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"Palestine and Europe: The Weight of the Past and Contemporary Dynamics"

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The possible angles and points of entry into the relationship between Palestine and Europe are difficult to enumerate. Consider, for instance, that it is impossible to detach Palestine from the relations between the northern Mediterranean and its southern and eastern shores, and from the multiple, shifting configurations these relations have taken across history. Nevertheless, since the subject at hand is the Palestinian cause, the nineteenth century seems like the logical chronological starting point, as this was when European colonialism's interest in the Arab Mashreq, which included Greater Syria, of which Palestine was a part, reached its peak. It should therefore come as no surprise that my point of entry is the emergence of the Zionist movement in nineteenth century Europe.

That century brought a rising tide of European theologians, clergymen, travellers, and geographers to Palestine. Some conducted surveys of its natural and demographic environment. Others undertook archaeological excavations in search of evidence to support their religious beliefs, projecting their readings of Old Testament narratives onto the unearthed artefacts. Some even studied the possibility of reviving the ancient Jewish kingdom as imagined through a scriptural-historical lens. These were not Zionist travellers, or even Jews. They were predominantly European Christians, mostly Protestants.

In the preface to *Eretz Israel in the Past and Present*, written in New York in 1918 after being expelled from Palestine by Ottoman authorities, David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, expressed their surprise at the lack of Jewish-authored studies on the geography and history of that land. The two Zionist activists – one from Poland, the other from Ukraine – observed that the vast majority of studies on Palestine until that time were produced by European Christians of various disciplines, primarily for religious motives. This is particularly noteworthy. There was no shortage of Jewish historians and other scholars at the time, but they had not produced a single work on the geography or history of Palestine. Secular Jews had shown no academic interest in Palestine before Zionism. Religious Jews did not engage in scientific research, surveys, or cartography, and most of them had no secular connection with what they called the "Land of Israel."

Since European powers began to colonize the Americas and other parts of the world starting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious motives were always closely intertwined with their geostrategic and economic ambitions and hegemonic rivalries. This was doubly true when it came to the colonization of the Arab Mashreq.

At that time, the "Palestinian question" had not yet emerged as an issue distinct from what was called the "Eastern question", but a "Jewish question" certainly existed. Yet, even if it preceded the Palestinian question historically, it was an exclusively European concern. There is no need here to delve into the religious, class, and pseudo-scientific racialist background of the Jewish question, as this has been covered exhaustively in studies on anti-Semitism. Of concern to us here is that the question itself arose out of European modernization and specifically the strains resulting from the reforms that led to the repeal of discriminatory laws and gradually brought the status of Jews in line with the rest of the citizenry. The Jewish question is thus rooted in the tension between advocates of

equality and assimilation, as part of the secularization of the state, and the opponents of this policy. The latter camp attempted to fight the reforms with claims Judaism and Jewish law are incompatible with Christian society, Jews are unable to assimilate, and Jews know no loyalty to the nations in which they live. Wild conspiracy theories were also circulated, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which imagined a transnational Jewish cabal bent on fuelling class conflict and even igniting wars to weaken European countries.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Europe, without a doubt, had a full-blown Jewish question. It was manifested in attempts to deflect internal tensions by fuelling hostility toward an internal enemy through a blend of lingering medieval anti-Jewish myths (such as the infamous 'blood libel'), ethnic nationalism, and racial supremacist theories. The hatred was unleashed in recurring waves of mass violence – pogroms as they were called in Russian – targeting Jews in Eastern Europe or in various forms of social discrimination in Western European states where Jews had attained legal equality.

