



How anti-Zionism Became Anti-Semitism – by Dr. Joseph Massad

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In the late eighteenth century European philologists invented the category “Semitic” to describe the languages of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa -- Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Amharic, among others-- to distinguish them from Indo-European “Aryan” languages. Since then, European Christians began to consider European Jews, who did not speak Hebrew, as “Semites,” and this was based on the religious Jewish and Christian claims that European Jews were the descendants of the ancient Palestinian Hebrews rather than European converts to Judaism. With the rise of the biological and race sciences in the 19th century, the philological claim was transformed into a racial claim, whereby Jews as “Semites” were posited as racially different from European “Aryans.” What is remarkable, however, is that no one suggested, then or now, that European Christians, themselves descendants of European converts to Palestinian Christianity, were also “Semitic” descendants of the ancient Palestinian Christians.

[Historical](#) research has established for many decades that European Christians and Jews were native European converts to the two Palestinian religions of Christianity and Judaism, and were not descendants of their ancient adherents, any more than today’s Indonesian or Chinese or Bosnian Muslims are descendants of the ancient Arab Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula. But given the force of European racialism and Europe’s deeply racist culture, both then and now, the belief in the foreignness of Jews persisted. It is a belief that the Zionist movement espoused.

When anti-Semitism emerged as a political ideology, it latched onto this Semitic linguistic category, which, anti-Semites, alongside the period’s race science, considered a racial category. This is what Wilhelm [Marr](#), the German inventor of the term “Anti-Semitism,” insisted on in 1879 – namely that the hostility of anti-Semites to Jews was not based on the latter’s religion, as hostility to European Jews had been previously, but rather decidedly on their “race.”

Ever since the inception of the Zionist movement, Zionist thinkers presented their national colonial project as a response to anti-Semitism. Whereas Zionists saw anti-Semitism as a symptom, if not diagnosis, of the Jewish Question, they offered Zionism as the final cure that would eradicate anti-Semitism in Europe once and for all. Theodor Herzl and his followers insisted that it is the presence of Jews in gentile societies that caused anti-Semitism. Herzl put it thus in his 1896 foundational Zionist pamphlet *Der Judenstaat*: “the unfortunate Jews are now carrying the seeds of anti-Semitism into England; they have already introduced it into America.” Sharing this diagnosis with anti-Semites, the Zionists called for the exit of Jews from gentile societies in order to “normalize” their “abnormal” situation, transforming them into a nation like other nations.

Zionists accepted the claim of a Jewish “race” that was separate from the race of gentiles and proceeded to justify their colonial project on this basis. Just as European Christians understood their “superior” race to be the justification for their colonialism and neo-colonialism, Zionism, as a new member of the European colonial club, used similar arguments to colonize the land of the Palestinians.

To further Zionism’s racial claims, Zionist Jewish scholars established in Berlin in 1902 the Organization of Jewish [Statistics](#) (*Verein der jüdische statistic*) that studied, among other matters, the causes of the racial “degeneration” of European Jews. The very notion of racial “degeneration” had indeed been invented a decade earlier by the second most important Zionist leader after Herzl at the time, namely Max Nordau, whose 1892 book [Degeneration](#), popularized the term. Zionist scholars insisted on the concept of the Jewish race and the centrality of Jewish demography to the survival of the race. They concerned themselves with the physical health of

European Jews, the rate of intermarriage with non-Jews, the Jewish birth rate, and rates of Jewish conversions to Christianity, in order to find out the causes of Jewish racial degeneration, and whether Jews remained racially pure. European Jews, they concluded, suffered from “degeneration,” which was caused by their residence in the “Diaspora.” However, their “degeneration” was not biological—the Zionist scientists claimed that Jews who intermarried with Christians or converted to Christianity after the Enlightenment had exited from the Jewish community altogether and no longer married within it, a serendipitous development that preserved Jewish racial purity. As Jewish “degeneration” was not biological, the task for Zionism was to “regenerate” Jews by creating a settler-colonial State for European Jews in Palestine.

