

Israel: Consequences of 'uniqueness'

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"If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and
which will not,
Speak then to me."

--Shakespeare, Macbeth, I, 3

WHY did the creation of Israel engender such deep but opposing emotions in the Islamic world and the West, leading to Arab wars against Israel and Israeli wars against its Arab neighbours, producing tensions that have poisoned relations between Islam and the West, and, now, arguably, pushing the United States into a direct occupation of two Islamicate countries?

The Zionists claim that Israel is a "normal" state, like India, Iraq, or Indonesia. They equate their struggle to establish a Jewish state in Palestine with the movements for national liberation in Asia, Africa and elsewhere during the twentieth century. The hostility of Arab and Islamic peoples to Israel, they claim, is motivated by their anti-Semitism, a hatred of Jews implanted by Islam itself. In recent years, this hostility has also been explained as the result of an Arab or Islamic envy of Israeli democracy.

We face a difficult choice here between Israeli and Arab normalcy. If Israeli statehood is normal, then it follows that there is perversity in the Islamic opposition to it. On the other hand, if Israel is not a normal state -- like India, Iraq, or Indonesia -- then we are justified in investigating this lack of normality, or "uniqueness," and probing into its consequences. It may turn out that Islamic hostility to Israel did not proceed from perversity but, instead, is a legitimate response to the "unique" conditions surrounding Israel's creation.

This Zionist claim to normalcy -- that Israel belongs to the same species of states as India, Iraq, or Indonesia -- is based on two superficial similarities. First, Israel was created as an independent state out of Palestine, a British colony since 1917. Second, after 1945, some of the Jews in Palestine took up arms against the British to force them out of Palestine. On the basis of these partial truths, the Israelis claim that Zionism was a nationalist movement aimed at liberating Palestine from the British occupiers. Incidentally, the Palestinians are completely missing from this narrative about Jewish statehood in Palestine.

This claim is not tenable: one intransigent fact militates against it. The Jews who created the state of Israel in Palestine were not indigenous to Palestine. Indeed, more than 90 percent of them were settlers from Europe, having entered Palestine after its conquest by the British in 1917. In the 1940s, the European Jews had a legitimate claim to our sympathy, but, as Europeans, they had no legitimate nationalist claim to statehood in Palestine. In other words, Israel is a "unique" case of nation building.

Sadly, the Jews of Europe could not have staked a nationalist claim to any part of Europe either. They did not constitute a majority in any of the territories which they shared with other Europeans. This was the unstated problem the nationalist Jews confronted in Europe during the 1890s. The oppressed nations in Europe could stake a valid claim to sovereign statehood. Not so the Jews: they may have been a distinct people, and some of them were still oppressed, but they were not a nation. In order to become "normal" -- that is, in order to transform themselves into a European nation -- the Jews of Europe would first have to create a Jewish majority in some part of Europe. This path of "normalisation," however, was not open to Europe's Jews. It would be opposed. Indeed, it would have amounted to courting disaster.

Nevertheless, there would be poetic justice in the creation of a Jewish state in Europe. After all, the Jews were a European people; the history of their continuous presence in Europe goes back to the time of the ancient Greeks. Since the Europeans Jews -- as minorities -- have historically faced persecution, and, under the Nazis, many Europeans participated in a fiendish attempt to exterminate them, one can argue that it was Europe's moral responsibility to accommodate the Jews as a nation inside Europe. The historical wrongs done to a segment of the European population should have been corrected by Europeans inside the geographical boundaries of Europe. At least, this might have been the right thing to do. But when has Europe shown magnanimity of this order?

II

UNABLE to stake a nationalist claim in Europe, those European Jews who sought "normalisation" as a nation had another idea. After all, this was the nineteenth century, the age of colonisation and of settler-colonialism. If the British and the French could establish settler-colonies in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Algeria, among other places, why not the Jews of Europe?

