

# Zionism: An Introduction

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## FOR THOSE WHO'VE

offered 'conditional' support for the recent pogrom launched by Hamas, and fulsome support for the Palestinian cause in general, the words "colonialism", "apartheid", "imperialism", are employed to render the complex reasons for the foundation of the State of Israel irrelevant. These words and their associated concepts have assumed an almost magical status, suppressing any reasonable discussion of the catastrophic situation in which Palestinians find themselves. In these political and social circles the history of Zionism is not discussed, or explained. It is simply asserted that Zionism was a colonial venture sponsored by a number of imperialist powers in order to replace Palestine with Israel as a secure base for imperialism in the region – Zionism is, so to speak, imperialism's trojan horse in the Arab world.

**Leon Pinsker**



What follows is an introduction written in 2018 to accompany sixteen articles on Israel that I'd written in the previous ten years. These can still be accessed in Articles at [www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net).

Don Milligan  
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# Zionism: An Introduction

Don Milligan, 2018

## IS THERE A JEWISH NATION?

The answer given to this question is often, no. There is what Moshé Machover has called a “Hebrew” nation – the Jews born and raised in modern Israel – but for him this nation does not embrace the Jews or Jewish communities living in other countries across the world.



The rejection of Jewish nationhood is rooted in the observation that Jews are united neither by race, language, or territory. Jews have many different mother tongues; they come from different races, and have never, since first and second century struggles in and around Judea, lived together in one place or region.

Consequently, the conclusion reached is that Jews do not pass muster as a nation. They must be considered as an ethnic group united merely by religious observance or by the secular cultural traditions associated with religiously observant Jews.

Some of those promoting this sort of argument will concede that the vast Yiddish-speaking communities of Jews in the ‘Pale of Settlement’ during the final decades of the Russian empire exhibited many features of a real Yiddish nation, united by religion, language, territory, cuisine, literature, and music. But even here, in this de facto Yiddish realm Jewish nationhood was not uncontested.

This was because throughout the nineteenth century the dominant struggle of the Jews was for emancipation, not nationhood. Jews wanted the right

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to live anywhere they chose, they wanted the right to enter the universities and the professions, they wanted full social equality. Jews were emancipated in France in 1791, in Austria-Hungary in 1867, and in a host of other European countries between these dates. Jews had, with the exception of Spain, Portugal, Russia, and Romania, won civil equality throughout Europe by 1900.

This achievement together with the Jewish Enlightenment pioneered by Moses Mendelsohn in the latter years of the eighteenth century and by Avrom Ber Gotlober and many others in the nineteenth, promoted the idea that Jews could move beyond the historic isolation imposed upon closed Jewish communities and live freely in any country, embrace the secular loyalties demanded by the state, and adapt to the common life of the countries in which they lived without relinquishing either the practice of Judaism or broader aspects of Jewish culture and identity.

Even in Russia where hatred of Jews was integral to the autocratic rule of the Tsars the Jewish masses sought freedom within the Russian Empire rather than separation from it. This is why the general Jewish labour federation of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, The Bund, was founded in 1897 uniting Jewish workers across the Western regions of Russia.

Against the advice of Lenin and others, the Bundists saw the urgent need for specifically Jewish organisation, but they stopped short of national claims, focusing instead upon the struggle for socialism amongst the Jewish working class. Without endorsing nationalism of any kind they celebrated Jewish life with the promotion of women's equality and other progressive causes through Yiddish language and cultural creativity.

This strategy of pursuing emancipation through civil integration with the surrounding gentile communities was fatally undermined after the assassination of Tsar

Alexander II in March 1881. His death was swiftly followed by waves of pogroms, which apparently arose spontaneously across the Pale of Settlement in which hundreds of Jews were murdered and tens of thousands rendered homeless as Jewish neighbourhoods, towns and villages, were attacked and looted throughout the enormous region from the Baltic to the Black Sea. John Doyle Klier in his magisterial study, *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881-1882*, described the anti-Semitic riots as a crisis, not simply for the Jews, but for the Russian Empire:

For the better part of two years rioting was endemic across a wide swath of a strategic region of the empire. Major cities, such as Kiev and Elisavetgrad, fell under mob control. The countryside was unsettled by pogroms and rumors of pogroms. The urban proletariat and the rural peasantry, the two groups feared most by the security-minded government, threatened to slip from state control. The ability of the imperial authorities to maintain stability, law, and order was called into question [. . . .] Control was wrested from the rioters, the *pogromshchiki*, only through stationing large contingents of troops throughout the troubled areas”.

