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A Century of Settler Colonialism in Palestine: Zionism's Entangled Project

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THROUGHOUT THE PAST CENTURY, THE Zionist movement constructed the most sophisticated settler-colonial project of our age: the State of Israel. The violent birth of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent colonization of the entirety of the land of Palestine after the 1967 war are indeed reflections of Zionism's successes in fulfilling its settler-colonial ambitions in Palestine. Yet, while this settler-colonial project continues unabated, it is an entangled one, unable to reach the ultimate point of Jewish exclusivity in the land. **Zionist settler colonialism, as its historical precedents suggest, is fundamentally based on the operative logic of "eliminating the native" and failing to utterly marginalize and "minoritize" him.** The vibrant Palestinian presence in the land, the everyday resistance to the colonial order, and the robust Palestinian adherence to their rights all stand as structural obstacles to the ultimate realization of the "Zionist dream."¹ Despite Israel's relentless colonial power and domination, Palestinian steadfastness means that this project will remain impeded and incomplete, a matter that may lead to its future demise.

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UNMASKING ZIONISM

Those who seek to grasp the present-day complexity of the so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict must begin by uncovering its geopolitical roots. This means understanding the nature of the Israeli state, society, and economy as a byproduct of a larger settler-colonial movement, distinguished by a combination of a hybrid form of nationalism with a sophisticated colonial model. This merger lies at the core of the Israeli state's ideology; it systemically guided the decades-long policies of forceful dispossession of the Palestinian people to build an ethnically exclusivist Jewish state.

The Zionist movement emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in Eastern and Central Europe and was initially formed “as a national revival movement, prompted by the growing pressure on Jews in those regions to assimilate totally or risk continuing persecution.”² Although political Zionism is a homegrown European movement, nurtured and shaped by the continent's sociopolitical development, it has induced far-reaching consequences on distant regions of the world. Indeed, Palestine—as a land, people, and history—is a prime victim of Europe's collusion in exporting its homegrown problems.

Thus, any discussion of the nature and dynamic of the Zionist colonization of Palestine must be anchored in the triple dynamics that constituted the essence of nineteenth-century Europe: nationalism, colonialism, and anti-Semitism. Although the distinctly European interplay between nationalism and colonialism is a defining feature of political Zionism, the movement developed peculiar characteristics that make it particularly problematic.

It is transnational: In sharp contrast to conventional nationhood—revolving around common linguistic, cultural, and historical ties within a shared territorial space—the Zionist nationalistic doctrine invented a transnational ethnic identity that sought to bring together the culturally, socially, and ethnically heterogeneous world Jewry to establish a nation-state.

It is mythological: Zionism placed the Hebrew biblical mythology as the primary source of national identity formation. In his seminal work *The Invention of the Jewish People*, the Israeli scholar Shlomo Sand deconstructs the official Zionist historiography by challenging the claim that the Jewish people constitute a national group with a shared tie to the land of Palestine, and concludes that the Jews should be seen as a religious community. He rightly points to the fact that “In the modern world, membership of a religious community does not provide ownership rights to a territory, whereas an ‘ethnic’ people always have a land they can claim as their ancestral heritage.”³ Furthermore, Sand contends that

“In the eyes of the first Zionist historians, the Bible ceased to be an impressive theological text and became a book of secular history.”⁴ Against this backdrop, one can infer that Zionism manipulated Judaism as a religion to reinterpret history and redefine Jewishness in terms of ethnic belonging. Paradoxically, whereas the Zionist nationalist paradigm relied heavily on religious texts and traditions to justify its very existence, the Zionist body of thought was primarily constructed along secular principles, with its founding fathers—such as Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, David Ben-Gurion, and Chaim Weizmann, among others—maintaining a staunchly secular worldview.

It is monopolistic: Zionists framed their claim to the land of Palestine by a monopoly right of nationhood granted by divine will. This is particularly underscored in the strategic way that early Zionist thinkers deployed terms of biblical origin such as “chosen people” and “the promised land” to reinvent Jews as an ethnonationalistic group in search of political self-determination and invent a territorial space where Jewish “emancipation” could materialize in the form of monopoly over the land and nation-state.

It is exclusionist: Early Zionist leaders envisioned the Jewish state as part and parcel of European colonialism. The Zionist movement deliberately disregarded the presence of the people of the land and constructed an exclusionary view grounded in blind supremacy. “A land without a people for a people without a land” was a baseless phrase widely employed by early Zionists to induce European Jewry to emigrate to Palestine. At best, Palestine was viewed as inhabited by some religious minorities or by nomadic tribes who had no political claim over the land. It was deceptively depicted as an abandoned, deserted area to justify Jewish immigration to “make the desert bloom.”⁵

It is ahistorical: The Zionist proclamation that the land of Palestine belongs to the Jewish nation is grounded in ahistorical connections between the ancient Israelites (1050 and 930 BCE) and modern Israelis. Such a proclamation disregards substantial historical phases that shaped the region’s rich civilizational background and cultural and social formations, including the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Greeks, the Romans, the Israelites, and Arabs. Critical accounts of the Israeli “archeological practices” in recreating modern Israel’s “origin myth” have tended to demonstrate the myriad historical discontinuities and inconsistencies of the Zionist historical narrative.⁶ Commenting on the early history of Israel, the leading Israeli archeologist Israel Finkelstein asserts that “The Bible presents a *fictional but functional* origin myth.”⁷

