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The Zionisms of the 20th Century: Between Context and Contingency
Denis Charbit

Being for some the product of two world wars in general and of the Holocaust in particular, and for others a product of British imperialism, the State of Israel most often elicits either complete loyalty or absolute condemnation. Sometimes equated with a form of colonialism, if not racism, Zionism certainly is not an object of dispassionate study. However, these entrenched attitudes hinder what is essential: seeing and constructing Zionism as a historical object, assessing the role of contexts, the weight of circumstances, and the impact of policies decided outside the Middle East. This is a relatively rare approach, and Denis Charbit takes here.

In an essay that caused an uproar when published in 2003, the historian Tony Judt justified the creation of a binational State in Israel/Palestine by proclaiming Zionism to be anachronistic. In his view, it was a typical nineteenth-century idea, which, having somehow wandered into the twentieth century, would, wrongly, survive into the twenty-first.\(^1\)

However, the anachronism attributed to Zionism seems little more pertinent and heuristic than the edifying position adopted in national-religious circles, according to which Abraham and Moses are not merely the fathers of the Hebrew nation but the original Zionists; the former for having, on divine injunction, left Ur in Chaldea for the Promised Land, the latter for elevating this individual experience of departure to the collective level, leading the Exodus from Egypt to hand down a Law to his people as a prelude to the conquest of the land of Israel.

This argument does not merely confer on an immigration movement the eminent dignity of inscription into a valorous genealogy stretching back to the very origin of Judaism, a dignity which persists to this day in calling the passage from exile to Israel “Alyah” (literally, “ascent” or “elevation”); it also aims to assimilate Zionism with a miraculous intervention, to remove it from the historical plane and to align it within the re-enactment and reproduction of Abraham’s journey.\(^2\) With other means and to other ends, and to better support his political claim, Tony Judt isolates Zionism from History and from its century, thus passing the fatal sentence of anachronism on it.

On the surface, these two visions of Zionism appear contradictory; one praises it to the skies while the other treats it with scorn. However, despite their diametrically opposed points of departure, both strip Zionism of its contingent and contextual component in terms of both Jewish and universal history, of which it is the convergent product.

\(^{(1)}\) Judt, Tony “Israel : the Alternative”, *The New York Review of Books*, 50, October 23, 2003. In 2008, the Israeli historian Schlomo Sand took up the offensive. After Zionism, which, according to Tony Judt, was no longer in keeping with the times, the Jewish people’s turn to be in the dock: nothing but a recent invention; and out of place in Palestine, as today’s Jews largely originated in the Berber or Khazar kingdoms. Sand, Schlomo. *The Invention of the Jewish People*. London: Verso Books, 2010.

Is it possible to escape this unappealing choice without being suspected of being at best naïve, and at worst manipulative? This is the challenge we address here: to demonstrate how Zionism does indeed belong to its century and is in keeping with the times.

The Century of Zionisms

As with every political experiment, Zionism today exhibits dated and outmoded aspects. It has faced trials, contradictions, and tensions which required adjustments, corrections, and questioning. This is a reality that Israelis experience day-to-day, as they have been responsible for reducing it to the essential: providing a form of legitimacy to a Jewish and democratic state in Israel. In the process, they have relegated to the museum of History institutions, practices and convictions once viewed as inherent to Zionism.

Neither do we wish to deny the impact of the nineteenth century on its emergence, as this would be absurd. Zionism assuredly owes much to emancipation, romanticism and the “Spring of Nations.” Nevertheless, towards the end of the nineteenth century the open and democratic dimension of European nationalism was yielding to an increasingly anti-liberal and anti-Semitic tendency. As a result, following the various visionary outlines of Jewish (proto-)nationalism drawn by Joseph Salvador and Moses Hess, and paralleling the models of Ahad Haam and Martin Buber in which Israel was envisioned as an ideal of social and cultural regeneration, Zionism was also conceived and outlined as a political solution by Leon Pinsker and Theodor Herzl. Dictated by urgency and gathering dangers, Pinsker and Herzl’s call for the creation of a Jewish state aimed to provide protection to Jews threatened by anti-Semitism, which – both were convinced – had not exhausted its murderous potential.

Zionism’s destiny in the twentieth century, far from being a historical enigma, was linked to the great events that gave the century its light and its darkness, its high points and low points. Unless one subscribes to the conspiracy theory derived from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which sees in everything the controlling hand of Israel, Zionism was the cause neither of the First nor of the Second World War, any more than it later brought about decolonization, the collapse of the Soviet Union, or globalization.

We explicitly refer to these three major events and two historical processes which have marked the century because they have, directly or indirectly, altered the course of Zionism and of Israel. We will endeavor to show this by pointing to a certain plasticity in Zionism (contrary to the thesis of an evil or providential plan leaving no room for chance or improvisation) – a plasticity that has allowed Israel and the Jewish people to find a place, however precarious or contested, in the concert of nations and states.

(1) Even this definition, which at first sight appears to be minimalist, is not self-evident, including to those who use it, because of the multiple interpretations it allows. See Neuberger, Benyamin, “État juif et démocratique: essai de définition,” Les Temps modernes 652 (January-April 2009): 19-47.

(2) The intellectual origins of Zionism have been delineated by Shmuel Almog in Zionism and the Rise of a New Jewish Consciousness (New York/Jerusalem: St. Martin’s Press/The Magnes Press/The Hebrew University, 1987).

As with many projects born in the first half of the century, Zionism was conceived and experienced as a revolution that represented a new direction to Jewish history. We will attempt to define what was revolutionary about the Zionist project, and then to explain why the tendency to form a common front that is characteristic of this type of cause did little to prevent, or even reduce, the multiplicity of currents and the interplay of factions echoed to this day in the Israeli political system.

This proliferation contradicts the thesis of a single dogmatic vision, because if Zionism was certainly in keeping with its time by espousing this revolutionary vein, it was also motivated, and probably balanced, by a deep desire for the normalization of the Jewish condition, which also implied a capacity for pragmatic adaptation. It is not that Zionism was a moderate cause; rather, coupled with other factors, it was a tug of war between these two polar imperatives (“the new Jewish man” and “a people like any other”) that allowed the neutralization of the messianic and radical tendencies at work in Zionism and prevented a recourse to Terror to bring about the advent of the “new Jewish man” it invoked.

We will conclude this historical study of the Jewish national project up to the creation of the State of Israel by examining the difficulty of offering a nuanced reading of it in a context today that is hardly conducive to this type of a perspective.

