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Settler colonialism and Indigeneity: the Case of Israel/Palestine

The article examines notions of settlement, colonialism, and indigeneity, and their relevance for the case of Israel/Palestine. With a focus on the pre-1948 period, it looks at how the Palestinian-Arab national movement and the Zionist movement offered different understandings of the process of Jewish immigration into the country and the opposing political claims that were raised in that historical context. It concludes with a discussion of the crucial role of the 1948 Nakba for future relations between the two ethno-national groups in the country, as it set the stage for the social and political conflicts that have plagued the state of Israel since its inception.

Der Artikel analysiert Vorstellungen von Besiedlung, Kolonialismus und Eingeborenheit und deren Bedeutung am Falle von Israel/Palästina. Mit dem Zeitraum vor 1948 im Mittelpunkt untersucht der Artikel wie die palästinensische-arabische Nationalbewegung und die Zionistische Bewegung verschiedene Erklärungen anboten für den Prozess der jüdischen Emigration in das Land und wie sich gegensätzliche politische Ansprüche in diesem historischen Kontext ergaben. Die zentrale Rolle der Nakba (ethnische Säuberung der palästinensischen Bevölkerung) im Jahre 1948 wird zum Schluß diskutiert und im Zusammenhang mit den zukünftigen Beziehungen zwischen den beiden ethnisch-nationalen Gruppen im Land gesehen, da die Nakba den Hintergrund für die sozialen und politischen Konflikte bildete, die den Staat Israel seit seiner Gründung plagen.

1. Introduction: Settler Colonialism

In the last decade the concept of settler colonialism has gained currency as a new field of study. It identifies a cluster of societies in which colonial rule —the overseas extension of Europe-based states —was combined with large-scale immigration of metropolitan settlers. Politically, it focuses on particularly resilient forms of domination that serve the interests of settlers who made a new home for themselves in overseas territories. Facing resistance from indigenous people to their subjugation, settler societies were shaped historically by ongoing conflict. This has provided them with common features and a sense of shared destiny, based on the similar challenges they faced. Solidarity between those at the losing end —indigenous groups, slaves and other people marginalized through this form of colonial rule —is the other part of the process.¹

¹ See for example, Davis, Angela Y.: *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, Chicago 2016. On settler colonialism in general, see Veracini, Lorenzo: *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Basingstoke 2010.

At the same time, the extent to which the concept serves a useful purpose in historical and theoretical analysis is less obvious and its utility in these respects is limited.²

What is the problem with settler colonialism as a historical concept? Its strongest point is also its weakest: it is applicable to cases that exhibit a great diversity of conditions. It is applied to societies that saw settlers overwhelm the indigenous population to the point that it became demographically and economically marginal: no more than 2-3% of the population in the USA, Canada and Australia. In other places — Kenya, Rhodesia, Algeria, Mozambique and South Africa — indigenous people remained the bulk of the population and the main source of labour. Slavery featured in some cases such as USA and early colonial South Africa, but not in others. European settlers retained legal and political links to the mother country in Algeria, Kenya, Rhodesia and Portugal's African colonies but became independent in the USA, South Africa and other British territories, often as a result of a violent intra-colonial conflict.

In some countries most settlers left the territory after independence — Algeria, Mozambique, Angola and Rhodesia — but substantial numbers stayed put in other places such as Namibia and South Africa. And, of course, where they became numerically dominant, settlers used their political independence to consolidate their rule, marginalize 'natives' further, but also to incorporate them into the new polity once they ceased posing a demographic threat to settler domination. This contrasts with the retention of legal-racial divisions in places where indigenous people remained a majority of the population.

Resistance strategies differed as well: attempts by natives to integrate as individuals on an equal basis in some societies, maintaining pre-colonial identities and modes of organization in others, forming nationalist movements on the new ground created by colonial settlement, keeping a focus on race — all with varying degrees of recognising settlers as legitimate members of the envisaged liberated society.