In truth, today’s Palestinians are the “the people of the land” who inhabited the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River for hundreds of

centuries. The term “people of the land” does not refer to ethnic and religious continuity, but it is instead a story of continuous presence on the land.⁸ Before the Zionist invasion, the land of Palestine had historically been a site of coexistence and harmonic social and cultural interactions among the diverse religious

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groups that collectively formed the people of the land. Further, depicting the Palestinians as “the people of the land” not only signifies their deep-rooted existence on the

land of Palestine, but it also asserts the dynamic cultural, economic, social, associational, and architectural life that characterized the Arab-Palestinian community long before the establishment of Israel.⁹

While Palestine was historically, politically, and administratively part of former empires, the Palestinians have been and remain possessed of the unmitigated right to self-determination and independence. Like other formerly colonized nations, the Palestinians began to realize and develop their distinct Arab-Palestinian identity following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent incorporation of the region into the British colonial sphere of influence. The Palestinians believed that their national identity and political self-determination were inalienable rights, echoed in their fierce struggle against both the British colonial mandate and the Zionist movement in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is dependent on Western imperialism: In the words of the foremost leader of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, the Jewish state ought to be “a portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.”¹⁰ Early Zionist leaders were aware that the objective of establishing a Jewish state could only be achieved with the backing and support of the European powers. Unlike former European colonial ventures, the Zionist project lacked a supporting colonial metropole, a gap that could be filled by securing the backing of imperial powers.¹¹ Thus, positioning itself with imperial powers served the Zionist movement on two levels. First, by aligning with British imperialism, and later with its North American successor, the Zionist movement ensured a power position necessary to pursue its colonization project. Second, this also helped the Zionist movement assert itself as a strategic extension of Western geopolitical interests in the region. In other words, Western imperialism filled the power vacuum erected by the absence of a mother country to sustain

the Zionist colonial project.

It is manipulative: Both anti-Semitism as an epidemic phenomenon and the abuse of anti-Semitism as a political tool have boosted Zionist aspirations. Though political Zionism marketed itself as the savior of Jewish communities suffering brutal injustices in Europe, it manipulated Jewish suffering to inflict violent dispossession and structural racism against another group of people. Past and present, anti-Semitism has been misused as a powerful pretext to attain a wide range of objectives.¹² Zionism was insignificant among European Jews before World War II.¹³ It was the Holocaust that upgraded the status and salience of Zionism, making it powerfully appealing to world Jewry and resulting in the unprecedented intensification of Jewish immigration to Palestine. Simultaneously, various Western governments, driven by sympathy or anti-Semitic sentiments, supported Zionist state-building in Palestine while blocking immigration to their own countries, ostensibly to resolve the long-standing Jewish question in Europe.

These problematic characteristics constitute the basis of the Zionist ideology that continues to fuel the settler-colonial project in Palestine to the present day. With the dominance of far-right Messianic trends over the Israeli government and society at large, these ideological characteristics became more pronounced and evident in Israel's domestic and foreign policies to assert the uniqueness and supremacy of Jewish nationhood over the Palestinian native population—that is, to legitimize structural racism, discrimination, and violent dispossession under the name of a Divine promise.

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CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

“History, as the saying goes, is written by the victor, and since 1948, Israel has been the victor.”¹⁴ As a consequence, the material, political, and military power of political Zionism is reflected in its own narrative, which despite containing numerous inconsistencies and unsubstantiated claims has largely suppressed the Palestinian narrative for decades.¹⁵ This is typical in situations of unjust power asymmetries, where narrative is used to manipulate the truth and to justify oppression.

The Zionist colonization of Palestine began during the last phase of the Ottoman rule and flourished under the British Mandate. Colonial intentions began to be felt in the post-WWI division of the Arab Levant into spheres of influence under British and French hegemony, as envisioned by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement.¹⁶ Palestine became part of the British-controlled areas,

and this offered a golden opportunity for the Zionist movement's diplomatic maneuvering. In 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, which committed the British Empire to favoring "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."¹⁷ In addition to garnering Jewish support for the allies, the British saw the establishment of a client Zionist state in Palestine as a post-war geopolitical and strategic goal that would maintain British hegemony over crucial territories connecting Egypt and India. The Balfour Declaration marked the first substantial triumph for political Zionism, as it ensured political backing by a major world power. Zionist efforts to intensify mass Jewish immigration, acquire lands, and build institutions and military capabilities in Palestine have since then become the mainstay of the movement's colonial activities. As a major source of historical injustice inflicted on millions of Palestinians to the present day, the Balfour Declaration disregarded the presence of the people of the land, referring to them as merely the "non-Jewish communities in Palestine," thus discursively transforming them into a minority. The demographic reality suggests a drastically different picture. By the time of the Ottoman Empire's dissolution, the Arab population in Palestine numbered 729,873, of whom 7,143 were Jews.¹⁸

