

Who's a 'Colonizer'? How an Old Word Became a New Weapon

In bitter debates from Israel to Africa to America, invoking a brutal history has become a powerful accusation.



By [Roger Cohen](#)

Roger Cohen, the Paris bureau chief and a longtime foreign correspondent, has traveled to Israel three times since Oct. 7. He filed this story from Jerusalem.

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The colonial era entered its death throes after World War II. From 1945 through the 1960s, a global order in which European powers took political control of other countries — occupying them with settlers, subjugating the local populations and exploiting the land and its inhabitants for economic gain — unraveled. Dozens of states in Asia and Africa threw off colonial overlords. Colonialism, once equated by the West with civilizing progress, became synonymous with iniquity.

More than a half-century later, a broad battle over colonialism and its legacy has restarted. The polemics reflect a world where wars rage [in Ukraine](#) and [the Middle East](#), the “Global South” has risen, and study has intensified in the United States and elsewhere of how different forms of domination and prejudice — whether in the fields of race, class, sex or religion — interlock to oppress minorities.

“We are witnessing neocolonial instincts in the West,” Sergey V. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said last month, even as his country waged what looks very much like a war of imperial expansion in Ukraine. “There is a desire to continue living at the expense of others, as they have been doing for over 500 years.”

As an insult, or line of attack, “colonial” is enjoying a field day. In African states, leaders of [several coups in recent years](#) have justified their actions in part as a response to a neocolonial order marked by Western dominance of international capitalism, technology and finance that, they say, accomplishes by other means what colonial armies once achieved through force.



A rally in August in support of Niger’s coup. In African states, leaders of several military takeovers in recent years have justified their actions in part as a response to a neocolonial order. Credit...Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

If there has been a striking new element in the current cycle of Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed, apart from the scale of the killing, it has been the way that pro-Palestinian protesters have denounced a “settler colonial” Israel, with Palestinians cast as the dark-skinned indigenous people and Israelis as white oppressor interlopers. This was a much less predominant line of argument as recently as [the Gaza war of 2014](#).

“Wars and social movements need to connect to dominant cultural tropes, and colonialism has become the go-to term for total pollution,” said Jeffrey Alexander, a sociology professor at Yale University. “Branding Israel with this

term is seen as effective, even if it connects Jews to the very white European colonizers who murdered them by the millions.”

Mohamed Mahmoud Mohamedou, a professor of international history and politics at the Geneva Graduate Institute, took a different view. “The colonialism perspective will be indissociable from genuine change in the Middle East and in particular Palestine, because of the rise of a new generation of international street militants effective globally, including in the heart of the Western metropolis,” he said.

One thing seems clear: The clash over purported Israeli colonialism is part of something larger, a profound movement in people’s minds. The Palestinian national struggle has become the cause of the justice-seeking dispossessed throughout the world. At the same time, the quest of the Jews to find refuge in a national homeland as the only answer to being the perennial outcast has become a battle to demonstrate that, far from being colonialist, Israel is a diverse nation largely formed by a gathering-in of the persecuted.

Few words map humanity’s evolution more clearly than colonialism. It was seen by European powers in the 19th century as the proud badge of the bearers of “the white man’s burden,” in Kipling’s phrase. Today, such thinking is anathema. Instead, “indigeneity” has become the go-to word conferring the moral authority of peoples on the right side of history.

A Long Shadow

Colonialism was not just a policy but a state of mind. It was not merely Britain’s East India Company seizing control of wide swaths of the Indian subcontinent to trade in silk, spices and tea, or the assault of European settlers on America’s indigenous peoples. It was the imposition of culture, language, social mores and attitudes that have proved hard to shake, or even to detect in full.

Decolonization was one thing. “Decolonizing the mind,” as the title of a seminal book by [the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o](#) put it in 1986, was another. For him, imperial colonialism was a comprehensive process designed to make its victims “ashamed of their names, history, systems of belief, languages, lore, art, dance, song, sculpture, even the color of their skin.”

