COMMENTARY | POLITICS

The Continuation of Zionist Settler Colonialism

By: Jamal Nabulsi · February, 2024

Introduction

The Israeli regime is currently committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, not only indiscriminately bombing Palestinians but actively targeting critical civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, universities, refugee camps, and residential buildings. Those who survive the bombings are far from safe, with severely limited access to clean water, food, electricity, and critical medical supplies.[1]

Alongside efforts to starve and slaughter Palestinians, the Israeli regime is likewise working to expel Palestinians from their land altogether. This has been made clear by the many statements made from Israeli officials and politicians, as well as through leaked documents that demonstrate intentions to "transfer" (a euphemism for ethnic cleansing) Palestinians in Gaza to Egypt or beyond—almost three-quarters of whom are already refugees from previous wars Israel waged on the Palestinians. This initiative is part of Israel's continuing collective punishment of a people who dare to resist their colonization and express their Indigenous sovereignty with the land.

This commentary anchors the Israeli regime's genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza as a continuation of the Zionist settler colonial project. Importantly, it insists that while the Israeli regime's present slaughter and

expulsion of Palestinians is certainly abhorrent, it is not an aberration in the context of over 75 years of Zionist colonization. It does so by outlining three key features of Zionist settler colonialism: 1) its nature as an ongoing *structure*; 2) its aims to *eliminate* the Palestinian people; 3) its use of *fragmentation*—both of land and of people—as a key strategy through which it pursues this elimination. It is through these tactics, the commentary asserts, that the Zionist project seeks to ultimately extinguish Palestinian Indigenous sovereignty.

Zionist Settler Colonialism

Zionism has always been a settler-colonial ideology—a fact that was declared explicitly by the architects of Zionism. For example, Russian Zionist leader Ze'ev (then Vladimir) Jabotinsky, who played a key role in the colonization of Palestine, wrote in 1923:

> Every indigenous people will resist alien settlers as long as they see any hope of ridding themselves of the danger of foreign settlement.
>
> That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope that they will be able to prevent the transformation of 'Palestine' into the 'Land of Israel.'
>
> […] Zionist colonization, even the most restricted, must either be terminated or carried out in defiance of the will of the native population.

The settler-colonial ideology of Zionism is steeped in European racism, holding many similarities with the white settler fantasy of "manifest destiny." In discussing whether Argentina or Palestine ought to be the location of Zionist colonization, the founder of the Zionist Organization, Theodor Herzl, claimed the Jewish state in Palestine would be "a portion of the rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of

civilization as opposed to barbarism." Such white supremacist discourse is deployed to justify the colonization of Palestinian land and the untold violence that it entails.

Palestinians have long understood the settler colonial nature of Zionism. In his 1965 book *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*, Fayez Sayegh deftly dissects Zionist colonialism as an ideology and political project. Later, in 1976, Jamil Hilal concisely articulated the logic of settler colonialism as distinct from extractive colonialism: "Zionists strove not to *exploit* the indigenous Palestinian population but to *displace* it." Building on such Palestinian theorizing, Zionist settler colonialism must be understood as an ongoing structure aiming to eliminate the Palestinians through the fragmentation of the people and land, as indicated by three key characteristics.

First, Zionist settler colonialism, like all other settler colonial projects, must be understood as an ongoing structure, rather than a singular event. In other words, the fundamental goal of settler colonialism is to entrench the settler community on the colonized land permanently. While this idea has been articulated in some detail in the academic discipline of settler colonial studies, the sentiment has long been understood through the everyday Palestinian notion of the Nakba as ongoing. On the one hand, this everyday theorizing stresses that the effects of the 1948 Nakba—whereby over 780,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from their land—continue to be felt today. At a fundamental level, all Palestinians forcibly expelled by Zionist militias during the 1948 Nakba continue to be denied their right to return to their homes in Palestine. On the other hand, and interrelated, the notion of the ongoing Nakba signals that the Zionist project of ethnically cleansing Palestinians from Palestine is a process that continues today: Since 1948, some two-thirds (9.17 million) of the fourteen million Palestinians worldwide are now forcibly displaced persons, all denied their right to return

home.

Second, the central aim of Zionist settler colonialism is to eliminate the Palestinian people from the land of Palestine. This elimination takes a wide range of forms, including but not limited to genocide and ethnic cleansing. Perhaps most egregiously, Zionist settler colonial elimination often takes the form of physically annihilating Palestinians. This is evident, for example, in the massacres of Palestinians by Zionist militias during the 1948 Nakba, the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, the current and four preceding major Israeli assaults on Gaza, as well as in the frequent executions of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers and paramilitary police (which occur most often in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem).