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In 1922, Palestine was formally declared a British mandate by the League of Nations. The British governed Palestine through the Colonial Office, which translated the Balfour Declaration into official policy. In order to legitimize and boost Zionist activities in Palestine, the British government appointed as high commissioner a pro-Zionist figure, Sir Herbert Samuel, who "would try to make a success of the Zionist programme."¹⁹

During the 1920s and 1930s, the British mandate adopted a double standard toward Zionist Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Whereas the British administration granted Zionists protection and facilitated Jewish immigration, institution building, the formation of paramilitary groups, and the acquisition of lands, it excluded and brutally suppressed the Palestinians and their demands for self-determination. From their side, the Palestinians took a rejectionist stance against the British mandate and Zionist colonization, which was particularly evident in a series of revolts. Culminating in the Great Arab Revolt (1936–1939), the mounting Palestinian pressure on the British administration, coupled with the looming of World War II, pushed the mandate to readjust its policies to assure some stability in the region. These changes were articulated by the British government in the White Paper of 1939. The White Paper outlined three measures: restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine, restrictions on land sales and transfer to Jewish ownership, and the promise of Palestinian indepen-

dence within a 10-year timeframe. Zionist groups rejected the White Paper and waged a series of attacks throughout the 1940s on the British authorities and Palestinian civilians and properties.

For reasons related to the British inability to control the situation and its desire to end its mandate, the UN passed Resolution 181 in November 1947, widely known as the Partition Plan, which called for the establishment of two separate states in mandatory Palestine. Although the demographic balance was overwhelmingly in favor of the Palestinians, with the Jewish community constituting only one-third of the population, the resolution envisioned a Jewish state covering 53 percent of the land (499,000 Jews versus 438,000 Palestinians), while the Palestinian state would cover 47 percent (818,000 Palestinians and fewer than 10,000 Jews).²⁰ The Partition Plan was tactically accepted with some reservations by the Jewish Agency in Palestine, while the Palestinians rejected the plan, arguing that it “deprive[d] the majority of the people of Palestine of their territory and transfer[ed] it to the exclusive use of a minority in the country.”²¹

Tensions between Zionists and the Palestinians escalated, leading to war in 1948. The Zionists were determined to establish their state over a majority of lands with a minority of Palestinians—an unachievable objective without embarking on systematic policies of extermination and violent dispossession of Palestinian inhabitants. The 1948 confrontation between Zionist terror groups (as designated by the UN) and the Palestinian resistance characterized a study in military power asymmetries.²² Whereas Zionist terror groups were highly organized and well-equipped with advanced weaponry and trained fighters, Palestinian resistance groups were poorly armed and disorganized.

Zionist military campaigns culminated in what is widely acknowledged as “the ethnic cleansing of Palestine”: a series of systematic, organized, and pre-planned terror campaigns conducted in 1947 and 1948 in order to uproot and expel as much of the Palestinian population as possible in most major urban and rural areas.²³ Various pro- and anti-Zionist historians have documented this tragic event, including the Israeli “new historians,” who benefited from access to Israeli archival documents. According to Israeli historian Ilan Pappé:

On a cold Wednesday afternoon, 10 March 1948, a group of eleven men, veteran Zionist leaders together with young military Jewish officers, put the final touches to a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. That same evening, military orders were dispatched to the units on the ground to prepare for the systematic expulsion of the Palestinians from vast areas of the country.²⁴

The Zionist terror campaigns resulted in the widespread destruction of Palestinian society. Over 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homeland and became refugees in surrounding countries and in the diaspora;

This Zionist worldview became the guiding principle of the Israeli settler-colonial project.

hundreds of cities and villages were destroyed and depopulated; and a fifth of the 150,000 Palestinians remaining in

Israel became internally displaced.²⁵ When British forces departed from Palestine on 14 May 1948, five Arab armies joined the fight against the Zionist groups but were handily defeated. The 1948 defeat of the Palestinians and the Arab forces resulted in the occupation of 77 percent of mandatory Palestine.²⁶ The birth of the State of Israel was declared. The year 1948 stands as a seminal one in the modern history of Palestine, as it precipitated two diametrically opposed realities and narratives: the Palestinian catastrophe (commemorated annually as *Nakba* day) and the establishment of the State of Israel (celebrated annually as the day of independence).²⁷

With the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, the ideological characteristics of Zionism became the foundational underpinning and the source of continuity of the Israeli nationhood. Most importantly, this Zionist worldview became the guiding principle of the Israeli settler-colonial project, which framed the state-society relations in a broad consensus around the nationalistic/messianic mission towards constructing a Jewish exclusivity.

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INSTITUTIONALIZING SETTLER-COLONIALISM IN THE ISRAELI STATE

The twenty-year period between the major Arab-Israeli wars (1948–1967) witnessed concentrated efforts to consolidate the nascent Israeli State. The settler-colonial paradigm became codified into the state’s legal and institutional structures and was translated into aggressive policies against the remaining Palestinian communities and surrounding countries. This resulted in a wide range of practices that primarily aimed at fostering the Jewish character of the state and ensuring superiority and deterrent capability at the regional level.