Reshaped Empires

Founded by Theodor Herzl (d. 1904) in 1897, the Zionist movement operated in a vacuum until the outbreak of the First World War. A few thousand immigrants to Palestine, a few plots of land acquired and farmed, institutions and local branches in several countries meeting in congress every two years: this was all that the movement had to show. However much Herzl wanted to take a diplomatic approach. If his intuition was correct it bore few results: a few polite meetings with the great men of the day had little chance of convincing any power, major or otherwise, to offer its support to putting the Zionist movement on track to become a recognized and respected political actor in the international arena.1

The First World War presented all self-determination movements with an opportunity to take their demands to the next level. From Ireland to Poland, from Jewish to Arab nationalism, all of them had to commit themselves to either the Triple Entente or the Triple Alliance. Initially, the Zionist movement had chosen neutrality so as not to embarrass its members on either side of the front line, notably Britain and Germany, but Zionist abstention became untenable once the theatre of military operations had spread to the Middle East. It now became necessary to choose a camp, not on the basis of the contradictory patriotic sensibilities of Zionist militants, but of the possible consequences of the war, and an evaluation of the new balance of power that it would call into play. Would Great Britain and France defeat Germany and its Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman allies? Haim Weizmann was convinced that it would. For the benefit of the cause in which he had become a leading figure since Herzl’s death, he urged the Zionist movement to side with the British in order to reap future benefits. It was not merely a matter of choosing the right ally, but also of the considerable political consequences arising from the defeat of the opposing coalition – in this case, the fall of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, as it would have lasting consequences for millions of Jews living in the former, and for Palestine, which was located in the latter.

(1) A British offer to the Zionist movement to create an autonomous Jewish entity in Uganda to take in Jews from Russia was abandoned a few months later, and reflects the lack of confidence and interest on the part of the British government.
Upon the demise of the dual monarchy sealed by the treaties of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (September 10, 1919) and Trianon (June 4, 1920), the independent entities established in central Europe exposed the Jews to all the vicissitudes troubling the newly-founded nations. While their protection was more or less guaranteed by the Habsburg dynasty, which had proclaimed their emancipation, the status of the Jews, whether recognized as a national minority or as citizens, turned out to be so precarious that they were soon singled out as the culprits in the dysfunctions that began to destabilize these new political systems.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as proclaimed by the Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920), completely redrew the political map of the Mashriq. As compensation for Sharif Hussein’s call to Arab insurrection and its actual contribution to General Allenby’s military effort, British diplomacy was committed to supporting the emancipation of the Arab provinces from Ottoman domination. This was the subject of the correspondence between Hussein, who was also guardian of the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina, and the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, between July 1915 and March 1916. Two years later, on November 2, 1917, in tandem with military gains on the ground, Arthur James Balfour, then Foreign Secretary, published his famous Balfour Declaration expressing the benevolent support of the British government for the founding of a “national home for the Jewish people.”

With the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, as with the Balfour Declaration, the British could claim to be in step with President Wilson’s Fourteen Point memorandum, dated January 8, 1918, which opposed any territorial gains by allied countries carved from their military conquests. Both Arab and Zionist aspirations provided the British with convenient cover, an alibi that scarcely masked the government’s fundamental ambition: to turn the Middle East a zone of influence. Had they not, in May 1916, signed the secret Sykes-Picot agreements to settle the future of the region as they envisaged it after military conquest and the resulting fall of the Ottoman Empire? Allying with the Arabs and inciting them to revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1915 was not motivated by any British recognition of a right to secession or of the principle of self-determination, but rather constituted a power-grab to replace the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war.

Great Britain was convinced that this alliance would further its interests; and a similar conviction would cause it to become interested, two years later, in the Zionist cause. The same imperial logic was applied in both cases: using a national cause to legitimize its desire for control, if not domination. This self-serving policy does not mean that the Foreign Office was without its ardent and sincere advocates for both causes – such as Lawrence of Arabia and James Balfour himself, who were delighted at having helped to make aspirations of independence compatible with British interests. In the long term, however, this apparent harmonization concealed a contradiction: how could the British contain a demand for nationhood, the initial emergence of which it had supported, along with that nation’s predictable desire for sovereignty within the limits of an autonomy that allowed Britain to maintain its influence? Thus, Great Britain would show little hesitation in changing its tune whenever circumstances required it.

This supremacy of national interest was a temptation in no way limited to imperial power,

1 See Nadine Picaudou, La Décennie qui ébranla le Moyen-Orient (Brussels: Complexe, 1999).
however: Arab and Jewish political leaders had similar concerns. Well aware of the importance of having British support, given Britain’s clout in the international arena, they would prove ready to forsake it at the opportune time, either because they were convinced that an erstwhile ally had become an adversary determined to frustrate their plans, or because they had found an alternative partner. In the same way that the British manipulated the Arab and Jewish national causes to legitimize their domination of the Middle East for as long as possible, the local actors attempted to take advantage of the alliance to protect their interests until the moment of the inevitable breakup.

Another contradiction resulted from the support simultaneously accorded to both causes: the territory claimed by the Zionists formed part of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in which the future kingdom promised to Hussein was to be established. Certainly, this conflict of interests never came to a head thanks to Britain’s decision to turn its back on this budding kingdom (for reasons other than the territory that was to be awarded to the Zionist cause). Failing to form a unitary or federated Arab state, the territorial divisions of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which had until then corresponded to administrative designations (vilayet, sandjak, pachalik), were now dissolved in order to create political entities separated by borders that were unilaterally drawn up by the British or negotiated with France.¹

Notwithstanding the protests by the Emir Faysal, one of Sharif Hussein’s sons, unified Arab nationalism immediately adapted to this new circumstance, fragmenting into as many local nationalisms as there were newly-created territorial entities (watanyyah) – the overall nationalism (kaomiyyah) having been elevated (in actuality, relegated) to the status of a ritually-affirmed mythical aspiration.² What Hussein had not obtained of a piece was partially compensated by two of these new entities being allocated to his sons Abdallah and Faysal, namely the neighboring states of Transjordan and Iraq.

The imposition of the mandate system to the detriment of a grand unified Arab kingdom over which Britain would, in any event, have exerted its sway, had the effect of restricting the confrontation to the Arab population of Palestine. Yet this would complicate a political solution: the monarch of a great Arab kingdom with such a vast territory might have consented to cede a part of the coastal strip to establish Jewish autonomy, as the 1919 Faysal-Weizmann accord indicates. For the Arab leadership in Palestine, however, this was out of the question.

In this respect, the hostility of Palestinian Arabs to the Zionist aspiration is related to land ownership and migratory and political objectives, and not to the British presence or influence. Britain’s influence would have been welcome if it had supported their cause, as it did for Abdallah in Transjordan or Faysal in Iraq. It is undeniable that the British mandate offered the Zionists propitious political conditions to socially and economically build up the Yishuv without having to directly confront local Arab opposition, a task handled by the Royal army. However, this was the very same, equally imperial Mandate that, under different circumstances a few years later would from 1939 implement numerous repressive measures against clandestine Jewish immigration.

(1) See Philippe Bourmand’s article in the current issue.

