

Zionism's Relationship to Anti-Semitism

by Wendy Elisheva Somerson via suzie - Truthout *Saturday, Jul 27 2019, 4:31am*

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Zionism developed in the late 19th century as a response to anti-Semitism in Europe, but it sadly reinforces the logic of anti-Semitism. A nationalist ideology that drove the founding of the Israeli state, Zionism developed as one response to the sharp rise in violent and pervasive anti-Semitism in Europe. Under escalating attacks, European Jews at the time responded to anti-Semitism in myriad ways, including assimilation, emigration and rejecting nationalism. The Jews who forwarded political Zionism proposed founding a Jewish nation-state in historic Palestine modeled after European settler colonialism.

Theodor Herzl, the founding father of political Zionism, and his political allies argued that it was the presence of Jews in predominantly non-Jewish societies that caused anti-Semitism. Therefore, Zionists at the time called for the exodus of Jews from Europe not to combat anti-Semitism itself, but to remove Jews from Christian countries. They appealed to the anti-Semitism of European leaders, making the case that helping to create a Jewish state elsewhere would help them expel Jews from Europe.

From the start, Zionists relied on anti-Semitism to implement their political aims. In his foundational pamphlet, *Der Judenstaat*, Herzl argued that "the Governments of all countries scourged by Anti-Semitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain [the] sovereignty we want," and in his diaries, Herzl predicted that "the anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semitic countries our allies."

After the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust came to light, in 1947 there was support for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in the land of historic Palestine, which is referred to as the Nakba, or catastrophe, in Arabic, because 750,000 Palestinians had their homes and property confiscated as part of a process of ethnic cleansing that continues to this day.

This founding was also a catastrophe for many Jews from across the Middle East and North Africa who were forced to leave their previous homes. After immigration to Israel, they suffered everything from the indignity of being sprayed with DDT upon arrival to the horrors of having their children taken from them, as well as medical experimentation.

After the war, anti-Semitism was condemned by the world powers at the same time as the explicit colonial era was coming to a close and post-colonial independent states were emerging. Overt colonialism was no longer seen as a viable methodology, which left the Zionist founders of the Israeli state scrambling to represent the Israeli state as the solution to anti-Semitism, instead of as a colonial project. This strategy then allowed them to portray Palestinian resistance not as a struggle against colonialism, but as a struggle that was inherently anti-Semitic. This story continues to this day: The state needs anti-Semitism to justify its existence, and accuses anti-colonialists of anti-Semitism.

The Spread of the Soros Myth and Alliances With Anti-Semites

Disturbingly, one of the most prevalent current anti-Semitic tropes, the Soros myth, was spread by two of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's key advisers. Netanyahu introduced American advisers George Birnbaum and Arthur Finkelstein to authoritarian Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2008 when Orbán decided to seek re-election. In 2013, they began advising him to focus his campaign on Soros as the "shadowy figure" and "puppet master" behind the scenes who controlled the economy.

In 2015 Orbán made a speech that Soros wanted to weaken the country and flood it with refugees, and by 2017, election posters around the country showed Soros's face and the slogan "Don't let George Soros have the last laugh!" According to BuzzFeed News, the campaign worked: "A huge part of the country turned against Soros. Orbán won in 2014 and 2018, both times with an overwhelming majority." Netanyahu himself has disparaged Soros, and in 2017, when Netanyahu's son Yair posted an anti-Semitic meme showing Soros and reptilians controlling the world, David Duke came to Yair's defense.

In addition to spreading anti-Semitic tropes, Israel's current leadership actively supports anti-Semites and right-wing, white nationalist governments and movements as long as they support the state of Israel. Many right-wing European nationalists support Israel because they want Jews to migrate there, and are also inspired by Israel's racist and xenophobic policies towards Palestinians and Ethiopian Jews. The Israeli government and the far-right movements in Europe are finding common cause in their Islamophobic responses to waves of migration in Europe from predominantly Muslim countries. Israel promotes itself to Europe as an effective model for preventing the immigration of people of color.