Zionism, which arose in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, was influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) while simultaneously rejecting it. The Jewish intellectuals who founded the Zionist movement opposed the Haskalah movement's integrationist drive. They insisted that Jews were not just members of religious communities, but a single people. Some even contended that they were a race – that being the century of the rise of racialist theorizing. Yet these intellectuals were also a product of the reforms, which had brought Jews out of the ghetto, and of the Jewish Enlightenment, which encouraged Jews to pursue modern education and engage in diverse professions. Like the Haskalah, the early Zionist ideologues rejected the parochialism and anti-modernism espoused by ghetto-based religious leaders. This conservative religious current opposed integration, insisting that Jews must continue to live according to Jewish laws and preserve their particular way of life, even if that meant remaining on the margins of diasporic lands, or *gulah*/*galut*, meaning exile in Hebrew. But while Zionism and orthodox Judaism both opposed Haskalah's assimilationist stance, the former, which considered an eternal malady, rejected the integration of Jews as equal citizens in European societies as a solution to the Jewish question and, instead, called for integration into modern European civilization through the creation of a nation-state like other European states. This was the Zionist solution to the Jewish question – a solution to be realized outside Europe as a part of the European colonial project.

In modern terms, the Zionist movement's main mission and historical function can be summed up as nation-building through state-building. This entailed transforming Jews from scattered religious communities led by religious leaders who understood "exile" as a divine punishment that will end with arrival of the messiah, into a national group, despite being bound only by a common religious affiliation, since Jews lacked a common language and culture. Also missing was a shared territory. To compensate for this, the movement ethno-nationalized the Jewish liturgical and spiritual longing for Palestine, recast as biblical Israel, and transforming it into nationalist aspiration to establish nation-state based on the European model.

Zionist leaders also emphasized the need to transform what they considered the weak, docile, parasitic character of the ghetto Jew – the object of their harshest derision, often using other antisemitic tropes – into a proud national character. This "New Jew" would be forged through toil on the land and military training, creating what Max Nordau, the second man in the leadership of the Zionist movement and its chief ideologue in its formative stage, called "muscular Judaism."

Zionism quickly came into conflict with three Jewish currents: the conservative religious circles; liberal Jews who feared that Zionism jeopardized the inroads in rights and integration achieved by the European and Jewish Enlightenments; and, thirdly, Jewish leftists and socialists for whom the solution to the Jewish question lay in the realization of socialism in Europe.

The rise of Zionism engendered its antithesis: Jewish anti-Zionism. The clash between the two was existential. It revolved around ontological questions: what was Jewishness? Was it an ethnicity and a national affiliation upon which Zionism planned to fulfil its modern ethnonational ideology? Or was it simply a religion? Most religious Jews, and certainly the religious establishment, argued that Judaism was a faith. If Jews were "a people", then they were a divinely chosen people, unlike other peoples and modern nations. As such, they did not seek a nation-state but, rather, awaited divinely ordained salvation. Secular Jews likewise held that Judaism was a faith, one that need not stand in the way of Jewish integration into secular, democratic, religiously neutral states, whether liberal or socialist. Secular Jewish anti-Zionists represented diverse strands of thought rooted in the European Enlightenment. They ranged from liberal democrats to socialists and communists. I am sure you are aware that Jewish representation in the European left significantly exceeded their share of the population.

The Palestinian people, at that time (the end of the nineteenth century), were unaware of these developments in Europe; perhaps only a handful of them had ever heard of those debates, so they were not opposed to Zionism. Nor, for that matter, were the vast majority of Europeans. Anti-Zionism was a Jewish phenomenon, because the debates centred around defining Jewishness and the question of Jewish integration. There was no conceptual or historical connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Historically, antisemitism in Europe predates anti-Zionism by far, and Europeans who hated Jews for religious, racial, or economic reasons did not care whether or not they were Zionists.

