

Yara Hawari, Sharri Plonski, and Elian Weizman, "[Settlers and citizens: a critical view of Israeli society](#)," *Settler Colonial Studies*, no. 9 (2019)

### **Jadaliyya (J): What made you compile this Special Issue?**

**Yara Hawari (YH), Sharri Plonski (SP), and Elian Weizman (EW):** The work on the Special Issue started with the 2015 SOAS Palestine Society Conference, held at SOAS, University of London. The project has since evolved through the writings of its contributors, the intellectual guidance of its reviewers, and through our collaborations as the editorial team. Bringing critical studies of Palestine into conversation with a critical study of Israel's internal workings, the Special Issue offers a platform through which the two intertwine and form a united body of knowledge on the settler colonial realities in which they are situated. Working against the analytical separation between settler colonial studies and indigenous studies, the Special Issue challenges the epistemological boundaries that usually frame the study of Israeli state and society, namely, its placement in the "disciplinary" boundaries of "Israel Studies", and with it, the tendency to disconnect this work the political project of liberation, on which the field of settler colonial studies should thrive. By situating these studies firmly within the field of Palestine Studies, the task of understanding the particular operations of the settler state and society connects to the process of unsettling the colonial order and contributing to its dismantling. Thus, more explicitly, the goal of this project overall has been to contribute to the intellectual and critical resources of the growing international solidarity movement with the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation.

### **J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the Special Issue address?**

**YH, SP, and EW:** Building upon critical work that has already established the efficacy and analytical astuteness of the settler colonial lens, the Special Issue's contribution to the field is framed by our analytical reading of the materiality of "settler-colonial logics." Settler colonialism takes on concrete forms through the colonization of people and land: as it uproots and violates native political structures and physical landscapes, it constantly seeks to legitimize itself, through a range of legal, political, economic, and social institutions. This is not only because settler societies are characterized by contradictory processes within their own constituencies, among financial and political support networks at home, and/or competing claims by other imperial powers; but also because of the indigenous communities that continuously resist and directly challenge colonization. The agents of settler-colonial systems and states work endlessly to entrench themselves through both productive and coercive processes, in order to further sustain their dominance over territory, capital, institutions and people, and at the same time erase the material and epistemological presence of those who lived on the land before them.

The topics presented in the Special Issue interrogate the material ambiguities of the Israeli case, while advancing our theoretical understanding of settler colonialism, as an ongoing global, regional, and local project. These range from settler anxieties concerning legitimacy and the economies of violence these produce, to modes of disciplining indigenous communities in the realms of education and knowledge production, the treatment of indigenous women's bodies, and even the ecological environment. Collectively and individually, the articles offer a re-reading of the Israeli case, in terms of the analytical lenses used to explore settler colonial relations, as well as the platforms that shape how they are treated and challenged.

### **J: How does this special issue connect to and/or depart from your previous work?**

**YH, SP, and EW:** The Special Issue—as well as the article we wrote for it—was an opportunity to bring many aspects of our work together. It offered an initial space for a collective of authors to engage with the different modalities of settler-colonial relations—to push at the boundaries of disciplinary thinking

around the settlers and citizens that produce the colonial state, and to break down some of the tautological assumptions that have edified around Israel as a settler-colonial state.

This comes through clearly with each of the articles but is also an outcome of the work each of us are doing: Elian's research on hegemonic knowledge production and resistance to Zionism from within the Israeli state, Yara's work on indigenous resistance and positionality, Sharri's work on space and materiality. This led us to curate something that took history, indigenous lenses, and global relations seriously in our analysis of Palestine and the Israeli state and which we hoped could intervene in multiple different fields that do not often have space for this conversation.

**J: Who do you hope will read this Special Issue, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?**

**YH, SP, and EW:** Our hope is that the Special Issue will be read, both by those scholars seeking to recalibrate their knowledge of Israel-Palestine, and those working in/on settler-colonial contexts elsewhere, where the field of indigenous studies is more developed and tightly connected to struggles on the ground. Since erasure is not just a material but epistemic goal of the settler-colonial state, we hope that the Special Issue will be part of the continued struggle against erasure, as it attempts to look at the settler-colonial project through a Palestinian lens.

With that in mind, we also want the Special Issue to speak to those looking to reconnect their political work with their scholarship. This is something we discussed frequently and also struggled with. In our view, it is the only way in which settler-colonial analytics can gain significance beyond being a mere intellectual lens—but as a framework that is intimately linked to struggles seeking to dismantle settler-colonial structures. Recent critical feedback from peers suggested that the next phase of this work needs to move beyond identifying how knowledge production and settler-colonial materiality are intricately connected, to articulating new modes of resistance praxis that directly confront and challenge colonial knowledge production in practice. We therefore hope that this Special Issue can inspire and contribute to the research agendas of colleagues in the region and elsewhere who are already doing this kind of work. As a small contribution to this, we are in the process of translating our own article in the Special Issue into Arabic, to ensure it is accessible beyond English-oriented academic circles.