Herzl explained in *Der Judenstaat* that the Zionist project shared with anti-Semites a desire to empty Europe of its Jews in order to send them to a colonial territory outside Europe. He famously declared that “the Governments of all countries scourged by Anti-Semitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain [the] sovereignty we want”; and indeed, that not “only poor Jews” would contribute to an immigration fund for European Jews, “but also Christians who wanted to get rid of them.” He added in his *Diaries*: “the anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semitic countries our allies.” When a surge of anti-Semitism arose in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century at the prospect of Jewish refugees fleeing Russian pogroms being allowed into the country, it was [Herzl](#) who reassured anti-Semitic British officials that supporting Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine would spare them from having to admit Jewish refugees into Britain.

Herzl’s British ally at the time was Britain’s colonial Secretary Joseph [Chamberlain](#), an anti-Semite who believed that “Jewish” money would aid British imperialism if Britain supported the Zionist project. When British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour shepherded the Aliens Act of 1905 through the House of Commons to ban East European Jewish immigration, his concern was to save the country from the “undoubted evils” of Jewish immigration. Like Chamberlain, the anti-Semitic Balfour had in mind another colonial destination for Jewish immigrants. The point was not that Balfour was first an anti-Semite and then became pro-Jewish when he issued the Balfour Declaration of 1917, but rather that his pro-Zionist views were mobilized by his anti-Semitism. Winston Churchill is also declared by Zionists to be yet another hero for the “Jewish people.” But his anti-Semitism was also legendary. [He](#) identified communism as a “Jewish conspiracy” to take over the world, and supported Zionism, which offered a colonial-settler solution to “the Jewish problem,” on the grounds that it would undercut communism.

The leaders of the Zionist movement deployed the charge of anti-Semitism against the indigenous Palestinians who fought Zionism since the early 1880s. They claimed that Palestinian anti-Zionism was not based on the movement’s colonization of Palestine and its takeover of the land of Palestinian peasants but rather on “anti-Semitism.” In 1920, Zionist colonists in Palestine accused Palestinians who resisted colonization of committing an anti-Semitic “pogrom” against their Jewish colonizers during the Nabi Musa events that led to the death of five Jewish colonists and four Palestinians, including a young Palestinian girl. Meanwhile Zionist Jews, who espoused a peculiar form of Socialist Zionism, launched an attack on Communist Jews in 1927 at the first Congress of the League Against Imperialism. The Jews who opposed Zionist settler-colonialism and its imperialist alliances at the Congress were dubbed “anti-Semitic” by the Zionists.

This was not solely a Zionist effort, as the British who conquered Palestine in late 1917 adamantly refused to identify the Palestinian people except as religious communities, and therefore would attack all Palestinian anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist resistance as “sectarian” in nature, objecting to Jewish colonization on account of its *Jewish* character rather than its *colonial* nature.

The Zionists, a minority among European and US Jewry at the time, insisted that their Zionism was in fact nothing less than political Judaism and Jewishness and could not be separated from them; later Zionists then adopted this appropriation as a historical fact and not as an innovation. This is why, when Zionists and the state of Israel use the charge of anti-Semitism for propaganda purposes to shield Israel's settler-colonialism from criticism and condemnation, they pretend to be sincere when advancing the claim that critics of Israel are anti-Semites. For them, Zionism is a "Jewish" trait; it is something constitutive of every Jew. They insist that the quest to "return" to Palestine, to "Zion," is something that all Jews share and have always shared through the ages. When the world, represented by the United Nations General Assembly, judged that "Zionism is racism" in 1975 and compared it to other white European settler-colonialisms in Rhodesia, Namibia, and South Africa, Zionists and their friends insisted that the opposite was in fact true: the UN resolution and all forms of anti-Zionism are anti-Semitism!

The struggle to define a "Jew" legally in Israel has been ongoing since the founding of the settler-colony and there is no resolution in sight. However, the only thing that all Zionists agree on is that Zionism constitutes Jewishness. And this is even, and is said to be especially, true of those who want to resist their "Jewish" identity by resisting Zionism. It is in this vein that such Zionism-resisting Jews are labeled "self-hating," on the grounds that they are seen to hate the alleged Zionist part of their Jewishness.

