

# What is Modern Israel?

Yakov M. Rabkin

Translated by Fred A. Reed



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# *Introduction*

An inescapable presence on the international political scene, the state of Israel plays a role out of all proportion to its size. The estimated 7 million inhabitants of this tiny country in Western Asia account for barely 0.1 percent of the world's population, smaller in fact than any mid-size city in China. But for all its imposing economic and political status, Israel remains a state that is frequently ill understood. Indeed, the origins and the legitimacy of Israel, as well as the ideology upon which it was founded, raise fundamental questions, including that of political rationality.

The founding ideology of the state of Israel has emerged from a complex relationship with the heritage of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, Zionism would have been impossible without the emancipation of the Jews of Europe, founded upon the principle of equality that underlies the Enlightenment ideal. But on the other hand, Zionism marks a clear break with the Enlightenment by postulating the eternal character of anti-Semitism and affirming ethnic exclusiveness. Furthermore, many of the challenges Israel faces arise from the uneasy encounter between politics and religion. The lessons that the relatively short history of this state offers can assist us in better understanding today's world, whatever the distance that separates us from Western Asia.

One of the particularities of Israel has been the reticence of the leaders of the Zionist movement, and later of the Zionist state, to define its borders: a peculiarity that can be traced back to the beginnings of the Zionist project, and that made it possible to negotiate the existence of a state with the Great Powers of the day. The tactic proved effective, and led to the unilateral declaration of independence in May 1948, under which no borders were established. Territorial expansion is thus one of the distinguishing characteristics of the history of Israel. In place of well-defined borders, we witness the Zionist equivalent of the continuously expanding American frontier. Acting "in the name of the Jewish people," formally transnational organizations such as the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which enjoy non-profit status in many countries including Canada, are full-fledged participants in the administration of the state. It is in this fashion that Israel, since its founding, has conquered and colonized increasingly greater territory without ever seeking to define its eventual

borders. The colonization by over half a million Israeli citizens of the territories occupied in 1967 has unfolded, in a strictly segregated manner, on lands inhabited by a Palestinian majority who, though now living in an Israeli-run administrative and economic space, are not citizens.

Israel today is a prosperous country with a per-capita gross national product (GNP) estimated at nearly US\$40,620 in 2014.<sup>1</sup> This places it far above its neighbors. It attracts substantial direct foreign investment. In 2013 the total investment was close to \$12 billion, but it dropped by nearly half the following year.<sup>2</sup> Israel's economy is often described as "a transplant economy,"<sup>3</sup> that is, insulated from the economy of Arab Palestine and the surrounding countries, and based primarily on high-tech industry, particularly in the military and security sectors. By comparison, the per-capita GNP in the Palestinian territories under Israeli control since 1967 is considerably lower (\$3,060).<sup>4</sup>

For all its prosperity, Israel displays a high level of socio-economic inequality among the industrialized countries, even within its 1949 borders, putting it in second place just behind the United States. Once a relatively egalitarian society, Israel today exhibits a poverty level of 21 percent, the highest among members of the Organisation for Co-operation and Economic Development (OECD). Extremes of wealth are particularly pronounced between Arab and non-Arab citizens, the income of the latter being three times higher than that of the former. Although Israel ranks 22nd among 177 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI), the position held by the Arab population would relegate it to 66th place.<sup>5</sup> While they account for 20 percent of the population of Israel, its Arab citizens own less than 3 percent of the land.<sup>6</sup> Inequalities are particularly pronounced in educational expenditure: \$192 annually for each Arab student as against \$1,100 for each non-Arab student. Similar disproportions may be observed in public health indicators: infant mortality is twice as high among Arab babies, while cervical cancer is diagnosed five times less among Arab women than among non-Arab women.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time a powerful military-industrial complex, which produces and maintains sophisticated weapons both nuclear and conventional, ensures that for the moment no regional army or coalition of armies can be taken as a credible threat to Israel's dominant position. The country occupies the tenth place in the world arms trade,<sup>8</sup> rather disproportionate to its modest size. Israel also exports its expertise in

security-related matters, a sector overwhelmingly staffed by former members of the intelligence services and the IDF.

