

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Settler Colonialism from the 20th Century to the Present: The Ongoing *Nakba*

Beginning in the mid-19th century, British Christian Zionists and then Jewish Zionists collaborated with the British imperial government to colonize Palestine with Jews. This collaboration arose at a significant historical time when nation states and nationalism had emerged. The term *antisemitism* also appeared (1879) as a secular socio-political ideology different from religious “anti-Judaism” based on conflicting Judaic-Christian creeds. Reflecting the *zeitgeist* of the time, *antisemitism* also viewed Jews more “scientifically” as a race or nation. Still, despite civic emancipation of Jews and their assimilation in Western Europe, this distinction did not eliminate discrimination of Jews and fed into the Nazi ideology of racial purity. Hence, this 19th century collaboration was initially motivated somewhat less by imperial geopolitical reasons than solving the “Jewish Question”: That Jews, especially from Eastern Europe, were seen as unassimilable in largely Christian Europe. This settler-colonial plan would prevent Eastern Jews from settling in Britain particularly, but also would fulfill political Zionism’s professed intentions to escape Jewish persecution and (in their view), unalterable antisemitism by non-Jews, by establishing a separate Jewish state in Palestine. Jewish Zionists also increasingly encouraged (later manipulated) a genuine longing of some Jews and Evangelical Christians for their biblical Holy Land, especially the city of Jerusalem, which historically had not been inhabited by Jews for over two millennia. The 1917 British Balfour Declaration formalized these efforts.

At WWI’s end, Palestine was a modernizing, multicultural society, mostly Muslim and Christian, with a Jewish population of about 3%. Victorious Allies Britain and France divided the war spoils of the defeated Ottoman Empire, including Palestine. The League of Nations placed Palestine under a British-administered Class A Mandate, a legal document intended as a transitory phase supporting Palestine’s becoming a fully independent nation, a status provisionally recognized. This choice superficially considered the wishes of Palestinians who had inhabited the land for at least two millennia, and whose leaders had been promised independence in return for their support of the Allies during WWI. Nonetheless, the British Mandate’s clear bias toward the Zionist Organization’s work to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine was evident early on, by recognizing the Jewish Agency in Palestine “for the purpose of advising and co-operating with the [Mandate’s] Administration of Palestine in such economic, social and other matters as may affect the establishment of the Jewish national home and the interests of the Jewish population in Palestine.” Significantly, ““other matters”” included increasing the Jewish population in Palestine via immigration, largely insufficient until the Nazi

holocaust. This accelerating influx of Jews caused alarm and opposition among native Palestinians who recognized early on, that Zionist Jewish immigration would replace their multicultural country with one dominated by Zionist Jews.

On September 3, 1947, the UN Special Committee on Palestine recommended a Majority Plan to partition Palestine (vs a federated union). With no legal authority, the UNGA, on November 11, 1947, passed Resolution 181 dividing Palestine into Jewish state and Arab states, awarding 56% of the land to the former, representing 31% of the population, owning 6% of the land. Arab Palestinians, representing 69% of the population, owning 85% of the land, were to receive 42% of it. The remaining 2% was to be internationally governed as a “*corpus separatum*” for Jerusalem, Bethlehem and its surroundings in consideration of the holy sites of all three Abrahamic religions. In this unfair land distribution for the Arab state, the UN plan excluded many of the main cities with Palestinian Arab majorities and economically important coastline from Haifa to Jaffa. Moreover, the Arab state would be deprived of key agricultural lands and seaports, and *principally*, their self-determination, all of which led Palestinians to reject the proposal.

Consequently, from 1947 to 1949 at least 750,000 Palestinians—the majority native Palestinian population--were expelled from their homes by Zionist militias, of whom at least 250,000 were expelled *before* the British Mandate ended at midnight, May 14, 1948, and the State of Israel state was declared that day. Zionists expelled Palestinians from eleven major cities and destroyed one-half of the 530 Palestinian villages, destroying the remaining in the 1967 war. They also expelled *another* 300,000 Palestinians from the territories Israel seized in that war. Palestinians refer to this experience of dispossession begun in 1947 as the *Nakba*, the “catastrophe,” a process that continues in Gaza. Since 1948, the State of Israel has refused to allow the now 6+ million stateless Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in historic Palestine. This refusal stands in violation of international law as well as a UN condition for Israel’s second, successful application for UN membership in 1949, a condition to which Israel deceitfully agreed with no intention of honoring.

Denial of Palestinian existence in an “empty” Palestine was a key feature of pre-1948 Zionism. After 1948, denial extended to the *Nakba* itself, with Israeli myths that Palestinians left because Arab radio broadcasts told them to temporarily leave their homes, one among many attempts to absolve Zionist forces of charges of war crimes. However, Israeli archives revealed a “Plan Dalet,” a *planned* expulsion of Palestinians and *not due* to the “fog of war” defense as Israel has maintained as a core feature of Israel’s historical narrative. While this narrative has been disproven by diligent historians using Israeli archives and testimonies from Palestinians,

attempts to discuss or study the *Nakba* have often been suppressed in the West. Still, resistance from activists, students and scholars have continued to challenge attempts to bury the historical truth.