(2) Here, we encounter the ambiguity which accompanies the watanyyah from its inception: its formal success (the foundation of nation states, with the exception of that of Palestine) is based on a misalliance, insofar as it was born of territorial divisions imposed by the British. Conversely, the kaomiyyah is adorned with every virtue, first and foremost authenticity, precisely because it does not result from any explicitly foreign influence – and although it has little to show, as evidenced by the failure of attempts at unification between Arab nations, which were in vogue during the 1960s but have since fallen into disfavor.
Zionism: A Form of Colonialism?

Did this alliance with the British turn Zionism into colonialism, as the orientalist Maxime Robinson was the first to affirm? The answer to this question inextricably entangles judgments of facts and of values, as much in one direction as in the other. If one follows the Palestinian and Israeli arguments, the answer is as self-evidently “yes” for the former, as absolutely “no” for the latter. Such contradictory perceptions only highlight the chasm between the two groups’ positions. To the Arab side, Zionism is colonial *per se*, and not merely because Great Britain decisively lent it support: the Jews constituted a European population, foreign to the region, neither Arab nor Muslim, whose political objectives were illegitimate by the very fact that they contradicted the Palestinians’ objectives. The protection afforded the “national homeland for the Jewish people” by Great Britain is reprehensible in Arab eyes, because it created an asymmetry that benefitted the Jews, an advantage which the Palestinian political class would strive to reduce through political and diplomatic pressure, even by a return to violence – in vain.

Can one thus legitimately speak of a colonial situation?

Some of the formal elements of colonialism are certainly present. We do encounter a non-indigenous population aspiring to exert political control to the detriment of the local population and without their consent, and which, in order to achieve its objectives, relies on the authority of a foreign power acting as the home country. Moreover, this foreign power guarantees the freedom to immigrate along with the right to buy land, two measures which Ben Gurion, now the political leader of the Jewish community in Palestine, prized highly, for it was on these two measures that the fate of the Yishuv was hinged. The future of any political demand (whether in the form of autonomy for a binational or unitary state) was closely linked to the Yishuv’s capacity to constitute a sufficiently substantial core, from a demographic and territorial point of view, for it to be considered irreversible and irremovable by the international community generally, and by its Arab neighbors in particular.

And indeed, between 1922 and 1944, the Jewish population increased from 11 to 30%, while landholding in 1947 accounted for 6% of mandate Palestine. Finally, as in a colonial situation, after a period of overlapping interests between Jews and Britons, between “colonists” and “home country,” the two ended up parting ways and entering into open conflict – which occurred in early May 1939 with the publication of the draconian White Book. Jewish immigration for the next five years was limited to 75,000 (plus 25,000 refugees); any immigration beyond this was subject to the prior consent of the Arabs of Palestine, i.e., out of the question. All sales of land to Jews were severely restricted, if not outright prohibited, in 95% of Palestine, while on the political level, the White Book required the formation of an independent state within ten years, based on demographic realities on the ground; in other words, what it prescribed denied the Jewish population any right to self-determination.

Other historical elements detract from the pertinence of the analogy of Judeo-Arab

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(2) Yishuv: The body of Jewish residents living in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel.

(3) Here are the figures in absolute terms: in 1922, 668, 258 Arabs (Muslims, Christians, and others) and 83,790 Jews are counted; for 1944, the numbers were 1,210,922 Arabs and 528,702 Jews. These figures are taken from the *General Monthly Bulletin of Statistics. See Great Britain and Palestine, 1915-1945*, Information Papers, 20, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1946, 61. The acreage acquired by the KKL, the landholding organization for the Zionist movement and for private individuals of Jewish extraction, totals 1,690,000 dunams (720,000 and 970,000 dunams respectively, i.e., 1,000 km²); see Israel Cohen, *Le Mouvement sioniste* (Paris: La Terre retrouvée, 1946), 246-247.
coexistence as a colonial situation, however: although only a minority, there had always been a Jewish population in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem and in the sacred cities of Hebron, Tiberiad, and Safed.¹

The choice of Palestine was neither whim nor happenstance, still less was it motivated by economic considerations related to natural resources. Rather, it resulted from an age-old attachment cultivated by a religious and cultural tradition that no colonial power could ever have used to justify its conquests. Does this not constitute a qualitative difference from French and British colonialism, which was indifferent to the conquered territory so long as its annexation added to its power? Objectively, the home country in a colonial situation can do without the contested territory, precisely because it does not occupy a central place, but merely constitutes an appendage, while in the case of Zionism, the territory of Palestine is the only territory in play, corresponding to the home country, whether one defines its dimensions as limited or extensive (Greater Israel). Finally, the so-called colonists were rarely transported by the British home country; it found them already living there, then opened the gates of Palestine to the Jews of whom Europe wished to rid itself. No one had sent them; it would be more accurate to say they had been expelled.

Those who chose Palestine rather than join the many who settled in the United States, came not to enrich themselves at the expense of the locals, but to escape being trapped between the reality of humiliation and the prospect of persecution. They left Europe for good and warded off the misfortunes they were leaving by participating in a unique experiment – as trying as it was exalting – of social, cultural, and political renewal. They were not motivated by economic gain – in fact quite the contrary. Zionism’s social project aimed to break with the traditional Jewish occupations: the pioneers threw themselves body and soul into “conquest of the land,” in other words, the agricultural work from which they had been barred in the Diaspora from time immemorial. As much as achievement of the new political status sought by Zionism seemed distant and conditioned on diplomatic factors over which the Zionists had little control, the social and political conditions could be immediately achieved, and depended only on the will of the candidates and the support they received. Those Zionists who were believers in “Hebrew labor” have been accused of seeking to restrict agricultural jobs to Jewish workers and excluding Arab laborers – not exploiting them.²

As the years of the Mandate had not been a period of recession or pauperization for the population of Palestine as a whole, Palestinian grievances focused little on economics, but on Zionism’s political aims and the results of the competition if Israel were to prevail after the mandate and succeed, completely or partially, in imposing its objectives. In this respect, the partition plan proposed by the UN appeared to be an equitable solution, as it took into account the two competing aspirations.³ Contrary to prevailing conceptions,

(1) This indigenous Jewish elite did not take the destiny of the Yishuv in hand, but ceded it to the militant, energetic leadership of the pioneering generation of the second Alyah who had immigrated from Russia and Poland.

(2) Though the clamor for “Hebrew labor” was an influential slogan, which expressed the will to create an autonomous Jewish society relying on its own resources, it is worth recalling that this struggle ended in serious failure: Jewish bosses generally turned a deaf ear to this demand, preferring to rely on cheaper Arab labor, which was considered to be more skilled and efficient. Moreover, the employers’ opposition to national protectionism with respect to labor allowed continued coexistence of the two communities in the economic realm at the same time as the political rift was widening. See Anita Shapira, Hamaavak hanikhzav: avoda ivrit 1929-1939. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1977.