Politically, Israel can rely on the solid support of the elites of Western nations. For example, only a few months after the Israeli attack on Gaza in the winter of 2008–09 ended with more than 1,400 people killed by the IDF and nine by Palestinian forces,<sup>9</sup> the diplomats of the wealthiest countries voted unanimously to admit Israel into the OECD. Condemnation of the human rights violations, not to mention the war crimes committed during the offensive, by eminent UN experts—Richard Falk and Richard Goldstone, both Jews—did not appear to have the slightest impact on the outcome of the vote within the OECD. Israel also sought and obtained the cooperation of all the Western nations in turning away pro-Palestinian pacifist demonstrators who attempted to travel by sea or air to Gaza and the Occupied Territories as part of a solidarity campaign in the summer of 2011.

The essentially European character of this recently established settler colony, which resembles in many ways the United Kingdom's former colonies throughout the world, also explains Western support of Israel. Its self-ascribed identity as a "Jewish state" brings *de facto* legitimacy to the renewal of ethnicity as the criterion for belonging. The congenital and organic links that the Zionist state possesses and cultivates with the West go far to explain the impunity it enjoys in the eyes of the European powers, or those whose majority population is of European descent, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. These links have acquired even greater influence within the increasingly accepted ideological construct of the "clash of civilizations," which has enabled Israel to position itself as the West's protective rampart against the hypothetical threat from the East.

Guilt over the Nazi genocide, to which some attribute this preferential treatment, appears today less significant than Israel's service to Western interests in the region. These interests, reinforced by Evangelical "end-times" beliefs, form the bedrock of non-Jewish Zionism, which well antedates Jewish Zionism, and whose history is discussed in the pages that follow. In our day, Western partiality toward Israel suffers from a democratic deficit: contrary to their elites, the majority of the citizens of the Western nations consider the state of Israel as a threat to world peace.<sup>10</sup>

All nationalisms are based on "imagined communities,"<sup>11</sup> but some of these communities appear to be more imagined than others. Most European nationalisms were constructed around regional identities that had



to be transformed into national ones. In this sense, political Zionism is at once typical and exceptional.<sup>12</sup>

Political Zionism is typical in that it is part and parcel of the history of late-19th-century ethnic nationalisms. The nationalism that led to the creation of Israel is essentially and profoundly European, drawn up by Europeans to solve the “Jewish question,” itself strictly European in nature. But the Zionists were obliged to mobilize considerable energies in order to be able, within a single century, to transfer almost half of the world’s Jews to Palestine, a transfer that involved not only people but also their fears. The nightmare of the pogroms of Tsarist Russia were projected upon the previously largely peaceful reality of Ottoman Palestine, a mosaic of different religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups. The sequels of the Nazi genocide, conceived and perpetrated in Europe by Europeans against other Europeans, were also projected onto existing Palestinian society, and contributed to the transformation of that territory into a nation-state on the European model, complete with European aspirations and Western allegiances.

Long ill at ease with minorities, Europe at the turn of the 20th century became particularly intolerant with the rise of ethnic nationalism, which often took the form of “scientific racism.” The collapse of multinational empires in the wake of the First World War released powerful nationalist feelings, with new states being established in Central and Eastern Europe at the war’s end. The United Kingdom, which not only kept its empire but also sought to extend it to the Middle East, expressed in 1917 by way of the Balfour Declaration its support for the idea of a “Jewish national home in Palestine.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Zionism is an integral part of the European colonial history. Colonialism at the time had no negative connotation: the principal financial arm of the Zionist movement was then officially known as the Jewish Colonial Trust.

What made Zionism exceptional was the imperative of creating a single people out of disparate religious groups scattered throughout the world. As we will soon see, the Zionists did not simply have to shape and propagate a sense of national belonging of the European variety among Jews who were utter strangers to it, but also to provide them with a common language. Unlike other European nationalisms, it was vital to create prospective settlers from these diverse populations in such a way as to facilitate the establishment of Zionist settler colonies in West Asia, on the model of European colonies in Africa, Australia, and the Americas. But

at the turn of the 20th century most Jews did not consider themselves as belonging to a distinct race or nation, in the European sense of the term, a conception that then possessed a pronounced odor of anti-Semitism.