With the 1967 Israeli military seizure of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza (Occupied Palestinian Territories, OPT) in its war with Egypt, Syria and Jordan, Israel controlled all of historic Palestine (Israel had planned the occupation from 1963). Palestinian resistance to its dispossession began long before Israel was created, including violent resistance, (e.g., 1936-1939 Palestinian “Arab Revolt” and the 10/7/23 Hamas attacks). Yet Palestinian resistance has been largely nonviolent, characterized by a struggle to remain on their land, as exemplified in the non-violent Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) from 1987-1993 in response to Israeli oppression in the OPT. In fact, to abort this widespread indigenous revolt as it increasingly gained sympathy worldwide, Israel, supported by Western governments, initiated the Oslo Peace Process with the ever-illusory bait of the “two state solution.” Revealed as a chimera early on, this process gave cover to Israel’s ongoing violent land theft in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, by now over 700,000 armed Jewish Israeli settlers, protected by the Israeli state. This ongoing dispossession throughout historic Palestine and Israel’s genocidal response in Gaza to the Hamas attack, reveal opposition by all Israeli governments to support a sovereign Palestinian state. Indeed, Israel’s foundational settler-colonial structure included annexing these territories, an intention made most explicitly by Netanyahu’s government, thereby defying a July 19th ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that Israel’s military occupation is illegal; and that Israel must leave all these territories.

In December, 2023, as Israel demolished Gaza, continued killing thousands of civilians with US weapons and political support, South Africa initiated a case at the ICJ formally accusing Israel of the crime of genocide. As the ICJ investigates this charge, it issued an interim ruling in January: it is plausible that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza; ordered Tel Aviv to take provisional measures to stop/prevent any genocidal acts; and to take immediate, effective measures guaranteeing that humanitarian assistance is provided to Gazan civilians. These measures are legally binding on Israel, with no right of appeal. Thus far, Israel has refused to comply with this ruling while its genocidal acts and obstruction of humanitarian aid continue.

Since its founding as a settler-colonial state, a Zionist Israel has been enabled to entrench an apartheid regime of Jewish supremacy over non-Jews in all of historic Palestine (from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea), as documented by several human rights groups. Israel’s settler-colonial actions, recognized as violations of international law (e.g., settling Jewish Israelis in the OPT; preventing

Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes), have also brought constant instability and violence to the region as evidenced by the 1967, 1973 wars; Israel's invasion and destructive occupation of Lebanon in 1978, 1982 and 2006 to destroy Palestinian and Lebanese militant resistance. Most recently, Israel intensified its attacks on Lebanese Hizballah, killing hundreds of Lebanese civilians, maiming and displacing thousands. Potential for regional war including Iran have increased.

Nevertheless, Western governments and corporate media continue to ignore the actual origin of this conflict: Israel's settler-colonial structure designed to dispossess and ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Palestine because they are not Jews.

At best, these Western institutions frame the conflict as having begun with the 1967 Israeli military occupation; that it represents a contest between two equal national movements. At worst, Palestinians are seen as innately hateful interlopers/terrorists who constantly threaten the security of Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East; Jews are the natives of the land with a divine right to all of historic Palestine.

Meanwhile, the international community responded to the 2004 Palestinian civil society call for Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it ends its military occupation and apartheid in all of historic Palestine, and permits Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and lands in Israel. This movement is increasingly successful despite attempts to outlaw such actions, especially in the US.

In sum, the move toward genuine peace would include:

- *The first, unavoidable step would be to acknowledge historical truth: The source of the conflict is *Zionist settler-colonialism—as a structure*--that includes the ongoing *Nakba* and genocide. As important is recognition that *Israeli military occupation is not the cause of the conflict*, but a part of Zionist settler-colonization. Thus, Palestinians should not be viewed as equal partners with Israelis in a contest of nationalisms. Rather they are the indigenous people of the land of Palestine who want to stay and/or return to it.

- *International acknowledgement, condemnation, and sanctions of Israeli apartheid; ending Israeli daily oppression of Palestinians including its military occupation. These are conditions for Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation *and not the reverse*.

- *Providing material support for Palestinian self-determination by facilitating Palestinian national unity and leadership goals (for example, via open/transparent elections for all Palestinian populations and political factions, including Palestinian Israelis, Palestinians in the OPT, and Palestinian refugees).

- *Eventual implementation of the legal right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Palestine/Israel.

*Ultimately, replacing Israel's apartheid regime (as in apartheid South Africa), with a democratic structure that guarantees equality for all its citizens irrespective of ethnic identity; that is, to create an inclusive political entity in historic Palestine and not another ethnostate.

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