**J: What other projects are you working on now?**

**YH, SP, and EW:** As we have already mentioned, the Special Issue was significant in developing our thinking about settler colonialism as being bounded to a particular place and as part of transversal projects of extraction, conquest, destruction, and domination. It also really brought home the importance of linking our intellectual and political labor, and of understanding how critical writing on settler colonialism does not necessarily contribute to the struggles for decolonization we are often writing about. The connection needs to be explicit, working to offer relevant, grounded analysis that can support and contribute to anti-colonial movements.

This point evolved into the central feature of the article we wrote together, but also gave voice to other questions we had regarding how different communities of writers and activists, focusing on settler colonialism in other contexts, were dealing with similar questions in their work and movements. Since developing the Special Issue together, we have initiated several workshops on these themes. These gave form to a network of scholar-activists working together to curate conversations across multiple sites and disciplines. Participants include scholars developing research and activism in Palestine, North America, South America, the Caribbean, the Pacific region, and a variety of African and European contexts. We have met in multiple locations to build a collective analysis about the specificity of colonial relations: how they articulate race, identity, class and gender in both territorial and transnational contexts; how materials, infrastructure, institutions and ideas connect and produce the modes of

erasure and replacement at the heart of colonial violence; and how indigenous resisters and their allies are key to entrenching the limits and contours of settler-colonial modalities of conquest and control. We are calling this project, “Comparative anti-colonial and decolonial solidarities,” and its aims include developing scholarship on settler-colonial relations that contribute to anti-colonial/decolonial movements on the ground. It is also an opportunity to move past the limits and divisions being cultivated in/between settler-colonial and postcolonial studies and find ways to work together towards a decolonized future.

**J: What made you decide to produce the co-written article you developed for the Special Issue (“Seeing Israel through Palestine”)?**

**YH, SP, and EW:** The inspiration for the article “Seeing Israel through Palestine” came from our individual scholarship, as well as via collective conversations we had in the initial series of workshops and roundtables, mentioned above, where discussions revolved around the nexus of power/knowledge in producing academic discourse around the Israeli state and society. These conversations—with about fifty scholars and activists—opened our conceptual work to the idea that we need to trace how knowledge-making around Israel coheres with new neoliberal management and funding circuits in Middle Eastern, European, and US institutions. They encouraged us to think through the university space as racialized and gendered, making it a perfect arena for normalizing settler ways of knowing and erasing indigenous epistemologies. It further forced us to think about what studies of the settler state would look like through other lenses and why it is so important to center indigenous, anti-colonial frameworks in our work. The article specifically reconnects intellectual analysis of settler-colonial relations, with political engagements in the praxis of liberation and decolonization. Our idea was to shift who, as well as what, should be centered in discussions of settler colonialism, even when we investigate the settler state and society.

**Excerpt(s) from the Issue:**

“Our paper, while steeped in discussion of the settler colonial character of the Israeli state, is less interested in the violence it produces, than in the myriad modalities through which these are normalised and thus hidden from plain sight. As is clear from the above, Israel is constantly seeking new ways to make itself abstract and unknowable, and at the same time fixed, solid and irrefutable. This is an unending and unfinished project, indelibly tied to the unending and unfinished territorial project, with its incompleteness anchored in the fact that the Indigenous Palestinians continue to resist its structures. Our focus is on how to unravel and re-articulate how the ‘story’ of Israel is told, to itself and others; seeing this as key to the assemblage of material and discursive practices operating to erase and replace Palestine, on multiple front lines, in multiple places... This involves de-mystifying the settler project in Palestine, understanding why and how Israel hides its colonial character and modes of violence in liberal matrixes, and emphasising the importance of educational technologies to both bolstering and unsettling how Israel cultivates hegemony over how we know and see Palestine. It also requires thinking about what is or should be the centre of this analytical project, who or what is often left out (and why), and what spaces, frameworks and discourses are conducive to disrupting or divesting from, as opposed to condoning, the kinds of power relations that maintain settler colonial relations. By looking through the lens of Israel Studies, as part of the institutionalisation of settler knowledge production in academic, political and economic arenas, we are able to map this process, find its holes and contradictions and look for new ways of re-articulating how Israel is discussed and challenged. In so doing, we work to shift our empirical and theoretical encounters with Palestine, engaging with fields of study that radically challenge mainstream and critical ways of knowing, writing and historicising settler colonial relations...