First, in order to consolidate its grip on a wide swath of the land, the Israeli authorities embarked on the “legal dispossession” of Palestinians by creating a new land regime that primarily aimed “to seize, retain, expropriate, reallocate, and reclassify the Arab lands appropriated by the state.”²⁸ Most importantly, with the passing of the “absentee property law” by the Knesset in 1950, the Israeli

state captured 90 percent of the land.

The absentee property law designated as “absentee” every Palestinian or resident of Palestine who had left his or her usual place of residence due to the partition brought about by the United Nations Palestine Resolution in 1947. Even people who remained within the eventual borders of the Israeli state and eventually became Israeli citizens were classified as “present absentees.”²⁹

Second, while hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their homeland were denied the right to return to their lands and properties, Jews worldwide were granted the right to live in Israel and acquire citizenship. The Law of Return of 1950 and the Citizenship Law of 1952 were designed to attract Jewish immigration without preconditions; being of Jewish decent was the principal requirement that could guarantee automatic citizenship. This set of laws constituted the cornerstone for consolidating the Jewish character of the state by maintaining a privileged Jewish majority.

Third, Palestinian residents were subjected to institutional discrimination and exclusion. This was done through the legal military regime that governed areas inhabited by the Palestinians. Israel formed a military government (1948–1966) to perform a variety of roles pertaining to monitoring, controlling, and constraining the Palestinian residents of Israel. They were effectively rendered second-class citizens of the state.³⁰ Those areas were subjected to the Emergency Regulations inherited from the British mandate and included **policies such as curfews, administrative detention, military trial, banning of political activity, and imposing of security closure on these areas.** Moreover, the Interior Ministry appointed “minorities officers” to implement policies of segregation among Palestinian communities, turning them into separate security zones and effectively restricting social and commercial interactions between them.³¹

Fourth, the construction of a powerful military institution was another significant feature of the state, society, and culture. Zionist paramilitary groups that conducted the ethnic cleansing operations in 1948 were reorganized in a formal state army. Yet, the Israeli military is not solely an institution concerned with security, defense, and war. It was designed to play multiple social and economic functions and promote the culture of militarism. As a result, Israeli society is a militarized one, where citizens are actively involved in military activities, and the military is actively involved in non-military activities. For example, the Defense Service Law of 1948 obliges male Israeli citizens who turn 18 to serve in the army for 36 months, while women must serve for 24 months. This mandatory conscription is still ardently upheld today. Following the end of military service, Israelis remain in a reserve unit and spend one month in the army every year

until the age of 40. Additionally, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Israeli state invested heavily in expanding the military workshops that existed before the foundation of the state, and they introduced new industries that not only served the military needs of the state, but also proved to be a lucrative export-oriented industry. While not acknowledged officially, Israel upgraded its status as a deterrent force by developing a nuclear program in the 1950s, through which it became the only state possessing nuclear weapons in the Middle East. By the 1960s, Israel completed the development stage of its first nuclear weapon, and on the eve of the 1967 war, it already had nuclear capability.³²

Fifth, Israel sought to weaken and restrict the development of neighboring Arab countries while projecting itself as a regional power. In 1956, Israel triggered a conflict with Egypt, joined by an Anglo-French imperial coalition, culminating in a large-scale offensive war against Egypt in response to the nationalization of the Suez Canal. While the Suez Canal crisis did not pose a strategic threat to Israel, it was a “war of choice,” motivated by the desire to weaken Egypt militarily and overthrow the Egyptian President Jamal Abdul-Nasser; to consolidate its alliance with Western imperial powers; and to enforce a new MENA (Middle East and North Africa) regional order in which Israel was the superior power.³³

ENTANGLED COLONIZATION

After consolidating the settler-colonial state, Israel embarked on a new colonial venture to expand its boundaries and achieve its dream of a “Greater Israel” of maximum land with minimum Arabs. For this purpose, Israel waged a lightning war against its Arab neighbors in 1967, resulting in a swift victory that inaugurated a new chapter in its settler-colonial expansionism. It extended its colonial order over the remaining parts of Palestine while occupying the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip was perceived as a fulfillment of the Zionist ambition of greater Israel over historic Palestine, without which “the Zionist dream would remain incomplete.”³⁴ Nevertheless, it could hardly be argued that the Zionist dream was completed following the 1967 occupation. Unlike the demographic reality in the aftermath of the Nakba, which ensured Jewish predominance and facilitated the establishment of the Israeli state, only 350,000 people fled the territories occupied in 1967, leaving over 1.5 million Palestinians in a direct encounter with the Israeli occupation. This reality suggests that Israel’s military victory of 1967 implied an ideological defeat, whereby its colonial project was complicated through the multilayered challenges posed by the presence of the

people of the land. This prompted Israel to embark on an even more multidimensional strategy, combining economic, institutional, demographic, military, psychological, and legal pressures to perpetrate the effective colonization of the land and to get rid of the Palestinian demographic burden.³⁵

