POLICY BRIEF | POLITICS

Liberal Zionism: A Pillar of Israel's Settler Colonial Project

By: Muhannad Ayyash · June, 2023

Overview

Despite the Israeli regime's increasingly right-wing policies, liberal Zionism still plays a dominant role in Zionist ideology. It fulfills the specific and critical function of providing the Zionist project with the veneer of enlightened, Western civilization and democratic, progressive politics. As a result, the Israeli regime is rarely described in mainstream Western circles for what it is: a settler-colonial state that practices apartheid.[1]

Politicians and media outlets from across the political spectrum in Europe, North America, and elsewhere largely describe Israel as the "only democracy in the Middle East," sharing Western values that make it a beacon for progressive politics in an otherwise authoritarian and irredeemable region. This rhetoric is then used to justify unbridled Western support for the Israeli regime, including by providing the diplomatic, economic, and military means needed to maintain and expand its colonization of Palestine.

While right-wing Zionist ideologies abound and have their global supporters—especially among Christian Zionists—that must be confronted, it is critical to debunk liberal Zionism. As global leaders and mainstream media outlets continue to express concerns over the extremist Israeli coalition government and call for a return to the two-state solution, the idea that there is a liberal form of

Zionism worth salvaging must be refuted. After defining liberal Zionism, exposing its settler-colonial and apartheid foundations, and offering a case study from the US, this policy brief proposes a guiding framework for how to confront and invalidate the notion of liberal Zionism.

Understanding Liberal Zionism

Contemporary liberal Zionism emerges from Labor Zionism—the so-called left-wing, socialist arm of the Zionist movement that emerged over a century ago and played an instrumental role in the formation of the Zionist state. Since the state's establishment, liberal Zionism has appeared in the policies of successive left-wing governments and in the missions of non-governmental organizations, lobby groups, political parties, and scholarly networks and institutions that promote Israel as a liberal Jewish state. Liberal Zionism enjoyed ideological hegemony for many decades following 1948. As liberal Zionist Yehuda Kurtzer writes in reference to early Zionists: "The triumphant Zionists understood what they were doing as building a liberal political movement. Liberalism was baked into the political Zionism that ultimately led to the building of the state."

Like Kurtzer, most Israeli analysts focus on the interplay between Left and Right ideologies as a matter of intra-Israeli and intra-Jewish politics. Zionism, however, is best defined through the experiences of its victims: The Palestinians. From this perspective, liberal Zionism can only be understood as settler-colonial, root and stem, as it is directly responsible for the 1948 Nakba. While liberal Zionism is not a monolith, its proponents have operated in mainstream circles under the following central beliefs for decades:

1. The establishment of the Israeli state is the only method of securing Jewish safety and resolving Jewish exile;

2. Jews have inherent, biblical, and sovereign claims to the land of Palestine;
3. The Zionist project is a heroic and miraculous endeavor that carried the torch of modernization and civilization to the so-called land of Israel; and
4. The 1948 "War of Independence" was necessary, and the outcomes of the war—namely, the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their lands and homes and the destruction of Palestine—were natural and ought to be accepted.

Not all liberal Zionists agree with each of the four points. For example, some use very different language for the fourth point, arguing that Palestinians left and were not expelled. However, across its variations, mainstream liberal Zionist ideology holds that the settler-colonial conquest of Palestine in 1948 was righteous, legitimate, valid, and fully justifiable and therefore, no serious critiques can be directed against the establishment of Israel in 1948.

Liberal Zionism is hostile to Palestinian decolonial critiques of 1948 and often paints them as antisemitic in order to marginalize and censor them. The erasure of the Palestinian critique through the notion of "the new antisemitism" dates back to at least the early 1970s, when the Israeli foreign minister for the Labor government, Abba Eban, began pushing the narrative that anti-Zionism is antisemitism. Furthermore, liberal Zionists use these foundational beliefs to critique the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza, while carefully avoiding drawing attention to 1948.

