

Zionism

Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, is a modern political movement. Its core beliefs are that all Jews constitute one nation (not simply a religious or ethnic community) and that the only solution to anti-Semitism is the concentration of as many Jews as possible in Palestine/Israel and the establishment of a Jewish state there. The World Zionist Organization, established by Theodor Herzl in 1897, declared that the aim of Zionism was to establish “a national home for the Jewish people secured by public law.” Zionism drew on Jewish religious attachment to Jerusalem and the Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*). But the politics of Zionism was influenced by nationalist ideology, and by colonial ideas about Europeans’ rights to claim and settle other parts of the world.

Zionism gained adherents among Jews and support from the West as a consequence of the murderous anti-Jewish riots (known as pogroms) in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Nazi genocide (mass murder) of European Jews during World War II killed over six million, and this disaster enhanced international support for the creation of a Jewish state.

There are several different forms of Zionism. From the 1920s until the 1970s, the dominant form was Labor Zionism, which sought to link socialism and nationalism. By the 1920s, Labor Zionists in Palestine established the kibbutz movement (a kibbutz is a collective commune, usually with an agricultural economy), the Jewish trade union and cooperative movement, the main Zionist militias (the Haganah and Palmach) and the political parties that ultimately coalesced in the Israeli Labor Party in 1968. The top leader of Labor Zionism was David Ben-Gurion, who became the first Prime Minister of Israel.

A second form of Zionism was the Revisionist movement led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. They earned the name “Revisionist” because they wanted to revise the boundaries of Jewish territorial aspirations and claims beyond Palestine to include areas east of the Jordan River. In the 1920s and 1930s, they differed from Labor Zionists by declaring openly the objective to establish a Jewish state (rather than the vaguer formula of a “national home”) in Palestine. And they believed that armed force would be required to establish such a state. Their pre-state organizations, which included the Betar youth movement and the ETZEL (National Military Organization) formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

Although many Jews became Zionists by the early 20th century, until the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and the institution of a “Final Solution” to exterminate world Jewry, most Jews were not Zionists. Most orthodox Jews were anti-Zionist. They believed that only God should reunite Jews in the Promised Land, and regarded Zionism as a violation of God’s will. Some Jews in other parts of the world, including the United States, opposed Zionism out of concern that their own position and rights as citizens in their countries would be at risk if Jews were recognized as a distinct national (rather than religious) group. But the horrors of the Holocaust significantly diminished Jewish opposition or antipathy to Zionism, and following World War II most Jews throughout the world came to support the Zionist movement and demand the creation of an independent Jewish state.

Although orthodox Jews continued to oppose the creation of a Jewish state for several more decades, they supported mass settlement of Jews in Palestine as a means of strengthening and protecting the community. And following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, most orthodox Jews who previously had resisted Zionism adopted the belief that Israel's overwhelming victory in the war was a sign of God's support, and a fulfillment of God's promise to bring about the Messianic era. The areas captured and occupied in 1967, especially the West Bank, were important to religious Jews because they are the core of the biblical Land of Israel (Judea and Samaria). Consequently, Israel's victory in 1967 gave rise to a more religious variation of Zionism. Some existing political parties representing orthodox Jews came to embrace religious nationalism, and new parties and movements formed to advocate Israel's permanent control and extensive Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza.

The religious-nationalist parties and groups which constitute the far right of the Israeli political spectrum maintain a hard line on matters relating to territory and the Arab-Israeli conflict. They have allied with the Likud Party. Although the Labor Party also has supported Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza, a key difference is a willingness to consider a territorial compromise with Palestinians as a means of ending the conflict. The Likud and its allies oppose any territorial withdrawal. In 1977, the Likud won the national election, for the first time unseating the Labor Party which had governed Israel since independence. Since then, Likud and Labor have alternated as the governing party, sometimes forming coalition governments when neither could achieve a clear electoral victory.

A minority of Jewish Israelis belong to left-wing Zionist parties, which formed a political coalition known as Meretz in the 1980s. Meretz often joins Labor-led governments. Leftist Zionists are fully committed to maintaining Israel as a Jewish state, but tend to be more willing than the Labor Party to compromise on territorial issues, and have relatively greater sympathy for Palestinian national aspirations for a state of their own. A tiny minority of ultra-leftist Jewish Israelis identify themselves as non- or anti-Zionists. Some of them aspire to see all of Israel/Palestine transformed into a single state with citizenship and equal rights for all inhabitants, and others advocate the creation of a Palestinian state in all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.