A cornerstone of Israel's colonial pursuit since 1967 has been land expropriation and the construction of Jewish-only settlements (colonies). Israeli settlements are heavily subsidized by the state and often supported by non-governmental, pro-settlement movements. Israel's successive governments between right and left have shown slight differences in their positions toward settlements. While both sides have demonstrated persistent willingness to build and expand settlements as the overall strategy, they differ on the basis of tactical motifs, timing, and intensity. From 1967 to 1977, the Labor Party pioneered in advancing settlement construction.³⁶ The Labor settlement policy was guided by the Allon Plan, which advocated for the annexation of over half the territories and the construction of settlements to defend boundaries so as to secure the Greater Israel. With the right-wing Likud Party assuming power in 1977, settlement policy became fundamentally driven by ideological factors based on a Messianic/nationalist credo. Under Likud, settlers' movements—such as Gush Emunim and Amanah—flourished and advanced their practical agenda of “settling anywhere and everywhere.”³⁷ Settlement construction across the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem and around the Gaza Strip, consequently intensified in number and ferocity. By the time the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, there were around 250,000 settlers in the occupied territories.

Settlements are strategically designed to serve a multipurpose objective. First, they meet the Israeli strategy of creating facts on the ground—a system to avoid international pressure and create de facto colonization—and altering the demographic balance. Second, settlements are intentionally constructed around and between densely populated Palestinian areas, thereby imposing territorial discontinuity and preventing the natural expansion of Palestinian communities. Third, because settlements are well-equipped with military technology and armed, trained residents, they serve as an extension of Israel's military formations in the occupied territories. Fourth, settlements are implanted on natural resource-rich areas to exploit water and arable lands, which facilitates settlement economic activities and deprives the Palestinians of economic development. Fifth, East Jerusalem has always served as a staging ground for settlement activity with the aim of “Judaizing” the city.³⁸ Sixth, settlements are central to the policy of segregation; whereas settlers are governed by Israel's civil laws, the Palestinians are ruled by military orders. Jewish-only settlements are a blatant expression

of the brutal nature of Zionist colonization: they are segregated communities built on illegally expropriated Palestinian lands to ethnically cleanse the native communities. Additionally, settlers continue to wage violent attacks on neighboring villages to drive the population out of their homes and farms in order to conquer further lands for expanded settlements.

Israel has legalized the segregation policy by subjecting the population to military administration since 1967. It enforced military rule that penetrated and regulated every aspect of Palestinian life; this practice was further institutionalized by the establishment of military courts under the command of the Israeli military.³⁹ The overall objective was to impose effective control over the population and stifle national aspirations. The Israeli legal order was translated into restrictive practices that denied basic political and civil rights and included the criminalization of any form of expression of Palestinian national identity, political association, and activism.⁴⁰ The military order allowed Israeli forces to introduce a wide range of measures of individual and collective punishment, such as curfews, home demolitions, arbitrary and administrative detention, the expulsion of local leaders, and the closure of towns, schools, and civil associations. The military

administration was also tasked with issues of land use, planning, and zoning to facilitate land expropriations for the benefit of settlers and

The Israeli legal order was translated into restrictive practices that denied basic political and civil rights.

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the military. In the 1980s, Israel sought to mask its military rule by establishing the “Civil Administration.” The Civil Administration functioned as the governing arm of the Israeli Ministry of Defense in the occupied territories and appointed a military commander in each area to enforce military orders.

Parallel to the settlement project, another pillar of Israel’s colonial structure has been economic domination. From the outset of the 1967 occupation, military orders encompassed numerous economic matters aimed at incorporating the Palestinian economy into Israel’s own economy, thus making its colonial rule a cheap venture while simultaneously stymying Palestinian economic development. Among measures adopted were the closure of Arab financial and monetary institutions, the imposition of the Israeli currency, the banning of exports and imports except through Israeli controlled borders, the imposition of high taxes (customs, income tax, VAT), poor investment in infrastructure, strict licensing for industrial activities, and control over communications, electricity resources, water, and natural resources. Israeli policies transformed the Palestinian mar-

ket into a captive one that became a convenient dumping ground for shoddy Israeli industrial products that could not compete with the manufacturers of the industrialized countries of Europe and North America.⁴¹ This has not only brought massive profit to the Israeli economy, but it has also formed a new class of Israeli capitalists whose primary manufacturing activities were designed for the occupied territories.⁴²

Economic domination was accompanied by economic pacification. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the occupation in 1967, the Israeli government adopted a proposal by the minister of defense Moshe Dayan, who advocated a political-economic strategy widely known as “open bridges.”⁴³ This strategy was based on the notion of “self-management” and relied on three principles: non-presence, reducing the presence of the Israeli military forces in the occupied areas; non-interference, encouraging the population to manage their daily economic and social activities with minimal interference from the occupation authorities; and open bridges, allowing the Palestinians to trade with Jordan and, to a lesser extent, with Egypt. The open bridges endorsed a limited pattern of modernization of certain sectors to serve the needs of the Israeli economy. However, Israel failed to implement macroeconomic policies that could serve the actual needs of the Palestinian economy.⁴⁴ It also absorbed a large segment of Palestinian labor forces, thereby creating Palestinian labor dependency on its market.⁴⁵