Following this logic, colonizing Palestine, driving the Palestinians out to make room for colonizing Jews, enacting myriad laws to guarantee the racist nature of the Jewish settler-colony, invading neighboring territories, bombing and killing thousands of civilians, instituting an apartheid system, are all presented by Zionism and Israel as "Jewish" acts, which means that opposing them clearly constitutes anti-Semitism.

When Palestinians respond insistently that Israeli crimes *are not* Jewish crimes, and that their condemnation of Israel is not a condemnation of Jews, Zionists balk, but *not* at the Palestinians' assertion that they are anti-colonialists and *not* anti-Semites. Rather, Zionists object to the hubris of the Palestinians who fail to realize that not considering Israeli acts as "Jewish" acts *is* what makes Palestinians anti-Semites in the eyes of Zionists.

In recent years, and with the increasing success of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, Israeli and pro-Israel voices began to express much concern about the "anti-Semitic" motives of all movements that oppose Israeli settler-colonialism, State racism, and military occupation. The pro-Israel accusers want to correct the record, and claim that anti-Semitism is not a Right-wing ideology anymore but instead endemic on the Left.

This was not a new strategy but an old Israeli State-sponsored scheme to attack Palestinians and defame critics of Israel in the American and European Left who began to advance criticisms of Israel after 1967. During the two decades between the establishment of the Israeli settler colony and its 1967 invasions of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, the white American and European Left was enchanted with the country, defending it at every turn against the claims of the expelled and suppressed indigenous Palestinians whose lands and livelihoods it had usurped. However, following the 1967 invasions, the rise of the civil rights movements and liberation movements in the US, students' uprisings in France and elsewhere, the situation began to change. A minority of the white Left in the United States and Western Europe began to voice criticisms of the country for the first time. This alarmed the Israeli leadership and pro-Zionist circles in the US and Western Europe.

If more recently the Israeli government has devoted huge financial resources and a separate organization with a [\\$72](#) million (USD) budget to combat BDS, its response in 1972 was

less drastic if not less effective. It was Israel's foreign Minister who instructed American Jewish organizations on how they must respond to these criticisms. Speaking at an annual conference in Israel sponsored by the American Jewish Congress in August 1972 (later published in the Congress's publication *Congress Bi-weekly* on March 30, 1973), Israel's able foreign minister Abba Eban (born in South Africa under the name Aubrey Solomon) laid out the new strategy: "Let there be no mistake: The New Left is the author and the progenitor of the new anti-Semitism... the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism is not a distinction at all... Anti-Zionism is merely the new anti-Semitism." While gentile critics were castigated as anti-Semites, Eban described two American Jewish critics (Noam Chomsky and I. F. Stone) as suffering from a complex of "guilt about Jewish survival." Their values and ideology, meaning their anti-colonialism and anti-racism, "are in conflict and collision with our own world of Jewish values."

That Eban would identify Israeli colonial and racist policies with Jewish tradition and values was part and parcel of Zionism implicating all Jews in Israel's actions and ideals. If Zionism becomes another word for Judaism and Jews, and if "Israel" is the "Jewish people" (which is what the word "Israel" referred to before its Zionist appropriation to name their colony), and not only "their" alleged State, all pro-Zionists would perforce *not* be anti-Semitic, whereas all anti-Zionists would be.

Abba Eban's concern about the "New anti-Semitism" was never expressed when dealing with pro-Israel and pro-Zionist anti-Semites. Continuing Herzl's legacy, the Israeli government built strong alliances with the Apartheid regime of South Africa, whose Afrikaner leaders were pro-Hitlerites in the 1930s and 1940s. Israel also supported the anti-Semitic Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, who launched anti-Semitic campaigns against Paraguayan Jews who opposed him but at the same time supported Israel, which provided him with weapons. Israel also allied itself with the Argentinian coup leaders of the late 1970s and 1980s and provided them with military aid as they launched anti-Semitic campaigns, targeting Jewish dissidents whom they disappeared, tortured and killed.

