

# ZIONISM & ANTI-ZIONISM

ZIONISM

## BEYOND THE SLOGANS

Roberto Sussman takes a close look at different sorts of Zionism and anti-Zionism and shows how they have been confused through being used in different contexts.

The Zionism vs. anti-Zionism debate can often become a sterile exercise in dogmatic apologetics and polemics. At the crudest level deep feelings of hostility against the 'enemy' are expressed as racist stereotypes. Part of the problem is that there are many types of 'Zionists' and 'anti-Zionists', supporting or opposing Zionism on different grounds and in different contexts.

Ideologies are never absolute and static and their implementation through political practice is a complex and ever-changing process. So it is unavoidable that people will use similar ideological labels to represent different policies, strategies, tactics and priorities. In the case of Zionism, nationalist ideology, this confusion is aggravated by the fact that it originated in Central and Eastern Europe as a reaction to specific political circumstances, but was implemented in the totally different context of Palestine. This distinguishes Zionism from other nationalisms, therefore the reaction against it, loosely called 'anti-Zionism' presents the same confusion between labels, slogans and policies due to the context in which it opposes Zionism.

### EUROPEAN ORIGINS

Certain basic ideas are shared by all the different elements within the Zionist movement, but Zionism in practice has largely been dictated by specific conditions in which Zionists operated. In Central and Eastern Europe the Zionist movement did not oppress any group, but instead aimed to represent the interests of an oppressed national minority. The separatist option offered by Zionism was not perceived as adequate by the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe; this can be gleaned from the fact that the majority of Jewish workers supported parties opposed to Zionism, such as the Bund or non-Jewish Socialist and Communist Parties. A consequence of the Holocaust was that most European non-Jews felt genuine revulsion towards any party which openly espoused anti-semitism. With the disappearance of the Bund and other Jewish anti-Zionist (mainly religious) parties from the European scene together with the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe; in the eyes of sympathetic Europeans and surviving Jews the Zionist movement seemed to be the most important representative of Jewish interests.

If in the European context, the role

of Zionism was a peculiar form of nationalism of an oppressed national minority; its role in the Middle East cannot be separated from the fact that Palestine was already inhabited. Obviously these inhabitants opposed a plan to build a nation which, if it were successful would lead to their dispossession. The responsibility of the Zionist movement for turning the Palestinian Arabs into homeless refugees cannot be ignored. However, there were important factors which made Zionism unique. Instead of being citizens of a powerful colonial state, the Jews were a fragile group, lacking not only political power in Europe, but also facing increasingly virulent persecution. This led to the idea of Palestine as a 'national shelter'. The implications of this have to be taken into consideration, but not to the point of denying that the national aspirations of the Palestinian Arabs were thwarted by the establishment of a Jewish state. Thus, it is legitimate to say that, as far as the Palestinian Arabs are concerned, Zionism did have a colonialist aspect. This has always been perceived in the Middle East and, surprisingly, in Israel itself, but it has taken decades for it to be even discussed in the West. Among Jewish communities it remains a sort of ideological taboo. Those who break this taboo risk being politically ostracised.

### NEW LEFT

Familiarity with the oppression of the Jews made it very difficult for the 'old' European left to come to terms during the late forties and fifties with the colonialist side of Zionism in the Middle East. Opposition to Zionist ideology was brought to Europe and North America during the late sixties and early seventies by the so-called 'new' left. This new left mystified and glamourised third world liberation struggles, including that of the Palestinians. Therefore it brought into the European context ideas and tactics which only understood the colonial aspect of Zionism. However, outside the Middle East, this colonialist aspect of Zionism is not self evident. Zionist European Jews are not 'colonialist settlers' and the states in which they live do not discriminate in their favour and against European non Jews. Therefore, the denunciation of Zionism by the new left in this context failed because it clashed with the experience the European public had had of the Jews in their midst. Something like this has happened when Americans or Europeans try to

make people in the Middle East more sympathetic to Zionism by emphasizing its role in Europe and playing down its colonialist side, of which they have direct experience. Just as an analysis of the Zionist movement which ignores or plays down its role in the Middle East can be used to justify anti-Palestinian or anti-Arab hostility, an analysis which ignores or plays down its role and the causes of its emergence in Europe can be used to justify antisemitism. Just as Europeans or North Americans trivialising the oppression of the Palestinians are bound to express their hostility by using racist stereotypes of Arabs which are a product of European colonialism, a similar trivialisation of the historical oppression of the Jews is bound to be expressed in antisemitic terms.