In its early stages, during the 1890 and 1900s, when the project to create a Jewish state was being broached in some Jewish circles of Europe, several locations for this state were considered. Although Palestine was his first choice, at various times Theodore Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, was willing to settle for Uganda or Madagascar. Earlier, others had scouted Surinam, Argentina, Missouri, and New York! However, Palestine won easily. It would appeal to Jewish emotions associated with religious Zionism, and the Messianic Christians would support the idea of a Jewish return for their own eschatological reasons.

If political Zionism does not qualify as a movement for national liberation, was it a scheme for establishing a colonial-settler state similar to those being established or consolidated in the same era? I will argue that it was, but with two differences that make Israel rather unique among states of this species. Unlike the other colonial-settler states, Israel was not the creation of another state ethnically allied to it. Israel had no mother country. A Jewish state did not yet exist. Indeed the Zionist movement sought to create such a state; this would be its end point, not its point of departure. Secondly, there was an important difference in the goals of the colonial-settlers in Africa or Australia and the political Zionists. The former intended to expropriate the natives so that they could use them as cheap labour on the lands they would expropriate. In other words, they did not intend to expel the natives from their colonies. On the other hand, the Zionists intended to expropriate the Palestinians and remove them from Palestine. They wanted a Palestine without the Palestinians; this was their goal, not the serendipitous consequence of their settlement activity. In its conception, then, Zionism was a colonial-settler project with a difference.

This "unique" project had several vital implications. First, in the absence of a Jewish mother country, the Zionists had to find a surrogate, a Western power that would use its military to implement their colonial-settler project. This would not be too hard to find. For more than two hundred years several Western powers -- in league with Christian messianic groups -- had worked on various schemes to persuade the Jews of Europe to establish a Jewish state in the Levant, a state that would serve as the staging post for their colonial ambitions in that region and farther East. Wisely, the Jews rejected these overtures, suspecting

The Islamists expect to turn this into a broader war against the United States fought on Islamic territory. It is likely that the United States will deliver this too with an attack on Syria or Iran. Prodded by its neoconservative ideologues, the Bush administration is eager to take on this challenge. They expect to use the 'war against terrorism' to restructure the Islamic world, modernize (read: neutralize) Islam, defeat the Islamists, and create a new and deeper system of clientage. The Islamists expect to defeat the United States on their home turf, as the Vietnamese had done a generation before. At this point, it is hard to predict where the chips will fall -- or what unintended consequences this will produce for the United States, Israel, and the Islamic world.

that they were traps to get them out of Europe and into greater trouble. However, the emergence of political Zionism in the late nineteenth century turned the tables. Starting in 1897, after the First Zionist Congress, the Zionists began courting the powers to take on their cause.

Their efforts were directed primarily at Britain, the greatest colonial power of that era. Success in this venture came almost exactly twenty years after the First Zionist Congress, in the shape of the Balfour Declaration of November 1917. This document stated that His Majesty's Government "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object." In fulfillment of this commitment, the British created the mandate (euphemism for colony) of Palestine. Under the terms of this mandate, duly approved by the Council of League of Nations in July 1922, the British administration in Palestine would work with the Zionist organisation to "secure the co-operation of all Jews who are willing to assist in the establishment of the Jewish National home." Thanks to British support, the Zionist project was in motion.

The Zionists converted the absence of a Jewish mother country into an advantage. Political Zionism appealed to the West for at least three reasons: messianic Christians saw the Jewish return as a prelude to the Second Coming; Western powers were eager to acquire control over the Middle East because of its strategic value; and the West was still animated by an antipathy to Islam. In September 1922, the US Congress passed a resolution endorsing the Balfour Declaration. When British support for the creation of a Jewish state wavered in the 1940s -- coincidentally, just when British power was being superseded -- the United States stepped into the breach, thanks to Jewish votes, money and influence in that country. The Western sponsorship of Zionism would evoke historical memories in the Islamic world. In time, many Muslims would come to see the creation of Israel as the return of the Crusaders, an escalation of Western Christendom's campaign to undermine their faith and civilisation. This was a dynamic that contained the seeds of a clash of civilisations.