Of course, modern forms of anti-Semitism had been gathering pace throughout Europe for decades before the Tsar’s assassination. As old forms of life and economic arrangements were undermined by the growth of capitalism millions of people were dismayed by dislocation and rapid change. This was the context in which medieval restrictions imposed upon Jews began to be eroded by Jewish participation in wider society; Jews began to be associated, with general cultural and social disturbance, with revolutionary upheavals, and the emergence of large-scale

commercial and financial competition associated with the development of a society increasingly dominated by commerce and market relations.

It was a situation in which venerable caste-like hierarchies began to be questioned by assessments based upon the quality of expertise and performance rather than lineage or 'breeding'. It is a world in which Yermolai Alexeievitch Lopakhin, the child of former serfs, buys the estate and chops down *The Cherry Orchard*. The old world and the old certainties are being fatally undermined.

A general unease about society and the role of Jews within it began to emerge as Jews entered the general cultural and professional life of society, often excelling in one field of endeavour after another. As early as 1850, the composer Richard Wagner, incensed by the commercial success of the Jewish opera composer and impresario, Giacomo Meyerbeer, wrote 'Das Judenthum in Der Musik' – 'Judaism in Music'. Wagner believed that "Judaism is the evil conscience of our modern civilisation." He ended his essay in the following manner:

From out of his isolation as a Jew, he came among us seeking for redemption: he found it not, and had to learn that only *with our redemption, too, into genuine Manhood*, would he ever find it. To become Man at once with us, however, means firstly for the Jew as much as ceasing to be Jew [...] Without once looking back, take ye your part in this regenerative work of deliverance through self-annulment; then are we one and un-dissevered! But bethink ye, that one only thing can redeem you from the burden of your curse: the redemption of Ahasuerus – *Going under!*

There is a murderous logic in Wagner's argument in favour of the self-annulment and disappearance of the

Jew he regarded as essential for the progress of creativity and civilisation. As Jews made their way to the top of many professions and fields of endeavour the apparently solid imperial political structures in central and eastern Europe began to tremble; social, ethnic, and nationalist pressures that were to prove insurmountable, began to assail imperial governments and provincial elites.

These were the circumstances in which the wholesale repression and murder of Jews fatally undermined the aspirations of Jewish Enlightenment and of the belief that Jews could take their place in society on the same terms as everybody else. The new anti-Semitism, more febrile and active than medieval Jew hatred, proved more absolute, even more resolute and systematic in the killing and maiming of Jews. From Odessa to Vilnius, to Lviv, anti-Semitic peasants, merchants, and intellectuals, brought a brutal end to the idea that Jews would be able to take their place in society as equal and valued citizens.

As a result some two million Jews fled to America and Jewish nationalism began to emerge as the only solution to what was proving to be the endemic nature of anti-Semitism. In 1882 Leon Pinsker published *Selbstermanzipation – Auto-Emancipation* in which he advocated the gathering together of Jews in Palestine, Syria, or North America. The Jews, “must become a nation” he argued, because “Judeophobia” was endemic in situations in which Jews were capable only of martyrdom – the answer was self-emancipation.

The events of the last few years in *enlightened* Germany, in Romania, in Hungary, and especially in Russia, have effected what the far bloodiest persecutions of the Middle Ages could not. The national consciousness which until then had lain dormant in sterile martyrdom awoke the masses



of the Russian and Romanian Jews and took form in an irresistible movement towards Palestine. Mistaken as this movement has proved to be by its results, it was, nevertheless, a right instinct to strike out for home. The severe trials which they have endured have now provoked a reaction quite different from the fatalistic submission to a divine condign punishment [. . .] today, when a number of other subject and oppressed nationalities have been allowed to regain their independence, we, too, must not sit a moment longer with folded hands; we must not consent to play forever the hopeless role of the “Wandering Jew.” It is a truly hopeless one, leading to despair.