A 2023 opinion piece in the Washington Post by liberal Zionists Paul Berman, Martin Peretz, Michael Walzer, and Leon Wieseltier is a good illustration of these tactical critiques. The authors locate Israel from the moment of its founding within the "freedom-loving nations" of the world, arguing that Benjamin Netanyahu's new right-wing government "threatens Israel's standing in world affairs." The centrality of the image problem is accentuated at the end of the piece, where they insist on

continued and full US military funding for Israel and ask for US support for Israelis protesting Netanyahu's right-wing coalition government.

The "double, but not contradictory, support," as they put it, is indeed an accurate description, but not because, as they suggest, it would protect democracy in the global battle between "democracy vs. autocracy." Rather, it is because underwriting this request to the Biden administration is an implicit recognition that: (a) what was taken by force in 1948 can only be held by force—hence the continuous and perpetual need for military funding regardless of which political ideology is in power—and (b) rejecting the new government's expansionist and annexationist policies will save the Jewish state as a state for a Jewish majority, crucially blocking the Palestinian critique of Israel from entering mainstream discourse.

This shows that liberal Zionists' support for the 2023 Israeli protests across 1948 territories is not at all in opposition to the settler-colonial project of the Zionist state but rather an indication of their concern that the right-wing path may disrupt the liberal veneer of Israeli settler colonialism. Ultimately, the Left and the Right are on the same page regarding the creation and "defense" of Israel as a state for a Jewish majority.

Finally, it is critical to understand liberal Zionism as part and parcel of colonial modernity. In other words, that modernity—conceived of as a Western phenomenon—cannot be separated from the tools used to achieve it: Colonization and slavery. It is no surprise that liberal Zionists fail to critically engage with the violent, colonial foundations of so-called Western liberal democracies. Instead, they accept as conventional wisdom and fact that Western civilization is superior to all others and boasts the most advanced democratic systems in the world.

Furthermore, the West is rightfully and globally spreading a civilization that

endogenously developed within the West. A case in point is Walzer's most recent book, in which he praises and promotes "liberal morality" and "liberalism" as a "product of the Enlightenment and the triumph…of the emancipated individual—a Western figure." He argues that this allegedly Western invention, of which Israel is a part, is needed to prevent us from becoming "monist, dogmatic, intolerant, and repressive." Absent from the book is a decolonial paradigm that centers the experiences and aspirations of those who have suffered and were erased due to the Western colonial project. By separating the civilization of the West from what the West does, liberal Zionism justifies, legitimizes, and naturalizes the violent Zionist settler-colonial project in colonized Palestine and beyond.

Settler-Colonial and Apartheid Policies of Liberal Zionism

As evidenced by the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 and in the ideological justification and legitimization of that expulsion thereafter, all the policies that arise from within the liberal Zionism framework are settler-colonial and apartheid. Most fundamentally, establishing the Zionist state in 1948 was settler-colonial; it necessitated the expulsion and dispossession of the Palestinians. Soon after, Israel promulgated a series of apartheid laws to make the expulsion permanent and to begin the process of Judaizing colonized Palestine—the 1950 Law of Return, the 1950 Absentees' Property Law, and the 1952 Nationality Law, among many others.

As part of their careful attention to Israel's image problem, liberal Zionists avoid language that reveals this settler colonial reality. For example, in their critique of the latest Netanyahu coalition government, Berman, Peretz, Walzer, and Wieseltier describe Israel's settler-colonial and apartheid policies as "an ever-more aggressive" campaign to establish additional settlements and "increasing challenges" for Palestinian citizens of Israel. They further describe Netanyahu's

government as encouraging "extremist Jewish vigilantism" and "ethno-nationalists," warning that Israel is moving closer to Viktor Orban's Hungary. In their discourse, Israel becomes another victim of the global wave of ethnonationalism that is threatening liberal, Western democracies—a point that others, like Kurtzer, make more explicitly in order to reaffirm Israel's image as foundationally a liberal democracy.

This framing is far from true. Israel continues to entrench a system that spatially, politically, militarily, economically, and legally places the settler in a superior position to the indigenous population. This is done in such a way that materially and symbolically benefits the settler; on the one hand, settlements are expanded, and on the other, the settler is indigenized while the Palestinian is displaced. In this regard, apartheid is a step along the settler-colonial continuum of violence that begins with the mass expulsion and displacement of indigenous people. It is a process that eliminates indigenous sovereignty, thus serving as a tool for cementing and expanding settler-colonial conquest.

