

WHAT IS ZIONISM?

SEPTEMBER 2025 EXPLAINER

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Getting to grips with Zionism and the Zionist project is central to understanding what informed the establishment of the state of Israel and the political project that has sought the destruction of Palestinian society. Zionism can often be discussed in unclear and unhelpful ways in popular and media discourse, and sometimes avoided altogether.

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Zionism is both an ideology and a political project. It is the foundation of the Israeli state and society and is central to the destruction of Palestinian life and homeland.

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Within this context, political Zionism can be understood as one of multiple responses arising from Europe's politically diverse Jewish population to the problem of antisemitism.

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The British government issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917, a public statement in which the British announced their support for "a national home for the Jewish people" in the land of Palestine.

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In 1948 the state of Israel was formally declared and around 750,000 Palestinian Arabs were ethnically cleansed from the land. This is known as the "Nakba", or the "catastrophe."

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The Zionist project of forcibly removing Palestinians continues to this day and has arguably reached its zenith, which is why Palestinians often describe their struggle as an "ongoing Nakba."

ORIGINS AND CONTEXT

The earliest form of Zionism was in fact Christian Zionism, predating Jewish Zionism. It can be traced as far back as the early 19th century, based on the belief that the Jewish "return" to Palestine was divinely ordained. Christian Zionism did not build a significant political movement at this time, but these origins are important to consider because since the 1960s, Christian Zionists have been a powerful religious and political force in the United States.

Zionism emerged in Europe as a more organised political movement and vision towards the late 19th century. At this time, discrimination and violence against Jewish people was widespread throughout many parts of the continent. There was large-scale violence and immiseration in Eastern Europe, including what were known as pogroms, and within Western Europe there was likewise a culture viewing Jews with suspicion and contempt.

The Dreyfus affair was an infamous episode demonstrating the depth of antisemitism in France. It began in 1894, when a French military officer of Jewish descent was wrongfully accused of treason and sentenced to prison. This episode was a stark example of the power of antisemitism even in 'liberal' Europe.

The 19th century was also a time when people around the world began to identify themselves as nations, demanding the right to rule over themselves and determine their own futures. This is now known as the right to self-determination. Simultaneously, this time was a high period in the era of global European imperialism.

In addition to the reality of widespread antisemitism, these contexts were crucial to informing the emergence of Zionism and early Zionist thinkers.

16th Century

Christian Zionism the earliest form of Zionism emerges with roots in the Protestant Reformation.

Late 19th Century

Amid European nationalism and antisemitism, Jewish Zionism takes shape as a political movement seeking a state of refuge.

1894

The Dreyfus affair takes place in France, demonstrating the power of antisemitism even in 'liberal' Europe.

1960s/1970s

Evangelical and political movements in America adopt Zionism, turning it into a powerful political force in support for Israel.

RESPONSE TO ANTISEMITISM AND ORGANISING

Within this context, Zionism can be understood as one of multiple responses arising from Europe's politically diverse Jewish population to the problem of antisemitism. As opposed to liberal Jews, who pushed for assimilation and integration as a way of combating antisemitism, or revolutionary socialist Jews, who called for social and political revolution throughout Europe to fight antisemitism, Zionists argued instead for a colonial enterprise to establish a Jewish state.

They argued for this by constructing Jews - specifically European Jews - as a nation, as opposed to simply a religious community, which was unprecedented at the time. By virtue of positioning themselves as a nation, they required a state. At the same time, during a burgeoning era of European imperialism and colonialism, early Zionist thinkers saw virtue in a colonial venture, they saw as a sign of strength and civilisation, through which they could prove themselves as a "worthy" people deserving of respect from European society.

Zionism seeks to
establish a home in
Palestine for the Jewish
people...

Taking all of this together, Zionism can essentially be seen as a nationalist movement that offered a particular vision of Jewish self-determination as an "answer" to the problem of antisemitism in Europe. The key argument of the Zionist movement was that Jewish suffering was inevitable and unsolvable within Europe, and no amount of assimilation would be enough. They argued therefore that Jewish people, primarily at that time European Jews, needed a safe haven of their own: they needed their own state.

Organising structures were founded to see this vision through. In 1897 in the city of Basel in Switzerland, the First Zionist Congress was held by the Zionist Organisation (ZO), today known as the World Zionist Organisation (WZO). The ZO was founded at this congress by Theodor Herzl, who is considered to be the foremost founding Zionist thinker and theorist. At this congress, inaugurated and chaired by Herzl himself, the official Zionist program was laid out and agreed upon, known as the Basel Program.