The goal of a Jewish state in Palestine with a Jewish population had an unavoidable corollary. As the Jews entered Palestine, the Palestinians would have to be "transferred" out of Palestine. As early as 1895, Theodore Herzl had figured this out in an entry in his diary: "We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country." Others took a more direct approach: "As soon as we have a big settlement here we'll seize the land, we'll become strong, and then we'll take care of the Left Bank. We'll expel them from there, too. Let them go back to the Arab countries." At some point, when a dominant Jewish presence had been established in Palestine, and the Palestinians had departed or been marginalised, the British could end their mandate to make room for the emergence of a Jewish state in Palestine.

This plan ran into two problems.



The Palestinians would not cooperate: they refused to leave and very few were willing to sell their lands. As a result, in 1948, the year that Israel was created, nearly all of Palestine's "penniless population" was still in place. In addition, more than fifty years after the launching of political Zionism, the Jewish settlers owned only seven percent of the lands in Palestine, not the best lands either. During the Second World War, the Zionists ran into a problem with the British too. In order to rally Arab support during the war, in 1939 the British decided to limit Jewish immigration into Palestine to 75,000 over the next five years. However, these problems would not derail the Zionist project. The Zionists would achieve under the fog of war what they had failed to achieve through money and discriminatory policies.

In cooperation with the British colonial authorities, the Zionists had been establishing since 1918 a parallel government in Palestine, consisting of a network of Jewish organisations that brought in Jewish settlers, acquired Palestinian lands, organised Jewish settlements, supported Jewish businesses, and established Jewish educational institutions. In addition, as early as 1920, the Zionists had set up the Haganah, a grass-roots military organisation. Fifteen years later, the Haganah consisted of 10,000 mobilised men and 40,000 reservists, equipped with imported and locally manufactured weapons. When the British refused to lift the restrictions on Jewish immigration after the war, the Jewish military organisations started a campaign of terror against them. Partly in response to this terror, the British announced their premature departure from Palestine before the conflict they had spawned could be resolved.

The Zionists found their opportunity in the British loss of nerve. On May 14, 1948, on the termination of the British mandate in Palestine, they declared the emergence of the Jewish state of Israel under a UN partition plan. Although the Jews in Palestine owned only seven percent of the land, the UN plan assigned 55 percent of Palestine to Israel. The Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states decided to resist the UN partition plan. But the ranks of the Palestinian resistance had been decimated before by the British, and the Arab armies were poorly equipped, poorly led, and their leaders lacked nerve and commitment. They were decisively defeated. In the process, the Zionists occupied 78 percent of Palestine, and 800,000 Palestinians were expelled or left their homes under duress. Israel, Mark I, had arrived in the Middle East, a Jewish state in Palestine with only ten percent of its Palestinian population.

III

THE dynamics that brought Israel into existence, and no less the consequences it had already produced, indicate that Israel, Mark I, would be only the first stage in the unfolding of the Zionist project. A dialectic now existed, with Israel and its Western sponsors on one side and the Palestinians and the Islamic world on the other, that would produce a widening circle of consequences.

The creation of Israel had thrown a spanner in the wheel of Islamic history. In the aftermath of the First World War, the Western powers had dismantled the most powerful Islamic state -- indeed the Core Islamic state -- by instigating and supporting the still marginal forces of Arab nationalism. At the same time, even as they were using Arab nationalist feelings, they had made plans to fracture Arab unity by creating a multiplicity of Arab fiefdoms, each of them subject to Western powers. Adding insult to injury, the Western powers also worked with the Jews to establish a Jewish state in a segment of the Islamic heartland. This restructuring of the Islamic world, imposed by Western powers, would not be easily swept under the rug of time. Indeed, the creation of Israel alone was pregnant with consequences, much of it yet to unfold.

Quite apart from Israeli ambitions in the region, the logic of the Israeli state would almost inevitably propel it to rapid demographic growth, military dominance and expansionism. At the time of its founding in 1949, Israel contained only 5.6 percent of the world's Jewish population. In order to justify its creation as the world's only Jewish state, Israel would have to attract more Jews, perhaps even a majority of the world's Jews. Israel's small population -- relative to that of its Arab neighbours -- also called for a rapid influx of Jewish settlers. Then there were the temptations of success: imagine what we can do if we brought a third or a half of the world's Jewish population into the region.