It is not only the broad contours of history that vary greatly in settler colonial societies but also patterns of social change over time. There was constant geographical expansion while driving out indigenous people in some places such as the USA and Australia, and constant expansion while incorporating indigenous people as labour power in others, South Africa most notably. An initial takeover of the entire territory with more-or-less fixed relations of subordination throughout the period was the case for Algeria, Kenya, Rhodesia, Namibia. Diverse dynamics coexisted with different degrees of incorporation of 'urban natives' in a relatively privileged position compared to rural populations, and different combinations of direct and indirect rule. These continued to affect the evolution of societies in the post-colonial period.³

The concept of settler colonialism, then, is compatible with different demographic ratios, different trajectories of indigenous-settler relations, different relations between settlers and metropolitan centres, different destinies of settlers in the post-colonial period, and different social structures, ranging from reliance on free white labour, indentured immigrant labour — from Europe, India, China — to African slavery,

² See discussion in Bhandar, Brenny/Ziadah, Rafeef: Acts and Omissions: Framing Settler colonialism in Palestine Studies, Jadaliyya, 14th January 2016, online: http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23569/acts-and-omissions_framing-settler-colonialism-in- [24.04.2017]; Greenstein, Ran: Settler Colonialism: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis?, Jadaliyya, 6th June 2016, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/24603/settler-colonialism_a-useful-category-of-historica [24.04.2017].

³ As discussed in Mamdani, Mahmoud: Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism, Princeton 1996.

indigenous labour subordination, and many combinations of the above. In short, settler colonial societies do not move in a similar direction, be it the consolidation of settler rule or its demise through indigenous resistance.

With all that diversity, one issue remains a unifying element of the cases mentioned above: the distinction between indigenous people and settlers (including their descendants). The extent to which this serves as a foundation for political organization at present varies. In some cases it is no more than a historical legacy, important symbolically, but no longer an active factor in shaping the contours of state and society. One case in particular is different, however: the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine.

2. Israel/Palestine: Setting the scene

In what ways are notions of colonialism in general and settler colonialism in particular relevant for Israel/Palestine? We can look at the issue from different angles: the world-historical setting, the motivation of settlers, the perspective of indigenous people, indeed our understanding of indigeneity in relation to different groups in the population, notions of legality and force, relations of land and labour, global relations of power, and so on. I touch here on some of these with a focus on the meanings that different actors attach to their positionality and their relations to the land itself.

By definition, settlers and colonial forces are external in the sense that they arrived on the scene from elsewhere at some specific point in time, and their foreign background remains central to their identity. They may have lived in their current locale for generations but their origins in another part of the world (almost invariably Europe) are known, acknowledged and taken for granted, as are the privileges they usually enjoy. The question of if and when they can be considered to have become indigenous to the country rarely has an obvious answer though. Whites in South Africa, for example, even after centuries of settlement are regarded by many people as not quite African in essence, and many of them still emphasize their foreign origins. It is not a coincidence that the racial term 'blankes' (literally 'whites') was rendered in English usually as 'Europeans' under apartheid rule.

The position of Israeli Jews presents a particular conundrum. Are they settler or indigenous? On the one hand, their physical origin in other parts of the world (Eastern Europe and the Middle East/North Africa region in particular) is obvious, though a small minority lived in the country before the Zionist era. We have detailed documentation about the immigration process, and know how many people arrived from where in which specific period of time, from the late 19th century to the present. On the other hand, Zionism as an ideology, the political movements inspired by it and the global forces that provided diplomatic endorsement of its goals, maintain that Jews are indigenous to the country, if not as individuals then as a collective —The Jewish People—that maintained unique identity and link to the country over millennia, regardless of specific time and space configurations. If Israeli Jews are indeed indigenous, they have not invaded a foreign country and their settlement and establishment of a 'national home' or state there is a form of 'return' and historical redress rather than an act of colonial conquest.

Things look different from the perspective of Palestinian Arabs, who were the vast majority of the population in the country at the beginning of the Jewish-Zionist settlement process in the 1880s, and remained as such until Israel was established in 1948. As the indisputable majority, whose position had not been challenged for many centuries, since the time of the Crusades, they had not felt the need to develop an explicit ideology or justification for their presence in the country, point to their historical rights or connections, and engage in active defence of political claims. Instead, they took their own existence and settlement patterns throughout the country for granted. The presence of Jews together with those of other religious and ethnic minorities posed no problem: it was natural for people of different backgrounds to reside in the same places, albeit usually in somewhat self-segregated physical spaces. Immigration of individuals who settled among the rest of the population without making specific political claims or forming distinct socio-economic structures was tolerated.⁴

All that changed with the rise of the Zionist movement. The issue was not immigration and settlement of Jews as such, but the overall political framework within which these processes took place. By introducing the goal of making the country into a Jewish homeland, Zionism singled out Palestine from all other immigration sites. Jews did not go there to blend in, find a place for themselves among the existing population or merely seek better living conditions, as they did in the UK, USA, Argentina, South Africa and other destinations which attracted millions of people at the same time. Rather, they became part of a project that targeted the country itself as the ultimate prize.

