

– Introduction –

For more than sixty years, Israel and its conflicts with its neighbours have formed one of the world's most intractable problems. When the state was founded in 1948, the aim of the Zionist movement was fulfilled. A homeland for the Jewish people had finally been secured, but it was never to 'dwell at ease'. Since its inception the state has either been at war with its Arab neighbours or defending itself against terrorist groups or freedom fighters, a description dependent on what side you take. The ideals of Zionism have become contentious even in Israel itself, not just between Arab and Jew, but between Right and Left, secular and religious, conflicts which are reflected in the Diaspora, which has 8.3 million Jews to Israel's 5 million.

Yet the original ideology of Zionism, with its call for an independent Jewish state in Palestine, was simple and straightforward. It was a late-nineteenth-century nationalist movement, made urgent by outbreaks of resurgent anti-Semitism across Europe. The pogroms and persecutions in the 1880s in Russia led to a huge wave of Jewish emigration westward, mostly to America. But the dramatic moment of Zionism's birth was in Paris

on 18 January 1895. Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist and playwright, was pressed against the railings of the Ecole Militaire listening to the anti-Semitic shouts of the crowd as they watched Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, being publicly humiliated after a false accusation of treason. Dreyfus was to spend four years on Devil's Island before being re-tried and eventually exonerated. In that time Herzl had written *Der Judenstaat*, gained international attention for the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine and held the first Zionist Congress in Basel. Herzl then proceeded personally to plead the Zionist cause with world leaders, the Czar, the Kaiser and the Sultan. He received offers of land for the Jewish people from the Sultan – Mesopotamia (if they paid off the Turkish National Debt); and from the British Colonial Secretary – El Arish in Egypt; the offer was later changed to Uganda. Herzl and the Zionists refused anything but Palestine. Exhausted by his work, Herzl died at the age of forty-four and was accorded virtually a state funeral in Vienna.

With the idea of a Jewish homeland at least established, the progress of political Zionism continued. As Herzl had realised, this could only be achieved with the backing of a great power. In the closing years of World War I, it was the British who became the inheritors of this historic burden. Chaim Weizmann, Herzl's successor, had gained the ear of

Arthur Balfour, the British foreign minister, and persuaded him of the righteousness of the Zionist cause. In his turn Balfour persuaded the prime minister, Lloyd George, and in November 1917 the British government issued the Balfour Declaration which gave its slightly ambiguous promise of ‘the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people’. In 1918, at the head of a British army which had defeated the Turks, General Allenby marched into Jerusalem. In the wake of the war, the Ottoman empire was finally divided up and Britain given the Mandate for Palestine. It was to take another thirty years, another World War and a Holocaust for a ‘national home’ to become an independent state.

If the backing of one great power in the form of Britain was essential to the establishment of the Jewish homeland, the support of another, the United States, has remained crucial to its survival ever since. After thirty stormy years of administering the Mandate, the British were more than happy to get rid of it. America then became the protector of the new State of Israel for a variety of reasons – humanitarian sympathy for the Jews after the Holocaust, support for a strategically placed ally during the Cold War, and most recently the dictates of the War on Terror. Yet alongside these diplomatic and military motivations stood an important religious factor – not Jewish, but Christian Zionism.

Christian Zionism has been a core belief of millions of Americans since the late nineteenth century. Its political influence, however, dates from the late 1970s, when the television evangelist the Rev. Jerry Falwell founded the conservative Christian campaigning organisation, the Moral Majority.¹ While its main purpose was domestic – to combat liberalism and permissiveness within America itself – the Moral Majority was also passionately Zionist, supporting the Israeli right wing’s claim to a Greater Israel within its biblical boundaries. The roots of this conviction, central to the Moral Majority and to its successor organisations, lie in a particular interpretation of the Bible. In the Old Testament there are references to the Chosen People being returned to the Holy Land and the coming of the Messiah, but in the New Testament it is the Book of Revelation that forms the basis of Christian Zionist belief. This contains the prophecy that the Millennium and the Second Coming will happen when the Jews are not merely restored to the Holy Land but converted to Christianity and accept Christ as their Messiah. In other words, the Jews, not known for their enthusiasm for conversion, have literally to see the light, to accept a Second Coming to make up for their rejection of the first one.

From 1977, an alliance between the American religious right and the Israeli nationalist right began to form and it has endured to the present day.² On

the face of it, it may seem bizarre that Israeli Jews should accept the friendship of those whose greatest hope is their conversion to Christianity. Yet the link has proved too important to both sides for them to let even this obstacle stand in its way. For the American religious right, a Jewish state in the biblical Holy Land, even if it has not yet become Christian, is a major step along the path set out in the Book of Revelation. For the Israeli right, the support of a grouping with such influence and voting power across the USA is far too useful to be sacrificed for a point of theology. The unspoken compromise appears to be that as long as the US Evangelicals leave the conversion of the Jews to God rather than man, the Israeli right is prepared to overlook its allies' ultimate goal. There could be no better proof of this unlikely pact than the words of Binyamin Netanyahu to a Washington Evangelical prayer breakfast in 1985:

I suggest that for those who know the history of Christian involvement in Zionism, there is nothing either surprising or new about the steadfast support given to Israel by believing Christians all over the world. For what after all is Zionism but the fulfilment of ancient prophecies? . . . And this dream, smouldering through two millennia, first burst forth in the Christian Zionism of the nineteenth century – a movement that paralleled and reinforced modern Jewish Zionism . . . Thus it was the impact of Christian Zionism on Western statesmen that helped modern Jewish Zionism achieve the re-birth of Israel.³