



Palestinian Settler-Colonialism

by Alex Joffe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The concept of “settler colonialism” has been applied with almost unique vehemence against Israel. But the fact that Jews are the indigenous population of the Southern Levant can be proved with ease. In contrast, historical and genealogical evidence shows Palestinians descend primarily from three primary groups: Muslim invaders, Arab immigrants, and local converts to Islam. The Muslim conquest of Byzantine Palestine in the 7th century CE is a textbook example of settler-colonialism, as is subsequent immigration, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries under the Ottoman and British Empires. The application of the concept to Jews and Zionism by Palestinians is both ironic and unhelpful.

One of the mainstays of the modern university is the idea of settler-colonialism. This argues that certain societies are birthed by settlers implanted in a foreign territory, either directly by or with the consent of an imperial power. These colonists then dominate and eradicate the indigenous population. They develop bellicose cultures that eliminate the natives from historical, literary, and other narratives. Primary examples often cited are the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia, and Israel.

The settler-colonial argument against Israel posits that Zionism was an imperial tool of Britain (or, alternatively, that Zionism manipulated the British Empire); that Jews represent an alien population implanted into Palestine to usurp the land and displace the people; and that Israel has subjected Palestinians to “genocide,” real, figurative, and cultural.

According to this argument, Israel’s “settler colonialism” is a [“structure, not an event,”](#) and is accompanied by a “legacy of foundational violence” that extends back to the First Zionist Congress in 1897 or even before. With Zionism thus

imbued with two forms of ineradicable original sin, violent opposition to Israel is legitimized and any forms of compromise, even negotiation, are “[misguided and disingenuous because ‘dialogue’ does not tackle the asymmetrical status quo.](#)”

But Middle Eastern history is not amenable to these formulations. Among the many concepts abused and perverted by the Palestinians, accusations of Israeli “genocide” rank the highest for blatant audacity, and for twinned calumny and odiousness. But the settler-colonial idea deserves attention for three reasons: its comparatively recent adoption by Palestinians and their advocates; its broader currency in the academy; and its obvious and ironic falsity.

The idea of Jews as “settler-colonialists” is easily disproved. A wealth of evidence demonstrates that Jews are the indigenous population of the Southern Levant; historical and now genetic documentation places Jews there over 2,000 years ago, and there is indisputable evidence of continual residence of Jews in the region. Data showing the cultural and genetic continuity of local and global Jewish communities is equally ample. The evidence was so copious and so incontrovertible, even to historians of antiquity and writers of religious texts, some of whom were Judeophobes, that disconnecting Jews from the Southern Levant was simply not conceived of. Jews are the indigenous population.

As for imperial support, the Zionist movement began during the Ottoman Empire, which was at best diffident towards Jews and uncomfortable with the idea of Jewish sovereignty. For its part, the British Empire initially offered support in the form of the Balfour Declaration, but during its Mandatory rule (1920-48) support for Zionism vacillated. The construction of infrastructure aided the Yishuv immensely, but political support for Jewish immigration and development, as stipulated by the League of Nations mandate, waxed and waned until, as is well known, it was withdrawn on the eve of World War II. This is hardly “settler-colonialism.”

Ironically, the same cannot be said for the Palestinian Arabs. A [recent analysis by Pinhas Inbari](#) reviewed the history of Palestine (derived from the Roman term Palaestina, applied in 135 CE as a punishment to a Jewish revolt). Most notably, he examines the origin traditions of Palestinian tribes, which continue even today to see themselves as immigrants from other countries. Inbari’s review, along with many additional sources of information he did not address, demonstrates that modern Palestinians are, in fact, derived from two primary streams: converts from indigenous pre-modern Jews and Christians who submitted to Islam, and Arab tribes originating across the Middle East who migrated to the Southern Levant between late antiquity and the 1940s. The best documented episodes were the Islamic conquests of the 7th century and its aftermath, and the periods of the late Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate.

Even notable examples like Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who [ludicrously claimed](#) that “I am the proud son of the Canaanites who were there 5,500 years before Joshua bin Nun burned down the town of Jericho,” traces his [real family lineage](#) to the Huwaitat tribe, which migrated from Arabia to Jordan. The [rare admission](#) by Hamas minister Fathi Ḥammad that “half the Palestinians are Egyptians and the other half are Saudis” is more honest.