While it is true that Dayan’s strategy led to a considerable increase in the individual income and general socioeconomic well-being in the occupied territories, it effectively aborted their capacity to build a productive economy capable of absorbing the labor force and developing technologically. In fact, while Israel’s policies have led to the doubling of per capita income, they have also caused a disintegration of the Palestinian economic base and superimposed a state of structural dependency on the Israeli economy. The open bridges policy was particularly effective in terms of stabilizing the initial phase of the colonization process through “redefining the conditions that govern the lives of Palestinian people.”⁴⁶ In the words of Dayan, the real aim was to make the “occupation invisible.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, among the vital natural resources exploited by Israel is water. Israel maintained exclusive control of water resources, including the Jordan Valley, the headwaters of the Jordan River, and the West Bank groundwater and mountain aquifers. The occupation authorities virtually deny the Palestinians access to new water resources and forbid deep drilling of new wells.⁴⁸ Israeli domination over water resources is evident in the stark inequality of water

distribution and consumption. For example, Israel and Israeli settlements take about 80 percent of the aquifer's flow, leaving the Palestinians with 20 percent.⁴⁹ According to B'Tselem, "Whereas Israelis enjoy an unlimited supply of running water all year round, Palestinians are allotted a small fixed amount, resulting in constant water shortages."⁵⁰ Strikingly, figures show that the average water consumption for domestic, commercial, and industrial use in the West Bank is approximately 79 liters a day per person, less than the World Health Organization recommendation of 100 liters of water per person per day. At the same time, the average domestic, commercial, and industrial water consumption in Israel is more than four times that figure, or about 287 liters per person per day.⁵¹

COLONIALISM REORDERED

"Facts on the ground" have continued to be Israel's key policy throughout the Oslo years, aimed at aborting any possibility for the creation of a Palestinian state. With the institutionalization of physical, territorial, and demographic fragmentation, the restriction of the movement of people and goods, and the imposition of new modes of dispossession and collective punishment, apartheid became the core feature of Israel's colonial order in the post-Oslo reality.⁵² The post-Oslo reality brought about effective mechanisms of control and fragmentation of Palestinian communities, especially through a rapid Judaization of various parts of the West Bank, most notably in crucial areas such as Jerusalem, the old town of Hebron, the Nablus periphery, and the mushroomed settlement blocs.

After almost 25 years since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the "peace process" has proved to be an illusion. While this process was initially heralded as the beginning of the end of Israel's occupation of the territories occupied in 1967 and was supposed to result in two states living side by side in peace and coexistence, the Oslo process enabled Israel to reinvent its colonial order by other means. In fact, the Oslo framework was used by Israel as a fig leaf to cover its continued colonization and to assure unrestricted control over the occupied territories, all under the banner of peace.

A salient aspect of the reordering of Israel's settler-colonialism after Oslo is that its colonial rule came to be mediated by the Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA was established in 1994 as a self-governing entity without sovereignty to oversee administrative and civil affairs over densely populated areas. But the PA has been turned into an effective mechanism through which Israel could outsource various civil, economic, and security tasks and relieve itself of responsi-

bility for the population. Asymmetric power relations as echoed in the PA-Israel coordination committees have redefined the relationship between colonizer and colonized in a way that entrenches Israeli control over Palestinian life.⁵³

Israel used the Oslo framework to deepen territorial fragmentation by turning the West Bank into a series of separated enclaves, effectively cutting off spatial and social continuity with the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. The West Bank was divided into Area A (under PA civil and security control and covering 18 percent of the land), Area B (under the PA civilian and Israeli military control and covering 20 percent of the land), and Area C (under full Israeli civilian and military control and covering 62 percent of the land). In order to ensure effective control, Areas A and B are completely surrounded by Area C.

Settlements have rapidly expanded and been fortified by a set of military installations, settler-only roads, surveillance technologies, roadblocks, and other infrastructures. These settlements are mainly located in Area C and absorb around 42 percent of West Bank territory. Since Oslo, the number of settlers has more than doubled. As of 2015, there were an estimated 588,000 settlers in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) residing in 127 government-sanctioned settlements, compared to 150,000 settlers in 1993. In addition, there are more than 100 illegal “outposts” implanted throughout the West Bank, unrecognized by the Israeli government despite official assistance to these outposts. The exponential increase in the number of Israeli settlers since Oslo underscores not only the fact that Oslo failed to protect the rights to life and self-determination of the Palestinian people, but also that it further erected the political context necessary for the Israeli state to obscure, and thus deepen, its colonization of Palestinian land.⁵⁴

The post-Oslo years have also been characterized by the imposition of a severe closure regime, which places restrictions on the movement of people and goods and enforces a separation between Palestinian communities and the external world. Moreover, Israel imposes an internal closure that aims to disconnect Palestinian towns and villages from each other, and between the West Bank and Gaza, through the use of military checkpoints, barriers, ditches, and roadblocks. The construction of the separation wall in 2002 caused a “slow but cruel suffocation of normalcy that adds challenges to practicing everyday activities such as sleeping; eating; going to work, school, or hospital; and visiting friends and relatives.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, Israel imposes an external closure by controlling borders and international crossing points to Jordan and Egypt as well as preventing the Palestinians from having their own airport or seaport. The closure regime is solidified by the engineering of a sophisticated permit

system, bolstered by multiple types of identification techniques, surveillance, and mixed IDs, all of which systemically shatter the Palestinian social fabric and impede social continuity.⁵⁶