The first large influx of Jews, doubling Israel's population over the next five years, came from the Arab countries. In large part, this was inevitable. The Arab Jews were migrating to greener pastures; Arab defeat in 1948 and the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands provoked hostility towards Jews in Arab countries; and Israel encouraged and a facilitated their departure.

In addition, given the very high educational levels of Jewish settlers (especially those drawn from Europe and the United States), the reparations from Germany, the financial contributions of world Jewry, and grants and loans from Western countries, Israel would soon acquire the characteristics of a developed country whose capabilities

in science and technology would rival the best in the world. In itself, this enormous disparity between an advanced Israel and mostly backward Arab countries would tempt Israel to seek military solutions to its conflict with its Arab neighbours. Indeed, Israel had within a decade built a military capability that could defeat any combination of Arab states. Finally, Israel had acquired a nuclear arsenal by the late 1960s -- with French technology -- thus securing the Samson option against any potential Arab threat to its security.

At the same time, Israel would face hostility from Arab states that had gained independence under the aegis of Arab nationalism. This was inevitable. The creation of Israel was an affront to Islamic peoples, in particular to Arabs. In Israel's victory, the Muslims had lost lands that had been Islamic since the first century of Islam. Further, the Arabs feared that if allowed to consolidate itself, Israel, with Western support, would seek to dominate the region with new rounds of expansionary wars. In the climate of the Cold War, the Arab nationalist states had reasons to believe that they had a chance to roll back the insertion of Israel into Arab lands. In other words, the creation of Israel also charted, inevitably, a history of hostility between this state and its neighbours.

Whether in response to this Arab hostility or using it as an excuse -- as some would argue -- for deepening its assault on the Arabs, Israel would seek a new "mother country" to replace Britain. This time, it would turn to the United States. It was a natural choice, given the preeminence of the United States, and its large and influential Jewish population. It would appear that American commitment to Israel



Israeli withdrawal from Gaza

was not strong at first, if measured by the volume of its military and economic assistance to Israel. Israel sought to change this by demonstrating its strategic value to the United States. This happened in 1967, when in a pre-emptive war it simultaneously defeated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. The defeat of Egypt and Syria, the two leading Arab nationalist states, both allied to the Soviet Union, persuaded the US to enter into a deeper partnership with Israel, one that would only grow with time, as Israel acquired greater influence over decision-making in the United States, and as US backing for Israel would create Islamic hostility against the US.

Just as importantly, this second military defeat of the Arabs produced a new Israel. This was Israel, Mark II, now in occupation of 100 percent of the former British mandate of Palestine; this included the new territories of Gaza and the West Bank with 1.1 million Palestinians. Inevitably, Israeli ambitions rose to match the new opportunities created by the war of 1967. Immediately, plans were set in motion to make the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza permanent. Israel began to appropriate Palestinian

lands in the occupied territories. It established fortified settlements all over the territories, in control of the main water reservoirs, and sitting on hilltops overlooking Palestinian villages.

After facing yet another defeat in 1973, Egypt broke ranks with the Arab states and recognised Israel in exchange for the return of the Sinai and an annual American subsidy. This capitulation of the core Arab country sounded the death knell of Arab nationalism; it was also the signal for Israel to expand its military operations. In June 1981 Israeli jets destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor under construction in Osirak. A year later, it invaded Lebanon, occupied Western Beirut, laid siege to Palestinian refugee camps, and forced the exist of the Palestinian resistance from Lebanon. During the Israeli siege, the Phalangists, a Lebanese Christian militia allied to Israel, massacred 3,000 Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

At around the same time, in 1982, the World Zionist Organisation, published a report in its official organ, Kivunim, urging Israel to annex the West Bank and Gaza, reoccupy Sinai, convert Jordan into a Palestinian state, expel all Palestinians west of the River Jordan, and split up the Arab states into ethnic and religious micro-states. In order to dominate and control these micro-states, Israel would build garrisons on their borders, military outposts for projecting their power over these states. In addition, these states would be policed by local militias drawn from ethnic minorities in their population -- like the Christian militia created by Israel in Southern Lebanon. Once executed, this plan would establish Israel as the dominant power in the Middle East, independent of the United States. What this plan reveals is the reach of the dialectic inaugurated by the creation of Israel in 1948. In the 1980s, the World Zionist Organisation was urging Israel to take steps to dominate the region on its own.

