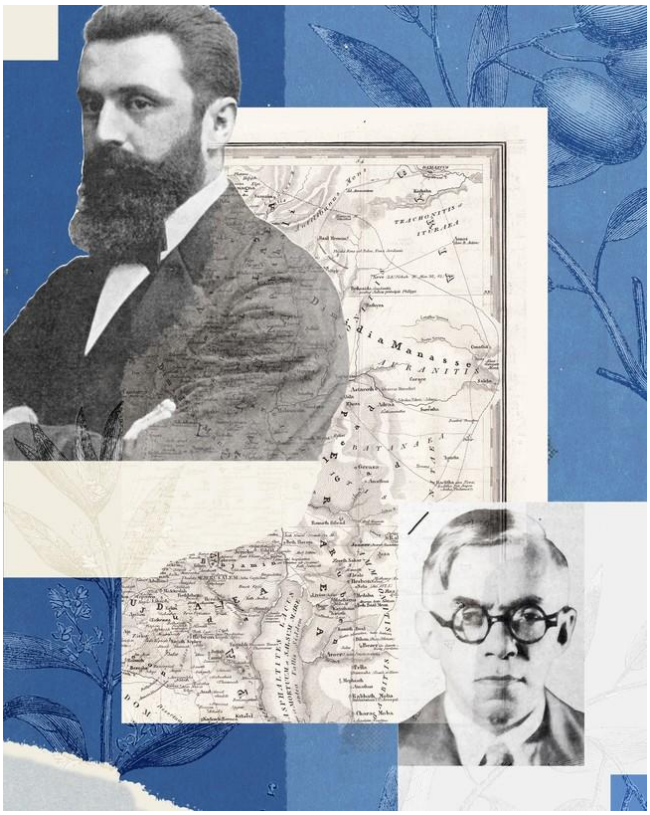
The Atlantic

Global



Understanding Zionism

The movement for Jewish settlement of Palestine resembles other nationalisms of its era.

By Arash Azizi

September 16, 2025

Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Universal History Archive / \ Universal Images Group / Getty.

One summer in Brooklyn, a controversy broke out in my dog-park group chat. Dedicated to the upkeep of the park and welfare of our canines, our chat had never indulged in politics before. But someone was now complaining that a dog-insurance company was "Zionist," and a passionate debate ensued.

This American-based company's founders were of Israeli nationality, and that was apparently enough to earn their company the epithet. Not that even such a tenuous link is necessary. I've seen actors, chefs, and writers pejoratively called "Zionist" by those who mean to disqualify or exclude them. To criticize someone for supporting, say, the Israeli government or its war in Gaza is one thing. But this charge is broader and vaguer, uttered sometimes in circumstances with no reference to Israel, and in many cases as little more than an anti-Semitic dog whistle.

I'm probably the only Middle Eastern member of that park group chat. I'm also a historian by training. I jumped in to say that I didn't think *Zionist* should be used as a term of derision. Zionism is a nationalist movement, I insisted, and like other nationalist movements, it has a story rooted in the 19th century—one that is neither all good nor all bad. To call someone a

Zionist as an insult is as strange as attacking someone for being a Ghanaian or Chinese nationalist. I'm not sure how many people I convinced. But to me the history of Zionism bears revisiting as a reminder of its impetus and early diversity.

The modern Zionist movement began 128 years ago, in August of 1897, with a congress of about 200 people in a concert hall in Basel, Switzerland. Chief among the Jewish leaders who'd convened the meeting was the Hungarian-born lawyer and journalist Theodor Herzl, whose long beard and charismatic personality gave him a Messiah-like air. The central idea under discussion was at once simple and revolutionary: that Jews, then living mostly in Europe, should build a new society in Ottoman Palestine.

Many Jews recognized Palestine as their ancestral homeland; it was once the site of a Jewish state, but the Romans destroyed it in a number of sieges occurring from the first century B.C.E. to the second century C.E. and gradually drove out the region's Jewish majority by about the fourth century. By the time of the Zionist congress, most of Palestine's population consisted of Arab Muslims and Christians, although Jews retained a majority in the holy city of Jerusalem.

