

By Ilan Pappé – The Palestine  
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*The phenomenon of religious Zionism originates in the teaching of two of the most respected Zionist rabbis, a father and son, belonging to the Kook family.*

Mainstream media and governments in the Global North insist that we should equate between Hamas and ISIS. This position is modeled around Israel's insistence on such a reference.

Apart from the fact that this is a spurious comparison, it is particularly important to note that there is a much better case study that demonstrates the fusion of dogmatic messianism and violence. This comparison, however, is not a Palestinian phenomenon but an Israeli one.

This phenomenon originates in the teaching of two of the most respected Zionist rabbis, a father and son, belonging to the Kook family.

Let us first talk about the father, Avraham Itzhak Kook (1865-1935). He was born in Latvia, in a region that used to be Russian, and eventually became the father of religious Zionism.

This messianic, racist, and fundamentalist ideological stream is now growing in terms of presence and influence among Israeli political elites, who are trying to follow religiously the teachings and visions of Rabbi Kook and his son, Zvi Yehuda Hacoheh Kook (1891-1982).

### **Kook, the Father**

But first, let's talk about Kook, the father.

Avraham Kook arrived in Palestine in 1904 to become the most important rabbinical authority who challenged the Orthodox Jewish view, which is still being held today by many Orthodox Jews. This view maintains that Zionism is a secular attempt to tamper with God's will and, therefore, should not be supported.

As a chief Rabbi of the Zionist community in Mandatory Palestine – British colonialism in Palestine from 1918 to 1948 – Kook gave the religious blessing to the Zionist project.

From this authoritative position, Kook preached that the right of the Jewish people to Palestine is God's will and that rabbis should do all they can to persuade Jews around the world to come and colonize Palestine.

In the 1920s, Kook was very active in demanding the expansion of the area around the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem through the eviction of its Muslim inhabitants. He even suggested compensating them, a program that Israel will, indeed, try to implement after the June 1967 war.

Kook's main legacy was a place of learning called *Merkaz Harav*, "the Rabbi's Center".

This institution became an important place in the history of religious Zionism, because of the massive influence of Kook's son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Hacoheh Kook.

### **Kook, the Son**

Now, let's talk about Kook, the son.

Zvi Kook was the true ideological father of the messianic movement *Gush Emunim*, which carried out the Judaization of the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip after the war of 1967.

As the years went by, this movement moved from the margins of the Israeli political system to the center. In fact, some of its members became important ministers in various Israeli governments.

Until his death in 1982, Zvi Kook was far more committed than his father to the colonization of historical Palestine as a religious imperative, and as a necessary act needed to hasten the redemption of the Jewish people.

Kook's voice was somewhat drowned when the Labour Party was in power between 1967 and 1977. During these years, the government was directly involved in the Judaization process of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip through ethnic cleansing, and sometimes massacres; but on the basis of a different ideology: that of secular socialist Zionism.

Once the Likud came to power in 1977, Zvi Kook rose to prominence as the spiritual leader of settlers who were colonizing large parts of the Palestinian West Bank, building their outposts at the heart of densely populated Palestinian areas.

The idea was that such an aggressive colonization would accelerate the de-Arabization of the West Bank. This process was meant to put Palestinians under pressure by taking over all of their resources, such as land, water, and even access to the labor market.

With the help of the army, this ruthless methodology became a daily practice of abuse, harassment and, in some cases, of directly killing and wounding Palestinians in the vicinity of these mushrooming illegal settlements.

It was convenient for all Israeli governments to pretend that these expansionist plans were being implemented without their blessing. But this is a lie. In fact, most of the settlers' actions in the West Bank were directly coordinated with the military commanders on the ground to be later approved by successive governments.

These groups of vigilantes and vandals, mostly educated at the *Merkaz Harav*, were prodded by Zvi Kook's religious rulings, edicts that directed their actions against the Palestinians and preventing any government from "giving up" even one square inch of so-called 'Eretz Israel'.

It is important to note that, for Zvi Kook and his disciples, 'Eretz Israel' includes Jordan as well.