...The logic of ‘liberal’ settler states, such as Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel, relies on the production of subjects and supporters in its control and surveillance of indigenous populations,

in addition to structural and more direct acts of violence. Members of the colonising society, the international community, and even colonised communities are weaved into the overall project, through the ordering of space, movement and the circuits and engagements of everyday life. The sites, methods and technologies of 'knowledge production' in the settler state are key anchors in sustaining, maintaining and challenging hegemony. As ways of knowing the world elide with the hegemonic system, it becomes difficult to think outside its existing frames and limits. Even more problematic, in addition to silencing dissent or actively repressing indigenous knowledge (which holds within it contentious claims to who and what is privileged and produced in the colonial state), the system operates to incorporate and hence neutralise or flatten the politics of these different and challenging voices.[i] Even though it is also rife with contradictions and inconsistencies, knowledge produced in support of a settler colonial common sense, is also flexible and constantly evolving; a structure that is contingent and elastic, making it difficult to unpack and challenge. As we contemplate the field of Israel Studies as a site and practice of settler-colonial knowledge production, it is with this complexity in mind.

...While the study (and normalisation) of Israel has a long history in academia, over the last decade, Israel Studies' chairs and programmes have mushroomed across university campuses.[ii] More than 40 have found homes throughout UK and North American universities – a number that excludes centres in the Middle East, including Israel, as well as the plethora of visiting established researchers, postdoctoral students and doctoral candidates that also make up these programmes. These positions represent millions of pounds of institutional funding, from both private individuals and philanthropic organisations.[iii] They have been carved out of regional studies of the Middle East in academia – some with their own centres, others as part of revamped 'Jewish Studies' programmes – ostensibly in response to the increasing relevance of Israel to scholarly understanding of modern politics.[iv] On the surface, it is a complex field of study. Conceived as 'borderless', allegedly formed in conversation with so much more than 'the Middle East', Israel Studies grapples with the Jewish Diaspora and Jewish identity, the history and impact of the translation of European-Zionist ideology into a state-building project in Palestine, and the ongoing geo-politics of the region that include volatile internal and external social-spatial relationships.[v] Yet, its invention as an integral arena of study cannot be divested from the political sphere in which it is situated – as an outpost of Israel (or rather, the 'Israeli perspective' on the 'conflict' with Palestine/the Middle East), fighting for space in 'enemy territory'.[vi] Nor can Israel Studies be divested from the politics that underwrite endowments by philanthropic associations intimately tied to the Israeli state's 'hasbara' (propaganda) efforts,[vii] even as critical scholars take up these posts and articulate diligent and even radical scholarship in their treatment of Israeli social and political space.

As a site for the (re)production and normalisation of settler colonial knowledge, Israel Studies should be considered on its own terms, as well as a signifier for how Israel as a state functions and represents itself. It becomes a mirror for Israel's own dislocation and isolation from the region – a gated colony of Europe in the Middle East – and its modes for obfuscating the violence of this project. In rooting and institutionalising Israel Studies in the academy (through international conferences, academic journals and multiple associations and institutions),[viii] it makes Israel (as well as the study of Israel), appear familiar and complex. That said, it is important to understand the academic space itself, as Magid Shihade, Walter Mignolo and Achille Mbembe argue, as essential to the production of 'Western' hegemony and colonial privilege;[ix] and thus Israel Studies as part of (rather than exceptional to) how academia articulates, veils and promulgates colonial and capitalist relations, historically and in the present. Thus, when the study of Israel is folded into Israel Studies, its particular frame, narrative and agenda inform and are informed by an existing and evolving set of interests, in which indigenous claims, approaches and knowledge are already effaced. In the context of Israel/Palestine, this has meant a series of key excisions, many of which have already been alluded to above: Palestine is seen as an exceptional case, distinct from other sites of colonial conquest, along with Zionism/Israel, which is seen as distinct from other national and settler colonial projects. When discussion is situated on Palestine or Palestinians, history often begins in 1967, 'Occupation' is (at best) the ontological category for thinking

through Palestinian relations with Israel,[x] and geography begins and ends with the 'Green Line'. Devoid of historical and geographical connections to the process of making and unmaking the Zionist state in Palestine, scholars tend to focus on fractured categories of violations that ultimately flatten analyses of power, technologies of violence, and the social productions of race generated as part of settler colonial relations.[xi] This also tends towards either leaving out or misrepresenting anti-colonial acts of resistance by indigenous groups, which constitutes a spectrum of individual and collective actions that intervene in the flows of power. And of course, Israel is always the centre and starting point.”

## **Bios**

**Dr. Yara Hawari** completed her PhD in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter where she continues to be an honorary research fellow. She is also the current Palestine Policy Fellow at Al Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network.

**Dr. Sharri Plonski** is a lecturer in International Politics at Queen Mary University of London and recently published her first book, *Palestinian Citizens of Israel: Power, Resistance and the Struggle for Space* (2018: IB Tauris, SOAS Palestine Studies Series).

**Dr. Elian Weizman** is a lecturer in Middle East Politics at SOAS, University of London. She is also a committee member at the Council for British Research in the Levant.