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US and Israeli Exceptionalism

With and Without God On Their Side

by RON JACOBS

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Recently, the US House of Representatives voiced unanimous support for the Israeli onslaught on the people of Gaza. Many opponents of Israel's continued occupation and oppression of the Palestinians pointed, like they always do, to the disproportionate influence the so-called Israeli Lobby has in Congress. While this is an established and verifiable fact, I would argue that the Lobby is just a manifestation of a less obvious but essential reason for the neverending support Israel receives from Washington and its apologists in the US media.

As a resident of the United States one hears repeatedly of an illusion many fellow residents share. That illusion is called American exceptionalism. In short, the essence of this illusion is that the United States is a blessed nation whose actions in war, peace and otherwise are measured differently than those of almost every other nation. This means that the genocide of the indigenous peoples living on the continent that cleared the land for the settler-invaders was not mass murder, but a holy mission. It also means that every war undertaken by those invaders and their descendants were also missions of their god and undertaken for the purest of motives. This mythology has served the powerful well.

Despair is the absence of hope. That defines the current reality. Washington and its armed forces act at will. The same can be said for Washington's occasionally ornery client (some would say puppet) operating from Tel Aviv. The state of Israel, like its protector and benefactor the United

States, assumes a similar right to disregard international laws and conventions it demands every other nation follow. Likewise, the founding fathers of Israel created documents replete with high-sounding ideals like freedom, justice and peace and demanded that the previous inhabitants of the land they were stealing accept the new reality or flee. If those previous inhabitants refused, the very same ideals were used to force their departure or die. Indeed, in Palestine this process continues. Sadly, in the United States the majority of the native peoples were buried long ago.

Not long after the first British landed on the shores of what is now Massachusetts, the Pequot peoples realized their intention to chase them from their lands. The colonial settlers, in their smug, Christian certainty, needed little rationalization to undertake their endeavor. The perception most settlers had of the Pequot and other native peoples can be summed up in the words of Richard Mather who, in a sermon delivered in Boston, denounced the Pequot as the “accursed seeds of Canaan.” Other preachers equated the colonists war against the Pequot with the battles of King David in the old testament, thereby making the war for the Pequot lands a holy war where the only possibility for a holy servant of god was victory. This war was one of the first of many by the British, then American settlers intended to make the New World theirs.

Although the founder of Zionism Theodor Herzl considered his philosophy to be a secular one, there has always been a religious element. Indeed, Israel’s “Declaration of Independence,” opens with the declaration “Eretz Israel [Hebrew: The Land of Israel] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed. Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world.” In making this claim, the founders of Israel linked their nation to the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition. Further on in the same document, those founders refer to the British colonial mandate Balfour Declaration to establish their legal right to the land they were stealing. By acknowledging the biblical land of Israel and the colonial mandate for Palestine, Israel’s founders made clear their allegiance to the western colonialist tradition. More importantly, and disastrously, they paved the way for their ongoing occupation of Palestine and the neverending war against its people.

Israel’s founding documents (and the utterings of many of its politicians during its earlier years) insist on the nation’s allegiance to principles of freedom and fairness for all of its inhabitants. Likewise, a call for peace and cooperation with its neighbors was issued. However, a nation founded by the theft of others’ lands, homes and places of worship is bound to find adhering to those principles to be impossible. This will certainly be the case if actions of the new nation display little intention to follow its stated principles. Like the young nation called the United States, the nation of Israel was founded by stealing land and the spilling of blood. Also, like the young United States, Israel quickly proved that its lofty principles of its founding documents applied only to certain inhabitants of the newly created nation.

In the early American colonies (and in the United States once it was its own entity), the indigenous nations that fought back were accused of cowardice and deceit because they fought asymmetrically. Instead of making themselves easy targets and engaging the settlers and Washington’s cavalry head-on, the fighters utilized guerrilla means in their battle against the encroaching settlers. Civilians were killed by Native American fighters and occasionally gruesome massacres and acts occurred. Yet, even the most gruesome of those acts lacks in

comparison to instances like the Sand Creek massacre or the Trail of Tears. Furthermore, the essential foundation of the settler endeavor to rid the North American continent of its indigenous peoples is rivaled by only a few other such instances in history; ironically one such instance is the Nazi attempt to deport and/or kill all the Jewish people in the lands under its control. In Israel, the fighters in the Palestinians' struggle to keep the lands they consider theirs have also been called cowards due to the means they wage that struggle. Of course, actions like suicide bombings and car bombs are despicable and difficult if not impossible to justify. However, to pretend that the Palestinians use of these and other guerrilla means of warfare are somehow more repugnant or cowardly than Israel's use of US fighter bombers and missiles against the people of Gaza is just plain dishonest.

Both Washington and Tel Aviv claim an exceptionalism that objectively does not exist. However, the fact that both nations believe such an exceptionalism does exist makes it an element in the actions those nations undertake. It provides the citizens of those nations with a rationale for their prejudices and it enables a system based on those prejudices to operate. This can be seen on the daily attacks on Latin American immigrants in the United States by individuals, politicians, and police agencies just like it is seen in the constant humiliation and abuse of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. In extreme moments, that exceptionalism provides a rationale for mass murder like that currently taking place in Gaza at the hands of the Israeli military (with US provided weaponry) or that undertaken by Washington in countries too numerous to count.

Both nations were founded by a group of predominantly secular men (and in Israel's case a woman or two). Relative to their size, in their history as secular nations both have killed too many to count; both nations also oppressed and continue to oppress too many to count; both nations make alliances with dictators and racist states whose crimes are oftentimes equally bloody; and both nations justified their actions as being for the betterment of humanity. In reality, they are almost always for the betterment of those who benefit from them the most. All too many of the rest of us remain accomplices to their continued barbarity.