

## **One Invented Nation Or Two**

by MJ Rosenberg,

It is hard to believe that anyone who defends Israel's legitimacy as a state would buy into former Speaker Newt Gingrich's argument that Palestine is an "invented nation."

The singular triumph of the Zionist movement is that it invented a state and a people — Israel and the Israelis — from scratch. The first Hebrew-speaking child in 1900 years, Ittamar Ben-Avi, was not born until 1882. His father, the brilliant linguist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, created a modern language for him to speak by improvising from the language of the Bible.

The founder of the Israeli state was Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), an assimilated Viennese writer who was convinced by the Dreyfus trial in France and the horrendous right-wing anti-Semitism that resulted from it that Jews had to get out of Europe.

In 1897, he wrote the book that would essentially inaugurate the Zionist movement. It was called *Der Judenstaat* (meaning "the Jews' state" or "the Jewish State"), which was his proposal for moving the Jews out of Europe and into their own country.

He didn't specify where the Jewish homeland should be. He was more concerned about quickly obtaining territory anywhere for Jews to seek refuge.

Later he decided that Palestine made the most sense because that was where the Jewish people both began and exercised self-determination in ancient times and where there already was a small minority of Jews. But he also spoke of finding a place in Africa or the Americas if Palestine was unavailable.

The reaction to Herzl's idea was primarily that he was a bit crazy. Jews committed to assimilation insisted that Jews were not a nation but a religious faith. Their nationalities were French, German, Polish, Iraqi, or American — not some imaginary Jewish nationality that had not existed for 1900 years.

As late as 1943, during the worst days of the Holocaust, the American Jewish Committee — which adhered to the assimilationist view — resigned from the body created by American Jews to respond to the Nazi catastrophe over its "demand for the eventual establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine."

Seventy-plus years later, it is impossible to argue that the Israeli nation is not as authentic and worthy of recognition as any in the world (more authentic than some, in fact).

The Hebrew language is spoken by millions of Jews and Palestinians. The Israeli culture is unique, bearing little resemblance to any other in the world. In fact, diaspora Jews have as little in common with Israelis as African-Americans have with Africans.

Israelis are not just Jews who happen to live in Palestine, even though the concept of Israel-ness started just over a hundred years ago as nothing but an idea. They are Israelis, entitled to self-determination, peace and security in their own land.

And the Palestinians are every bit as much a nation. If the ultimate definition of authentic nationhood is continuous residence in a land for thousands of years, the Palestinian claim to nationhood is ironclad. They never left Palestine (except for those who either emigrated or became refugees after the establishment of Israel).

Those who deny that Palestinians have a nation base their case on two arguments, both of which are logically incoherent. The first is that Palestinians never exercised self-determination in Palestine; they were always governed by others from ancient times to the present day.

The answer to this is: So what?

Most nations in the world lacked self-determination for long periods of their history. The Polish nation existed between 1790 and 1918 even though the state was erased from the map — divided between Russia and Austro-Hungary. It achieved independence in 1918 only to again lose it to the Nazis and then the Soviets from 1939 until 1989. Would anyone today argue that the Polish nation was invented?

The idea of it is ridiculous, especially when offered by Israelis or Americans (or Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians, etc.), whose national existence would have been unimaginable a few centuries ago.

The second argument is that Palestinians never thought of themselves as Palestinians until Jews started moving into their territory, that Palestinian nationalism is a response to Zionism.

Again, so what?

When European Jews docked in Jaffa, Palestine in the early immigration waves of the late 19th century, there were Arabs waiting at the port. When the Jews purchased land, it was Arabs who had to move out.

And if those Arabs didn't call themselves Palestinians until the Zionist movement began, neither did the Jews call themselves Israelis. Until 1948, they were just Jews. But each of the two peoples knew who they were and who the other was.

The bottom line is that today the Palestinian nation is as authentic as the Israeli nation, and vice versa. Those who think either is going away are blinded by hatred. To put it simply, the first part of the phrase self-determination is the word self. Both nations have the absolute right to define themselves as two nations which, hopefully, will evolve into two states. The alternative is national catastrophe not for one nation, but for two.

Why would Newt Gingrich care about that?  
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