Palestine was chosen for obvious religious and historical reasons, but there was a practical consideration involved as well.⁵ It was seen as a soft target, a small provincial part of the large Ottoman Empire which was expected to be willing to grant Jews rights there in exchange for diplomatic and financial benefits. The precedent of Christian communities given diplomatic protection by European powers (Catholics by France, Greek Orthodox by Russia, and Protestants by England) was applicable to Jews as well, especially those who retained some sort of European citizenship.⁶ That Jews were regarded as the original residents of the land, both in Christianity and Islam, before they went into enforced exile, was an argument used to advance that goal. While the Ottoman authorities did not go along with that, they frequently turned a blind eye to the small but constant stream of Jewish immigrants that entered the country before the outbreak of First World War, many of whom were part of a conscious effort to create a political community on new foundations that would set it apart for the old Jewish Yishuv.

The demise of the Ottoman Empire during the course of the First World War allowed the Zionist movement to find a new powerful sponsor for its settlement project, the British Empire.⁷ In what may be regarded as the single most important document in the

⁴ For Palestinian nationalism in its early stages see Porath, Yehoshua: *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, Frank Cass 1974; Muslih, Muhammad: *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, New York City 1988; Khalidi, Rashid: *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, New York City 1997.

⁵ On the use of traditional religious symbolism to serve the needs of modern Jewish nationalism see Sand, Shlomo: *The Invention of the Jewish People*, New York City 2009; Sand, Shlomo: *The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland*, New York City 2012. A critical discussion in Greenstein, Ran: Shlomo Sand and the De-Mystification of Jewish History, in: *Socialism & Democracy*, 29, 1 (March 2015), pp. 152–63.

⁶ Masters, Bruce: *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*, Cambridge 2001.

⁷ Ingrams, Doreen: *Palestine Papers, 1917-1922: Seeds of Conflict*, London 1972.

history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—the Balfour Declaration of 2nd November 1917—the British government announced that it would “view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”⁸

The Declaration made no mention of existing Jewish communities in Palestine (Zionist-inspired or not), or of links Jews might have with the country. The latter were mentioned though in the text of the Palestine Mandate, adopted by the Council of the League of Nations in 1922, which was based on recognition “given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country”. In consequence, Britain was given the responsibility “for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home, as laid down in the preamble, and the development of self-governing institutions, and also for safeguarding the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion.”⁹

The British Administration of Palestine was mandated to “facilitate Jewish immigration under suitable conditions” and to encourage, in co-operation with the Zionist Organisation, “close settlement by Jews on the land”, while ensuring that “the rights and position of other sections of the population are not prejudiced.” It was tasked further “to facilitate the acquisition of Palestinian citizenship by Jews who take up their permanent residence in Palestine.”

The language used in the document was indicative of the way the “historical connection” of “the Jewish People” to Palestine was conceptualized. It was a connection of an entire group of people to the entire country, without making any internal distinctions within these terms. In other words, there was no attempt to make claims about any specific Jewish individuals or communities and their concrete links to any specific piece of land, house, village, town or region. It was based on generalized abstract notions rather than on differentiated historically-grounded evidence. It was difficult to reconcile with the ‘normal’ rules of claims to property or territory, which are based on demonstrable links between specific individuals or groups and specific assets and locations.

Palestinian Arabs accepted neither the validity of Jewish historical claims nor the practical political implications that flowed from them. In a last-ditch effort to prevent the inclusion of the Balfour Declaration in the text of the Mandate, they sent a high-level delegation to London in 1922 to negotiate with the British government. Their main grievance was with the British using their authority “to impose upon the people against their wishes a great immigration of alien Jews”. They called on them to “put a stop to all alien immigration and grant the People of Palestine ... Executive and Legislative powers”. Any constitution that fell short of granting Palestinians full control of their affairs, they said, would “be used to smother their national life under a flood of alien immigration.”¹⁰

⁸Balfour Declaration: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/balfour.asp [24.04.2017].