There are fortunately few instances when the anti-Zionist language of Western European radical groups becomes so hostile to Jews as a group that it deserves to be called antisemitic. With the exception of overtly fascist groups who openly acknowledge their antisemitism, it would be an exaggeration to say that the excesses of an often crude and dogmatic form of left-wing anti-Zionism represent a danger to the lives and property of European and American Jews. However accepting that in most cases left-wing anti-Zionism discourse is not meant to be antisemitic, most Jews in Europe feel alienated and in some cases threatened by it. The main reason for this situation is that left-wing radical anti-Zionism talks in terms of vaguely defined possible 'Socialist' solutions for the Middle East and has nothing to say to most Jews outside the Middle East who adhere to 'Zionism' because it is the only form of Jewish identity they know besides Jewish religion. Therefore, most anti-Zionists cannot relate to those issues which are important to the Jews they come across without pressing these Jews into subordinating their experience to the context of the Middle East. Since 'Jewish identity' is regarded by many anti-Zionists as inherently reactionary (if it is religious it must be 'obscurantist', if it is 'Zionist' it must be racist'), it has no place in the future socialist world conceived by these anti-Zionists.

### ALTERNATIVES

If the point of opposing Zionism is to make Zionist Jews aware of the reality of the Israel-Palestine conflict and so make them critical of their blind support for the State of Israel, then these dogmatic attitudes must be rejected and creative

alternatives sought. For example, it must be accepted that it is perfectly legitimate for Jews outside Israel to both support Palestinian national rights and be concerned about the fate of the Israeli Jews. After all, many Jews, whatever their attitude towards Zionism, have relatives living in Israel and feel some form of emotional attachment to and cultural affinity with that country. In addition, an acceptance of Zionism's colonialist role as regards the Palestinian people does not mean uncritical support for any political arrangement which claims to reverse this injustice. In many cases, Jews who become aware of the Palestinian predicament feel alienated by the fact that the only fate for Israeli Jews which seems to be acceptable to many anti-Zionists is that of late sixties Palestinian nationalism: citizens of the Secular Democratic State of Palestine of the Mosaic persuasion. When these Jews reject this and insist on Israel's right to exist they are expressing legitimate concern for the fate of Israeli Jews. Although 'Israel's right to exist' is posed by many Jews in a rhetorical manner which ignores the political constraints within which Palestinian organisations work, it is an issue which must be discussed and not dismissed simply as a 'Zionist argument'. Part of the problem is that many Jews, before committing themselves to support Palestinian national rights wish to be certain that support for the Palestinian cause should be helpful in reaching an agreement which is not detrimental to either of the two peoples. That Israeli Jews have national (as opposed to purely 'human') rights, whilst not denying that they oppress the Palestinians, is gaining ground among anti-Zionists. However it is still not accepted by all anti-Zionist groups, especially some in the Middle East who insist on seeing Israeli Jews as similar to the Druze or the Maronites. It is worth pointing out that many Jews who define themselves as Zionists are unaware that Zionism thought categorically rejects an Israeli state which represents only the interests of Israeli citizens. This would apply even if such a state was 'Jewish' in the sense that the majority of its population would define itself as Jewish in one way or another.

### PUBLIC RELATIONS

Today more Jews leave Israel than go there. Most Jewish communities are reasonably comfortable and well integrated into their respective societies. The 'shelter' role of Zionism has been abandoned, even though lip service is still paid to it. Zionist ideas have been adopted by the establishment in different Jewish communities worldwide. However this 'Zionism', which has degenerated into a

## I was a teenage Zionist

### David Rosenberg looks back at his political adolescence.

At the age of seven I went to school in the "Middle East" of Hackney, wearing a blazer with a Zionist symbol on its chest pocket. At 17 I came home from Zionist youth meetings to torment my parents: "How can you call yourself Jews and carry on living in Ilford?" I asked. Israel, after all, was our true destiny. At 27, I was old enough to know better. I wrote articles and spoke at meetings of the Jewish Socialists' Group in which I vehemently rejected Zionist solutions to Jewish issues. My destiny now was neither Ilford nor Israel, but the *heymishe* security of being a non-Zionist, neo-Bundist, polycentrist Jewish Socialist Londoner. Here to stay.

In the meantime though, I had been called a Zionist by anti-Zionists, an anti-Zionist by Zionists and even an antisemite

public relations exercise of giving unlimited and uncritical 'support' to the State of Israel is quite at home with the type of dogmatic anti-Zionism mentioned above. This is not surprising, this 'public relations Zionism' as opposed to that which advocates immigration requires the Jewish establishment to constantly convince Jewish communities of the existence of a powerful 'enemy'. This enemy is a modern version of the antisemitic movements of the past, now using anti-Zionism as its rationale. Obviously every instance of antisemitism being expressed as opposition to Zionism conforms this conspiratorial view. However the failure of dogmatic and crude (but not antisemitic) anti-Zionists to appreciate Jewish issues unconstricted by their ideological straitjackets reinforces this view.

