attain political independence and instigate a national renaissance of the Jewish people. Potential 'Zions' were located in areas as far flung as Argentina and Tasmania. Many early Zionists, however, advocated a Jewish national home within Palestine - the geographical location of ancient Israel. It was to be a homeland, guaranteed by the international community with land purchased from local notables. Zionist pioneers in Palestine saw themselves as colonizers and not colonialists. They argued that that they were there by historic right and not on the sufferance of others. Unlike European imperialism, they did not come with armies, ready to expropriate the land and dispossess its inhabitants, but with hoes and pitchforks to cultivate the soil. They perceived Zionism as the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel and the construction of a just society in their ancient homeland

A Movement of National Liberation

Zionism was a movement of national liberation, modelled on nineteenth century progressive European nationalism. It sought to both normalize and modernize the situation of the marginalized Jewish people. For the religious, it was the beginning of redemption and the onset of the messianic age. For Marxist Zionists, it was viewed as an opportunity to normalize the abnormal socio-economic structure of the Jews in the Diaspora by settling them on the land. For idealists and dreamers of what could be, it was the construction of a perfect society based on socialist theory merged with themes of social justice cemented in the Biblical teachings of the prophets. Others ridiculed all this as utopian and proposed a modern technological, capitalist state. The Hebrew Republic that arose in May 1948 encompassed all these possibilities.

Liberating the Jews from the ghettos in the nineteenth century was a badge of the new liberalism. It was carried out according to the rationale of reason, but not always according to the reality of the situation. Clermont-Tonnerre, a tribune of revolutionary France argued 'To the Jews as individuals everything, to the Jews as a nation, nothing'. Any demonstration of Jewish national characteristics was unacceptable. No matter how good the intentions, by the end of the nineteenth century, emancipation had failed. In a period

of rising judeophobia, too many Jews discovered that they could not operate as bone fide French or Germans or Italians. Jews concluded that the answer to their predicament was self-emancipation rather than emancipation by others.

In Eastern Europe, state anti-Semitism played a powerful role in promoting the national self-emancipation approach, whilst the growth and consolidation of liberal nation states in Western Europe provided working models for Jewish communities throughout Europe, Asia and indeed to the Jewish community in Ottoman-ruled Palestine.

By the late nineteenth century over half of the world's eight million Jews lived under Tsarist rule in conditions of great poverty and deprivation. Such suppression – both physical and psychological – inspired Jews in Eastern Europe to dream of a better future. Between 1649 and 1881, over 600 laws were passed to hem in and control the Jews by Tsarist Russia. Jews were prevented from integrating into majority communities and could not take Russian first names. They could neither move out of the ghettoized Pale of Settlement nor exercise any modicum of self-government in the areas where they lived. Jews could neither do business on the Christian Sabbath and holidays nor conduct trade in Russia itself. Critical literary works that offended the political or religious sensibilities of the authorities were banned and sometimes burned publicly.

The Zionist intelligentsia evolved from this milieu. The reclamation of Hebrew as 'a living language' began with writers such as Judah Leib Gordon in such poems as 'Awake, My People'. Through his Hebrew periodical, Peretz Smolenskin attempted to develop a cultural nationalism for a people who were rapidly beginning to see themselves as an ethnic minority rather than simply as an isolated, marginalized religious group that was neither Christian nor Muslim. Indeed, the Jews became a nation in the modern sense in nineteenth century Tsarist Russia – and particularly in the overcrowded and hermetically sealed Pale of Settlement. It was in Eastern Europe that they became more than the People of the Book.

Pogroms and Antisemitism

In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by members of the revolutionary organization, 'The Peoples' Will'. Russia moved to the nationalist Right. Jews were branded as liberals, revolutionaries and subversives as well as Christ-killers. All this translated itself into a series of pogroms in the Empire, often taking place under the less than watchful eyes of the police. Laws passed between the summer of 1881 and May 1882 were designed to punish the Jews in every way possible.

Such measures heralded the end of the Pale of Settlement. It disrupted the concentration of Jews gathered there and redistributed them. Many fled to the slums of the nearest city and became urbanized. Others emigrated to Britain and the United States. A few began to think about Palestine as the logical Jewish homeland. At the beginning of 1882, Jewish students formed a group called 'BILU'. This was the Hebrew acronym for a quote from the Book of Isaiah. 'O House of

Jacob, come and let us go'. The first group of fourteen immigrants reached Jaffa in July 1882.

