settler colonial studies

Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine

OMAR JABARY SALAMANCA, MEZNA QATO, KAREEM RABIE, SOBHI SAMOUR

This special issue of *settler colonial studies* emerges out of a March 2011 conference on settler colonialism in Palestine organised by the Palestine Society and the London Middle East Institute at the School of Oriental and African Studies. It is our hope that this issue will catalyse creative, collaborative work that puts the settler colonial framework firmly on the agenda of Palestine studies. The need for such engagement arises from our recognition that while Zionism and the Palestinians are gradually being included in the growing body of scholarly works on comparative settler colonialism, the analytical framework that comparative settler colonialism offers has yet to enter the field of Palestine studies.[1]

From the earliest Palestinian accounts to the vast majority of contemporary research, the crimes committed against Palestinian society by the Zionist movement and the state it built have been well recorded. Zionism is an ideology and a political movement that subjects Palestine and Palestinians to structural and violent forms of dispossession, land appropriation, and erasure in the pursuit of a new Jewish state and society. As for other settler colonial movements, for Zionism, the control of land is a zero-sum contest fought against the indigenous population. The drive to control the maximum amount of land is at its centre. The continued existence of Palestinians, therefore, poses severe problems for the completion of the Zionist project, and, consequently, informs Israeli state policies against Palestinians inside Israel, in the Occupied Territories, and in exile. Consequently, transfer – a Zionist euphemism for the coordinated, at times randomly applied, plethora of legal, military, and economic tactics to expel Palestinians – has been part of Israeli

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policy and public discourse since the creation of the state.[2] As Israeli historian and neoconservative Benny Morris remarked, 'had [David Ben Gurion] carried out full expulsion – rather than partial – he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations'.[3] Yet, plagued by 'instability', the settler colonial structure undergirding Israeli practices takes on a painful array of manifestations: aerial and maritime bombardment, massacre and invasion, home demolitions, land theft, identity card confiscation, racist laws and loyalty tests, the wall, the siege on Gaza, cultural appropriation, dependence on willing (or unwilling) native collaboration regarding security arrangements, all with the continued support and backing of imperial powers.

In the absence of a cohesive framework, scholarship often appears to catalogue Zionist practices and offences against Palestinians as a series of distinct – yet related – events. The Palestinian nation is pushed from one catastrophe to another as the Zionist project accelerates. However, viewed through the lens of settler colonialism, the *Nakba* in 1948 is not simply a precondition for the creation of Israel or the outcome of early Zionist ambitions; the *Nakba* is not a singular event but is manifested today in the continuing subjection of Palestinians by Israelis. In order to move forward and create a transformative, liberatory research agenda, it is necessary to analyse Zionism's structural continuities and the ideology that informs Israeli policies and practices in Israel and toward Palestinians everywhere. In other words, while Israel's tactics have often been described as settler colonial, the settler colonial *structure* underpinning them must be a central object of analysis.[4] By bringing together scholars of both comparative settler colonialism and Palestine studies, this special issue intends to further a nascent conversation, and hopes to provide a spark for future cross-disciplinary research that contributes to both fields.

Despite the endurance of Israeli settler colonialism, settler colonial analysis has largely fallen into disuse in Palestine studies. As a framework, settler colonialism once served as a primary ideological and political touchstone for the Palestinian national movement, and informed the intellectual work of many committed activists and revolutionary scholars, whether Palestinians, Israelis, or allies.[5] Today, research tends to focus on Palestine as an exceptional case,

constituted in local contexts, in particular the West Bank. But these problems are far from simply the result of shifts in academic knowledge and practice: the Palestinian liberation movement has seen a series of ruptures and changes in emphasis, and in many ways scholarly production accurately mirrors the dynamics of incoherent contemporary Palestinian politics. Recent Palestinian political history has been a long march away from a liberation agenda and towards a piecemeal approach to the establishment of some kind of sovereignty under the structure of the Israeli settler colonial regime. In this environment, it is not surprising that even scholarship written in solidarity with Palestinians tends to shy away from structural questions. Much of the contemporary literature tends to take on micro-political issues or Israeli administrative practices within a given context and prodigiously overwork them. But when did Palestinians ever find themselves in a 'post-colonial' condition? When did the ongoing struggle over land and for return become a 'post-conflict' situation? When did Israel become a 'post-Zionist' society? When did indigenous Palestinians in the Galilee (for example) become an 'ethnic minority'? And when did the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the consequent fortification of Palestinian reserves become 'state-building'?