Consequently, Pinsker concluded his pamphlet with the proposition that the only solution lay “in the creation of a Jewish nationality, of a people living upon its own soil” ranked as an equal alongside all other nations. Undeterred by the struggles of Hovevei Zion – The Lovers of Zion – and the failure of the Bilu'im pioneers in Palestine in the early 1880s Zionism became a major element in Jewish responses to anti-Semitism.

Theodore Herzl was deeply shocked by the Dreyfus Affair and rampant anti-Semitism in France, the first country to emancipate Jews (after the dissolution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). It appeared to him that even in enlightened France, even in Paris, ‘the city of light’, the capital of European culture, Jews were not safe. In response he published *Der Judenstaat – The Jewish State*, in 1896, a much more detailed pamphlet than Pinsker's, designed to dispel any utopian elements that might adhere to the Zionist project. The following year the First Zionist Congress was convened in Basel and the movement was placed on a firm institutional and financial footing.

Despite this, Zionism remained a minority movement until the late thirties and early forties of the twentieth century when the murderous violence heaped upon the Jews by nationalists in Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania, Germany, and Poland, made any response other than Zionism and escape to Palestine unsustainable. The refugee quotas imposed by the USA, and by Britain and her Dominions, made Palestine the only realistic option for those fleeing the waves of killings, which followed hard on the heels of the outbreak of the First World War that turned into a veritable tsunami of massacres from the summer of 1941 onwards.

The years between 1914 and say, 1952, presented Jewish opponents of Zionism with increasing difficulties. Perhaps only in the United States, despite widespread discrimination, was it possible to argue the case for the success of Jewish emancipation. Postwar pogroms in Poland, Britain's continued opposition to Jewish migration to Mandate Palestine, and Stalin's anti-Semitism provided dismal evidence for the continued failure of emancipation.

In the late twenties Stalin had, of course, supported the establishment of Birobidzhan by Jews transplanted from Ukraine to faraway Siberia on the border with China. The town was formally established in 1931 and became the centre of the Jewish autonomous Oblast in 1934. However, without resources in a territory in which few other people had opted to live, Birodzhnan was destined to remain a propaganda device designed simply to support the progressive credentials of the Soviet Union. It had no impact whatsoever on the anti-Semitism common in Soviet life or on Stalin's anti-Jewish witch-hunts.

Perhaps the most tragic figure of the anti-Zionist left was Abram Leon, the author of *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*. In this work he develops a dense account of why the status of Jews as a "people-class" can only be overcome by socialism. Yet despite



the reality arising around him, despite his stalwart opposition to Stalinism he was able to write:

The ferocious persecutions against Judaism render stark naked the stupid bestiality of anti-Semitism and destroy the remnants of prejudices that the working class nurse against the Jews. The ghettos and the yellow badges do not prevent the workers from feeling a growing solidarity with those who suffer most from the afflictions all humanity is suffering.

And the greatest social explosion the world has ever seen is finally preparing the liberation of the most persecuted pariahs of our planet. When the people of the factories and the fields have finally thrown off the yoke of the capitalists, when a future of unlimited development opens up before liberated humanity, the Jewish masses will be able to make a far from unimportant contribution towards the building of a new world.

This does not mean that socialism, brought to maturity by a wave of a magic wand, will remove all the difficulties that stand as obstacles to the solution of the Jewish question. The example of the USSR shows that even after the proletarian revolution, the special structure of Judaism – a heritage of history – will give rise to a number of difficulties, particularly during the transition periods. During the time of the NEP, for instance, the Jews of Russia, utilizing their traditional business experience, furnished numerous cadres for the new bourgeois class. Moreover, the great mass of Jewish small tradesmen and petty artisans suffered greatly at the beginning of the proletarian dictatorship. It was only later, with the success of the Five Year Plan, that the Jews penetrated en masse into Soviet economic life. Despite certain difficulties, the experiment was

decisive: hundreds of thousands of Jews became workers and peasants.