After considering various places, including modern-day Kenya and Argentina, the Zionist movement identified Palestine as the destination for their future state because of historic Jewish connections and therefore the greater likelihood that settlement could be encouraged, particularly amongst religious Jews.

EARLY SUCCESSES

It was also thought that early Zionist planners recognised the increasing interest amongst imperial powers, such as the British, in the region of the Ottoman Empire where historic Palestine was located. As the Ottomans were on the decline at the turn of the 20th century, this interest was increasing, and Zionists identified an opportunity.

The Balfour Declaration is perhaps the earliest concrete illustration of the way in which the Zionist project was entangled with imperialist interests, decades before the establishment of the state of Israel. This was a significant initial achievement, effectively making stated British and Zionist interests one and the same, while denying the political rights of the indigenous Palestinians from that same power. The declaration was later officially incorporated into the terms of the British Mandate of Palestine.

The Balfour Declaration

November 1917

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was a public statement in which the British government announced its support for "a national home for the Jewish people" in the land of Palestine, at that time a part of the Ottoman Empire.

The declaration was made at a time when the tumult of World War I was encouraging imperial powers such as France and Britain to consider the futures of various territories around the world, particularly in the Middle East. With this background in mind, historians cite a range of strategic and ideological reasons for the declaration, including the presence of dedicated Zionists in the British cabinet, as well as the aim of gaining a foothold in the region.

ZIONISM AS COLONIALISM

In order to establish a Jewish state on land populated by non-Jews, the Zionist movement concluded that the indigenous population must be expelled. Early Zionist thinkers and planners were well-aware that historic Palestine was well-populated by an indigenous people. There was no pretence of an empty land except in statements of propaganda. Not only was there frank recognition of an existing population on the land, but Zionist planners were clear-eyed that the population would resist being displaced.

Throughout the early-to-mid 20th century, localised expulsions and displacements were already occurring as Jewish settlers arrived in the first waves and Zionists bought up land under the British mandate. In fact, the very first waves of settlement were already occurring in the late 19th century. But it was not until the 1930s, with the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, that Zionist settlement began to increase dramatically. This process and the expulsion and displacement which it entailed reached a high point in 1948, when the state of Israel was formally declared and around 750,000 Palestinian Arabs were ethnically cleansed from the land.

Zionists see this moment as the culmination of their project and their most significant victory. But the rupture of 1948 demonstrated the violence and dispossession that Zionism necessitated for the Palestinian population, the indigenous people already inhabiting the land and thus the chief obstacle to Zionism's colonial endeavour.



AN ONGOING PROJECT

Because Zionism sought to establish a Jewish state on land largely populated by non-Jews, ethnic cleansing was central to the movement. Importantly, this process of forcibly removing Palestinians from their homes and taking over their land not only continues to this day, but has arguably reached its zenith, which is why Palestinians often describe their struggle as an "ongoing Nakba".

In other words, 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel can be seen to mark the *beginning* of the formalisation of the Zionist project, rather than its end. This has been demonstrated through:



Home demolitions



Israeli settlement expansion



Denying Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes



Genocidal assault on the Gaza Strip

Palestinians would further attest that Zionism has always had within it the potential to be genocidal. Because of its essential goal of taking over the maximum amount of land in historic Palestine with the minimum number of Palestinians on it, the Israeli state operates with the constant displacement and dispossession of Palestinians, which taken to its logical conclusion is geared towards the effective destruction of Palestinians as a national group. Zionists may indeed see the current moment as their greatest opportunity to conclude their project in its most expansive form, which has always been denied by Palestinian resistance.

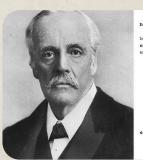
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To explore this topic further, we encourage you to check out our other resources.



Nakba Glossary Term

Explore how the Nakba led to the mass displacement of Palestinians in 1948 through expulsions and village destruction. Learn about its origins, its ongoing impact today, and how it shapes Palestinian life and resistance.



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Balfour Declaration Glossary Term

Explore how the 1917 Balfour Declaration marked Britain's support for the Zionist project in Palestine. Learn more about what he Balfour Declaration is and the significance it holds in Palestinian history.



Historical Overview

Dive into Palestine's history through an interactive timeline in our historical overview. Learn how key events from the late 19th century to now have shaped Palestinian history.



Understanding Palestine

Join our online course created with the Institute of Palestine Studies. It explores Palestine's history, identity, and politics, covering key issues such as the Nakba, refugeehood, and Israeli apartheid.