Zionist settler colonial elimination also takes countless more insidious forms. As just one example, the Israeli regime has attempted to erase the very identity of Palestinians living in 1948 territories—those who live as third-class citizens of Israel on Palestinian land occupied in 1948. Israel seeks to de-Palestinianize this community through a wide range of policies, including criminalizing expressions of Palestinian identity, such as displaying the Palestinian flag or commemorating the Nakba. These policies function alongside decades of attempted Zionist indoctrination in school and university curriculums, as well as countless other ways of obscuring and rewriting the history of Palestine. Such policies are comparable to those of other settler colonies, including the residential school systems in so-called Canada and the US as well as the Stolen Generations in the colony of Australia.

Third, a key colonial strategy through which Israel pursues this elimination is fragmenting Palestine and Palestinians. This fragmentation ultimately drives towards elimination—working to fracture Palestinians to then pry them from the land. Like elimination, fragmentation takes a wide range of different forms. It functions, for example, to splinter Palestinian land, fracture bodies, destroy families, dismantle institutions, rupture Palestinian space, time, and memory,

shatter selves, and break the will to resist. These are not distinct forms of fragmentation but are all intimately connected, with cracks and tears extending through Palestinian lives.

The 1948 Nakba was a founding moment in the fragmentation of Palestine. Israel's colonization of 78% of Palestinian land served to sever this land from the remaining area of Palestine, the West Bank and Gaza, which are geographically isolated from one another. During the Naksa (Setback) of 1967, Israel then militarily occupied the West Bank and Gaza (alongside territories in Syria and Egypt)—colonial occupations that continue until today. In turn, the Palestinian people have been fragmented across these three distinct territories and in exile, with each fragment of Palestinians living vastly different realities, facing diverse forms of Israeli colonial violence.

Bringing together the described three key features of Zionist settler colonialism, through its ongoing elimination and fragmentation, the Zionist settler colonial project ultimately aims to extinguish Palestinian Indigenous sovereignty. This sovereignty is an embodied claim to land that was never ceded and is grounded in ongoing Indigenous Palestinian presence that both precedes and endures the Israeli settler state. Indigenous sovereignty inevitably takes distinct forms for different Indigenous peoples. But what these forms of Indigenous sovereignty share is that they all index an enduring Indigenous claim to the land, refusing the state sovereignty of the settler colony.[2] Meanwhile, Palestinian indigeneity does not rely on "proving" the continuation of particular cultural practices or a certain measure of "Indigenous blood." Contrary to the way it is defined under international law, indigeneity is not a set of criteria to fulfill, but rather a political relationship to the structure of settler colonialism. Insofar as the settler state of Israel seeks to eliminate Palestinians from their land, Palestinians are an Indigenous people resisting such elimination.

The Settler Colonial Present

Indeed, we hear echoes of the racist discourse of early Zionists in the genocidal language of Israeli leaders today. As the Israeli regime began its current genocide in Gaza, Benjamin Netanyahu posted from the official Prime Minister of Israel account on X (before later deleting the post): "This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle." Israeli President Issac Herzog likewise warned that the war on Gaza was "intended to save Western civilization" and that if it weren't for Israel, "Europe would be next." Such rhetoric is a regurgitation of colonial ideology, seeking to justify genocide as a battle of "Good versus Evil." In announcing Israel's plan to collectively punish Palestinians in Gaza by completely cutting off all resources necessary for life, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant declared, "There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly." Such racist, dehumanizing language paves the way for Israel's genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

The reality of the Nakba as an ongoing process has never been clearer than it is now. Since the Israeli military began its current onslaught on Gaza, it has killed over 26,000 Palestinians and expelled 1.9 million people (over 80% of Gaza's population) from their homes. The images coming out of Gaza are appalling – a father clutching his child burned alive by white phosphorus, a child digging through the rubble of her home in the hope of finding one single surviving relative. The human impact of the genocide is incomprehensible. Footage of streams of Palestinians fleeing their homes under Israeli gunfire calls up images of the 1948 Nakba, as well as other major expulsions of Palestinians. Many of those currently fleeing Zionist violence are descendants of Palestinians ethnically cleansed from their land in 1948.

This is Zionist settler colonial elimination in its most brutal form. Just as Israel's massacres of Palestinians in 1948 worked in tandem with its ethnic cleansing, so today Israel's genocide and ethnic cleansing are tandem strategies in the Zionist project of eliminating the Palestinian people. Having expelled the majority of Palestinians from their homes within Gaza, Israel is now actively attempting to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Gaza entirely. In a document leaked on October 28, the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence recommended ethnically cleansing all 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza from their homes, expelling them permanently to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Despite the Egyptian government's repeated refusals to accept such a plan, the actions taken by the IOF in Gaza so far mirror the steps laid out in the document. The IOF has expelled Palestinians from northern Gaza to the south, their bombing and shooting of Palestinians along the way making a mockery of their claim that they are evacuating civilians for humanitarian purposes. They have now begun to expel Palestinians from their homes in southern Gaza, raising grave and credible concerns that they will be forced to amass at the Rafah border putting further pressure on Egypt. This ethnic cleansing is advocated not only by government ministries, but by prominent politicians, academics, and everyday Israeli citizens alike. This is, after all, the fundamental goal of Zionism and the Israeli state: expel the Palestinian people and take their land.