In fact, the Christian motivation for the restoration of the Jews in the Promised Land lent a powerful practical impetus to the Judaic hope of return, which had been traditionally characterized by an entirely different sensibility and ultimate goal. As we will see in these pages, Jewish tradition holds that this return must be a part of a messianic project rather than the human initiative of migration to the Holy Land. It then becomes much easier to understand why the Zionist enterprise, reflecting as it did Christian motifs, was rejected by an overwhelming majority of Jews at the turn of the 20th century. There was little room for Jewish tradition in the Zionist scheme, which not only originated among Protestants but was also sustained by individuals of Jewish origin who were atheists or agnostics.

This book accords particular weight to this rejection, which may appear paradoxical in our day when Jews and Zionists, Judaism and Zionism, the millennia-old Jewish tradition and 20th-century National Judaism,<sup>14</sup> Israeli state interests and those of the Jewish citizens of other countries, are often conflated and confused. To understand Israel, it is necessary to distinguish between religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, precisely because the Zionist ideology has created a fusion of the three. By way of example, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs established in Canada in 2004 embodies this fusion and illustrates how the public perception of Jews and Israel is manipulated.

Both the Zionists and their adversaries are well aware of the ideological fragility of the Zionist project. While many Israelis affirm that Zionism constitutes the principal obstacle to peace between Israel and Palestine, and thus to the integration of Israel into the region, the current Israeli government insists on the acceptance of the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” by the international community and by the Palestinians who are its primary victims. Even though its principal function is to obstruct any possible peace settlement, the demand testifies to the fragility of the Israeli state, for all its power and prosperity, as felt by many Zionists.

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) described St. Petersburg as the “most abstract and premeditated city in the whole wide world.”<sup>15</sup> Built as an act of will by Peter the Great upon the 60th parallel and perpetually threatened by flooding, the city remains at the mercy of the elements, precarious and even illusory in the midst of the surrounding

marshlands. A mere nine years after its founding, the new city was proclaimed capital of a vast empire, even though it was closer to New York City than to the empire's easternmost reaches. Russia's greatest authors saw that city of majestic elegance as an incongruous intruder, both foreign and strange, prophesying a dreadful end in the form of nature's revenge. When one day the mirage would vanish—wrote the Russian poet Mikhail Dmitriev (1796–1866)—only the highest tower of the Peter and Paul Fortress would protrude above the waters that had engulfed the proud and haughty city:<sup>16</sup>

A small boy, taken fishing by an aged companion, hears from the old fisherman the story of a proud city, now submerged, with only a thin spire still breaking through the water's surface to mark the spot. Mesmerized and horrified by the story, the lad asks the name of the drowned city, and hears in reply:

Its name was—well, not one of ours,  
 One I have not recalled for years.  
 Its sound was not one we would know,  
 And so 'twas lost long, long ago.<sup>17</sup>

Some fear that the state of Israel, foreign and incongruous in its region, will suffer a similar fate, becoming a desert in whose midst, among the shifting sands, will stand the ruins of City Gate, the 200 m high Tel-Aviv skyscraper that once symbolized the material success of Israel.

The association with St. Petersburg does not end there. It can be found as well in the cost in human lives of the Zionist enterprise. The Israeli poet and author Benjamin Harshav, who found refuge in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, compared the two ambitious projects in these (translated) words:

Peter the Great did build  
 His capital St. Petersburg  
 Atop the northern marshes  
 And atop peasant bones  
 David Ben-Gurion<sup>18</sup>  
 Paved a road  
 To his capital Jerusalem  
 With the bones of adolescents from the Shoah

...