Jews who had joined the revolutionary movement were astounded when The Peoples' Will called upon the peasants to join the instigators of the pogroms. In an address to the Ukrainian people, it stated

The damned police beat you, the landowners devour you, the Yids, the dirty Judases rob you. People in the Ukraine suffer most from the Yids. Who has seized the land, woodlands, the taverns? The Yids. Whom does the peasant beg with tears in his eyes to let him near his land? The Yids. Wherever you look, whatever you touch, everywhere the Yids. The Yid curses the peasant, cheats him, drinks his blood. The Yids make life unbearable.

Whether Jews were revolutionaries or reformers, liberals or reactionaries, they were blamed by all. In Central Europe, the situation followed this pattern. Liberal German nationalism, a beacon of enlightenment for Jews such as Freud and Mahler became progressively dimmed as the century came to a close with the rise of anti-Semitism. Even France to whose progressive banner Jews had rallied in the past was infected by this virus. At the end of 1894, the infamous trial of Alfred Dreyfus, the first Jew to serve on the General Staff of the French Army took place.

One Viennese liberal, an assimilated Jew, Theodor Herzl was traumatised by these developments. The Christian Social party which regarded Jews and liberals as one and the same were in the political ascendancy in Vienna. They believed in 'Catholic values' and demanded that Jews be barred from teaching Christian children. Jews, they argued, should be excluded from the University of Vienna which should be a purely Catholic institution. In parliament, there was even a discussion about whether Christ should be considered a Jew. In early 1895, the Christian Socials secured a narrow victory in the municipal elections in Vienna. It was this watershed that propelled Herzl to write *The Jewish State*. This small pamphlet electrified Jews across Europe with a different vision of the future.

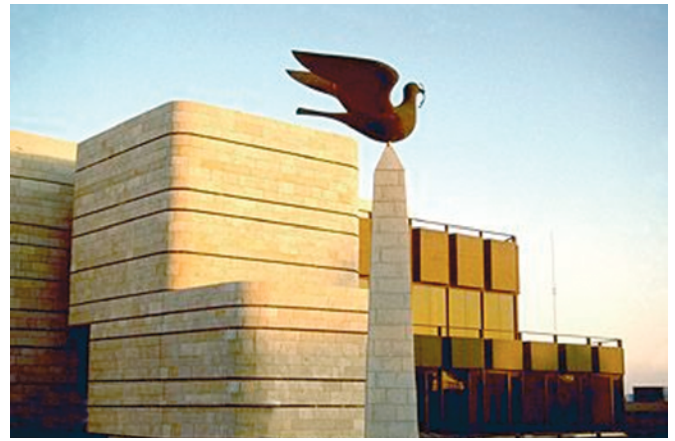
Rebuffed by European leaders, Herzl established the Zionist Organisation in 1897. For the next 50 years, Zionists fought to establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine. On 29 November 1947, the UN proposed a two state solution. Only the Jews accepted this and the State of Israel came into existence in May 1948 despite attempts to strangle it at birth by the Palestinian Arabs. With the end of the British Mandate, the entire Arab world declared war on Israel. By 1949, in the wake of the Arab failure to eliminate Israel, the Palestinian Arabs found their territory annexed by the kings of Transjordan and Egypt. The promised Palestinian state did not come into existence.

For the majority of British progressives including such diverse figures as David Lloyd-George, Aneurin Bevan and Bertrand Russell, Zionism was seen as a movement of affirmative action. The creation of the State of Israel was the securing of a haven for the persecuted where Jews would no longer be history's scapegoat. Progressives viewed Zionist settlement and development of purchased land as a unique egalitarian

experiment. There was a profound admiration for a people which had crawled out of the concentration camps to build a state out of sand dunes.

Today, many Zionists differentiate between a revolutionary phase which ended in 1948 and a post-revolutionary Zionism whose task now is to correct the distortions that have occurred along the way including a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. It is all too easy to forget that the Jordanians, having unilaterally annexed the West Bank in 1948 only renounced their own territorial claim to it in the late 1980s. The Palestinian Arabs fared no better in Gaza – itself annexed by Egypt in 1948. In both Gaza and the West Bank, Palestinian national aspirations, under Arab rule, were set aside and economic development was stifled.

Despite all the conflict and terror of the last sixty years, the vast majority of Israelis accept the right of the Palestinians to national self-determination in their own sovereign state alongside Israel. It is their aspiration that a State of Israel can live in harmony with a democratic Palestinian state, as its peaceful neighbour.



Dove of Peace Statue – Jerusalem

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Israel's place in the Middle East



The Objectives of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel

- Maximise support for the State of Israel within the Liberal Democrats and Parliament
- Develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect between the Liberal Democrats and the Jewish community
- Support and promote policies which lead to peace and security for Israel in the context of a comprehensive and lasting Middle East peace settlement.
- To encourage a broad understanding of Israel's unique political situation as the only democracy in the Middle East.

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