Echoing Inbari, it is not to be argued here that “there are no Palestinians” who thus do not deserve political rights, including self-rule and a state. To do so would be both logically and morally wrong. Palestinians have the right to define themselves as they see fit, and they must be negotiated with in good faith by Israelis. What Palestinians cannot claim, however, is that they are Palestine’s indigenous population and the Jews are settler-colonialists.

Palestinian genealogies that show their own tribes originating outside the Southern Levant are *prima facie* evidence of Arab settler-colonialism. And while narratives of the Arab conquests of Byzantine Palestine and North Africa cannot be taken at face value, they are pure ideological expressions of settler-colonialism. In 634-37 CE, Muslim armies commanded by the Caliph Umar conquered the entirety of the Levant before invading Armenia and Anatolia in 638 and Cyprus in 639.

The subsequent Islamization and Arabization of the Levant was a long and complex imperial process that entailed reorganizing the region into administrative provinces, instituting new social categories for the purposes of taxation and control, implanting settlers and reapportioning lands as estates, and encouraging conversion to Islam. Over the centuries, other settlers migrated and were intentionally implanted, including, in the 19th century alone, [Egyptians fleeing from and imported by](#) Muhammad Ali from the late [1820s to the 1840s](#), as well as Chechens, Circassians, and Turkmen relocated by the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s after its wars with Russia. Tribes of [Bedouins](#), Algerians, Yemenis, and many others also immigrated during that century.

As for modern immigration, Inbari could well have pointed to the well-documented increases in [Palestinian census numbers from 1922 to 1931](#), produced by illegal immigration spurred by the development of the region’s infrastructure and economy. [One estimate](#) sees some 37% of the increase in Palestinian population between 1922 and 1931, over 60,000 persons, having been the result of illegal immigration. [Another study](#) found that from 1932 to 1946, another 60,000 illegal male immigrants entered the country, with uncounted females imported as brides. These were in addition to the great influx of Arab workers from 1940 to 1945 in connection with the war effort.

To reiterate, these arguments do not devolve to arguing “a land without a people for a people without a land,” or that Ottoman Palestine was “empty”

when the Zionist movement began. It was indeed populated, albeit unevenly, but those populations had immigrated into the land over the previous centuries, a process that accelerated precisely because of the Zionist movement and the British Mandate. Palestinian settler-colonialism took place, ironically, under the aegis of both a Muslim and a Christian empire.

Finally, there is the matter of a separate Palestinian ethno-national consciousness and its relationship to settler-colonialism. Claims to find a separate Palestinian ethnic identity as far back as the 17th century are unpersuasive. Instead, the idea developed as an elite concept in the years immediately before and especially after World War I, vying with far deeper and more resilient tribal and religious identities. The nationalization of the masses occurred gradually over the next few decades, propelled in part by tragedies largely foisted on them by their leaders, notably the “Arab Revolt” of 1936-39, the rejection of partition in 1947, the Israeli War of Independence of 1948-49, and the subsequent, rather local, dispersal of refugees into the 1950s. Palestinian nationalism and identity are largely reactive and secondary, pointing to the fact that settler-colonial identity was primarily tribal and religious, the latter imperial by definition.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, a mythology of the “timeless” Palestinians took root. During the earlier period, this was a European Orientalist trope: the Palestinians as living “fossils” who reflected the lifeways of the Bible. It was later adopted for strategic reasons by the Palestinians themselves as a political and cultural retort to the Zionist return to the land. That usage was perhaps understandable, if ironic; but it reaches a *reductio ad absurdum* in Erekat’s claim to have had Upper Paleolithic ancestors.

It is, then, the Palestinians who are the settler-colonialists, not the Jews or even the Zionists. Does this realization change anything? Does removing a term from the rejectionist toolbox bring the cause of negotiation and peace any closer? This seems unlikely. But in the longer term, facing certain truths will be necessary for Palestinians and Israelis alike. One is that rejection of Israel, at its core, is not a function of Palestinian nationalism and local identity but Islamic religious opposition to Jewish autonomy and sovereignty. Another is that tendentious categories like “settler-colonialism,” which ironically undermine Palestinian claims to indigenous status, should be dispensed with in favor of honest appraisals of history.

Alex Joffe is an archaeologist and historian. He is a Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow at the Middle East Forum.