

Israel: The Unique Settler-Refugee State of the Jews

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Abstract

This article critically assesses the claim that Israel constitutes a “white settler-colonial state” by examining the applicability of settler-colonial theory to Zionism and Jewish immigration to Palestine. It argues that dominant settler-colonial models—developed primarily from European imperial expansion in the Americas, Africa, and Australasia—do not adequately capture the historical and sociological realities of Jewish state formation.

Drawing on migration studies and classical definitions of colonialism, the article demonstrates that Jewish immigrants arrived largely as refugees fleeing systemic antisemitic persecution, without a sponsoring metropole, imperial military structure, or extractive economic agenda. Land acquisition occurred primarily through legal purchase, and early Jewish communities lacked the political dominance characteristic of settler-colonial regimes. The article further critiques the conceptual elasticity used to subsume Zionism within settler-colonial frameworks.

It proposes the concept of a “**settler-refugee state**” as a more analytically precise category, offering a historically grounded alternative to prevailing colonial analogies.

Keywords: Israel; Zionism; settler colonialism; refugee migration; Palestine; migration studies

Introduction

One of the many “Pro-Palestinian”¹ propaganda campaigns deals with the conflation of Israel with the major “White” Settler-Colonial states of European origin such as the “United States, Canada, New Zealand, Kenya, South Africa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Australia.”² These states exhibited characteristics of genocidal activity toward the existing inhabitants, those who are considered the “indigenous” population, to such a degree as to either severely reduce their population or reduced them to a state of segregated second-class existence in which the majority of the indigenous were fated to be little more than barely educated, unskilled and semi-skilled, laborers existing in a state of economic poverty. By labeling Israel as another white Settler-Colonial enterprise of European origin, an implication is encouraged that the “Settler-Colonial Jews” have treated the “indigenous” Palestinian Arabs³ in the same manner as the white European Settler-Colonials did in the aforementioned states.

In 2011, there was a conference on settler colonialism in Palestine organized by the Palestine Society and the London Middle East Institute at the School of Oriental and African Studies. The presentations are within a 2012 special issue of *Settler Colonial Studies*.⁴ Some of the attending notable “experts” in the field included Omar Barghouti of Boycott, Divestment,

¹ Pro-Palestinian is in quotation marks as so much is not actual “pro” anything but just a mix of anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and antisemitic propaganda.

² Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 10.

³ There is no question that the Arabs of the Palestinian region were the existing populations vast majority when modern Zionism (1880) started with a program of Jews legally immigrating into the region.

⁴ Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie and Sobhi Samour, eds, “Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012).

Sanctions (BDS) fame,⁵ Lorenzo Vercini, Gershon Shafir, Edward Cavanaugh, Gilbert Achcar (famous or infamous for downplaying the influence of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Muhammad Amin al-Husseini),⁶ and Ilan Pappé.

Ilan Pappé is likely the major Israeli expat most responsible for spreading the notion of Israel as a settler colonial project. He stated that “Zionism in Palestine is a settler-colonial project, and Israel remains to this day a settler-colonial state. This depiction is now widely accepted in the scholarly world....”⁷ For the purpose of his article, that seemed enough proof.

However, the editors of the journal do state the purpose of making the Settler-Colonial accusation:

‘For natives’, as Patrick Wolfe (2006, p. 388) puts it, ‘the issue is that, at the hands of the settlers, they face [physical and symbolic] elimination’. Given such a threat, the central question for committed scholarship and liberatory movements should be how to develop a praxis that brings back decolonisation and liberation as the imperative goal. The advantage of advancing settler colonialism as a relevant interpretative framework for the study of Zionism is not only that it can offer conceptual and political possibilities for how we read Palestine today, but that it also dismantles deep-seeded analyses and assumptions sustaining claims of exceptionalism. It brings Israel into comparison with cases such as South Africa, Rhodesia and French-Algeria, and earlier settler colonial formations such as the United States, Canada or Australia, rather than the contemporary European democracies to which Israel seeks comparison.⁸

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⁵ Omar Barghouti, *BDS* (Haymarket Books, 2011), 314.