Leon was a brave communist, murdered in 1944 in Auschwitz as a Jew, as a member of the Nazi's "enemy-people" rather than the "people-class" of his own account. Clearly the optimistic assimilationism of his thought and analysis had little or no bearing on the experience of Jews in general, or of his own terrible death in a gas chamber. Evidently, the socialist and communist left had no answer either to the 'Jewish Question', or to the Zionists who predicate their nationalism upon the manifest failure of Jewish emancipation.

The outlook common on the left regarding Zionism has rarely reached the heights of Abram Leon's deeply flawed attempt to engage seriously with the problem of anti-Semitism. It is true that implicit in his analysis is the idea that Jews are a problem created by feudalism, exacerbated by the crisis of capitalism, and will only be solved as Judaism and the Jews are wafted out of existence during the construction of true socialism. The contemporary left thinks something similar with rather less coherence and honesty than Abram Leon.

The modern focus of anti-Zionism is the fate of the Palestinians and the colonial nature of Israel. The left's ire is focused upon Israel as a pariah state fit only for dissolution. Ken Loach, the socialist filmmaker recently reiterated the view, common on the left, of the criminal nature of Zionism:

History is for all of us to discuss. All history is our common heritage to discuss and analyze. The founding of the state of Israel, for example, based on ethnic cleansing, is there for us to discuss . . . . So don't try to subvert that by false stories of anti-Semitism.

The fact that Turkey, along with postwar Poland and Czechoslovakia, Stalin's Ukraine after 1944, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan were also "based on ethnic cleansing" does not detain Ken Loach or many others on the left. Their ire is directed wholly at the Jewish state and at Jewish nationalism.

The scale of the ethnic cleansing carried out by Jewish forces is not in doubt. In March 1948, two months before the British left Palestine, Haganah put the final touches to the plan at their headquarters on Yarkon Street, Tel Aviv, to expel more than half of Palestine's population from their ancestral towns and villages. Historian, Ilan Pappé, estimates that by the end of the process:

... more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighbourhoods emptied of their inhabitants. The plan decided upon 10 March 1948, and above all its systematic implementation in the following months, was a clear case of an ethnic cleansing operation ..."

Consequently, there are those, who like Jaqueline Rose, will ask why shouldn't Israel be singled out for criticism. Because, it is indeed the case that in the fighting between 1947 and the armistice of 1949 the Jewish forces fighting those of Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and their allies, carried out massacres and extensive violations of universal rights. Jaqueline Rose made this point in the following manner:

To those who object to criticism of Israel on the grounds that it is being singled out, a question must nevertheless be put. Why is criticism of everyone else a *precondition* of criticizing Israel? (Rather than, Why is Israel being criticized *instead* of everyone else?) Isn't this argument in

itself a form of exclusivity? – a plea for special protection under cover of the claim that Israel is being unfairly attacked. By what standards, then, should Israel be judged? If the standard is international law or universal rights, then the fact that other nations violate these principles is, surely, irrelevant.

She is right, forms of *exclusivity* are relevant here, “Why is Israel being criticized *instead* of everyone else?” The answer in part, at least, is because they are Jews. The real powers in 1945 ratified the extensive alteration of Poland’s frontiers, and the expulsion of millions of ethnic Germans, just as they have done on many other occasions with regard to ethnic cleansing by other states. The Jews, have, however been singled out for special criticism, and continue to be characterized by many on the left as a pariah state, and it is reasonable to ask, why?

It remains true, of course, that responsibility for Israel’s ethnic cleansing and violence is routinely denied in what are, to be frank, psychotic assertions of innocence issued by Zionist authorities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Israel is always simply a victim, never an aggressor. The raw argument of Zionism, often elaborately camouflaged, is: “It’s us or them”. As far as the Zionists are concerned the war of 1948 was a war of survival in a life and death struggle for territory. Since then the logic of war and survival has dominated all the actions of the Zionist state in its dealings with Palestinians, and with neighbouring Arab states. Those in charge of the state apparatus in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem reason, that protection of its citizens is the first duty of any state. “Any state would behave as we do if attacked by its neighbours” is the bland and routine response to criticism of the Israel Defence Force’s swift and overwhelming violence.