⁹Mandate for Palestine: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/palmanda.asp [24.04.2017].

¹⁰Quotes from *Correspondence with the Palestine Arab Delegation and the Zionist Organisation* (London, June 1922): <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/48A7E5584EE1403485256CD8006C3FBE> [24.04.2017].

The Palestine Arab Delegation called for a constitution to provide for a national independent government while safeguarding the legal rights of foreigners and minorities. This was rejected by the British as inconsistent with the Balfour Declaration, which continued to serve as the foundation for their policies. The meaning of a 'National Home' for the Jews, the British said, was that "the Jews, who are a people scattered throughout the world, but whose hearts are always turned to Palestine should be enabled to found here their home, and that some amongst them, within the limits fixed by numbers and the interests of the present population, should come to Palestine in order to help by their resources and efforts to develop the country to the advantage of all its inhabitants." The Delegation responded by saying that "Alien Jews not in Palestine do not come within the scope" of the League of Nations Covenant, "neither is their association with Palestine more close than that of Christians and Moslems all over the world."

This was the crucial distinction: Palestinians accepted that Jews residing in Palestine at the time should be treated equally to others (Muslims and Christians comprising 93% of the population). However, they rejected the application of this principle to non-resident Jews. Jews already living in the country thereby became indigenous but could not extend that status to others just because they shared religion or ethnic identity with them. The British, on the other hand, focused on the "further development of the existing Jewish community; with the assistance of Jews in other parts of the world, in order that it may become a centre in which the Jewish people as a whole may take, on grounds of religion and race, an interest and a pride ... [knowing] that it is in Palestine as of right and not on sufferance."

In essence, there was a clash between two ways of looking at the issue: (1) Jews were concrete flesh-and-blood individuals, present in Palestine but mostly elsewhere, members of multiple communities, linked by religion but located in many places and differentiated by distinct historical experiences, languages, cultures and political interests, and (2) there was one Jewish People with an overarching identity transcending time and space. Its unity meant that its members shared a right to Palestine (their historical homeland) regardless of personal experiences, religious beliefs, concrete links to the territory, and physical location at present. That the vast majority of Jews never set foot in the country, were totally unfamiliar with its features, had no relationship to any physical assets or locations within it, and no individual or family links to it, even from the distance of many generations, made no difference. The right to the country as a whole was not dependent on the physical presence of Jews in any part of it at any given point in time.

From the perspective of Zionism, then, shared to an extent by the British, some of whom were inspired by Protestant millenarianism, Jews were indigenous to Palestine due to their historical link to it. From the perspective of Palestinians, Jews who lived in Palestine at the time had rights *in* the country but not *to* it. Immigration was a way of granting indigenous rights to those not entitled to them. That was particularly the case as the acquisition of personal rights —to settle in the country as individuals —paved the way to a collective claim by a group, to make the country its own, whether the language of a 'national home', a 'commonwealth' or a 'state' was used.

3. Ending the Mandate

It is important to realize that the Zionist movement's efforts to claim Palestine and recruit global actors to support its cause were not simply based on the notion of Jews returning to their land. Arguments based on current needs, interests and rights were central. Chaim Weizmann, giving evidence to UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) in 1947 said: "Palestine, for reasons which I need not labour, releases energies, activities in the Jewish people which are not released anywhere else ... and the rocks, marshes, and sands of Palestine became a precious possession into which we pour our sweat, blood, effort and ingenuity in order to make it what it is." Variations on familiar myths of 'making the desert bloom' and 'a land without people for a people without a land' served to reassert Jewish claims to the country: "here in Palestine there were marshes and we have drained them; there were stones and we have planted over them; there were no houses and we have built them; it was ridden with disease and we have cleared it. All that has been done here, from the modest cottage of the settler to the University on Mount Scopus, is the work of Jewish planning, Jewish genius and of Jewish hands and muscles, not only of money and initiative."¹¹