Since liberal Zionists purportedly support a two-state solution along 1967 borders, they should theoretically no longer be interested in expansion; indeed, they view the occupation as dangerous for the Jewish state project. This is sometimes expressed through a critique of apartheid policies and practices (without using the term apartheid) that expand the Israeli state by unleashing totalitarian power over the Palestinians.

Still, this support for a two-state solution must be understood to be based on their ultimate fear of a one-state solution in which "unofficial" Israeli sovereignty over Palestinians will transform into "official" Israeli sovereignty over the whole of colonized Palestine, leaving Israel with a significant Palestinian population that threatens Israel's status as a Jewish state. Since liberal Zionism cannot reconcile the Zionist dream of an ethnocratic Jewish state with true democracy, a one-state reality will expose this foundational fallacy. In this way, settler-colonial and

apartheid policies are embedded in the liberal Zionist ideology that refuses to face the facts of what Zionism is and always has been.

A Case Study in US Liberal Zionism

One of the leading liberal Zionist organizations in the US is J Street, which describes itself as a "pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-democracy" organization that works against "bigotry, inequality, and injustice." Importantly, J Street holds that Israel shares these "democratic principles" with the US, painting the "intensive threat" to "liberal democracy" in Israel as part of a recent global wave of extremism and ethnonationalism also threatening the US. Furthermore, it purports to work "in multi-faith, multi-racial coalitions with communities in their efforts to overcome…oppression and to strengthen liberal democracy." Finally, it believes that Israel faces "dangerous enemies" and has the right to defend itself—and, by extension, democracy, progress, and civilization.

Building from this foundation that renders "questioning Israel's fundamental right to exist as a Jewish homeland" as illegitimate, J Street constructs its opposition to the occupation. Indeed, the organization acknowledges that Palestinians "deserve full civil rights and an end to the systemic injustice of occupation" and that it "support[s] the creation of an independent, de-militarized state of Palestine with defined borders." In this way, J Street positions itself squarely as liberal and reasonable.

Even so, J Street fails to explain why it believes a Palestinian state ought to be demilitarized. This serves as a telling example of how liberal Zionists hold that Palestinians already are—or can always potentially become—dangerous enemies who, if given access to organized military violence, will inevitably unleash it. Such language falls squarely within decades-long Zionist discourses and policies that racialize Palestinian bodies as violent.

J Street's position on borders is also revealing. The organization's website states that Israel must "give up the vast majority of occupied territory on which a Palestinian state can be built in exchange for peace." By calling on Israel to "give up" territory, J Street implicitly acknowledges that Israel has rights to it, reflecting the foundational logic of liberal Zionism that Israel has a claim to the land from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

Moreover, J Street makes clear in its policy on borders that its idea of a peace plan "would allow established Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and some of the large West Bank settlement blocs close to the Green Line to be incorporated into the State of Israel." This policy indicates support for annexation and aligns with Israeli governments across the political spectrum.

The Annexation Conundrum

For J Street and similar organizations, annexation has to be limited out of fear that expansion would expose Israel's settler-colonial foundations. Though liberal Zionists ignore that the lands occupied in 1948 became Jewish and democratic—for Jews only—through settler-colonial and apartheid policies and laws, this reality is ever-present in their ideology. It appears, first and foremost, in their opposition to the Palestinian right of return to their homelands. But it also appears in their concerns that the increasing visibility of Israel's daily violence against Palestinians–thanks to the digital revolution and Palestinian activism—may lead international onlookers to question all of Israel's policies and, possibly, its very foundation.

This fear drives liberal Zionists to critique Netanyahu's right-wing coalition government. How can they uphold the narrative of Israel as a democratic and Jewish state if they annex the entirety of colonized Palestine? Thus, the main implication of the new Israeli regime for liberal Zionism is that it exposes it for the myth that it is. In other words, the new Israeli regime accompanies eliminatory

policies with an honest articulation of the aspiration behind these practices—such as when Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called on the Israeli state to "wipe out" the West Bank town of Huwara—thus dismantling the veneer of democratic and progressive policies that liberal Zionists have spent decades building.