(3) This is still the case today, as the international consensus, in 1947 as in 2009, is based on the same principle of “two states for two peoples.” However, the size of the Palestinian territory, now reduced to 22% of Mandate Palestine, has since changed.
encouraged by the adventure of the kibbutzim and the growth of the first Hebraic urban center, Tel-Aviv, bordering the Palestinian city of Jaffa, public and private Jewish landholdings never accounted for more than 6% of Mandate Palestine. In this respect, Palestinian dispossession is a myth.1

One can presumably detect traces of “orientalism,” paternalism, or suspicion in the attitude and opinions of the Jews in Palestine, but not a colonialist ideology. And it is not Theodor Herzl’s comment on the rampart offered by the Jews in Palestine against the invasion of the barbarians2 that reveals the quintessence of Zionism: it was not Europe that needed Israel, but Israel that had to rely on the West. To this picture, which tempers and balances the colonial analogy, one must add that if there existed a convergence and a complementarity between Zionist “colonists” and British “home country,” their interests were never the same. The initial good will did not last. After the departure of the high commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, the mandate administration quickly grasped the contradictions which this support generated in relation to the Arab population, and implicitly split into two camps, the judeophiles and the arabophiles.3

Although the Yishuv managed to make the most of the Mandate, British involvement in the service of a Jewish national homeland showed little of that atmosphere of complicity, of unqualified support – in short of the structural collusion characteristic of relations between colonial administration and colonists to the detriment of the colonized which lies at the heart of the colonial relation, as described by Albert Memmi in his famous Portraits.4 One did not find in Mandate Palestine a colonial administration deliberately breaking with its objective neutrality toward those it administered in order to deliberately be exclusively at the service of a privileged Jewish population. In Jerusalem as in London, Ben Gurion needed to continuously negotiate with the authorities. He sought continuance of the Mandate, under the protection of which he could continue to build the “State in action,” while under no illusion as to the temporary and ambiguous nature of those bilateral relations.5 The earliest example of this unequal balance of power is, with little doubt, Winston Churchill’s 1922 decision to exclude Transjordan from the area open to Jewish colonization. The Zionist response was disappointed, but resigned.6

This opposition between formal elements congruent with the colonial model, and historical and concrete elements which contradict this thesis, presumably explains why (if the reader will forgive the generalization) it is primarily sociologists who defend assimilating Zionism with colonialism, while historians, who are more sensitive to singularities than to

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1 There were indeed cases of friction when landowners declined to reemploy the Arab sharecroppers who had long worked certain lands. As to expropriations, these were massive after the War of Independence, following the voluntary or forced departure of 700,000 Palestinians, when Israeli authorities took possession of lands belonging to “absent” owners. Any peace treaty between Israelis and Palestinians will necessarily have to include resolution of this problem, including a system of financial compensation.

2 Herzl, The Jewish State, 47.


4 On the privileges of the colonizer in its relations with the colonized and their institutionalization in the colonial system, see Albert Memmi, Portrait du colonisé (following Portrait du colonisateur) (Paris: Payot, 1973, 38).

5 A useful read on the British Mandate period is a work by Tom Segev, One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate (New York: Picador, 2001).

6 The right-wing Zionist theoretician Zeev Jabotinsky called for revising some of the options adopted by the entire Zionist movement (hence the name “revisionist Zionism” given to his ideological current), among which the territorial limits of the Jewish national home. Contrary to the tacit consent which the Zionist movement exhibited in this matter out of political realism, Jabotinsky rejected this territorial amputation and demanded the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and Transjordan. “The Jordan has two banks; this one is ours, the other also.” See Marius Schattner, De Jabotinsky à Shamin (Brussels: Complexe, 1991).
ideal types with variants, tend to be skeptical of a hypothesis that resembles sophistry.¹

Viewing a passing alliance, a valued but short-term advantage, as the essence of the situation, underestimates what was fundamentally a competition between two emergent national movements bent on asserting their authority over the same land, quite apart from the British presence in Palestine. It may, however, be possible to simultaneously admit both theses in a controversy which goes far beyond a mere argument among specialists and where the issues involved – beyond a strict assessment of events stretching back more than 80 years – directly inform the current manifestation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That Zionism is not a colonial project from the point of view of the Jews who were engaged in it does not invalidate the contrary perception of it by Palestinian Arabs, so long as one recognizes that in the struggle opposing Arab and Jewish nationalisms, the game was not rigged, the dice loaded, as with colonialism. The Jewish side undeniably demonstrated a greater capacity for maneuver and pragmatism; and it developed more effective institutional structures and leadership than the Palestinian side.

Having immediately realized that the initial balance of power, numerically as well as geopolitically, was not in their favor, the Zionists ceaselessly sought to address this and to compensate for it by drawing not merely on their commitment to the cause (a *sin qua non*), but also, and imperatively, on the support of a foreign power with imperial ambitions. From Theodor Herzl to Tzipi Livni, the foreign policy of Zionism, then of the State of Israel, has not varied: the Jews cannot operate alone in the international arena. Diplomatic support is indispensable to them, whether from the UK or France, as in the past, or from the United States today. This protection, however, also forces Israel to align itself with the positions adopted by these successive powers, for better and for worse, as did their adversaries supported by the Soviet Union: dependence always has a price. This hardly makes Israel an imperial agent, but only an actor seeking to preserve its specific interests in a strategic equation that it does not control.

This combination of a land whose political future had yet to be finalized, and of a Jewish population in Europe that was subject to the whim of undemocratic regimes, conferred upon Zionism in the interwar years a genuine political significance to Jews in search of a refuge – a political significance, but not necessarily a national one.

On this point, the teleological and determinist view of the Jewish state as stated by Theodor Herzl was mistaken. It is indeed based on the title of his manifesto (*The Jewish State*), and from there traces a straight line leading to the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948. Herzl himself was the first to reduce the official objective by, at the end of the first Zionist Congress, inserting into the program of Basel the need “to establish a national home guaranteed by public law.” This reserve speaks to his consideration of the political system specific to empires based on the coexistence of several national communities within the same state framework.

Woodrow Wilson’s endorsement of the right to self-determination had a major effect on the British decision to support the Zionist movement, although it proved unable to overcome the private reticence of Chaim Weizmann, who, like Theodor Herzl at the Congress of Basel, consented to the Balfour Declaration’s reference to its objective in terms of a “national home for the Jewish people,” not to a state. That caution was presumably dictated by realism and political pragmatism.