David Ben-Gurion, speaking on behalf of the Jewish Agency, focused at his UNSCOP testimony on the specific features of Jewish history —albeit in a version that most historians would recognise as mythical rather than factual—that made the link to Palestine essential: "Our entire history is a history of continuous resistance to superior physical forces which tried to wipe out our Jewish image and to uproot our connections with our country and with the teaching of our prophets. We did not surrender, we never surrender to sheer physical force deprived of moral validity. We paid a dear price for our resistance. We lost our independence. We were dispossessed of our homeland. We were exiled to strange lands."¹²

He continued in a similar vein, portraying Jewish history as an eternal cycle of oppression and resistance: "There were two main things which enabled us to survive all these persecutions —our faith in Zion, faith in our national revival, and our faith in the vision of our prophets for the future, and our faith in a new world of justice and peace ... You are faced with a tragic problem, perhaps the tragic problem of our time and of many generations, of a people which was twice forcibly driven out of its country and which never acquiesced in its dispossession, and although it was its bitter destiny to wander in exile for many centuries it always remained attached with all its heart and soul to its historic homeland. It is a unique fact in world history."

Like Weizmann, Ben-Gurion used the trope of physical labour to re-claim the country: "What distinguished the Jewish community in Palestine from Jewish communities in the Diaspora, is precisely that fundamental change in our economic structure, that the great majority of our people here are people who are doing hard manual work in the fields, in

¹¹ Weizmann's July 1947 testimony in:
<https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/9a798adbf322aff38525617b006d88d7/364a6ac0dc52ada785256e8b00716662?OpenDocument> [24.04.2017].

¹² All quotes from Ben-Gurion's testimony in July 1947 in:
<https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/9a798adbf322aff38525617b006d88d7/7735b7dc144807b985256e8b006f4a71?OpenDocument> [24.04.2017].

the factories, at sea and on the roads.” This was crucially important in distinguishing Zionist settlement from colonial settlement in other places: “I came to see Sir John Chancellor, who was High Commissioner from 1928 to 1931, to ask that Jewish workers be given a share in Government road works. Sir John, who had come from Rhodesia, tried to convince me that the most suitable system for this country would be the one existing in South Africa, that the primitive, hard, unskilled work should be left to the ‘native,’ while the Jews should concentrate on skilled, better paid jobs. He was very much surprised when I told him that this was precisely the status which we would in no circumstances accept in our country. We were not here to form a superior class leaving the rough and hard work to others. While we are willing to use our brains, we must and want to use our hands and do every kind of work which is necessary for the maintenance of society. We believe that the homeland cannot be bought nor conquered. It must be created, and created by hard work.”

In a move with long-lasting implications, Ben-Gurion positioned Jewish Palestine in the context of the Arab world rather than Arab Palestine: “Nobody can seriously claim that a Jewish Palestine could in any way endanger or harm the independence or unity of the Arab race. The area of Western Palestine is less than 1% of the vast territory occupied by the Arab States in the Near East, excluding Egypt. The number of Arabs in this country is less than 3% of the number of Arabs who have gained their political independence. The Arabs in Palestine, even if they were a minority, would still be a part of that large Arab majority in the Middle East. The existence of Arab States to the north, east, and south of Palestine is an automatic guarantee, not only of the civil, religious and political rights of the Arabs in Palestine, but also of their national aspirations.”

The two rhetorical devices —the centrality of settlers in re-building and thereby claiming the country, and the relegation of Palestinians (a majority locally) into a small subset of the overall Arab population, therefore of minor importance —were crucial to the case for a Jewish state made, somewhat poetically, by Zionist leaders. Arab spokespersons stuck, in contrast, to more prosaic considerations, such as majority rule. Arab-British academic and activist, Albert Hourani, expressed to the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry of 1946 Arab opposition to a Jewish state, “based upon the unwavering conviction of unshakeable rights and a conviction of the injustice of forcing a long-settled population to accept immigrants without its consent being asked and against its known and expressed will; the injustice of turning a majority into a minority in its own country; the injustice of withholding self-government until the Zionists are in the majority and able to profit by it.” The solution therefore was “the constitution of Palestine, with the least possible delay, into a self-governing state, with its Arab majority, but with full rights for the Jewish citizens of Palestine ... a state in which questions of general concern, like immigration, should be decided by the ordinary democratic procedure in accordance with the will of the majority.”¹³

When the UN General Assembly adopted the partition resolution in November 1947, dividing Palestine into two states, it went along with the notion that Jews were entitled to a state, but only in areas where they had established substantial presence in the previous decades, even though Palestinians remained a large minority there. The location of new

¹³ The Case against a Jewish State in Palestine: Albert Hourani’s Statement to the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry of 1946, in: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35, 1 (Autumn 2005), pp. 80–90.