The Zionists are undoubtedly correct in this assertion, and they not unreasonably ask: “Why is

Israel being criticized *instead* of everyone else?” They conclude, perhaps inevitably that “it is because we are Jews.” Psychotic assertions of innocence flow from this inescapable answer fed, no doubt, by ineradicable memory of the pogroms and massacres that gave birth to Zionism in the first place. Consequently, they insist: “Our violence and oppression are the responsibility of those who attack us.” As mad as it seems this Zionist rationale is, in fact, the standard response of anybody engaged in war.

However, perhaps the most significant aspect of Zionism, apart from the expulsion of three quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs from Israel in 1948, and the continued occupation of the West Bank, is the manner in which Zionism has revealed the intrinsically synthetic nature of nationalism, not simply that of the Jewish nation, but that of all other nations.

The Zionists in synthesizing the multiplicity of Jews into a singular nation were giving practical expression to the idea of nationhood lost during the struggles with the Romans in first and second century Judea. Zionists were in fact engaged in a *Völkisch* enterprise similar to that taking place in pre-Imperial Germany, and amongst the multiplicity of language groups throughout Ukraine, Poland, and the wider Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

During the nineteenth century an array of nationalists claiming to represent ancient organic communities – *Volkskörper* – spent enormous amounts of energy inventing and resurrecting national costumes, music, specific religious confessions and liturgies, together with distinct histories and literatures, all designed to undergird claims to nationhood. The Jews, with their extraordinarily robust religious traditions, with the rabbinate tracing its origins back into the sixth century of the common era, had perhaps more of a claim to nationhood than say, Czechs, Serbs, or Ukrainians, despite their lack of territorial concentration or linguistic unity.

The Zionists, in successfully creating the Jewish state, recreating Hebrew as a modern language, and winning over the support of the vast majority of Jews worldwide have demonstrated that the Jews, far from being a special case, have pursued, in the most exceptional circumstances, a path entirely familiar to nationalists and state builders of all stripes since the dawn of the nineteenth century.

To be sure, the nationhood of Syrians, Iraqis, Lebanese, and Jordanians, is as synthetic as that of Israelis – they are the result of the French and British partition of Ottoman territories in 1920 following the Treaty of Sèvres. The carve up of the Ottoman Empire had been settled between Britain and France in the Sykes-Picot Agreement four years earlier. The result was borders drawn in London and Paris, which rode roughshod over historic ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, cramming their diverse millions into new 'nations' by fiat, none of which gained full independence from London or Paris until 1946-7.

Palestine, ruled by Britain following the collapse of the Ottomans, was also part of this process, but Palestinian nationhood and consciousness was the direct result of the struggle with the Jews for the possession of Palestine. The Palestinians of the Ottoman Empire were not a nation, and the British Mandate (1920-1948) did not make them one. Despite the huge Arab Revolt of the late 1930s – Palestinian nationhood, as synthetic as that of the Jews, only arose gradually in response to the challenge of Zionism, eventually achieving autonomous institutional and political form during the second half of the twentieth century.

This, no doubt, continues to dismay most of the left who, of course, have no answer to nationalism except to counterpose the 'legitimate' nationalism of the Palestinians to the 'illegitimate' nationalism of the Jews, whilst all the time lazily asserting an equivalence between the State of Israel and Apartheid



South Africa, or even the Islamists of Islamic State. Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, in the course of claiming to fight anti-Semitism, with the use of his unctuous phrase, “Our Jewish friends”, recently made clear this equivalence:

Our Jewish friends are no more responsible for the actions of Israel or the Netanyahu government than our Muslim friends are for those various self-styled Islamic states or organisations.

Implicit in the outlook of Loach and Corbyn is a rejection of the ordinary character of Jewish nationalism during the progress of state creation, and the specific nature of Zionism as a response to the unparalleled waves of persecution and killings, which brought Jewish nationalism and the Jewish state into existence. The seventy years following the assassination of Alexander II, punctuated by the outbreak of the First World War, the collapse of Europe’s territorial empires, the clash between Polish and Ukrainian nationalists, and the rise of fascism, made the Zionist response to the failure of emancipation unanswerable.