The 'public relations' type Zionism of the Jewish establishment does not further the economic interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie or of Jewish capitalists. In fact, 'support for Israel' is not necessarily a profitable enterprise. Rather, it is an ideological support similar to the support of the Soviet Union by Communist parties during the Stalin era. As in the case of Stalinism, this type of Zionism requires a rigid control of individuals and groups who go beyond the limits of a certain tacit consensus so they are denied access to communal institutions to voice their opposition. This type of Zionism also transforms mainstream Zionist organisations and pro-Israel lobbies from means to an end into bodies whose end is their own preservation. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Palestinians like Issam Sartawi or Said Hammami who

by less thinking Zionists. Apparently it is easier to throw labels around than discuss the issues. And that applies both within the Jewish community and the Left. I recall many occasions when constructive discussions couldn't even start because of a qualified or "wrong" answer to the drably inevitable first question. "Are you a Zionist?" I suspect that people who ask that question are mainly interested in dismissing, rather than engaging, other people and their ideas.

Fortunately, with the help of the JSG, I have found enough space to develop my views in the light of experience, other peoples' perceptions and growing awareness and understanding of historical and current circumstances. My views changed, but the process of change can be painful. Zionism, anti-Zionism, antisemitism. . . these are all highly charged emotionally. I know many people open enough to grapple with these issues. I hope that

wished to remove the 'danger' feeding this bureaucracy were a real threat to many Zionist apparatchiks. They would prefer to 'play it safe' with the familiar types of anti-Zionist. Although there is a symmetry between the dogmatic 'Zionism' of the Jewish establishment and the dogmatic 'anti-Zionism' of many pro-Palestinian support groups, and both dogmatisms feed each other, this symmetry does not exist in terms of resources and political influence. The Palestinians as a group are much weaker in the West than the pro-Israel lobby, and they often have to promote their cause through pressure groups which have an extremely narrow outlook.

The behaviour of the Jewish establishment is closely connected with the crisis in modern Jewish identity and has implications which go beyond Jewish communities. However, these implications are complex and have not been properly researched. Yet the rigid political control exerted by the Jewish establishment on Jewish individuals or groups which challenge the established 'truth' cannot be maintained for ever. In the case of Stalinism, the facts from the Gulags forced Communist parties outside the Soviet Union to re-examine their uncritical support for the policies of the Soviet state. If the state of Israel becomes an apartheid state through the continuous occupation of Palestinian territories, the Jewish establishment will have to face up to its responsibility for having contributed to such a horrible (but possible) outcome through blind support for policies. □

this personal account will engage those people and encourage others who can identify themselves as moving in a similar direction.

I suppose it all began at primary school — Clapton Jewish Day School — where, together with the usual subjects, including four English lessons a week, we had five Hebrew lessons a week. I left Clapton with a positive feeling towards Hebrew culture and to a country called Israel, though I had not been there and had only met a handful of its people. I also left with a view of being Jewish which saw Jewishness, religion, Israel and Hebrew as necessarily bound up with each other. It was only later that these different elements began to disentangle themselves.

While I found meaning and vitality in Jewish festivals and ritual, I found the belief part of the religion increasingly banal. I don't ever remember believing in God, so I began searching for a more real Jewish identity. Meanwhile my general political views were becoming articulated in a more soundly based socialism but the more I read up on classical socialism, the greater became my sense of unease about class. Most Jews I knew were not well off but nor poor either. But by my mid teens, my father had become his own boss, buying a chemist shop in Dagenham. Socialism and business were hard to reconcile.

And then came Israel. At 17 I made my first trip to Israel on an Association of Jewish Youth (AJY) tour. I went anticipating good things and I came back with these expectations fulfilled. I spent the next two summers on Kibbutz with a Zionist youth movement. I had discovered socialist Zionism. I avidly read Borochoy, Moses Hess, A D Gordon. . . and assimilated their views of Jews in the diaspora always being at the mercy of "inevitable" antisemitism, and, by their "unhealthy" and "abnormal" middling class position, as much threatened by revolution from the left as reaction from the right. Their solution was for Jews to have their own land where they could "normalise" themselves and become the working class. Together with these views, I assimilated their blindness to the existence of another people on the very land in which the Jews would prepare their national base for socialism.