Decolonization no more put an end to colonialism than Jim Crow brought down the curtain on slavery. Colonialism has shaped modernity; the countries

that were once colonial or imperial powers play a large, if increasingly contested, role in global decision making and the structure of the international order. Brazil, India and Nigeria look on as Britain and France, former colonial powers par excellence, remain as two of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. This is a provocative anomaly. The Enlightenment and colonialism were both born in the West, which prefers to celebrate the freedom-forging legacy of the former than confront the enduring prejudice bequeathed by the latter.

Now, a significant societal shift in the West has seen [the embrace of the Palestinian cause](#) as an extension of the powerful movements for racial and social justice that have unfurled, particularly in the United States, since 2020. In 2021, Black Lives Matter issued a statement declaring “solidarity with Palestinians” and opposition to “settler colonialism in all forms.”



A pro-Palestinian protest in Brooklyn this month. Credit...Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Sam Klug, an assistant teaching professor of African American History at Loyola University Maryland, recently [told Fabiola Cineas of Vox](#) that the “shift in 2021 happened in part due to the George Floyd uprising.”

“This uprising,” he added, “and the longer-term Black Lives Matter movement of which it was a part, influenced many Americans, especially young people, to begin viewing the situation in Israel-Palestine in terms of structural violence, occupation, and colonial oppression.”

The problem is that transposing to a faraway conflict the colonial horrors of institutionalized slavery, the lessons of American racism and the banner of indigeneity against colonial assailants, is a risky exercise. The model does not fit everywhere that injustice lurks. It may be a distorting lens.

‘A Clash of Two Intense Nationalisms’

Nowhere does colonial history get more tangled than in Israel-Palestine. As the great era of decolonization began in 1947 with the end of British rule over India, nobody knew what to do about British control of a much smaller colonial territory: Mandatory Palestine. Racked by violence, including the Arab revolt of the late 1930s, and by an ongoing Jewish insurgency aimed at driving out the British, the imperial status quo was untenable at the dawn of the post-colonial age.

What to put in the place of Britain-in-the-Levant was, however, a puzzle pregnant with violence. The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine reviewed a now familiar range of options in 1947: a single unitary state of Arabs and Jews, a binational federal state, or partition into two states. But the difficulties defied resolution. They still do, as warring Israelis and Palestinians hurl accusations of genocide at each other — in the week of the 75th anniversary of the Genocide Convention.

“The basic conflict in Palestine is a clash of two intense nationalisms” between “some 650,000 Jews and 1.2 million Arabs who are dissimilar in their ways of living,” the committee’s report concluded 76 years ago. The only solution, it said, was partition into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, with a special international status for Jerusalem, because “the claims to Palestine of the Arabs and Jews, both possessing validity, are irreconcilable.”

That “validity” lay for Palestinians in the fact that they were people who had lived on the land for a very long time, mostly under various empires; that they were the clear majority; and that they were plainly indigenous.

For Jews, it lay in the biblical origins of the Jewish people on the same land; three millenniums of continuous habitation (albeit in small numbers for centuries after the mass expulsions of antiquity); and an intense emotional attachment that, by 1946, had led large numbers of Jews to flee centuries of persecution and Hitler’s annihilation “solution” in Europe to head to Palestine. Jews generally tried their best to overlook the indigenous Arab presence and viewed their own indigenous claim as equally valid.

Within three months, in November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed [Resolution 181](#) calling for the establishment of two states. On this basis, in May 1948, the State of Israel came into being. Five Arab states

immediately invaded in an attempt to eradicate the newborn intruder, as they saw it; that attempt continues to this day in the form of Hamas.



David Ben-Gurion declaring the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948.
Credit...Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

So, for Rashid Khalidi, a professor of Arab studies at Columbia University, there began, in the form of a Jewish state, an attempt to “do the impossible: impose a colonial reality on Palestine in a post-colonial age,” as he puts it in his book “The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine.”