Additionally, quite a few secular Jews in Israel were admirers of this brutal form of colonization, seeing it as a continuation of the 'glorious' early colonization of Palestine during the mandatory period.

**'Youth of the Hills'**

The most extreme manifestation of Kookism is the *Noar Ha-Gevaot*, the ‘Youth of the Hills’.

This group, constituted of hundreds of youths, was encouraged by late Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 1998 to “occupy every free hill in the West Bank and settle there”. This strategy was aimed at establishing irreversible ‘facts on the ground’, a path towards a full Judaization of the West Bank.

The main modus operandi of the *Noar Ha-Gevaot* is known as *Tag Mehir*, or Price Tag. These are particularly unprovoked vicious attacks on Palestinian farms, cars, businesses and fields.

Occasionally, the members of the group would burn a mosque or a church in these assaults. Sometimes, it is more than that. They try, and sometimes succeed, in **burning people alive** in their houses or killing them during these pogroms.

During these violent episodes, the Israeli army would stand by and allow the extremists to carry out their attacks unhindered.

In recent years, this messianic group has entered in a systematic way into the Palestinian neighborhoods of mixed towns inside Israel such as Akka, Haifa, Jaffa, Al-Lid and Al-Ramleh.

They built “learning centers” in the midst of the Palestinian areas and are constantly harassing the population. These settlers played an important role in instigating the riots against Palestinian communities, the ‘48 Arabs, in May 2021.

The Youth of the Hills added yet another component to their violent repertoire in recent years, the raiding of Al-Haram Al-Sharif, the most sacred Palestinian Muslim holy site. Their aim is to instigate a regional reaction, which, in their minds, would facilitate the building of the so-called third temple on the ruins of Al-Aqsa Mosque, with the ultimate hope of precipitating the coming of the Jewish messiah.

### **Jewish Power, Religious Zionism**

The Youth of the Hills became even more of a menace after the November 2022 elections as the two political parties that fully support them, *Ozma Yehudit* (Jewish Power) and *Haziyonut Hadatit* (Religious Zionism) significantly increased their representation in the Knesset. This new-found power allowed right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to establish his government.

The representatives of these extremist parties are now ministers in the current cabinet, with Bezalel Smotrich becoming the finance minister and Itamar Ben Gvir – who used to be the defense lawyer of these vigilantes – becoming the national security minister.

Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, along with other ministers of their parties, are not part of the small war cabinet created after the events of October 7. Consequently, they have little impact on the ongoing genocidal policies carried out by the Israeli army in Gaza.

However, they will be crucial in determining Israel's next move, which aims at bringing Jewish settlers back to the Strip.

Moreover, these extremist politicians are already playing a part in the intensification of the horrific assaults on the Palestinian community of the occupied West Bank. Additionally, they are the leaders of the new campaign of terror and racism targeting the '48 Palestinian Arabs.

These extremists have already succeeded once, namely, in their relentless attacks on the villages in Masafer Yatta, in the southern Hebron Hills. They have done so with the tacit help of the Israeli army, leading to the eviction of thousands of Palestinians. Successive Israeli governments have been wanting to de-Arabize that area for years, in order for Israel to create territorial integrity for Jews from the Negev (the Naqab) to the Jordan River.

Quite a few of these religious Zionist representatives are now making their way into the upper echelons of the Israeli security services and army.

Their final goal is to close a circle, which began with a rabbi who decided to nationalize Judaism as a settler colonial project in the early 20th century, and ultimately build a theocracy that would try and finish what secular Zionism failed to do: the very destruction of the Palestinian people.

Moshe Zimmerman, Israel's leading historian of modern Germany, had, as early as 1995, compared Kook's disciples to another group, which terrorized Jews during the dark days of Nazism. This is what he said in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronot*:

*“There is a whole sector in Israeli society that I contend without hesitation that it is a copycat of the Nazis. Look at the children of (the Jewish settlers in) Hebron, they are exactly like the Hitleryugend...They are indoctrinated from the cradle about the bad Arabs, antisemitism, how everyone is against us. They become the paranoid supremacists, precisely like the Hitleryugend.”*

Enough said.