¹ One of the “new sociologists,” Gershon Shafir, was the first to examine the validity of this analogy, while the “new historians” have not systematically adopted it. See Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
The major obstacle to a full-blown demand for a state solution was the absence of a Jewish majority, a *sine qua non* for the establishment of a state based on the rule of law, with a viable democratic regime. But there were also others: there were the anti-statist sensibilities of the sundry practical, cultural, socialist, and religious Zionist currents. Each expressed clear reservations about the state, for reasons related to their specific conceptions of their principal task, whether this was the country’s material development, the personal development of the individual and his/her contribution to the community, the Marxist conception of the superstructure, or the supremacy of divine authority.¹

Contrary to received opinion, far from being ignored during the Mandate period, the Arab question contributed to this reticence with respect to the demand for a state, which explains why the period saw so many proposals of a federal type: autonomy, “cantonization,” and even a binational state.² It was at the end of the Second World War that most of the political tendencies around the unitary state re-entered the debate, first over the whole of Palestine, then over part of Palestine, finally leading to the now hegemonic claim of the Jewish state.

**Historical and Discursive Functions of the Holocaust**

Like the debate on the link between Zionism and colonialism, the role of the Second World War, and in particular of the Holocaust, in the political destiny of Zionism is as much an acrimonious argument in public debate as a subject of scholarly research. If it can be demonstrated that the birth of Israel would have been improbable without the Holocaust, the issue would be settled: it would mean the Palestinians paid for a mass murder they never committed. Hence, it is not surprising that the opposing position should seek to dissociate the two events.³

The question of the absence of responsibility on the part of the Palestinians is debatable. A polite form of censorship veils this chapter in the history of the Arab world during the Second World War, which, to various degrees, maintained relations with fascist and Nazi regimes, even if there are strong indications that these were less the result of ideological sympathy than hostility to Great Britain. The mobilization in Bosnia of a Muslim battalion which Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, sent off in person with his best wishes is a matter not entirely devoid of significance. Even if this does not make the Arab world complicit in the genocide (which would be going too far) the claim to innocence, to having kept its hands clean, is simply not credible: the representatives of the Palestinian claim were not cut off from the rest of the world; they were not suspended outside of time.

The link between the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel is always advanced as self-evident. Discovering the scale and horror of the genocide, the international community is portrayed as having voted the partition of Palestine in a burst of moral indignation, a kind of categorical imperative that required them to overcome the tensions and divisions of the Cold War, then at its height. However, there is a dearth of official speeches, private statements, and diplomatic notes to explicitly

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³ The polemic resurfaced in muted fashion with a speech delivered by Barack Obama on June 4, 2009 in Cairo, and Benyamin Netanyaḥu’s response on June 14. The former closely linked the birth of Israel with the atrocity of the Holocaust, to which the latter retorted that it is not the Holocaust which lies at the origin of Israel, but the close, ongoing link of the Jewish people with the land of Israel, even while they were in diaspora.
support the thesis that the Holocaust was the principal, if not the exclusive, motive for UN member states to vote for the partition plan. The very fact that the creation of an Arab State in Palestine was considered to be the counterpart of that of a Jewish State demonstrates that the international community was sensitive to the legitimacy of both claims, and not just the one.

It is important to define the very precise meaning of this link between the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel.\(^1\) Even if we concede that it dictated the decision of the 33 delegations that approved resolution 181 (versus 13 against and 10 abstentions), it cannot be considered the matrix of the war of 1948 and of its dramatic consequences for the Arab refugees of Palestine. Responsibility for the war lies, first and foremost, with those who declared it, before it can be attributed to the nations who voted for the partition plan, or to Israel, which assuredly learned how to live with its results. It is not the partition plan that lies at the origin of the war, but Palestinian refusal to ratify and apply it on the ground.

Whether or not there is a cause and effect relationship between the Holocaust, which decimated over a third of the Jewish population in the world, and the actual foundation of the State of Israel, some advance the hypothesis that the Zionist objective of a sovereign State gained a legitimacy and necessity after the war which was not evident before, including for the Zionist movement itself, whose reticence and reservations concerning the founding of a state we saw earlier. In fact, among the Zionists, the demand for a state came to the fore in response not to the extermination of the Jews but to the provisions of the White Book of May 1939, which, on the political level, foresaw that ten years after its promulgation, a State of Palestine would be founded on the basis of the status quo, that is, an Arab state whose Jewish population would account for only a third of the total, and thus be denied any prospect of development. Contrary to what is generally believed today, it was not compassion or remorse for six million murdered Jews which provided the major, or even minor, impetus for the various chanceries that voted for the resolution. The fierce debates within the various respective foreign ministries clearly reveal the weight of far more down-to-earth preoccupations.

More than reparation or compensation for genocide, more than a sop to the determination of 600,000 Palestinian Jews to gain a sovereign state, for the Soviets the foundation of Israel would bring about the fall of reactionary Arab regimes,\(^2\) while the French were long torn between their desire to oust the British from Palestine and their fear that a favorable vote might kindle disturbances in North Africa.\(^3\) Even once accepted and sanctioned by a vote, the partition principle was not considered settled once and for all by the Foreign Office. It proposed several formulae, including the creation of an authority under the auspices of the UN. It took all President Truman’s resolve to return to the initial objective, a determination in which the extermination of the Jews played little part.\(^4\) As to the British government headed by Clement Attlee, it goes without saying that, from 1944 to 1947, the Holocaust at no time constituted an argument of any weight to deflect hostility to the principle of a Jewish

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state. Finally, if it proved necessary to exert pressure, to discreetly slip a few envelopes to the delegates of certain abstaining countries, this in itself indicates that the “Holocaust effect” did not have the unanimous effect that it is retrospectively reputed to have exerted.

There remains the problem of “displaced persons,” survivors of the camps who would not, or could not, return home, and who explicitly wished to travel to Palestine to rebuild their lives. Without the experience of the ghettos, then of the camps, they probably would not have made this demand. In this respect, although it does not appear that the Holocaust motivated the November 29 vote, it is undeniable that the fate of the survivors aroused universal sympathy in international opinion, once alerted to the fate of the passengers on the *Exodus*.

One must therefore qualify the hypothesis: it was not the extermination of the Jews that had the conjectured impact, but the fate of the survivors, who were barred from Palestine and forced back into camps in Cyprus. These were hardly concentration camps, but it seemed intolerable to deny freedom to these survivors who had been through hell. Thus, it was not the six million murdered Jews who weighed on people’s consciences as much as it was the survivors, who now stood out as an example associating perennial Jewish suffering with the heroism and determination of people who refused to comply, to simply bow to the authorities.

Was it not possible to imagine creating a state either as compensation for past suffering or to protect the Jews from a new catastrophe? On Israel as compensation for the Holocaust, André Neher took a stance of total firmness: “The unthinkable event of Auschwitz remains forever unthinkable.” To avoid adopting the idea of a direct relationship between two historical facts that constitute “the midnight and noon of Jewish history,” because of the perception that it is intolerable to attribute a positive function, even an objective role, to that which cannot bear it, it is customary to offer the hypothesis of the Holocaust having accelerated history. Although the Holocaust may not have exerted the immediate effect that is attributed to it, it did, however, gain a tremendous referential importance for the State of Israel and the Israelis in retrospect. It is not improbable that the memory of the event had an impact at least as powerful as its history. It seems that in this matter of the link between Israel and the Holocaust, there is a confusion between cause and legitimacy: some may indeed find that the legitimacy of a Jewish state is derived from the Holocaust, without seeing in it its immediate cause. In this regard, historical research must include the narrative of the successive and changing justifications that people attribute to their actions and choices, along with the historical phenomena with which they are confronted.