Palestinians – the indigenous inhabitants of the land – were themselves undergoing processes of modernization and urbanization and developing national aspirations. When Zionists began to settle in Palestine, the Palestinian opposition to that movement was not driven by hostility toward Jews or by a disagreement over how to define Jewishness after the rise of Zionism. Rather, Palestinians were suspicious of a colonizing project and its ambitions. It did not take long for the suspicion to be confirmed as it soon became palpably clear that the aim of the Zionist settlement drive was to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

The thought of accusing Palestinians of antisemitism did not even cross the minds of early Zionist leaders. In two essays from 1923, titled "The Iron Wall" and "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," the right-wing Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky wrote that it was natural for Arabs, like any people with dignity, to oppose the colonization of their land, and that only force could "persuade" them to accept Zionist settlement and the establishment of a Jewish state on their land. The charge of antisemitism was not levelled against the Arabs until after the establishment of Israel. It was a component of its official propaganda strategy, no more, no less. It was disseminated in the leadup to the 1967 war and has since remained a staple of Israeli state messaging – or *hasbara*. All critics of Israel are automatically branded as antisemitic.

Herzl, in his diaries and speeches at Zionist congresses, held that one of the most persuasive arguments that would entice European governments to support the Zionist project was that establishing a Jewish national home outside Europe, in Palestine, would relieve Europe of the Jewish question, which stirred tensions and contributed to Jewish involvement in radical movements that threatened European stability. Some nineteenth century European leaders were convinced, but they were not enthusiastic about helping to implement the project for practical reasons. Among these were the conflicts (and subsequently agreements) among European powers over the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Mashreq, and doubts regarding feasibility of the Zionist project itself.

Not that this prevented the Zionist movement from establishing proto-state structures and institutions once their colonization drive got underway. Nevertheless, the project as a whole could not have come to fruition – let alone thrive – without two major global developments ("global" at the time meant "European"). The first was the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. This enabled the implementation of the Anglo-French agreement to divide the Levant between them and Britain's commitment to establishing a national home for the Jews in Palestine. After the war, Britain appointed a Zionist high commissioner and adopted the Balfour Declaration as part of the Mandate Charter, committing the British Mandatory authority to its implementation. The second major development was World War II and the Nazi holocaust.

Despite all the organizational work and institution building undertaken by the European Jewish settlers, who drew from the expertise in party politics and syndicalist organization they had acquired in their countries of origin, and even though an organized settlement (*yishuv*) had taken root – complete with such institutions as a settlement bank, the Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet*) and other agencies to purchase and confiscate Palestinian land, two universities, a trade union federation (the *Histradut*), the *Hashomer* to guard the kibbutzes, and paramilitary outfits such as the Haganah (which would become the core of the Israeli army) – the Zionist project did not succeed – nor could it have succeeded – through gradual evolution. Jews remained a minority in Palestine. They could not have established a Jewish state without the mass expulsion of Palestinians and the seizure of their lands and property. This only became possible after the Nazi Holocaust – an event of monumental European significance, which did not occur in our region, and with which Palestinians, Arabs, and

Muslims had nothing to do. Only then could the Zionist movement secure the UN Partition Plan, use it as a pretext for unilaterally declaring a Jewish state in a land predominantly inhabited by an indigenous Palestinian Arab population, and then forcefully expel the majority of that population in the 1948 war.

Zionist leaders understood from the outset that it would be impossible to establish a Jewish state in Palestine without the cooperation and sponsorship of at least one colonial power. Herzl believed that the settlement activity undertaken by such Eastern European Jewish movements as the "Lovers of Zion" (*Hovevei Zion*) was the work of amateurs. He wanted a written legal decree that would make Jewish immigration lawful and supported by major colonial powers.

In those days, the word "colonial" did not carry negative connotations. In fact, engaging in colonial endeavours was widely seen as a mark of European civilization and its civilizing mission. So Zionists had no problem with creating institutions with names like the Jewish Colonial Trust – or *Jüdische Kolonialbank* in German – to support their settlement drive in Palestine. Whether that drive was backed by a colonial power or initiated and financed by Jewish financiers in Europe, it was a consummately colonial-settler enterprise. It sought to implant a distinct economic and demographic environment alien to the local habitat, in pursuit of ends at odds with the welfare of the indigenous socio-economic fabric. Above all, it aimed to establish a political entity for the settlers that would exclude the indigenous inhabitants.

