

ZIONISM

AND ISRAEL

The history of the Jewish religion goes back several thousand years but **Zionism** is a relatively modern political philosophy.

Judaism was a legal religion in Roman times and spread across the Roman Empire from its original sites in the old Jewish kingdoms. Jewish communities were established in North Africa and Europe, and even along the trade routes as far as China¹. After Europe became largely Christian, Jews often faced persecution. They were forced to live in ghettos, restricted from practicing certain occupations and subject to sporadic outbreaks of violence or even expulsion. Although in Western Europe Jews gradually won civil rights, in Eastern Europe anti-Jewish riots, or pogroms, continued to be common well into the 20th century.

In the late 1800s, some Jews in Eastern Europe began to be influenced by ideas of **nationalism and colonialism**. They felt that Jews were not so much a religious group as a nation, or race, and that they needed their own state in order to be free. In 1897, Theodor Herzl, a German speaking Hungarian, organized the First Zionist Congress in Switzerland.²

Zionism was a originally a **secular political movement**, but many currents developed within it: liberal Zionism, nationalism, socialism, labour Zionism, religious Zionism. While Zionism became popular among Jews in Eastern Europe, until WWII it remained a minority tendency among Jewish communities, especially in Western Europe and the United States.

At first, some in the Zionist movement considered **Argentina and Uganda** as possible sites to establish colonies and build a Jewish homeland. Others, for historical or religious reasons, preferred Palestine, the site of the ancient Jewish kingdoms. Palestine was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which by 1917 was collapsing. The British government, about to take over the area, was lobbied to issue the **Balfour Declaration** endorsing the idea of a Jewish Homeland in Palestine. Small scale Jewish immigration began. Although Jews

and Arab Palestinians generally coexisted, friction began to grow as Jewish settlers bought land from Arab landowners and displaced peasant farmers. There were riots in 1920, 1921 and 1929, with loss of life on both sides.

After World War II and the Holocaust, large number of homeless European Jews began immigrating to Palestine. The Nazi genocide strengthened support for Zionism among Jews around the world. The Zionist leadership of the growing Jewish population in Palestine began to demand a Jewish state. They launched a campaign against the British rulers including terrorist attacks against the Arab population to achieve that goal.

In 1947, to end the violence, the **United Nations** proposed dividing Palestine into Jewish and Arab sections. In 1948 **Israel unilaterally declared its independence** and there was a war with the surrounding Arab countries. Israel expanded well beyond the borders proposed by the UN. Two thirds of the Palestinian population was driven from its homes in what is called the "**Nakba**" or catastrophe.³ They have never been allowed to return. Zionist principals were written into the Israeli Declaration of Independence and it remains the guiding ideology of the Israeli state today.

Although it began as a secular movement, today Zionism often employs religious nationalist arguments invoking the Bible to justify Israeli control over Palestine and its occupation of Palestinian territories. It claims that God gave Jews the land, that Jews were exiled, and that now, all Jews, no matter where they were born, have the **right to "return"** to Israel.

¹Sand, Shlomo. *The Invention of the Jewish People*. London & New York:Verso.2009.

²Wikipedia. Theodor Herzl. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_Herzl

³Wikipedia. Zionism. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zionism#History>

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