Netanyahu has deep ties with Orbán, whose mission is to keep white Christian Europe free from non-European refugees. When the Israeli ambassador in Budapest issued a statement expressing concern over Orbán's campaign against Soros, Netanyahu made him retract the statement. After Poland passed a highly controversial Holocaust law in 2018 making it illegal to accuse Poland of complicity in Nazi war crimes, Netanyahu and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki issued a joint statement downplaying the role of the Polish in the deaths of Jews. It was so historically inaccurate that Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust museum felt compelled to point out its "grave errors and deceptions."

Trump and Netanyahu have such a close relationship that Netanyahu named a Golan Heights settlement "Trump Heights." As president, Trump has also forwarded the notion of "globalist" George Soros financing caravans of immigrants heading from Central America to the southern U.S. border and infamously said there were good people on both sides of a deadly white supremacist march in Charlottesville, which featured anti-Semites and white nationalists.

Israel also enthusiastically supports Christian Zionists and their anti-Semitic religious doctrine, which dictates Jews must return to Israel as part of a biblical prophecy and prerequisite for the second coming of Christ. When Christ returns, if Jews don't convert, they will end up in hell with the rest of the unsaved people. The group Christians United for Israel (CUFI), led by televangelist Pastor John Hagee, claims to be the largest pro-Israel organization in the U.S. Hagee himself infamously preached that Hitler was "a hunter" sent by God to drive the Jews back to Palestine so that the divine prophecy could be implemented. Many Christian Zionists are also white nationalists and some of Trump's most enthusiastic supporters. Netanyahu meets frequently with Hagee, endorses CUFI, and has spoken at numerous CUFI events

Conflating Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism

Yet while spreading anti-Semitic myths and allying with actual anti-Semites, including Christian Zionists and far-right extremists from Washington, D.C., to Hungary, the Israeli government keeps insisting that anti-Zionists are the ones forwarding anti-Semitism. How does a state that forwards anti-Semitism successfully lob charges of anti-Semitism at its critics?

In a wildly cynical move due to its negative image worldwide, the Israeli government has been promoting the idea that a “new” form of anti-Semitism has developed in the last decade, which manifests as opposition to Zionism and criticism of the Israeli state. In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) proposed a working definition of anti-Semitism that states “manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity.” One example the Alliance gives of anti-Semitism is “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.”

In 2018, Netanyahu argued that “vicious efforts to demonize the Jewish state and deny the Jewish people the right to self-determination” are a “new form of anti-Semitism.” With the urging of Netanyahu, the U.S. State Department and the EU have adopted the IHRA definition.

Ironically, this definition of the “new anti-Semitism” reinforces anti-Semitism by conflating the Jewish people with a nation-state. Political Research Associates, a group monitoring right-wing extremism, defines anti-Semitism as a form of bigotry that treats Jews (who are racially, economically and politically diverse) as a single body — “The Jews.” When the Israeli government conflates the state of Israel with “the Jewish people,” it treats us as a singular entity. It’s also inaccurate because the majority of Jews in the world live outside Israel and many of us dis-identify with the state completely.

Another way the IHRA definition reinforces anti-Semitism, by its own definition, is through naming Israel a “Jewish collectivity.” The authors say “holding Jews collectively responsible for the actions of the state of Israel” is an example of anti-Semitism at the same time that they “conceive” of the state as “Jewish collectivity.” This move to collapse Jews into the state increases the likelihood that we will be held responsible for the oppressive actions of the state.

Toward Palestinian and Jewish Liberation

We can’t fight real anti-Semitism without differentiating it from the false and often racist accusations that are used to protect Israel from criticism. From its origins, Zionism as a nationalist ideology wasn’t and still isn’t an attempt to eradicate anti-Semitism or make the lives of all Jewish people better — only those who support and participate in its nation-building project.

If we really want to eradicate anti-Semitism, we must refuse to let our diverse and diasporic Jewish communities be reduced to a nation state. The fight for justice for Palestinians, it turns out, is also a fight for Jewish liberation — a fight that will liberate Jews from having our identities used to justify the colonialism of the Israeli state. If we want to stand against white supremacy, white nationalism and anti-Semitism, there is only one place for us to stand: on the side of justice for Palestinians, for Jews, for all of us trying to be free.

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