**The Impact of Two World Wars**

Let us remain on the subject of the two world wars. Israel, we are told, could not have been born without British imperialism and Nazi totalitarianism. This type of reasoning makes a deliberate shift and confusion between motivation, cause, and condition. Let us not forget that many Zionists (though not all) demanded the foundation of Israel to prevent the catastrophe that they saw coming. The most worried, such as the poet Uri-Tsvi Grinberg, identified with what was then referred to as “apocalyptic Zionism.” They were not alone: the Zionist objective of creating an autonomous political structure in Palestine precedes both the establishment of the British Mandate and the mass

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murder of the Jews decreed by the Nazi regime. The role of the Mandate is ambiguous, as both its establishment in 1922 and its fall in 1948 favored Zionism’s political objectives. It was also after the defeat of Nazism (and not before or during) that the claim to independence was asserted, even though, tragically, with the principle now accepted and voted on in the United Nations, the Jewish State arrived, in essence, too late to perform its rescue mission. It may have been too late for the murdered Jews of Europe, but not for the survivors, and still less so for Jewish communities that remained subject to non-democratic regimes.

Indeed, for Israel the twentieth century cannot be reduced to two world wars. The decolonization of the Mashriq and the Maghreb in the 1950s and 1960s emptied these regions of their very ancient Jewish communities, while it considerably altered the composition of the Israeli population. If the idea of returning to the land of Israel could resonate with Jews of any and all diasporic communities, the objective of a fundamental renewal of the Jewish condition on political, social, and cultural levels, in the form of a national homeland in Palestine, essentially remained a response to the tragedy of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. This Eurocentrism was not merely due to the cultural and geographic origins of the Zionists: in 1880, Jews settled from the Atlantic to the Urals accounted for no less than 85% of the world’s total Jewish population. If the idea of returning to the land of Israel could resonate with Jews of any and all diasporic communities, the objective of a fundamental renewal of the Jewish condition on political, social, and cultural levels, in the form of a national homeland in Palestine, essentially remained a response to the tragedy of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. This Eurocentrism was not merely due to the cultural and geographic origins of the Zionists: in 1880, Jews settled from the Atlantic to the Urals accounted for no less than 85% of the world’s total Jewish population. This demographic reality notwithstanding, the Jewish nation was always conceived of as being inclusive by the Zionist movement, including all Jews, wherever they lived, even if, ideology aside, it was only after the Second World War that historical circumstances turned Jewish communities in Muslim countries into a mission field for Zionism. Without requiring ideological revision, for it posited the unity of the Jewish people, the new State of Israel thus turned to the Mashriq and the Maghreb to come to the rescue of any Jewish community in distress and to boost the country’s population, the two objectives being complementary, even if the latter related to a logic of state, while the former followed from what might be termed the logic of Zionism.

The defeats of 1948, 1956, and 1967 on one hand, the Arab nationalism of the newly-founded states on the other, placed the Jews who lived there in a politically precarious position. In the face of the ambivalent, if not outright hostile, attitude of the authorities, the Jews received the implicit or explicit message that they had lost their place, and were no longer welcome because they no longer fitted in with the Arab/Muslim exclusiveness demanded by the nationalist movements that had acceded to power, and this despite two thousand years of uninterrupted presence by the Jews in the Maghreb and in the Mashriq.

Zionism, which had not been initially or directly designed for the Jews of the Arab-Muslim world, was, for many, the cause of their malaise. But history shows that for them it was mainly a substitute ideology, and that they saw in Jewish nationalism a more reliable protection than in the Arab nationalism in which they might have found their place. However, these young Arab nations, swept along by the revolutionary dynamics of their struggle, generally lacked the necessary moderation and maturity, if not the democratic political culture, to fulfill the civic and integrative requirements of their national programs with regard to minorities. Moreover, Jewish communities had nurtured

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(3) See Orit Bashkin’s article in this issue.

(4) This difficulty arises in Israel in a different form: firstly, the refusal to reintegrate refugees after the War of Independence in order to maintain a Jewish majority, and secondly, the partial integration of the Arabs into an Israeli citizenship offering civil, political, and religious equality along with the fundamental liberties, but not economic and social equality, thus barring them, in effect, from participation in executive power.
a religious tradition that explicitly cultivated the memory of the land of Israel and the hope of return. Hence, they could not remain indifferent to the foundation of a Jewish state on this land toward which they turned to recite their prayers. Thus over a million Jews from Muslim countries – from Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia – had to abandon the lands of their birth and their property under dire conditions to settle in Israel.\(^1\)

The convulsions that followed perestroika from 1987, the advent of nationalist sentiment with an ethnic-religious basis, and, notably, the high profile of publicly anti-Semitic currents and political figures (the Pamyat group and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, respectively), once again prompted a large number of Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel. Between 1989 and 2000, close to a million Jews from the CIS (former USSR) availed themselves of the Law of Return, under which Israeli citizenship is granted upon request to anyone able to prove that at least one of four grandparents is Jewish. Thus, in the space of a generation, there was a large population exodus from two of the largest Jewish population centers in the history of the diaspora.

Whether fleeing the Russian pogroms between 1880 and 1917, the anti-Semitic measures of the Polish interwar governments, the policies of Nazi Germany from the Nuremberg Laws to Kristallnacht, whether searching for a refuge after WWII, or coming to understand that, for their security, they were better off leaving the Arab countries, Ethiopia, or post-communist Russia, it was in the twentieth century, and within these non-democratic political spaces, where Jews had lived for centuries (and sometimes thousands of years), that the urgency of emigration became evident. Until 1948, Chaim Weizmann’s warning was often confirmed: “The world seemed to be divided into two parts – those places where the Jews could not live and those where they could not enter.” Although the gates of the United States were opened wide to take in hundreds of thousands, as were those of France – not only to the Jews of Algeria, who were had French nationality, but also to tens of millions of Jews from Russia, Poland, Romania, and Tunisia – most often the only real option available was the “national Jewish homeland” in Palestine.