⁶ Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 131-173.

⁷ Ilan Pappé, “From Balfour to the Nakba: The settler-colonial experience of Palestine,” *Middleeasteye.net*

(Nov. 4, 2020): np. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/balfour-nakba-settler-colonial-experience-palestine>

⁸ Salamanca et al 2012, 4.

Settler Colonialism in Theory and Practice

Years ago, before the current fad among anti-Israel activist groups calling Jews who moved into an 80-year-old apartment building in eastern Jerusalem the now pejorative term “settlers,” the definition of a settler was merely someone who moved, migrated, or immigrated into a new area. That new area could be a different city, state, continent, and it is a word that will be used when humankind moves out into the rest of the solar system, establishing conditions for human life on the moon, Mars, and beyond.

There is a field within the social sciences that deals with this movement, a movement that started with the beginnings of humankind as it evolved and grew, with humankind eventually filling almost every corner of Earth. That field is Migration Studies, and it draws on the history of human migration, colonization, empire, colonial and postcolonial studies, and several other academic disciplines. The study of colonialism is a major part of Migration Studies, especially as it is a basis for the problem of inequality among states due to the exploitation of resources of the colonized states by states that were colonial powers.

In the field of Colonial Studies, three main types of colonization enterprises are discussed. That of the colony “proper,” the plantation colony, and the settler-colony.

Placing the studies in the modern field, Kris Manjapra considers the early 1500s as a starting point with Spanish colonies, the colony “proper,” set up in the “New World” as “extractive” in that colonization was done for the purpose of “taking possession of other people’s

sovereign domains in the pursuit of commodification.”⁹ The next step was plantation colonialism wherein the indigenous population is enslaved, or an imported population of slaves or poorly paid “third country” natives (Indian Bangladeshi into Myanmar (Burma) and “Plantation Tamils” into Sri Lanka (Ceylon)) for the purpose of growing a commodity, with the earliest incarnation being the *hacienda* system in Spanish South America.¹⁰ Moving onto settler colonialism, Manjapra comes up with a defining principle:

Settler colonial states seek to eliminate Natives through war and through cultural genocide. Settlers imagine Indigenous people as “vanishing,” standing on the edge of cultural extinction, and they see themselves as the replacements. Settlers tried to disappear Native peoples from their social ecologies, and to make them into insubstantial apparitions...¹¹

In Edward Cavanaugh and Lorenzo Veracini’s seminal collection of articles on various settler colonial enterprises, they allow the authors the freedom “to define settler colonialism as they see fit.”¹² This is a significant problem. As noted in a recent survey in Haaretz, opposition definitions determine condemnation or approval.¹³ What Cavanaugh and Veracini are doing is following in France’s “probably the most notable anti-Zionist in France,”¹⁴ Maxime Rodinson’s footsteps:

How is it possible to equate Israel with such odious colonial empires and white racist states as South Africa, Rhodesia, French Algeria? The answer lies in rejecting any single model of colonial takeover, discarding rigidly conceived social formulas, and

⁹ Kris Manjapra, *Colonialism in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30.

¹⁰ Manjapra 2020, 31.

¹¹ Manjapra 2020, 47.

¹² Lorenzo Veracini, “Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination,” in eds. Edward Cavanaugh and Lorenzo Veracini, *The Routledge handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2017), 4.