In their efforts to salvage that veneer, liberal Zionists responded by protesting the attack on Huwara using the language of "anti-occupation," "extremist settlers," and even "Jewish terror." But they continue to ignore that the lands they call "Israel proper"—from which they carry out their protests—were established as "Israeli'" by the same structure of settler-colonial violence that seeks Huwara's erasure.

Liberal Zionism is at best located in a multicultural liberal politics that sees the foundations of settler-colonial polities as perhaps tragic, but fundamentally sound and geared towards progress and civilization. In that regard, it joins a long list of apologists for Western colonial projects, concealing their foundations and structures and thus marginalizing and eliminating alternatives to those structures. If progressive politics today do not view the anti-racist project as one that must necessarily be decolonial and committed to dismantling the structures of colonial modernity, then they are not progressive politics at all.

De-Zionization is the Only Way Forward

Liberal Zionism is an ideology that provides cover for and advances the settler-colonial conquest of Palestine in the name of rationality, progress, equality, tolerance, democracy, and even anti-racism. It is, therefore, critical that this ideology be countered across all the spaces in which it operates. This means the rejection of liberal Zionism as a "partner in peace" and insisting on Palestinian decolonial liberation for the whole of colonized Palestine and for Palestinians everywhere.

A decolonial liberation framework is also beneficial for Israeli Jews in the long term. This is what de-Zionization speaks to: it begins with the recognition by Israeli Jews that Zionism never resolved the "Jewish Question" in Europe, but rather internalized it and replicated the Western colonial project in Palestine; it ends in a place where Israeli Jews would no longer be "natives or settlers in historic Palestine," but rather "immigrants…welcome residents in a historic homeland." Importantly, this concept means the reimagining of the state, nationalism, and sovereignty away from Western colonial models.

Beyond colonized Palestine, liberal Zionism must be debunked across political parties and institutions, the media, and civil society collectives. From activist to mainstream spaces, people must form intersectional coalitions committed to decolonial justice. These collectives must organize activities such as community teach-ins, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and so on in order to strategize how to confront the inevitable Zionist pushback.

These coalitions must follow five main practices to ensure de-Zionization:

1. Counter ideology with reality: journalists, scholars, and activists should reject the positions of liberal Zionist organizations, such as J Street, vis-à-vis sovereignty over Jerusalem, what Palestinian self-determination actually means, and so on. Liberal Zionists do not want to address decolonial Palestinian liberation, so it is necessary to shift the conversation to that topic and refuse the normalization of Israeli settler colonization.
2. Reject the weaponization of antisemitism: liberal Zionism does not present substantive answers to decolonial critiques, and thus, when pushed, it responds with the charge of antisemitism. Institutions and organizations must reject definitions of antisemitism that incorporate the question of Palestine in any way (from the right, the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), to the left, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism).

3. Center Palestinian paradigms: it is not enough to hear Palestinian stories of suffering. Public discourse must center Palestinian paradigms that explain why and how Palestinians suffer and, most crucially, provide a platform for Palestinian aspirations for liberation. To enable this change, pressure must be placed on media outlets to challenge the status quo of censoring and silencing Palestinian paradigms.
4. Emphasize decolonial anti-racism: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) offices have become widespread across political and social institutions. Many operate on corporatized, multicultural, and liberal anti-racism, and hold that decolonial critiques of Israel are antisemitic and therefore have no place in anti-racist spaces. Opposing the corporatized EDI initiative is necessary not just for Palestinian liberation but for the liberation of all who continue to suffer the violence of colonial modernity.
5. Dismantling Zionism: Zionism cannot lead to decolonial liberation. Whether liberal or right-wing, Zionism is exclusive Jewish sovereignty over the land, establishing Israel as the supreme and indivisible power. This necessarily means the continued expulsion of Palestinians from their lands and the elimination of Palestinian indigenous sovereignty. Only dismantling Zionist settler-colonial sovereignty can lead to a substantive decolonial and anti-racist project. For this to be possible, Jewish and Israeli communities—in whose name Zionist interests purport to speak—must participate in the project of de-Zionization.

1. *To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*

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