Jewish settlements played a crucial role in determining the boundaries; historical and religious links proved irrelevant. Provision was made for immigration, ensuring that an area “including a seaport and hinterland adequate to provide facilities for a substantial immigration” be made ready in Jewish territory before the Mandate expired. Other than that, the entire text of the resolution dealt with Jews and Arabs already residing in the country as equals with no preferential treatment on the basis of indigenous status, historical rights or religious claims. The Jewish/Arab nature of the envisaged states had to do with demography only: those residing within the boundaries of either state were to “become citizens of the State in which they are resident and enjoy full civil and political rights”. The Jewish People (a singular entity rather than a multiplicity of individuals) was not mentioned at all.¹⁴

The matter-of-fact language of the United Nations resolution, with its concern with practical arrangements, contrasts with Israel’s Declaration of Independence of May 1948. It asserts the Land of Israel as “the birthplace of the Jewish People” and the place where “their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped.” This was applicable to the country as whole, not to the area specifically allocated to the Jewish state. The land remained eternally central: “After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom. Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses. Pioneers, defiant returnees, and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture.”¹⁵

Although recent events made the creation of Israel necessary as a safe haven (the Holocaust obviously), the main thrust of the Declaration was the need to “confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the community of nations,” expressing “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.” Focus was placed on Jewish independence and self-segregation, not only in the course of a long history but in recent decades as well. This may not have been unusual; rather a fairly common feature of nationalist movements asserting their competing claims to territorial and political control. Neither were the ensuing military clashes, which involved both internal and external forces, unusual. One feature of the situation however, which began to manifest itself just after the UN partition resolution (November 1947) and had become full-fledged already by March-April 1948, was indeed unusual. It was the way in which territorial gains for the Jewish side were increasingly accompanied by ethnic cleansing, a process that became known as the *Nakba* (disaster or catastrophe in Arabic).

¹⁴ UN General Assembly Resolution 181, 29th November 1947: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/res181.asp [24.04.2017].

¹⁵ Israel’s Declaration of Independence, 14th May 1948: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/israel.asp [24.04.2017].

4. The Nakba and its Implications

On the face of it, 1948 saw a war between two communities, each trying to gain control of as much land and power as possible from the departing British forces. The Jewish side managed to acquire a larger territory and evict many Palestinians who resided there, sending them to areas under the control of Arab forces. It was a messy outcome, so the argument goes, but no different in essence from that of other conflicts unfolding under similar circumstances: Turkey and Greece in the aftermath of the First World War, Czechoslovakia and Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War, India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the 1947 partition that ended colonial rule on the sub-continent.

Similarities between the situations above pointed out by this mainstream version of history are real, but three crucial features make the case of the Nakba distinctive:

- It involved the displacement of indigenous people by recently-arrived settler immigrants: a vast majority of local Jews by 1948 had moved to Palestine in the previous three decades, and new immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East doubled their numbers within the next four years. In the other cases above those involved were equally indigenous to the scene as they had co-existed in the same territory for centuries.
- It affected almost exclusively one side: for every Jew displaced in the 1948 war hundreds of Palestinians lost their homes. In other cases, displacement of populations usually was mutual. Jews were indeed displaced from other Arab countries later on, but not by Palestinians, not at their behest or on their behalf.
- It saw the displacement of 80% of the Arab population residing in what became Israel (60% of the overall Arab population). In other cases only a small segment on either side of the ethnic divide was involved, usually no more than five percent of the total. The bulk of the population was not affected directly.