Since the foundation of the State of Israel, this readiness to welcome Jews, whatever their motivations, and all the more when they were in danger, is at the heart of the notion of a Jewish state. Whereas a return to the land of Israel was often the idealistic, if not ideological, component of the decision to leave, Israel was rarely an explicit motive for emigration for materialistic reasons. On the other hand, the establishment of an autonomous space – and then of a protective, sovereign space – was a decisive factor. This justification of Zionism was not without its disadvantages, insofar as the confrontation between Ashkenazi Sabras and immigrants from Arab-Muslim countries would reveal the contradictions of Zionist voluntarism.\(^2\) The implications were momentous, as much on the political level, with the accession to power of the right-wing nationalists after 29 years of labor governments, as on the cultural level. The centralizing tendency at work in the construction of the state machinery dear to Ben Gurion – strongly challenged since the emergence of the protest movements of Sephardic Jews in the early 1970s – was abandoned under popular pressure for recognition of diasporic identities after years of “denying the Diaspora.” Since then, the ideology of the melting-pot has yielded to the expression of differences in the name of now-legalize multicultural assertion. The Diaspora is no longer that distant continent to which one can never return.

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Over the past 20 years, Israel has opened up to the world. Today, the Jewish Diaspora is essentially concentrated in the United States and Western Europe, a novel situation for Israel: the repellent effect of certain countries has largely vanished as a factor, and it is now the potential attraction exerted by Israel, i.e., the desire to join the people, the country, and the State, the will to share this experience in spite of the external and internal conflicts that have accompanied the country’s existence, that motivates emigration. This explains the low figures for Alyah today. But it is here that globalization, by encouraging exchange and communication, far from producing two estranged Jewish peoples, builds bridges and allows a previously unimaginable level of contact. The virtual community does not, in itself, replace the national community, but adds to it.

Nationalist movements prefer to ignore this lesson of history – and Zionism is no exception: contingencies and context play a decisive role. A collective will and the organization it creates are not so much the cause of success as its prerequisite: without organization, without leadership, and without the activists who supported it with their effort, there can be no Zionism. Without them, the Zionist idea would have remained another utopian dream, like so many others throughout history. But neither idea nor will alone are enough to make history. Although indispensable, they are insufficient if they do not meet with favorable circumstances allowing the realization of their objectives and the overcoming of obstacles in their way. Historical context is the final arbiter to allow (or prevent) a project from becoming history. Under other circumstances, Zionism could just as well have amounted to nothing.

**Zionism and Totalitarianism**

The persecution and political, social, and economic marginalization of Jews long predates the birth of Zionism, yet it is only at the dawn of the twentieth century that Zionism was formulated, then realized. Zionism was not merely a break with the nations and states that could not, or would not, keep and integrate their Jews, however; it was also a rebellion against the way of life and way of thinking of the authorities, rabbis, and leaders of the Jewish communities.1 As a cause simultaneously territorial, national, political, social, and linguistic, the Zionist demand was perceived by its adversaries and by the Zionists themselves as a revolution – and rightly so. Did it not simultaneously require forever forsaking one’s native country for Palestine and settling there as a nation, no longer as a religious community, to found a state rather than to fit into an existing one; to establish Hebrew as a vernacular language and not to perpetuate a Jewish idiom like Yiddish, or a hegemonic language such as English, French, or German; to transform the social structure of the Jews, who had until then been consigned by their minority status to specific occupations? By making such demands, Zionism was in tune with the twentieth century, which had taken up the revolutionary standard of 1789 and 1848. If Zionism was not the only modernizing project of the Jews, it was assuredly the most radical, for whoever adhered to it had to switch countries, national frameworks, states, and languages. As to occupation, one was strongly encouraged to work the land, and later, as the conflict intensified, to bear arms. The Bund might claim to be more radical in matters of proletarian defense and atheism, yet it was more “conservative” with respect to language, territory, and political approach.2 This certainly explains why Jewish students were the first among their contemporaries to commit to the Zionist cause, and why, community notables were most often hostile to the project, which threatened their authority.

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2 Plekhanov derided the Bundists as “seasick Zionists.”
and purpose, regardless of whether their ideology was religious orthodoxy, liberal Judaism, bourgeois emancipation, or Jewish socialism.

At first sight, Zionism might indeed have appeared to be an enterprise of general, if not total, transformation in mores, behavior, and opinion. Was it not, like Marxism, quite explicit in its ambition to create a new man? And did it not see in the indigenism of the Sabra, born on Israeli soil, speaking Hebrew as their native language, and the future citizens of a country built for them by the labor of the pioneers, the intrinsic foundations of the “new Jewish man”? These ideas branched off into the numerous tendencies claiming affiliation to Zionism, and could be all the better realized, as the Diasporas existed outside Israel by definition. The Zionists were thus able to implement their program far from their opponents and their criticism.

Fundamentally, pioneer society was a grouping of young people, functioning without the presence and oversight of the older generation, which generally remained in the Diaspora. One can and must ask, then, which the factors were that made it possible to reject the temptation towards authoritarianism – perhaps even totalitarianism – that could not but have haunted the Zionist experiment, and to which the movement might have succumbed, as have so many similar experiments with the demiurgic and promethean ambition to remake man and humanity. In short, why did the new Jewish man remain a man, rather than morph into a superman?

In this connection, four factors should be borne in mind. The first relates to the versatile nature of Zionism: because it simultaneously associated a restorative with a revolutionary dimension, Zionism attracted people with diverse intentions and aspirations, as it pursued objectives that were both territorial and political, both cultural and national. In other words, in contrast to a certain homogeneity of views required by other Jewish movements, Zionism, as the project of the gathering of a nation in one land to create a state, left a wide field open to dissent and controversy, a constant in the Zionist movement from its very inception with the first circles of the Lovers of Zion, predating the first Congress of 1897. Indeed, the idea of the return to Zion could bring together Jews from the left and from the right, proletarians and petit bourgeois, Sephardim and Ashkenazi, Jews who believed in Heaven, and others who did not. And even if there was agreement on the location of the territory, on the aspiration to build a nation, the choice of language, the imperative of gathering in a sovereign space, this consensus hardly sufficed to mask the extent of their divergences on the nature of public life.

While the Zionist movement initially consisted of federations of local groups based on country of origin, this initial criterion of distinction was very quickly replaced by partisan ideological criteria based on differing points of view on tactics and strategy, political objective, and the economic and social regime. This explains why, once the movement was constituted, and despite the charismatic authority of its leader and founder, Theodor Herzl, the Zionist congress operated like a parliament, with its inevitable succession of coalitions and oppositions, its consensus and disagreement. This point, which proved crucial to the formation of Israeli political culture, is essential for understanding the balance that soon developed between a common national program and legitimate differences of opinion. Thus, there is justification for speaking of there being “Zionisms” as much as “Zionism,” even though the singularity associated with the latter quite often tends to conceal the profusion of demands and visions of the future circulating in public Zionist discourse. Although

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(1) See Avraham B. Yehoshua, Israel, un examen moral (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2005), 104.
tensions ran high, and violence even broke out between these various factions, it was crucial for Zionism to have a wide sweep and appear as radically demanding with respect to certain major life choices (switching countries, languages, cultures, perhaps even occupations) while requiring consociationalistic arrangements to manage, rather than resolve, social questions. These internal systems have not weakened much, and they largely explain the choice and survival of proportional representation for parliamentary elections and the maintenance of the status quo with respect to the religious and educational issues, despite their respective defects.