The idea that the Jews of Europe might return to Palestine was not new. Jewish activists, such as German socialist thinker Moses Hess, advocated it in the 19th century; in the 17th century Jewish Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza predicted that a Jewish state would eventually rise. Various world leaders, including France's Napoleon Bonaparte and Lord Palmerston of Britain, also floated the idea at various times. In 1881, in reaction to pogroms in Russia, Jewish groups that called themselves Lovers of Zion began organizing migration to Palestine and helped establish agricultural settlements there.

The congress in Basel, however, was where Zionists established two things that would pave the way to their success: a defined program and an organization. Ever pragmatic, Herzl wanted Zionists to seek permission from the Ottoman empire for the legal settlement of Palestine, rather than simply migrating there as individuals.

The Zionist Organization, founded at the Basel congress, was financed by membership fees. Unlike previous efforts, it grew rapidly. The Lovers of Zion had only had 23 branches in Russia before 1897. Within a year of the Basel congress, Russia alone had 356 Zionist branches. The Zionist Organization grew to 100,000 members by 1900 and 800,000 by 1923.

The delegates at Basel were all men. Seventeen women attended as participants; women would not be allowed to vote until the following year. The delegates came from about 20 countries, almost all European, although one came from French Algeria, five from America,

and four from Palestine. Due to anti-Semitic laws the Swiss had passed in 1893, kosher meat was not locally available and had to be imported from Germany.

Within a few years of the congress, Herzl would die. The Ottoman empire would collapse after the First World War. But Herzl's pragmatism would continue to inform the movement's methods as Palestine passed into British hands. So would the purpose and character of the meeting in Basel.

As a nationalist movement, Zionism was very much in tune with the fin de siècle Europe from which it arose. A group of men gathering in a concert hall in the hope of founding a new country: The idea sounds outlandish today. The zeitgeist of the late 19th century, however, was rife with such projects—national movements seeking to carve sovereign spaces out of the old empires.

Detractors of Israel often point out that the country came into existence only recently. But the same is true of many European states. In fact, Zionism was at least in part a response to the nationalist problematic of that period: Czechs, Poles, and other European ethnic groups had begun advocating for their own states, but they didn't always count their Jewish brethren as part of these political projects. Zionists argued that Jews needed their own country.

At the time of the Basel conference, the Zionist movement encompassed a variety of viewpoints. One early division pitted the "political" Zionists—who thought the Jews should seek a political license to settle Palestine en masse—against the "practical" ones, who thought that migrants should just go there individually and set down roots.

What kind of polity the Jews would establish in Palestine was another subject of debate. Today the goal of Zionism is commonly understood to be the formation of a Jewish state, but this was not historically so. Zionists disagreed over whether statehood was necessary or important. At Basel, not even Herzl, who had written a manifesto titled *The Jewish State* the year before, insisted on it. The congress's inaugural speaker, Karpel Lippe of Romania, specifically rejected seeking a state for two pragmatic reasons: one, that the Ottomans would never accept it, and the other, that observant Jews would be uncomfortable with the aspects of modern statecraft that didn't conform to religious law. As late as the 1930s, Zionist congresses voted down proposals to seek a Jewish state.

Early Zionists had a variety of views on religion. Herzl and many other Zionist luminaries came from secular backgrounds, but the movement also included more observant Jews. Herzl gave a speech at Basel that rested mostly on universalist appeals to human civilization and history but also made several gestures toward religious inclusion. The Orthodox rabbi of Basel spoke at the congress (though he clarified that he wasn't himself a

Zionist). A few other rabbis spoke, too, including Zadoc Kahn, the chief rabbi of France. This was all too much for the secular chemist Chaim Weizmann, who would later become the first president of Israel; he accused Herzl of conceding to "clericalism." Another speaker declared, "Every Jew who holds to his religion must be a Social Democrat!" (This was a reference to Germany's Social Democratic Party, which was explicitly Marxist at the time.) Herzl shouted him down and insisted on political plurality.

Despite all these differences, the Zionists remained in the same organization and adopted a shared Basel Program seeking to "establish a home in Palestine for the Jewish people, secured under public law." The terms *home* (*Heimstatt* in German, the main tongue of the gathering) and *public law* were subject to much debate, but the language was adopted by a vote. Zionists settled other differences by the same democratic method in later congresses.