¹³ Mira Sucharov, “Do American Jews really Know What ‘Zionist’ Means?” *Haaretz.com* (Oct 26, 2022): np. [Do American Jews Really Know What 'Zionist' Means? - U.S. News - Haaretz.com](https://www.haaretz.com/american-jews-really-know-what-zionist-means?mod=header)

¹⁴ Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Prophets without Honor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 311.

getting past the abstractions to the essential and concrete features of the complex, contradictory, and unique process which resulted in the creation of Israel.¹⁵

The key answer is in rejecting the common definitions and inventing new ones so as to make the accusation against Israel seem reasonable, instead of absurd. This was also done by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to make their “apartheid” claims reasonable,¹⁶ and systematically done by the UN Human Rights Council in their obsessive routine condemnations of Israel.

Zionism, Refugee Migration, and Historical Context

The re-establishment of the nation of Jews did not come about in the same manner as settler-colonial states. Lorenzo Veracini, in *Settler Colonialism*, discusses settler colonialism as a movement that comes behind, after the conquest of the land, after all the violent acts that enable the “ethnic cleansing” of the “new” land which the settler “enters a ‘new, empty land to start a new life’.”¹⁷ This certainly appears to be a rational explanation for the massive immigration to the Americas and Australia from the mid-1800s through the aftermath of World War Two’s structural and economic devastation of Europe. However, it is not a rational explanation for the immigration of Jews to the Palestinian region.

¹⁵ Rodinson 1973, 11.

¹⁶ NGO-Monitor, “Analyzing Amnesty’s Antisemitic Apartheid Attack,” *ngo-monitor.org* (Feb. 2, 2022): np. <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/reports/amnesty-apartheid-analysis/>

¹⁷ Veracini 2010, 14.

While the national movement of the Jews to return to their ancestral homeland is ingrained in centuries long tribal religious practice,¹⁸ the political movement to make this longing a reality starts with Christian Zionism:

Christian Evangelical Restorationism, a movement calling for and willing to sponsor the emigration of masses of Jews to Palestine as a precondition for the Second Coming of Christ while simultaneously seeking to convert them to Christianity. The high tide of Restorationism was the decade of the 1830s, when the Ottomans were driven out of Palestine by an Egyptian ruler, putting the country in play for a decade. Clergymen, officials, military leaders and influential British statesmen expressed their support, which led Prime Minister Palmerston to open the first British consulate in Jerusalem.¹⁹

Curiously, Shafir misquotes a popular refrain from the time:

a Scottish clergyman named Alexander Keith, reported about “a people without a country; even as their own land [. . .] is in a great measure a country without a people”, which eventually came to be transformed into the specious slogan “*a land without people for a people without a land* (italics by author).”²⁰

The citation used states “*a land without a people for a people without a land* (italics and bold by author).” It is obvious that removal of “a” leaving just “people” in the beginning indicates the inference that the land was empty while the actual quote indicates that the people living there were not a nation separate from the surrounding regions. If the slogan was as Shafir states, it would be deliberately misleading and, thinking it true, the slogan is a reasonable cause for an anti-Zionist complaint. Whether Shafir deliberately altered the quote is up for debate, but

¹⁸ Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Indiana University Press, 2009), 16.

¹⁹ Gershon Shafir, “Theorizing Zionist Settler Colonialism in Palestine,” in eds. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini, *The Routledge handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2017), 339.

²⁰ Shafir 2017, 339.

his is not the first time the quote has been altered to serve such an agenda with the notable Palestinian propagandist Edward Said also being found to do so.²¹

When this Christian movement was in its heyday, there was not much contact with the secular movement of Jews also seeking to re-establish a strong presence in the land.²² The beginnings of political Zionism emanating from Jews, although there was no clear political outlook,²³ can be seen in the 1880s with the establishment of the “*Hovevei Zion*” (Lovers of Zion) societies that encouraged immigration to Palestine in response to the revival of violent antisemitism in Russian society with its corresponding pogroms.²⁴ This wave of immigration became known as the “First *Aliya*.”²⁵ It lasted about 20 years and saw roughly 26,000 Jews enter the Palestinian region.²⁶

These Jews did not journey to the Middle East to seek their fortune or to work in order to send remittances home. They did not go as colonists supported by a military framework. They did not go on the request of a “colonial power” seeking people to populate a new land and extract its wealth for the benefit of a mother country. They did not go with the intent to forcefully dispossess the majority resident Muslim and Christian Arabs nor any of the other

²¹ Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (Random House, 1980), 9. Jacob Lassner and Ilan S. Troen, *Jews and Muslims in the Arab World* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 303.