The post-Oslo Palestinian economy was structured by the Paris Economic Protocol (PER) of 1994. The most important economic ramification of the PER is that it did not substantially alter the Israeli restrictive regime over the economic life of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Instead, it led to the redefinition of the Palestinian-Israeli economic relationship from one subjected to an enforced structural dependency that existed since 1967 to a consensually regulated structural dependency based on internationally recognized agreements. While some “cosmetic” economic functions were transferred to the PA to serve as symbolic trappings of quasi-statehood and help relieve Israel from the burden of overseeing civil services (e.g., welfare, education, health, and other social services), Israel maintained sole control of essential pillars of the economy, such as borders, land, water, natural resources, labor, the movement of people, trade, fiscal management, industrial zoning, and water resources.⁵⁷ In this context, the occupied territories remained a captive market for Israel where local markets were filled with Israeli products and at the same time the Palestinians were prevented from pursuing independent economic development. In addition, Israeli authorities placed severe restrictions on labor movement, thus contributing to deteriorating socioeconomic wellbeing and increasing unemployment to unprecedented levels.

In addition to serious economic restrictions, Israel has imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on the Gaza Strip since 2007, halting intra-Palestinian relations between the West Bank and Gaza. As a form of collective punishment, the blockade imprisoned 1.9 million Palestinians and prevented their access to the West Bank and their exit to the outside world. The devastation enforced on the besieged strip and the subsequent Israeli wars caused thousands of civilian deaths and the massive destruction of neighborhoods, educational and health facilities, and infrastructure. Gazan society has been subjected to a grave humanitarian crisis and deteriorating socioeconomic standards. Today, more than 70 percent of the population relies on humanitarian aid, the unemployment rate is the highest in the world at 43 percent, over 72 percent of households live in food insecurity, 95 percent of factories and workshops have been shut down, farmers are denied access to 35 percent of agricultural land, 85 percent of fishing waters have been affected, and vital infrastructure has been destroyed. With the systemic obstruction of Gaza’s reconstruction and the impossibility of recovery under such conditions, Gaza’s economy is on the verge of collapse.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the division between the West Bank and Gaza, coupled with Israel's double approach to the West Bank (economic peace in the context of ongoing settlement expansion) and Gaza (crippling blockade and periodic military assaults), has created different realities governed by opposing political, social, and institutional visions, split by widening economic inequality.

In short, post-Oslo East Jerusalem experienced intensified “Judaization” and the systematic destruction of its Arab heritage. The presence of Arab Jerusalemites is regularly targeted through different forms of “transfer” policies that aim to displace them. Settlements are implanted into the hearts of Palestinian neighborhoods, while the inhabitants are deprived of the right to construct houses, schools, hospitals, and other vital facilities. Discriminatory laws, including restrictions on civil status, confiscation of property, preclusion of urban planning, and revocation of residency IDs, are all strategic tools for uprooting the Palestinian population. Economic pressures and barriers to commercial and industrial development have led to high poverty rates, reaching 75 percent among Palestinian Jerusalemites according to recent estimates.⁵⁹

A CENTURY OF PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE

The Palestinian resistance movement emerged early last century, espousing an anti-colonial agenda and forging strategic alliances with similar anti-colonial liberation movements worldwide. It defined its mission as a struggle against the forces of international Zionism and colonialism in order to achieve self-determination and the liberation of Palestine.⁶⁰ Resistance constituted the backbone of Palestinian steadfastness and survival in the face of Zionist colonization, dispossession, and dehumanization. For a century, resistance has been a conscious mission among Palestinians, who have been well aware of the perils of the Zionist project. Resistance thus shaped Palestinian national identity and was integrated into cultural heritage, knowledge production, social life, and worldview. Yet the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle is not monolithic: depending on the circumstances throughout the various stages of Palestinian modern history, resistance has been articulated differently—ranging from active to passive, collective to individual, peaceful to armed, and organized to random.