The partition of Palestine and subsequent war resulted in the destruction of indigenous Arab society through the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian residents in a process of ethnic cleansing *avant la lettre*, and the rise of a new settler-dominated state in its place.¹⁶ Within a year, the Jewish population, most members of which were foreign-born or first generation in the country, became the overwhelming majority while Arabs were reduced to the status of a small, vulnerable minority. This was not a coincidence, a series of unfortunate events, or an unintended outcome of chaotic war conditions. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jewish-Zionist settlement project in Palestine embarked on building an ever-expanding zone of exclusion from which all local Arabs were barred. Tenants were not allowed to stay on land bought by settlement agencies, nor were Palestinians accepted as residents in new rural Jewish communities or urban neighbourhoods. The campaigns for Conquest of Land and Conquest of Labour were not always or completely successful, but they did set in motion exclusionary dynamics aimed to remove Arab workers from Jewish-owned

¹⁶ Morris, Ben: *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, Cambridge 2004; Pappé, Ilan: *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, London 2006.

enterprises, and eliminate (or at least reduce) dependence on Palestinian agricultural produce. The British imperial authorities facilitated this process.¹⁷

The motivation behind that had nothing to do with 'security'. Rather, the goal of the project was to build up a society in which Jews would be in control of their own affairs, overcoming their status elsewhere as a minority. Importantly, it was not an inevitable outcome of Jewish settlement as such. In the first immigration wave from 1882 to 1904, known as the First *Aliyah*, settlers made extensive use of local Arab labour, in the fields and at homes, in a pattern familiar from cases of European overseas expansion, such as Algeria, Kenya and South Africa. However, they did so with a distinct difference: the small scale of the project and its unfolding under the framework of a regional political order — the Ottoman Empire — meant that it had limited impact on local society. From the perspective of the Zionist movement, that pattern had a basic flaw, however. It limited employment opportunities for potential Jewish workers and therefore was not conducive for large-scale immigration and settlement.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, under the impact of the Zionist labour movement and against resistance from Jewish farming interests, a new pattern of settlement had begun to dominate the process. It was based on job reservation for Jewish immigrants, which resulted in the eviction of cheaper and more productive Arab workers. It was followed by experimentation with collective forms of economic production, especially in agriculture, to allow more efficient use of resources in competition with Arab producers.

This shift was driven ideologically by socialist-oriented activists, who called for the 'normalization' of Jewish existence, grounding it in productive labour — agriculture and industry. Ben-Gurion's testimony above expressed this attitude. Strong political commitment and financial subsidies were required to sustain this effort, which was made possible by mobilizing resources from numerous overseas-based individual supporters. Still a marginal perspective during the Ottoman period, the drive to base the Zionist project on recruiting, training and deploying large numbers of workers, was given a boost with the transition to British rule and the 'Jewish national home' policy in the aftermath of the First World War.

The core elements of the emerging society had been put in place by 1948, and the war that year served to consolidate them further. Before then, land transfers and the eviction of Arab tenants and workers were limited by British administrative regulations and the lack of settler coercive capacity. But once the British departed from the scene, Israeli political independence and access to superior military force allowed the new state the freedom to pursue policies of ethnic cleansing and land dispossession on a massive scale. The Nakba took place three years after the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust, giving the Israeli side a sense of moral justification, bordering on immunity, to do whatever it had to ensure what it deemed national survival.

The ethnic cleansing of 1948 shaped Israeli society in several ways which remain of crucial importance today and account for its particular ethnic stratification patterns.

¹⁷An extended discussion of exclusionary social and political dynamics in the pre-1948 period is found in Greenstein, Ran: *Genealogies of Conflict: Class, Identity and State in Palestine/Israel and South Africa to 1948*, Middletown (Connecticut), 1995.