The attacks of 9-11, the American invasion of Iraq, Israel/American plans for attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, and American plans for restructuring the region, suggest that the dialectic that began with the rise of

visible force.

Apart from America's strategic interest in the Middle East's oil -- always a backdrop to US policies in the region -- the recent evolution of this policy towards a massive programme for restructuring the Middle East owes much to two forces long in the making but which gained center stage with the election of George W Bush. On the one hand, these are the forces of Christian evangelists in the United States, who have derived strength from the creation of Israel and its victories over the Arabs, which they see as a necessary prelude to the Second Coming. As the largest voting bloc in the Republic Party, they are now the most powerful American supporters of Israeli Likudniks, seeking the expulsion of Palestinians from all of Israel. The Zionists have not only welcomed this support but worked to deepen their alliance with the Evangelists.

The second group of actors -- small but influential -- are the neoconservatives in the Bush administration who have for long, but especially since the early 1990s, urged the United States to use its military dominance to prevent the emergence of a rival power. Many of the most influential neoconservatives, both inside and outside the Bush administration, are Jews (but so are many of the most articulate members of the left in America) who have been involved with right-wing Zionist think tanks in the United States and Israel. Some of these neoconservatives were advising the Netanyahu government in 1996 to make "a clean break" from the Oslo Agreement. After 9-11, the neoconservatives became the principal intellectual backers of America's invasion of Iraq and the larger plan to restructure the Middle East. Could it be that this represents the belated unfolding of the Kivunim plan, with the dismemberment of Iraq an imminent possibility now? There is one difference, however. At least for now, Israel is taking a back seat.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, like the decision of the Young Turks in October 1914 to enter the First World War against the Allied Powers, mark a new historical turning point for the relations between the West and the Islamicate world. The Turkish entry in the war offered Britain the opportunity to settle the age-old Middle Eastern Question. It invaded the Middle East to dismantle the Ottoman Empire, and laid the foundations of a Jewish state and a system of colonies and client states in the region. Now, after 9-11, the United States enters the region, in strategic partnership with Israel, to restructure the region. This is a pre-emptive restructuring before the anti-imperialist forces in the region gain ascendancy.

At this point, there are few who are predicting with any confidence what will be the benefits and costs of this attempted restructuring; or what will be its unintended outcomes. The law of unintended consequences works surreptitiously, always hidden from the gaze of the stronger parties in a conflict whose power and hubris blind them to the resilience and force of the human spirit. It is unlikely that even the most prescient Zionists had foreseen in 1948 -- after they had created a Jewish state with a 90 percent Jewish population -- that the Palestinians would still be around some fifty-seven years later, causing existential anxiety, and still raising questions about the legitimacy of Israel as it is presently constituted. Incidentally, Israel too was an unintended consequence of Hitler's plan to exterminate the Jews. There would have been no Israel without the Jews who fled the anti-Semitic horrors unleashed by the Nazis in Europe.

In mounting their terrorist attack on the United States, most likely the Islamist radicals were not expecting this to sting the United States into a hasty revision of its policies towards the Islamic world. It seems more likely that what the United States did was what these Islamists wanted it to do -- to invade the Islamic heartlands. The Islamists expect to turn this into a broader war against the United States fought on Islamic territory. It is likely that the United States will deliver this too with an attack on Syria or Iran. Prodded by its neoconservative ideologues, the Bush administration is eager to take on this challenge. They expect to use the 'war against terrorism' to restructure the Islamic world, modernize (read: neutralize) Islam, defeat the Islamists, and create a new and deeper system of clientage. The Islamists expect to defeat the United States on their home turf, as the Vietnamese had done a generation before. At this point, it is hard to predict where the chips will fall -- or what unintended consequences this will produce for the United States, Israel, and the Islamic world.

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