²² Shafir 2017, 340.

²³ Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 98.

²⁴ Tessler 2009, 41-42.

²⁵ *Aliya* means to make an ascent and is usually used to indicate a person who is selected to go up to a slightly raised platform to read from the Torah during religious services.

²⁶ Tessler 2009, 43.

various minority populations.²⁷ They were refugees seeking refuge from the violent antisemitism of the day in Europe, but unlike other refugee populations, the Jews were “returning” to a land with which they had a significant millennial religious and romantic attachment,²⁸ and they were partially supported financially and emotionally by their more fortunate brethren in states which were not suffering, to the same extent, the same persecution and discrimination. Like many other refugees fleeing persecution, they entered seeking to settle in and make a new life. In this, they became “settler-refugees,” and not colonists nor settler-colonialists.

Reassessing the Colonial Claim: Rodinson and Beyond

Maxime Rodinson, likely the European²⁹ father of the “Israel as Settler Colonialism” school of thought, disagrees with any notion that dissuades the idea of Israel not being a settler-colonial state. The majority of his book on the subject deals with the refutation of a 1964 statement by the Union of Jewish Students in France (UEJF) countering a speech he gave regarding Jewish colonialism:

Not one of the traits that characterize colonialism the military lending a strong hand to missionaries in order to open up a path for merchants and to make it possible to exploit the labor of the colonized-can be found in the Jewish immigration movement in Palestine. In place of a mother country-Jews chased from one country to another in Europe; in place of soldiers- proletarians and intellectuals armed with pickaxes; merchants (Jews=merchants?) -there were none; as for missionaries, it would be well to recall that Zionism was a lay movement inspired by socialism.³⁰

²⁷ The Arab riots against Jews in the 1920s and 1930s likely changed that viewpoint in the minds of the Jews already living there.

²⁸ Rodinson 1973, 37-38.

²⁹ Rodinson holds that Arab sentiment has always been that Zionism was always a colonization enterprise.

³⁰ Rodinson 1973, 29.

Rodinson also deals with the fact that the land Jews settled on was purchased, at ever increasing cost over the intrinsic value of the land due to the increased need by the Zionist organization for land which could be used to settle the immigrating refugee Jews. While fully admitting that the land Jews bought was done so legally, Rodinson provides an underhanded caveat that “For obvious political reasons, neither the Ottoman government nor the British mandatory administration could permit any other course. But brutal confiscation of land is by no means a fundamental characteristic of. colonization.”³¹ Rodinson’s further discussion entails “unjust” means of obtaining land: “lands that were colonized were acquired much less often through the use of direct force than through seemingly legal deals, with the privileged position of the colonizer allowing him to use ruses and legal detours to his own advantage.”³²

However, Rodinson gives no examples of Jews obtaining land through “brutal confiscation” or “privileged position,” so its inclusion was likely made to enable Rodinson to make this absurd claim – “Yet in all these cases, no one hesitates to speak of colonialism. The legal correctness of the land purchases made by the Zionists can in no way, therefore, be considered an argument against the colonial character of the Yishuv.”³³ Further, there is no way possible to describe the condition of the Jews living in Ottoman “Palestine,” nor British Mandate Palestine, as having “the privileged position of the colonizer.”

³¹ Rodinson 1973, 87.

³² Rodinson 1973, 87.

³³ Rodinson 1973, 87.