They re-shaped the indigenous-settler issue completely and positioned it in a new historical context:

- By removing the bulk of the indigenous population it ensured that Jews acquired a dominant position in society as the undisputed majority. From that point onwards, the new demographic status quo became a shared platform for all mainstream forces, from the hard right and religious orthodox parties to liberal and left-wing Zionists. It mandated unwavering support for the Law of Return for Jews, and resolute opposition to the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees. The notion of Israel as a 'Jewish democratic state' rests on this foundation, which became part of the global diplomatic consensus on the issue.
- By reducing the proportion of internal Palestinians to 15-20% of all Israelis (and a similar percentage of all Palestinians), it entrenched their status as a minority, but also facilitated their incorporation as citizens. This would not have been possible had they remained a larger part of the population. From a truncated community, left defeated without leadership and socially marginalized, they managed to consolidate themselves over the years into a self-conscious and unified minority, powerfully asserting their rights.
- By creating a large population of refugees across the borders (and even within them—the 'present absentees', internally displaced citizens), it ensured a state of permanent tension, requiring constant vigilance, militarization, and enhanced security consciousness, all of which became essential features of public life in Israel. On the Palestinian side it created a political adversary located primarily outside the territory it sought to liberate, an unprecedented situation in the history of anti-colonial movements.
- Finally, by emptying parts of the country of their Arab population, it created both the space needed to settle new immigrants and the necessity for large numbers of people to fill in the resulting gaps, both geographical and social. The original Zionist vision was based on the expectation that Eastern European Jews, numbering in the millions, would re-locate to Palestine to build a new state and society. But, the majority of these potential immigrants were murdered in the Holocaust and many surviving Jews were unable to leave due to restrictions on movement imposed by Soviet-aligned regimes. *Mizrahim* ('Oriental' Jews from the Middle East and North Africa) were one group the state could access and manipulate with relative ease to play the roles of demographic barrier, cheap labour force and cannon fodder. Growing xenophobic sentiments among Arab nationalist movements and states contributed to the dislocation of Jewish communities into Israel in the post-1948 period. A new ethnic hierarchy thus emerged, affecting internal relations and the broader conflict.¹⁸

In all these respects the legacy of the 1948 war is alive. Of crucial importance is the excluded presence of the refugees, a spectre that haunts Israeli society not by directly shaping people's consciousness—many are not even aware of its existence—but by

¹⁸ On Mizrahim see Shenhav, Yehouda: *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, Stanford 2006.

nurturing an ever-present siege mentality, expectations of doom and fears of imminent destruction. Not only must all precedents for the return of refugees be denied (even if they are Israeli citizens, as are those from the demolished Galilee villages of Bir'im and Iqrit), but the impulse that initially led to the Nakba continues to be at work. Home demolitions, land confiscations, forced removals of Bedouin communities on both sides of the Green Line, denial of recognition to informal settlements and planning restrictions in formal Palestinian settlements, denial of residence rights to Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens, gradual revocation of residence rights in East Jerusalem —these policies are not as dramatic as those of 1948 but share the same imperative: to restrict and reduce the size, spread and capacity of the Palestinian population.¹⁹

Having that said, the most remarkable and surprising feature of post-1948 Israel is the sense of ordinary existence that it gave its Jewish citizens, who regard themselves as similar to ethnic majorities elsewhere, whose indigenous status is not in question. The memory of the Nakba was quickly swept away as mass immigration into the country and rapid natural growth left those who participated or knew about it a small minority of the population. The culture of silence and denial prevented those who may have wished to learn more from questioning the situation. Systematic removal of physical remains completed the process.²⁰ Jewish demographic dominance became the new norm. Palestinians within Israel knew of course what had happened, but were socially marginalized, residing in segregated communities and becoming culturally confined due to their different language. Politically, the issue of the refugees and their right of return became a taboo, threatening its advocates with dire consequences.

The status of refugees was central to Palestinians outside the country, their identity and social position, but their voices were not heard within Israel. The international community referred to them as a 'problem' in need of a humanitarian 'solution', rather than as agents working to advance their legitimate cause. It was only in the mid-late 1960s that the situation began to change with the rise of the new Palestinian national movement and the June 1967 war, and discussion of colonial settlement and resistance was revived in the new context, but that is a topic for another discussion.

Citation *Ran Greenstein: Settler colonialism and Indigeneity: the Case of Israel/Palestine, in: Medaon – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung, 11 (2017), 20, S. 1–14, online*
http://www.medaon.de/pdf/Medaon_20_Greenstein.pdf [dd.mm.yyyy].

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¹⁹ For an extended documentation on the conditions of Palestinian citizens of Israel see Adalah, The legal center for Arab minority rights in Israel: <https://www.adalah.org/en> [24.04.2017].

²⁰ Kadman, Noga: *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, Bloomington 2015.