Present-day Israel is no longer troubled by being described as the product of a settler-colonial drive. It does not mind being in the same club as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It has become so self-confident that it openly acknowledges its history of plunder and dispossession, while reducing the Torah to a morality free pass (or religious trump card), political charter, and real estate deed.

Nor does this fusion of religion and politics – this religious fundamentalism – seem to trouble Western secular leaders. Recent documents produced by the world's largest democracy, including the so-called "Deal of the Century" agreements, are replete with biblical terms and expressions, invoking the "Promised Land" and the fact that Jerusalem (al-Quds) is not mentioned by name in the Quran to justify the establishment of the contemporary Israeli state.

But Zionist settler colonialism was not content with the territory Israel held upon its establishment. It continued to expand, most dramatically through the 1967 war. It still prefers annexing more land over peace with the Arabs. But the inhabitants present a problem: Israel never found a way to absorb the West Bank and Gaza together with their populations, who remained on their land after the 1967 war. Because it refuses even a relatively equitable political solution that recognizes the legitimate rights of the indigenous population, Israel ended up creating an apartheid system in Palestine. In other words, this is not just settler colonialism, but the type of settler colonialism that produces a system of racial segregation like that in South Africa. The Israeli political establishment across the board – from those who justify apartheid to those who deny it exists – insists on a monistic

Jewish state and opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with Jerusalem as its capital. At the same time, that establishment refuses to grant full equality to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza as citizens of the political entity that rules over them. They are thus stripped of both individual rights and their collective rights as a people.

Europe has adapted to this apartheid reality. The European Union, and some European states individually, are keen to have more than normal bilateral relations with Israel and therefore grant it special privileges. They treat Israel as though it were a European state. Even antisemites, who have set their crosshairs on new "others" or "aliens" in Europe, are perfectly comfortable dealing with the Jewish state, and even allying with it as a "European" country – as long as it stays outside Europe.

The Jewish question was exported to a place it had never existed: the Arab and Islamic world. To be clear, Jews in the East did not live in a paradise of tolerance; like all minorities, they faced discrimination at different times. They suffered from discrimination not because they were Jews, nor as an ethnic group, but as non-Muslims. Today, the exported Jewish question has mentally supplanted the Palestinian question within the European establishment, which extends sympathy to the perpetrators as if they were the victims. It was this projection that has facilitated the unquestioning acceptance of the falsehoods and distortions disseminated by Zionist propaganda, such as likening the events of 7 October 2023 to the Holocaust.

With the same facility, European officials and mainstream media treated 7 October as though it were the beginning of history, ignoring everything that preceded it. If memories could not stretch as far back as the Balfour Declaration, the Nakba, and the occupation of 1967, then at least one might at least expect them to recall the ongoing suffocating blockade of Gaza.

Then, when the brutality of Israel's recent aggression began to exceed the farthest Europe could stretch its bounds of "the right to self-defence against terrorism" – i.e., as Israel shifted gears from vengeance against the indigenous population to genocide while pursuing political aims, from regaining control of Gaza, expanding settlements in the West Bank, and accelerating the Judaization of Jerusalem to settling scores in Lebanon and Syria and establishing new zones of influence in the region – European governments, with few exceptions, responded with a new level of sophistry. Rather than address what was unfolding on the ground in Palestine, they grappled with whether it was appropriate to use the word "genocide" given the sensitivity of this term in a continent where they could not deny acts of genocide had abounded. Therefore, Israel continued to benefit from monopolizing the role of European victim, even as it bombed schools and hospitals and targeted doctors, children, and journalists.