I spent the next two summers after that on a very different Kibbutz, called Yad Hanna, with a history of communist activism externally as well as internally (but that's another story). By now I was a non-Zionist, but it wasn't the summers that changed me — although in these last two visits I was able to see something of Israel-the-reality behind Israel-the-dream, and I met with Palestinians denied an

equal share in the land of their birth and history.

It was events in Britain that prompted the essential questions. In 1975, together with other comrades from the Zionist youth movement I went to my first anti-fascist demonstration. We shouted at the tops of our voices our protest at the National Front as they came marching down the Strand towards Trafalgar Square, and we endured the brutality of the police as they reserved the Square for the Neo-Nazis and the (British?) pigeons. I felt a strong sense of Jewish outrage, yet most of the people protesting with me were non-Jews. I felt a twinge then that they had no Israel to go to if the fascists did get strong.

The fight against racism and fascism dominated my life in the late 1970s, only to be interrupted every so often by the painful debates at my university campus over Zionism. The orthodox anti-Zionists claimed that Zionism was racism, that all Zionists were racists and could never fight racism. I knew this was untrue — I was living proof and I wasn't the only one — and yet I witnessed the feet-dragging by other Zionists who seemed to place rigid loyalty to Zionism above all other concerns. And when a mass anti-fascist movement — the Anti Nazi League (ANL) was formed, I saw the appalling cynicism of the Jewish establishment come to the surface. They refused to support the ANL because some of its leaders were anti-Zionists. Meanwhile the fascists were terrorising minority communities including Jews. I knew from the countless anti-fascist demonstrations I went on in that period that my most trusted comrades were not from the Jewish Student Society — they were barely interested — but in the Left groups who shared an instinctive and uncompromising anti-fascism. But as we demonstrated in the heart of Bradford, Batley, Leeds, Manchester, Leicester. . . a deeper question arose. What was my solution for the targets of racism and fascism? Was I to suggest to them that they leave England to be safer in their countries of origin? Wasn't that what the fascists wanted? Here to stay, here to fight, was the response of the black communities and it made a profound impact on me. How could I fight racism and fascism in Britain unless I had a vision of a Britain in which I and they would be free of racism and fascism? Zionism told me that my only future was in Israel. It was when I decided that my future as a Jew physically and emotionally would be in Britain where I would fight racism, not run away from it, that I broke with Zionism. And it was when I broke with Zionism on those grounds with its denial of my reality as a Jew in Britain that I was able, ironically,

to achieve a deeper and more objective insight into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I read Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine*, and in the aftermath of the Lebanon war I was one of the organisers of a public meeting in London at which Israeli peacenik Uri Avnery shared a platform with top PLO man Issam Sartawi, six weeks before his death. I was fortunate enough to meet with Sartawi and I learned from his words and Said's writing about what Zionism has meant *in practice* for the Palestinians — how it has denied and oppressed them.

I now know how important these words *in practice* are for this whole debate. What made it so hard to break through the Zionist/anti-Zionist stalemate on campus, what entrenched people's positions, was that the debate operated almost purely at the level of *ideology*, quite divorced from material reality. It was almost as if people were more concerned to oppose the ideology than the reality itself. It was through being drawn to the material reality that I began to understand Zionism in the Jewish community and how it affected Jewish life politically, economically, culturally and institutionally. I started to locate Zionism in its time, place and context and learn of the rest of Jewish history that it has tried to extinguish including the history of the Bund — the mass Jewish workers movement that opposed Zionism from a Jewish and socialist perspective (and, incidentally, opposed cultural chauvinism within the socialist movement). I began to learn Yiddish, their language, and also the language of left-wing Zionists in the 1930s, but which Zionists in power suppressed in Israel and worked to suppress elsewhere.

And I can now see the pillar of Zionist ideology, the centrality of Israel in Jewish life, for the propaganda it is: a denial of the reality and validity of Jewish life outside Israel and a subordination of the needs and interests of diaspora communities to those of the Israeli state. As a Jew in Britain I no longer feel the need to emigrate 2,000 miles away in order to be a "real" Jew, a "normal" and "healthy" Jew. Indeed far from the lives of diaspora Jews being abnormal and unhealthy, it is the current distorted relationship of Israel to the diaspora that merits these derogatory descriptions. *Doikayt* ("hereness") is now my guiding principle. There are many centres. Here is my centre. If we adopt a polycentric perspective and see Israel's Jewish community as one important Jewish community among others in the world, each with equal claims, then we can get a better view of our needs and our future as Jews. □