The second factor is related to the very precarious material conditions prevailing in Ottoman Palestine, conditions which were the lot of the first and second Alyah. Autonomy in running their affairs was for them a purely theoretical aspiration. Despite all the expectations and plans, the communities were quickly strangled by lack of resources and guarantees. To prevent their dissolution, the associations turned to the traditional support of the Jewish communities: philanthropists, such as Baron de Rothschild and Baron Hirsch, the initial financial backers providing these communities with the means of survival. The same occurred with the pioneers of the second Alyah: practitioners of a concrete Zionism which consisted of moving to Palestine to create the foundations of their ideal society, they generally nursed a common disdain for the professional Zionists, the “Congress Zionists,” such as Herzl, who excused the rest from settling in Palestine, so long as no major power had not committed itself to the cause.

However, the difficulties experienced by the pioneers of the second Alyah in obtaining employment with the small farmers of the first, who preferred to hire Arab laborers, led them straight into unemployment. Eventually, a rapprochement took place between Zionist activists burning with militant fervor and a Jewish organization which purchased and accumulated land although it lacked the farmers to work it: necessity had finally forced the pioneer and bourgeois wings of the Zionist movement to work together. In a way, it was another instance of the traditional alliance between the pariah and the upstart that was dear to Hannah Arendt.

Perhaps the most decisive factor was the contradiction between a social agenda guided by socialist Zionism and the freedom of Jewish immigration in Palestine. This last principle by definition prohibited any selection of candidates for immigration, while the quest for a socialistic commune on the scale of the whole nation made it necessary, on the contrary, to accept only confirmed militants who were wholly devoted to the cause. While the third Alyah matched that profile (to settle in Palestine, the immigrants had had to bide their time while they waited for WWI to end), the fourth and the fifth Alyah from Poland, and then Germany released into Palestine thousands of immigrants who were largely indifferent to any ambition of creating a “new man” or a pioneer society. From Poland came small craftsmen and shopkeepers with absolutely no desire to “return to the land,” who were to form the backbone of Tel Aviv’s middle class. It was the same with the immigrants from Germany, who were the origin of Israel’s urban elite: professors, physicians, lawyers, and other professionals. The necessity of dealing with unexpected challenges had trumped the quest for a pioneer society: without completely renouncing the pioneer ideal in education and culture, gathering the nation became the main objective of the Mapai, the dominant political party, while the Kibbutz could from then on remain an island that prefigured the socialist society of the future.

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Last, but not least, tension with the Palestinian Arabs and the need to manage relations with the British constituted two additional constraints which led the Mapai to put nation-building above founding a socialist society, despite its explicit working-class orientation. In this respect, one may conjecture that, rather than being directed inward toward the Yishuv, deadly violence found its release in the War of Independence, even though massacres such as Deir Yassin were the exception. The debate over evictions carried out during the War of Independence is of central importance. Should these be viewed as part of a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing, as Ilan Pappé says, and as the implementation of population transfer plans – which circulated, although none of the parties endorsed them – or, rather, responses dictated by combat conditions and reprisals for Palestinian attacks?

Even though an explicitly messianic dimension has been discerned in Zionism, it has most often been limited to rhetoric that has been neutralized by the generally rational behavior of the political leadership (specifically Weizmann, then Ben Gurion), which has primarily been concerned with managing what has been achieved to date and overcoming obstacles. This has been the case, even though Ben Gurion himself was wont to define the rebirth of Israel in terms that transcended the sphere of political action.

Zionism: An Historical Object?

We have endeavored to describe the transformations that Zionism underwent over the course of the twentieth century, along with the resistance that preserved it from any statist and authoritarian temptations that may have threatened it during the revolutionary and activist period of the movement. Indeed, a reasoned and nuanced examination of Zionism is difficult today. This is explained by the absence of any political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the context of a military occupation still persisting after 40 years, and the permanent problem of Palestinian refugees. In fact, Zionism itself is not even the subject of discussion: we all end up approaching it either with uncritical admiration, or outright rejection. Though hardly symmetrical, both approaches, governed by a passion for purity rather than critical reason, reveal a common taboo: in both cases, Zionism must remain unexamined, undisputed and undiscussable. Not a moment’s hesitation, not the shadow of a doubt is permitted: Zionism is either black or white, credit or debit, heaven or hell; and, take it or leave it, you must choose: it is either intrinsically virtuous or absolutely vicious, innocent once and for all or irrevocably guilty, supreme Good or absolute Evil.

Faced with adversity, the supporters of a transcendent Zionism either affirm the virginal purity of a movement which nonetheless had to get its hands dirty on history, or grant blanket amnesty for anything which might be leveled at it. This dogma of immaculate purity which nothing can affect, nothing can alter, nothing can corrupt is opposed by the inverse, equally dogmatic, revealed truth of those who apprehend Zionism through theological categories such as “original sin” and cannot countenance the idea of an examination that would dare relativize or, worse, absolve Zionism of its sinful impurity. Hardly pertaining to history, but, rather, to militant memory: unhappy memory for one side, hallowed for the other, a commemoration of the “Nakba” which it deliberately programmed, or of the tkouma (recovery) which it advocated in the form of the State of Israel as it now exists, Zionism is not, to say the least, a

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(3) Ilan Pappé, Le Nettoyage ethnique de la Palestine (Paris: Fayard, 2008).
cooled passion. Truth concerning it is nowhere to be found, because it is not sought in any real sense, but already exists a priori, existing ready-made in two narratives that are irreducible to each other. In short, Zionism is held hostage to a teleological vision that either makes it into an instrument of divine or historical providence, or an accursed idea, every malevolent avatar of which was present from the very beginning.

Discussing Zionism today for many boils down to continuing the war by other means: it is to follow the path of glorification or that of anathema, to seek refuge in justification or to cry out against injustice. With Zionism having been placed in the dock, the roles are already assigned: one can only plead in its defense as would an attorney who seeks not the truth but only victory for the client; or make an implacable indictment that spells its demise.

Here, we have sought to weigh the pros and cons, to show the shadows and the light in turn, so that Zionism may become an historical object, so that it may escape both an indulgent judgment and a pitiless verdict – simply based on our right to understand.


Abstract
— Despite being a product of the 19th and 20th century, Zionism is frequently either distinguished or decried as existing out of History. Born in the context of emancipation, national revival and anti-Semitism, its subsequent development took the form of the State of Israel and was shaped by key events of the 20th century: the First and Second World Wars, decolonization and the collapse of the Soviet Union. After dealing with the relevance of the analogy between Zionism and colonialism, the paper also demonstrates how Zionism as a revolutionary project for the Jewish People, unlike several other revolutionary projects of the same period, managed to avoid the totalitarian temptation.
Keywords: zionism, World War, colonialism, totalitarianism, decolonization.