It is important to note that Israel is also currently escalating its decades-long ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the West Bank. Emboldened by Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza and international impunity to Israeli war crimes during this assault, we are seeing a sharp increase in the violence of Israeli colonial settlers in the West Bank, who function with the full backing of the Israeli military to terrorize Palestinians and expel them from their homes. A key way that Israel pursues this ethnic cleansing in the West Bank is through the aforementioned colonial strategy of fragmentation. Israel has effectively divided the West Bank into 227 separate enclaves, while entirely isolating East Jerusalem from the rest of

the West Bank. This is achieved in part via the 730 km-long Apartheid Wall, which snakes through the West Bank well beyond the 1967 Green Line, cutting Palestinian cities and villages in two, separating farmers from their land and Palestinian communities from one another. Functioning alongside countless other Israeli technologies of fragmentation, these colonial tools ultimately aim to make life unliveable for Palestinians in the West Bank, to drive them out of their homes so Israeli settlers can appropriate them.

In Gaza, we see an even more extreme form of settler colonial fragmentation, where Israel has sought to isolate Palestinians from the rest of Palestine systematically. This geographic, social, and political isolation was intensified with the Israeli blockade imposed on Gaza following Hamas's 2006 election victory. Alongside raining death on Palestinians in Gaza through intermittent bombing campaigns, as well as heavily restricting the movement of people in and out of Gaza, this blockade entails severely restricting countless everyday items needed by Palestinians, from baby wipes to plant seeds. Following Hamas's operation on October 7 and the bombardment on Gaza that ensued, the Israeli regime largely cut off water, food, electricity, fuel, and other bare necessities for life in Gaza—something described by various experts as a genocidal act. In short, Israel laid the groundwork for the current genocide in Gaza with 17 years of brutal blockade, on top of 56 years of military occupation, which have together served to severely isolate Gaza from the rest of Palestine.

By politically, socially, and geographically isolating Gaza from the rest of Palestine, Israel seeks to carve out further Palestinian land that it can ethnically cleanse and appropriate into the settler state. This is not a new strategy, but rather one entirely consistent with the Zionist project and with settler colonial projects more broadly, which work to divide and conquer Indigenous peoples, to seize the land, and eliminate the native community.

Conclusion

For Palestinians to live in freedom and dignity, we must understand Israel's current assault on Gaza as a continuation of the Zionist settler colonial project. This means doing away with the still-dominant framework of a "conflict" involving "two sides." Propagated through the so-called "peace" process and its various afterlives, this framing not only conceals but actively upholds the colonial power relations between the state of Israel and the Palestinian people. Perhaps most obviously, Israel has consistently used peace negotiations as a veil behind which it can escalate its theft of Palestinian land. For example, between 1993 and 2000—the height of the "peace" process—Israel doubled the population of Israeli settlers on the very land that was purportedly to become a Palestinian state. At its core, the Zionist project is expansionist, and Israel does not even make great efforts to hide this fact.

Since the onset of Israel's current genocidal assault on Gaza, the global Palestine solidarity movement has grown exponentially, with record numbers turning out to protest for Palestine in cities around the world. While it is inspiring to see people across the globe waking up to the brutal reality faced by Palestinians, solidarity organizers at times reproduce the problematic framing described above that ultimately serves to uphold Israel's colonization. More specifically, advocacy for Palestine that is limited to ending Israeli occupation and/or apartheid fails to acknowledge the root cause of the violence—Zionist settler colonialism. In settler colonies such as the US, Canada, and Australia, as well as in colonial metropoles such as the UK, the failure to recognize this fact likely stems from activists' own complicity in related forms of colonization. To achieve justice and liberation for Palestinians, it is imperative to dismantle the Zionist settler colonial project, which, as has been demonstrated, is fundamentally concerned with eliminating the Palestinian people and extinguishing their Indigenous sovereignty with the land of Palestine.

In the face of this devastating colonization, we can take inspiration from those effectively demonstrating what it means to stand in solidarity. South Africa has brought Israel to the International Court of Justice, charging them with the crime of genocide. Yemen's Houthis have seized Israel-linked ships in the Red Sea, refusing to back down in the face of US-led aggression against them. Palestine solidarity activists have blocked Israeli ships from entering ports around the world, from San Francisco to Sydney. The Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement is stronger than ever before. These are but a few of the examples we may draw on that advocate for Palestinian liberation and recognize the root cause of its hindrance: Zionist settler colonialism. We must continue to stand in such solidarity until Palestinians, alongside all colonized and Indigenous peoples, are truly free.

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.*
2. *My understanding of Indigenous sovereignty owes the most to the intellectual leadership of Munanjahli and South Sea Islander Professor Chelsea Watego, as well as her published writing. I also draw here significantly on the work of Goenpul Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson.*

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

Al-Shabaka materials may be circulated with due attribution to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. The opinion of individual members of Al-Shabaka's policy network do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization as a whole.