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We Must Understand Israel as a Settler-Colonial State



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

While attending the University of Oklahoma in 1956 – 57, I met a Palestinian petroleum engineering student named Said Abu-Lughod. Said, whose older brother Ibrahim Abu-Lughod would become a renowned professor at Northwestern University, told me how Israeli settlers had violently forced his family out of their ancestral home in Jaffa during the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. This had happened only eight years earlier, when Said was 12 years old. His family fled as refugees to Jordan. ‘

Said also gave me a book—*What Price Israel?* by Alfred M. Lilienthal—that truly changed my thinking. Now there are many excellent studies by Palestinian and other historians, but in the 1950s there was nothing else like it. (Later, I met the author while

attending the 1983 United Nations' Conference on Palestine— also attended by Yasser Arafat and a large Palestine Liberation Organization delegation—and was able to thank him.)

This experience as a teenager was my introduction to the concept of settler colonialism and made me a supporter of Palestinian self-determination and right of return. It's also what led me to study history and eventually to write my doctoral dissertation on Spanish settler colonialism in New Mexico, still a major issue there today.

When I left Oklahoma in 1960 to attend San Francisco State College, I had expected— without basis— the city to be a hotbed of anti-colonial fervor. This was long before the famous strikes of 1968, but there was a very visible group on campus of mostly white activists attached to the U.S. Communist Party. I was attracted to the zeal with which they supported the burgeoning Black civil rights movement in the South, and, though I was married and working part-time, I attended their rallies on campus as often as I could. What puzzled me about them, however, was their vocal celebration of the state of Israel. Many had visited and lived and worked for a time in the socialist kibbutzim there. Most of these students were not themselves Jewish; the one who became my best friend was from a working-class Greek immigrant family in Indiana.

Just as the U.S. celebrates itself as “a nation of immigrants,” Zionists celebrated Palestine as a land without people for a people without land.

Their support for Israel was emblematic, I came to understand later, of the seductive mythology that settler-colonial states cultivate and depend on. These young people were drawn to the story about a state created to protect Jewish refugees from the Holocaust. Also, the mystic chords of American settlement resonated strongly then, largely due to the “new frontier” rhetoric of John F. Kennedy. The grandson of immigrants was elected president and inspired young people. In accepting his nomination in Los Angeles, Kennedy intoned: “I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch 3,000 miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. ... We stand today on the edge of a new frontier.” In the young students' minds, the state of Israel was duplicating that promise. They had little knowledge of the Indigenous peoples who were driven out of their villages and homelands here in North America and even less about the existence of Palestinians.

Although there are stark differences and time frames for the establishment of settler colonialism, there is a common thread that defines the process. To understand this, it's

helpful to distinguish, as historian Lorenzo Veracini does, between “settlers” and “immigrants”: While migrants enter existing political orders, “settlers are founders of political orders” and carry their sovereignty with them.

Mahmood Mamdani, a scholar of South Asian origin who grew up in Uganda, puts it this way in his book *Neither Settler Nor Native*: “If Europeans in the United States were immigrants, they would have joined the existing societies in the New World. Instead, they destroyed those societies and built a new one that was reinforced by later waves of settlement.”

Still, the United States celebrates itself as “a nation of immigrants,” just as Israeli Zionists celebrated Palestine as “a land without a people for a people without a land,” a homeland for Jews from all over the world, a nation of refugees — rhetoric that echoes U.S. “nation of immigrants” mythology. Rhetoric that ignores settler colonialism, writes Mamdani, “is essential to settler-colonial nation-state projects such as the United States and Israel,” which cloak themselves in the nonpolitical project of immigration to hide their true project of fortifying the colonial nation-state.

Though the apt term “settler colonialism” wasn’t invented until rather recently, the practice of settler colonialism dates back many centuries. It didn’t begin in Palestine in 1948 or with Dutch Afrikaners establishing the apartheid regime in South Africa around the same time, but was an invention of British colonialism, starting with the 1607 establishment of the “Plantation of Ulster” in colonized Ireland. It soon became a model for the Anglo colonization of North America.

The founding of the United States as a capitalist settler state less than two centuries later marked the beginning of a hundred-year war to erase North America’s Indigenous nations and communities, violently seizing their farms and grasslands, replacing them with Anglo and other Western European settlers and creating a massive economy. This was made possible by violently kidnapping, enslaving and transporting Africans, practically depopulating the west coast of Africa.

Anglo settlers also established colonies in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with their own ethnic cleansing of Indigenous populations. The French and Spanish, meanwhile, established their own settler colonies in Central and South America, the Caribbean, the Pacific and North Africa, the most famous being Algeria.

These settler colonies all had a common purpose, what the Nazis called *Lebensraum*—that is, the territory that a state or nation believes is needed for its perceived natural development. This was initially tied to the rise of capitalism in Great Britain and the

creation of the plantation and single-crop agriculture for profit. In the case of Britain's settler colonialism in Northern Ireland, that single crop was the potato. The 13 settler colonies that Britain planted in North America starting in 1607 were required, with enslaved Africans' labor, to produce tobacco and indigo (for dye) to market in Europe initially and then, with the conquest of the Caribbean islands, rice to feed the enslaved Africans.

Though not the dominant form of Western imperialist conquest, settler colonialism has distinct advantages over other forms, such as European military and administrative control over India and Africa—and, if measured in terms of the land, resources and wealth accumulated by the colonizing nation, it's been the most effective. The British colonization of Ireland helps explain why: By enticing landless Scots, Welsh and Anglo settlers to usurp land from Irish farmers, Britain evicted the Irish off their small holdings in Northern Ireland—exploiting the settlers' zeal to take free land forcibly. With British colonization across the Atlantic, landless Britons were encouraged to do the same thing in North America. After its founding, the new United States used the same settler-colonial tools to seize the rest of the continent within a century.

It is no coincidence that these imperial powers, with their histories of violent anti-Semitism, became the strongest backers of a Jewish state in the midst of the Arab region. A heavily-armed, Western-leaning state was just what they needed to protect their interests against a rising tide of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialist sentiment.

Jewish settler colonialism, culminating in the state of Israel, was a compressed version of these earlier Anglo-settler colonies, encouraged by the British under the mandate of Palestine. Jewish people had always lived in the area, along with dozens of other communities, including new monotheistic religion offshoots of Judaism with the rise of Christianity and Islam. The late 19th-century rise of political Zionism called for all Jews to return to and dominate Palestine.

On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency, announced the establishment of the state of Israel, immediately recognized by U.S. President Harry Truman and, a year later, by the United Nations. But settler colonialism in Palestine did not begin with Jewish Holocaust refugees. In 1908, oil was found in Iran, a discovery that would condemn the Middle East to more than a century of imperial interference and violence. British, French and U.S. oil companies came to dominate the region. It is no coincidence that these imperial powers, with their histories of violent antisemitism, became the strongest backers of a Jewish state in the midst of the Arab region. A heavily

armed, Western-leaning state was just what they needed to protect their interests against a rising tide of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialist sentiment. Imperial Britain issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917, supporting a “Jewish homeland” in Palestine.

At the time of the Balfour Declaration, Jews made up about a tenth of the population of the territory. The British did not consult with the Palestinian Arab majority. By 1947, the Jewish population was about 33%. Nevertheless, the partition plan passed that year by the UN General Assembly gave them about 55% percent of the land.

It’s vitally important that Israel be understood as a settler-colonial state because it would be impossible to understand the current conflict in Gaza without understanding its settler-colonial context. As historian Rashid Khalidi observes, the conflict is not between two equal national movements fighting over the same land, but rather is “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.”

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