Ben-Gurion gathered in rags

To deceive his enemy.  
Atop the bone-yard of youths from the Shoah  
We paved the bypass  
That leads to Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

This book examines the origins and the nature of the state of Israel, as well as its place in Jewish and European history, from several angles. It reminds us that the founders of Zionism saw their movement as a clean break with Jewish history; the pioneers of the colonization of Palestine were proud to have carried out “the Zionist revolution.” But paradoxically, if the status of the land of Israel was indeed central to Jewish tradition, Christians were the ones who sought the actual ingathering of the Jews in the Holy Land to bring about the Second Coming of Christ. Its deep and intimate connivance with Christianity goes far to explain the powerful support the state of Israel enjoys in the United States, where evangelical Protestant groups are numerous and influential.

At the same time, this book provides the reader with access to the essential sources of Jewish opposition to Zionism, and in particular to rabbinical writings that may appear almost impenetrable to the uninitiated.

The work also sketches the context of the emancipation that made it possible for the Jews of Central and Western Europe to integrate into their societies, and examines why the choice between integration and separate development remains even today, for the Jews, a crucial issue defining attitudes toward the policies and the very nature of the state of Israel. It goes on to detail the major identity shifts that placed the state of Israel at the center of the concerns of most of the world’s Jews, ranging from unconditional support for Israeli policies to condemnation and even outright rejection of the Zionist—that is, nationalist—concept of the Jew. It demonstrates why the state of Israel divides Jews far more than any other political, social, or religious question. It follows that the widely accepted idea that all Jews are necessarily Zionists and thus fierce defenders of the state of Israel appears as what it is: a myth that fuels anti-Semitism.

Any book about Israel must necessarily take up the question of anti-Semitism. Zionism, however, cannot be reduced simply to Jewish reaction to persecution, threats and anti-Semitic attitudes. The Zionists proved adept at benefitting from anti-Semitism, even on occasion by collaborating with its adherents. This troubled page of Zionist history is largely unknown to the general public.

The Nazi genocide is another major theme of contemporary Jewish

history. The approach adopted here, far from being content to state the obvious, is one of integrating this 20th-century tragedy into the theology developed through centuries of Jewish thought. In the event, this tragedy has been transformed into a vector for national unity in Israel, and for Zionist allegiance in the diaspora. It is a transformation that has given rise to a serious critique, particularly among Israeli intellectuals, of which this volume presents an overview.

Another crucial question is the critical role that has been—and continues to be—played by Jews of Russian origin in the Zionist enterprise. It is essential to take into account the discrimination that they suffered under the Russian Empire and their official transformation into a nationality among many others (Ukrainian, Uzbek, and so on) during the Soviet period. The book also attributes the reliance on the use of force that has marked Israeli society since its beginnings, setting it apart from the majority of the Jewish communities of the diaspora, to the lessons that Russian Jews derived from the violence of the pogroms and later of the Nazi genocide.

Above and beyond the still-contested legitimacy of the state of Israel, the question of Jewish identity remains the primary stumbling block. Certainly, Zionism has succeeded in creating a New Hebrew, speaking a new language, Modern Hebrew; but the attempt to graft this new identity onto the traditional, historic Jewish identity has not been a complete success. Jewish communities around the world have been able to protect certain specific characteristics, and the term “the Jewish people” covers, as it always has, diverse populations guided by interests different from, if not opposed to, those of the state of Israel.

While bringing to light certain aspects of history that are often, whether deliberately or not, left in the shadows, this work explains the achievements of the Zionist movement, and later of the state of Israel, which has risen to the rank of a world scientific, technological, and military power. At the same time, it provides an historical background to the apparently paradoxical enthusiasm that the Israeli experience has stimulated among Europe’s extreme right-wing parties.

Although there exists an abundant literature on Israel and Zionism, many of these writings are actually works of historical concealment. This book therefore intends to bring into focus some of the elements that are essential to understanding the nature of political Zionism and the history of the state of Israel. To expose certain facts, to make visible

aspects of history that have been cast into oblivion, is to invite you, the reader, to participate in the lively debate about Israel, and the reverberations the Zionist state's creation has touched off around the world. In these pages you will find food for thought and a challenge to the clichés, mantras, and stereotypes that make it difficult to have a clear view of this fascinating and controversial state.