Fifty years later, Manjapra makes a similar absurd accusation when discussing settler colonialism in the 20th century. He discusses the excessive horrors in South Africa, Kenya, Algeria, and then throws in this line, “And the violent displacement of Palestinian people accelerated in 1948 in the midst of war with the new state of Israel.”³⁴ There is no historical mention anywhere of any “violent displacement of Palestinian people” occurred between 1880 and April 1948 when the Jews started to change tactics from just defending and retaliating to aggressive advancement during the Palestinian Civil War, anticipating the May invasion of the somewhat united Arab armies from outside the borders of British Mandate Palestine.³⁵

Rodinson’s final argument revolves around very simple definitions of colonists and colonization: “A collection of persons who leave their country to go populate another,” and “occupation with domination.”³⁶ The former would mean that any peaceful group that ever moved anywhere are colonists and the second, colonization, would mean forced entry through warfare which certainly does not apply to the legal immigration of Jews to the Ottoman Palestinian region and later when it became British Mandate Palestine. However, in 1998, Rodinson had to admit that Israel is a “special case, ‘not a state like all the others’.”³⁷

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³⁴ Manjapra 2020, 69-70.

³⁵ Tessler 2009, 263. Morris 2008, 117. Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford University Press: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 85. Pappé’s description differs from Tessler and Morris but his narrative indicates that there was no “ethnic cleansing” prior to April 1948.

³⁶ Rodinson 1973, 90.

³⁷ Ben-Ami 2022, 311.

Conclusion

The Jews returning and living in the land resided on the land they bought or rented from the lawful Arab owners, and they did not dominate the region *until* they won the civil war which was forced upon them in late 1947 by the resident Arabs, aided by the Arab League financed Arab Liberation Army, which can arguably be considered to have been waged, based on the Arab rhetoric, with genocidal intent.³⁸ When finally on the offensive, knowing that the neighboring Arab states would invade once the British departed, and that Jordanian forces were already entering region, and realizing that the Arab villagers were willing to harbor and support the invading armies, just as they were willing to do for the “rebels” during the “great 1936-39 revolt” against the British and the Jews,³⁹ did the Yishuv leadership advocate depopulating and destroying the frontline Arab villages. Only after winning that civil war did the provincial government declare the formation of an independent state of the Jews based on the inherent sovereignty of the resident Jews, not based on conquering land by an invading army, who were now in the majority as a result of that civil war.

³⁸ Benny Morris, *1948: The First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 396.
Joseph S. Spoerl, “Palestinians, Arabs, and the Holocaust,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 26, no. 1-2. (2014):1. Mark Levene, *Crisis of Genocide: Volume Two* (Oxford University Press, 2013): 113

Jack Frank Sigman, “The 1947-1949 Arab Wars in an International Historical Perspective on Genocide,” *Academia.edu* (ND). ([3](#)) [The 1947-1949 Arab Wars in an International Historical Perspective on Genocide | Jack Sigman - Academia.edu](#)

³⁹ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine* (New York: Picador, 2020), 42, 46.

The Jews did not colonize the Palestinian region, despite the fact that the Zionist agencies did use the various forms of “colony” in their literature and agency names. This use was solely to make the endeavor attractive as “colonization” was considered a positive moral enterprise.

Colonization by the European states were mostly about “God, gold, and glory.” The Palestinian region contained no gold, those who left to settle in the region were mostly secular, and there would be no glory, only hard agricultural work for the most part. It was the idea of building a nation by the “sweat of one’s brow” that drove these idealists, the idea of living in a land where they would not be persecuted and driven out, as so many others like them had in years past and in the then current time, that kept them dreaming.

Pappé insists that Israel’s settler state is not as successful as America and Australia.⁴⁰ But does that matter? Surely it is close enough. Has there ever been another successful refugee-settler endeavor? Perhaps, when the world was emptier, there must have been some. But that is the task of sociologists, historians, and archeologists. I eagerly await the new theories of “Settler-Refugeeism” that will come from these scholars.

⁴⁰ Pappé 2020, np.

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