Certainly, neither the communist or the socialist left has had any answer to the failure of Jewish emancipation, or to the concomitant rise of Jewish nationalism, other than repeatedly expressing the pieties of secularism and the common class interests of the common people, while staunchly supporting the claims of Palestinians to nationhood, to the right of Palestinians to ‘return’ to their ancestral homes in what is now Israel, and to the liquidation of the Jewish state.

Many people on the left can be quite cagey about this, whilst they determinedly refuse to conflate Jews with Zionists they are perfectly prepared to conflate the violation of universal rights by Israeli politicians with Zionism. This is because outright opposition to Jewish nationalism and the existence of the Jewish

state appears to be *de rigueur* in most leftwing circles. If pressed many socialists will hurriedly clarify: they merely oppose specific actions of Israeli governments. This, labored distinction, however, is more honoured in the breach, as denunciations of IDF and Israeli government actions routinely blur into resolute expressions of anti-Zionism. Poet, Tom Paulin, put the matter succinctly:

Look, you're either a Zionist or an anti-Zionist,  
there's no middle way. Everyone who supports  
the state of Israel is a Zionist.

Thus opposition to Zionism, Jewish nationalism, and the Jewish state admits no legitimate case for the existence of Israel.

The fact that a minority of Zionists are fierce opponents of the occupation, of the settlements, and of the wall, is brushed aside. So too is the fact that a fairly large number of Jews across the world, whilst outraged by the conduct of Israeli governments, soldiers, and police, are not opposed to the existence of the Jewish state. Many Jews may also be disturbed by the messianic fervor of Zionist ideology and commitment, without ever suggesting that the Jewish state should be dismantled or demographically destroyed by 'returning' Palestinians.

The inescapable truth of anti-Zionism on the left is that it is an expression of unqualified opposition to the right of Jews to nationhood, and to the founding of a state by Jews. On the left, and specifically in the Marxist tradition, notably expressed by Karl Marx himself, and by Abram Leon, the historic emancipation of the Jews is to be accomplished by their disappearance, *not* by their transition from the status of a 'non-historic people' – living precariously within the interstices, first of feudal society, and then within that of 'decaying capitalism' – to a nation with its own language, territory, and state.

Zionism, complete with its messianic mission, represents for most socialists a violation of the proper movement of history. It confronts the broad left with a bold, assertive nationalism, rather than a nationalism, like that of the Palestinians, inspired by the struggle for 'liberation from colonial domination' – the only form of nationalism considered legitimate within leftwing and socialist circles.

Anti-Zionism is the result of this outlook and has led to a straightforward rejection of both the *idea* and the *reality* of Israel. It is inevitable; therefore, that the socialist left will be haunted by charges of "holocaust denial" and "anti-Semitism", because they insist upon conducting themselves as if the creation of Jewish nationhood had simply not taken place.

However, this 'blind spot' is of a piece with what Anthony Julius has called, "the anti-Semitism of condescension" traditional in England. We have not had Jew-hatred in England of the murderous sort since the thirteenth century, so the modern left is dismayed by insinuations that they might be bigoted with regard to Jews. To be sure there is much talk in some socialist circles of Rothschild, of the Jewish Lobby, and intimations of unwarranted or surreptitious Jewish influence in public affairs, but hating Jews does not loom large.

As a consequence dismay and disbelief often accompany charges of anti-Semitism amongst people on the left in Britain. As absurd as this might sound they regard their lively hatred of Zionism as a different matter altogether, something almost unconnected with Jews. Many socialists in Britain have caricatured Zionism so thoroughly that they have produced in their own mind a political movement, or a colonizing force, which somehow has no necessary connection with the Jews of the pogroms, of the holocaust, or of the modern Jews of the diaspora. Rather they see Zionism as, in some sense, a product of imperialism or the malign machinations of Washington, not as a

worldwide movement amongst the Jews to create their own territory with its own language and state.

It is common on the left to reject the reality of Israel and experience great anxiety when confronted by the overwhelming support the Zionist state commands amongst Jews throughout the world. Socialists often clutch at the straw of anti-Zionist Jews in the desperate hope that these tiny secular and religious circles will provide sufficient cover for their prejudice and condescension. Of course they don't hate Jews, such a thought is appalling to them, but their hatred of Jewish nationalism and of the Jewish state makes their anti-Semitism ineluctable.

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