One thing the Zionists in Basel didn't pay much attention to was the fact that Palestine's Arab population was unlikely to welcome millions of Jewish migrants. On the congress's third day, a delegate from Prague spoke of how, in Palestine, "the Arabs mock and molest the new arrivals." But such acknowledgment was rare; hardly any other speaker mentioned Palestinian Arabs at all.

In later years, Zionists would express a variety of wishful beliefs about how the Arabs would welcome them. Ze'ev Jabotinsky was a rare exception. A son of Odessa, Jabotinsky rose in the 1920s to become the main leader of right-wing Zionism. Unlike his competitors on the left, he had no illusions about socialist brotherhood among the peoples and warned that the Arabs would resist the Jewish migrants just as the Aztecs had stood up to Spanish conquistadors. Unlike some of his right-wing successors, Jabotinsky opposed expelling Arabs from Palestine and believed that "there will always be two nations in Palestine." He even envisioned a state in which every Jewish president would serve with an Arab vice president. But he was under no illusion about the inevitability of clashes.

Zionism was not the only Jewish movement of its day. The fact that it would become the most successful one had as much to do with history as it did with the movement itself.

A few weeks after the First Zionist Congress, a group of socialist Jews gathered in what is now Vilnius, Lithuania, to found the General Jewish Labor Bund. Just as the Zionists did, the Bund considered Jews to be a nationality of their own. But it opposed migration to Palestine and instead argued that Jews should fight for cultural autonomy in the states where they lived. Bundists and Zionists sometimes worked together—for instance, in opposing anti-Semitism in Poland. But the Nazi occupation of Europe and Hitler's pursuit of the "Final

Solution" eventually made the Bundist program impossible, and many Bundists found refuge in Palestine.

Following the Second World War, the United Nations mandated the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Thus the State of Israel came to be in 1948, 50 years after Basel. The new state's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, commemorated the anniversary of the Zionist congress of 1897 as "the greatest in our history."

The Basel congress showcased a pragmatism that later helped Israel flourish and persevere, as well as a diversity that would contribute to the country's dynamism. But it also demonstrated something darker: the tendency of many Zionists to dismiss the concerns, even the existence, of their Arab Palestinian neighbors, whose own nationalist identity would take shape in opposition to theirs.

In time, Zionists of all stripes would be forced out of this denial. But only in 1993 would the state of Israel acknowledge that a nation of Palestinians shared the land between the river and the sea. Israel has maintained a military occupation over millions of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza since 1967; today it opposes the formation of a State of Palestine that is already recognized by most countries in the world.

Even so, such opposition should not be presumed to be the only Zionist position. The Zionist Organization founded in Basel still exists, and it will hold its next world congress in October in Jerusalem. There, Zionists of all stripes will debate, just as they did in 1897. The progressive Zionists of America, for instance, will advocate for "a diplomatic pathway ensuring freedom, security, and sovereignty for both Israelis and Palestinians." Other Zionists are making the case for Palestinian statehood.

This history of dissent and multiplicity—this struggle to define a nation's identity and its relationship to the others with whom it shares a land—is not unique to Zionism. Other nationalist movements have undergone similar journeys. The Canadian historian Faisal Devji has compared Zionism to Pakistani nationalism, in that both reject "hereditary linkages between ethnicity and soil in favor of membership based on nothing but an idea of belonging." The British intellectual Perry Anderson saw Israel's trajectory as similar to those of India and Ireland: All had national movements founded by secular leaders who were overtaken by a religiously inclined, "more extreme rival." Nationalist movements in Hungary, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Iraq, and Peru have all struggled with questions of inclusion, specifically with regard to religious and ethnic minorities.

Viewing Zionism historically helps reveal it not as a caricatured monolith but as a national movement like so many others—one that encompasses a complex past, competing ideas, and a future whose possibilities have not yet been exhausted.

About the Author

Arash Azizi

Follow

Arash Azizi is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*. His new book, *What Iranians Want: Women, Life, Freedom*, was published in January 2024.