For some twenty years – while the people of Gaza suffered under a relentless blockade, the prospects for a political solution to the Palestinian question remained closed, and settlement expansion in the West Bank continued without restraint – European officialdom largely refrained from calling Israel to account for its crimes as an occupying power, confining its condemnations to some settlers, as if they were criminal gangs instead of Israeli state agents. It took no practical steps to

halt the unfolding establishment of an apartheid system in Palestine. It would never side with the victims of this system. Official Europe remained firmly allied with Israel, while striking a façade of impartiality and issuing statements that encouraged "moderates" and condemned "extremists" on "both sides" – such were the misleading framings and euphemisms it used to obfuscate the reality of the asymmetry between an occupying power and people under occupation. This was Europe's easy way out of assuming responsibility, especially after abdicating to Washington's takeover of the Western management of the Middle East since 1956. The image of European leaders standing behind Trump during the recent Sharm el-Sheikh summit epitomizes Europe's self-demotion to assistant, appendage, or extra. They stood behind the state that offers unconditional support to Israel, to the extent of adopting the Zionist theological terminology as applied to Palestine.

The atrocities Israel perpetrated in Gaza were so egregious as to embarrass Isreal's allies. That embarrassment ended as soon as the so-called ceasefire was announced and the focus shifted to sustaining it and ending the war, even if that meant accepting all of Israel's conditions. The US president appeared daily in the media to affirm that the ceasefire was holding, despite Israeli violations, which became so frequent that they were treated as part of the ceasefire. What mattered was the veneer of "the end of the war", because that meant Arab states could be invited to normalize relations with Israel and urged to welcome the war criminal and champion of genocide into their countries, with no discussion of a just solution to the Palestinian cause. It will be as if the war never happened, as if the dehumanizing occupation and the marginalization of the Palestinian cause had not led to the war in the first place.

The conduct of Western governments and mainstream media during the war severely undermined the credibility of the universal values embodied in the Declaration of Human Rights. In our part of the world, the outraged public has gone beyond condemning those values as hollow or hypocritical to doubting whether they exist at all. In this context, postmodern thought – which claims that universal values are just a facet of Western discourse, a product of power relations like any other discourse – has assumed the role that premodern thought. We found ourselves defending universal moral frameworks on behalf of the victims, at the expense of the time and effort needed to expose the systematic destruction of these values – in word and deed – by the perpetrators of genocide and their accomplices.

But what is heartening, against this grim background, is the rise of a generation in Europe and North America that takes moral values seriously and refuses to confine their universality to mere abstractions. For them, universality means the effective applicability of these values on all human beings, by virtue of their humanity. The members of this generation do not get their information on Palestine from media outlets biased toward the occupying power – the state that prevents these same outlets from entering the occupied territories and covering events on the ground.

This is a generation that condemns war criminals and stands with the victims. It denounces hypocrisy and double standards in world where the reigning superpower hounds International Criminal Court

judges, embraces wanted war criminals, restricts free speech in the cradle of liberal democracy, and has a president who openly admits serving pro-Isreal lobbies – confessing, for instance, that he recognized Israel's annexation of the Golan and Jerusalem under pressure from the wealthiest donors. The US president is so candid about his motives that he renders political analysts obsolete. These young people dare to make their voices heard in countries whose leaders grovel before a president whose personality they know all too well, thereby emboldening him further in his worst impulses.

What is also new is that Israel and its affiliated lobbies are now encouraging the use of visa bans, career threats, and the denial of academic opportunities to silence critics. Not that long ago, Israeli propaganda did not have to be supplemented by such coercive measures. Its narrative held such sway throughout the West that there was no need to suppress free speech.

Israel's loss of narrative hegemony in the West, including Europe, is an extremely important shift – one that must be sustained and augmented. The growing tide of solidarity we have witnessed over the past two years must be developed from an expression of fellow human sympathy for the victims and revulsion at Israeli brutality into political solidarity. While this solidarity should appreciate and end to the war it fought to stop, it should not be satisfied by proposals to fulfil Israeli conditions while shirking a just solution to the Palestinian cause.