Since the Palestinians became conscious of Zionist objectives and the complicity of the British colonial mandate early last century, a series of revolts erupted, such as those of Nebi Musa (1920), Jaffa (1921–1922), Al-Buraq (1929), and the October revolt of 1933. The largest one was the Great Arab Revolt (1936–1939), an organized insurgency that articulated the Palestinian

quest for independence and the end of the Zionist project in Palestine. It involved civil disobedience, general strikes, and armed struggle against British troops and Zionist settlers. The revolt was aborted by British empty promises on the eve of WWII to halt Jewish immigration and allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state. While Palestinian resistance continued throughout the 1940s, Zionist paramilitary groups had developed a far superior organizational structure and armament. The power asymmetry ended in the defeat of the Palestinian resistance and the implementation of Zionist ethnic cleansing of Palestinian towns and villages, finally leading to the conquest of 77 percent of the land of Palestine.⁶¹

The post-Nakba period saw the majority of Palestinians living in deplorable conditions, scattered in refugee camps, and deprived of political rights and dignity. They were also denied a distinct political identity. Their activism was subordinated to various Arab regimes and mainly exercised through Arab political parties. By the late 1950s, a few Palestinian resistance groups had emerged and initiated armed struggle along the Israeli borders with Jordan and Lebanon.⁶²

While these groups lacked organizational structures and resources, they implanted the seeds for the formation of the modern Palestinian national movement. In the 1960s, these armed groups coalesced to form a more coherent and organized national liberation movement along diverse ideological lines, collectively constituting the backbone of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). With the support of the Nasserite regime of Egypt, the PLO was founded under the auspices of the Arab League in 1964, and its operations and political maneuvering were restricted by, and dependent on, the political considerations of Arab regimes. It was the Arab defeat in the 1967 war that caused the PLO to prioritize the role of independent Palestinian leadership, decision making, and manpower in determining the fate of the struggle for liberation and self-determination.

The post-1967 rise of the PLO left a substantial imprint on the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle and brought the Palestinian cause into the center of world attention for decades. The PLO functioned as an anti-colonial liberation movement with far-reaching influence on the worldwide Palestinian diaspora. It was widely recognized as “the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”⁶³ It shaped Palestinian national identity, waged armed struggle, mobilized and represented its people, and formed transnational alliances. The PLO functioned as a state-in-exile, provided social services to Palestinians in refugee camps, and supported educational and cultural initiatives. It also played a significant diplomatic role; in 1974, the PLO was the first national liberation movement to be granted observer status at the UN.⁶⁴

The Palestinians who remained inside historic Palestine embarked on different forms of anti-colonial struggle. The Israeli occupation of 1967 inadvertently reunified Palestinian communities in the West Bank, Gaza, and inside Israel. Such interaction contributed to the rise of political consciousness, collective national identity, and a recognition of their shared fate.

Forms of struggle varied due to the different colonial systems imposed on each community. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza relied, to a large extent, on popular resistance. They challenged the Israeli authorities by organizing themselves in

The Palestinians who survived the 1948 expulsion and became second-class citizens of Israel developed distinct methods of struggle for their national and civil rights.

modern grassroots organizations, trade unions, voluntary committees, and student and women's movements. This process was accompanied by, and conducive to, the evolution of *Sumud*, a strategy that signified the adherence to Palestinian national identity as a source of collective steadfastness on the land. The first Intifada (1987–1994) was the most enlightening period of popular resistance. New representative structures emerged to organize popular engagement in the Intifada, most notably the popular committees which existed in almost every locality. Meanwhile, the engagement of mass-based organizations; women's and student movements; labor unions; and professional committees decisively transformed the spontaneous uprising into an organized action.


The Palestinians who survived the 1948 expulsion and became second-class citizens of Israel facing institutional discrimination and exclusion developed distinct methods of struggle for their national and civil rights. First, certain political forces established organizations and committees that aimed to preserve national identity and civil rights. These organizations have also mobilized constituencies to defy Israeli policies, occasionally resulting in confrontations, general strikes, and protests. Second, other political trends adopted struggle from within Israeli institutions, most importantly by running for the Israeli Knesset with the assumption that they could influence the state's laws and regulations in favor of equal citizenship and civil rights.

UNCERTAIN CONCLUSION

The active Zionist settler-colonial project has accumulated a series of successes

by conquering the land and encircling the people. Yet it is an entangled project, burdened by the dynamic presence of the people of the land whose steadfastness and resistance to injustices constitute the antithesis of Zionist colonization. Despite a century of repressive conditions of Zionist colonization that have made life unbearable, millions resist by not leaving their homeland and still adhering tirelessly to their rights.

With the intensification of Israel's colonial expansion after Oslo, the Palestinian body politic has been weakened to an unprecedented extent: the PLO lost its revolutionary potential, the PA was established as a dysfunctional institution lacking representation and sovereignty, the national movement became engulfed in multiple divisions and rifts, and the society has been territorially fragmented. For Israel, this status quo is comfortable, and its current policy is to prolong the situation of relative stability. Nevertheless, this cannot be sustainable given the unabated entrenchment of Israel's settler-colonialism.

While future scenarios are uncertain, the Israeli establishment does not hide its determination that a Palestinian state or even a meaningful type of autonomy should never materialize. However, for many, the current reality is that of a single apartheid state, with all the discrimination, segregation, and structural racism this implies. The consolidation of this reality may alter future directions toward a struggle for equal rights within the one-state framework. This direction, however, will be fiercely opposed by Israel because it will shake the doctrinal foundation of the state. Regardless of the way in which Israel continues its colonization, the unrelenting steadfastness of the people of the land will always pose a structural challenge to Israel's settler-colonial project. And the continuation of this state of affairs will likely make the accomplishment of the Zionist dream unattainable, and might result in devastating consequences for the whole settler-colonial project in Palestine. 

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