This was also the position of the Israeli government towards American evangelicals. Jerry Falwell, who founded the Moral Majority, a Right-wing fundamentalist Christian organization that emerged as the most powerful supporter of Israel on the Christian Right, identified the anti-Christ as a Jew. Yet, when he died in 2007, Israeli leaders and heads of pro-Israel mainstream American Jewish [organizations](#) praised Falwell's support of Israel "despite" some "differences" they had had with him.

If Eban was concerned about all gentile critics and a couple of Jewish intellectuals critical of Israel in 1972, by 2007, the pro-Zionist concern would be about not only gentile critics of Israel and one or two Jewish intellectuals, but about the much larger number of American Jewish critics of Israel. [David A. Harris](#), the executive director of the American Jewish Committee, published an essay in the *New York Times* in 2007 in which he stated that "Perhaps the most surprising — and distressing — feature of this new trend is the very public participation of some Jews in the verbal onslaught against Zionism and the Jewish State." He added that those who oppose Israel's right to exist "whether Jew or gentile, must be confronted."

In the more recent past, not only have Israel's leaders been uncritical of Right-wing white supremacist European and American movements with whom Israel is allied, but they have also continued to ignore their anti-Semitism, which, as expected, was forgiven because of their support for Israel and Zionism. The story has repeated itself in recent years in Israel's support for Ukrainian, [Hungarian](#) and Polish anti-Semites, and even German and Austrian anti-Semites. This has been important for the recent Israeli push to criminalize anti-Israeli criticism in the European

Union and in the United States. This began with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's adoption of a working definition of anti-Semitism in 2016, which included "Manifestations... targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity." When the EU adopted a measure last December defining anti-Semitism as including anti-Zionist positions and positions critical of Israel, it was the Right-wing Austrian government, which included members of a [Neo-Nazi](#) party, that pushed for its adoption.

Pro-Zionist Right-wing anti-Semitism has been and continues to threaten Jewish lives in the United States and Europe. Whereas progressive American and European Jews, Christians, Muslims, and people of all faiths have joined anti-Zionist movements and/or movements that oppose Israeli racist and settler-colonial policies and are committed to combat anti-Semitism, pro-Israeli Jews and gentiles are part of pro-Zionist movements whose anti-Semitism threatens the physical existence of American and European Jews.

It is not that anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are not only *not one and the same*, as Eban and the Israeli government and their supporters would like us to believe, it is that anti-Semitism, pro-Zionism, racism, and pro-Colonialism are inseparable companions. Indeed, pro-Zionism is the only respectable form of anti-Semitism today, one that is welcomed by the Israeli government and pro-Zionists everywhere as a boon to the State of Israel. When pro-Zionists celebrate Israeli invasions and war crimes as a Jewish achievement, Israel and its supporters cheer them on, but when anti-Zionists attack Israeli crimes and invasions as the crimes of the Israeli government, and decidedly not the crimes of the Jewish people, it is Israel and its pro-Zionist supporters that call them anti-Semites.

Supporters of Israel cannot have it both ways: They cannot claim that the Zionist movement has a right to colonize the land of the Palestinians in the name of Jews, and that the movement has the right to privilege Jews and to oppress and discriminate against the Palestinian people in the name of Jewish people, and that it has the right to pass racist laws in the name of Jews, and that it has a right to name its state "the Jewish people" for whom it speaks, and then after all that advance the disingenuous claim that those who condemn Israel are condemning Jews.

Ironically, it is the majority of Israel's critics, in contrast to the majority of its supporters, who reject Israeli claims that Israel represents all Jews and insist that Israeli racist laws and colonial policies represent the Israeli government and *not* the Jewish people. The Zionist conflation of Zionism and Israel with the Jewish people and its conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism are not only false equations to fight critics of Israel; rather, they are first and foremost the justification for pro-Zionist and pro-Israeli anti-Semitism.



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