Professor Khalidi’s core thesis — that the conflict is best understood “as a colonial war waged against the indigenous population, by a variety of parties, to force them to relinquish their homeland to another people against their will” — has gained significant traction. For hundreds of thousands of pro-Palestinian protesters in London and Washington, for example, that is the prism through which to see the current war.

However, for Yuval Shany, a professor of international law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, dealing with the establishment of Israel as a colonial enterprise is “a significant category error.” It cannot apply to a conflict involving “two indigenous peoples.” It is misplaced given that the 20th-century influx of persecuted European Jews came from a historically indigenous “population of refugees not sent by any empire.” It cannot be applied to the many other Jews from Muslim North African and Middle Eastern countries who arrived in Israel after they suffered expulsion.

“The idea of an imposed power is wrong,” Professor Shany said. “Israel’s creation was endorsed by the United Nations.”

Israel’s settlement of the occupied West Bank since 1967 is another story. Professor Shany and many liberal Israelis acknowledge marked colonial characteristics: a dominant power sending a half-million settlers into an area through force, accompanied by expropriation, control of the economy and daily humiliation of Palestinians that left little or no room for independent statehood.

But applied to the nation as a whole, the “colonizer” label fails in more ways than it succeeds. The colonial stereotype is of invading white occupiers, but Israel is, and has long been, a very diverse, multihued society. While the French could withdraw from Algeria to France, there is no such “metropole” for a Jew expelled from Iraq. Indeed, at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies the fact that both peoples are historically indigenous and neither has anywhere else to go, even as delusional dreams persist on both sides of the disappearance of the other.

The Rise of a ‘Global South’

One reason that “colonialism” has re-emerged as a withering accusation appears to lie in a fundamental reframing of world affairs. The view of history as an East-West conflict is losing ground to a view of it as a North-South battle. The West’s march of freedom from the French and American revolutions is colliding with a different historical perspective more focused on the millions of lives lost to the slave trade and the genocide of the native American peoples.

“Colonialism was the founding act of force of the West that enabled the Industrial Revolution, provided the manpower and necessary resources, and gave the West dominion over the world until now,” Professor Mohamedou said.

As Barnett R. Rubin, a political scientist, has [written in the online magazine Responsible Statecraft](#), the East-West view of Israel, and certainly the view of the United States and Germany, is of a beacon of freedom “that rose from the ashes of the Holocaust.”

In this optic, Israel’s existence grew out of the World War II victory of the democratic, freedom-loving Allies over authoritarianism and mass murder; the armed struggle of the Arab and Muslim world against it was in some ways an extension of a genocidal program, as the Oct. 7 attack illustrated.

For the Global South, however, the pre-eminent narrative of the past five centuries has been the North-South fight against colonialism in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Here, the 1922 League of Nations mandate to establish a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine without the consent of its Arab inhabitants, the wars that have followed and the unwavering United States support of Israel can only be seen “as the extension of colonialism into the 20th and 21st centuries,” as Mr. Rubin puts it.



Displaced Palestinians heading from the north of the Gaza Strip to the south last month. Credit...Samar Abu Elouf for The New York Times

The early Zionist settlers in Palestine from 1881 to 1914 had no hesitation in calling themselves “colonists.” The word still had a broadly positive connotation then. That world is long gone, but progress does not mean resolution.

Colonialism has given way to post-colonialism and neocolonialism, whatever those sweeping labels may encompass. But irrespective of the lexicon, the reality is that the wounds of colonialism are not healed, the consequences still not fully addressed and the universal human struggle for dignity persists.

Roger Cohen is the Paris bureau chief for The Times, covering France and beyond, including Ukraine, Russia, India, the Central African Republic and Israel. He has been a journalist for more than four decades. [More about Roger Cohen](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/10/world/europe/colonialist-word-gaza-ukraine.html>