Moreover, the trend towards studying the occupation often internalises it as an ontological category distinct from the larger structures of Israeli settler colonialism. The occupation imposes boundaries on space and time; and categories, discourses, and materialities that are embedded in colonial power relations are operationalised in this literature. The Green Line, the border between Israel and the Palestinian reserves, is one example of this phenomenon: it has become a powerful symbolic and material signifier that enforces, and takes for granted, the fragmentation of the Palestinian polity. With few exceptions, it is a line that is rarely crossed in scholarly accounts of Palestine – in either direction. Different Palestinian populations have come to be represented as isolated, analytically separate, pieces of an impossible puzzle. In addition, the focus on the second stage of colonisation, the 1967 occupation, emphasises settlement by Israelis in the West Bank and absolves previous generations of Zionists and Israel itself of settler colonialism.

'For natives', as Patrick Wolfe puts it, 'the issue is that, at the hands of the settlers, they face [physical and symbolic] elimination'.[6] 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. For Palestine, it means the reiteration of the fact that Palestinians are an indigenous people, and an alignment of Palestine scholarship with indigenous and native studies.

In this context, John Collins notes, the challenge

> is to bring all the relevant tools of critically engaged scholarship [...] in order to pursue two related objectives: to understand the complex set of structures and processes [...] that have combined to produce the intolerable reality evident today; and to think creatively about how this understanding might enable individuals to transform that reality.[7]

Otherwise, settler colonialism remains a descriptive category that does not move beyond sentiment and into strategy. While activists, both in Palestine and outside it, continue to push back against Zionist encroachment, intensify the demand for equal rights, and build a boycott, divestment and sanctions movement aimed at shaming and delegitimising Israel internationally, the creative offerings of the settler colonial studies paradigm remain underutilised. This lack of rigorous engagement has consequences for movement building. The historic response to settler colonialism has been the struggle for decolonisation; in the absence of a settler colonial analysis, Palestinian strategies have tended to target or

accommodate settler colonial outcomes rather than aiming to decolonise the structure itself.

Equally important, the analysis enabled by the settler colonial paradigm offers a powerful political tool to reorient and recreate genuine bi-directional solidarity alliances and political fraternity. As attested by the cover of this issue, a declaration of solidarity for Palestinians in their struggle against Zionist aggression by the Organization of Solidarity for the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL), this convergence is not new. The settler colonial perspective offers the possibility of a new in-gathering of movements, harnessing each other's strengths for an active, mutual, and principled Palestinian alignment with the Arab struggle for self-determination, and indigenous struggles in North America, Latin America, Oceania, and elsewhere. Such an alignment would expand the tools available to Palestinians and their solidarity movement, and reconnect the struggle to its own history of anti-colonial internationalism. At its core, this internationalist approach asserts that the Palestinian struggle against Zionist settler colonialism can only be won when it is embedded within, and empowered by, broader struggles – all anti-imperial, all anti-racist, and all struggling to make another world possible.

The issue opens with Zachary Lockman's critical and constructive engagement with Gershon Shafir's landmark study on the formative period of the Zionist labour movement and its colonisation strategy (*Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*). Lockman presents an alternative historical narrative of the evolution of the Zionist labour movement, and highlights the coercive power employed by the British colonial state in Palestine against Palestinian Arabs. Ilan Pappé's article meditates on the complications of applying the framework of comparative settler colonialism – which is largely based on historical case studies – to the specific case of Israeli settler colonialism, a project that is still expanding its frontiers. David Lloyd's paper engages with the work of Giorgio Agamben on the state of exception and deals with the following question: to what extent can the Palestinian situation be understood as unique?

These pieces are followed by two case studies from Palestine, one by Mansour Nasasra highlighting the case of the Zionist

expulsions and village destructions in the Naqab, the other by Magid Shihade on the practices employed by the state in fragmenting and dissolving Palestinian social identities. Shir Hever's article discusses Israel's approaches towards indigenous labour and the indigenous economy. In comparing the Zionist colonisation of Palestine with the cases of Australia and the United States, Patrick Wolfe points to the historical and material conditions that underpin this project. Wolfe argues that, contrary to common assumptions, Zionism constitutes an intensification of, rather than a departure from, settler colonialism. The last feature article is by indigenous scholar and activist Waziyatawin, who recently visited Palestine as part of a delegation of feminist women of colour. Here she discusses some of the lessons Palestine afforded her regarding indigenous resistance and struggles for sovereignty.

We also offer excerpts from two historical documents outlining the long struggle for Palestinian liberation. They highlight some of the ways in which settler colonialism as a paradigm has historically been used in work on Palestine. An excerpt taken from Palestinian trade unionist George Mansour's *The Arab worker under the Palestine mandate* (1937) opens the section. Mansour provides a clear picture of the dire socio-economic consequences that Zionist colonisation, and British support for it, had on Palestinian indigenous workers and Palestinian society as a whole. Along these lines, he exposes the *Histadrut's* 'conquest of labour' strategy and refutes British claims about the positive impact Britain's support for a national Jewish home had on indigenous Palestinian society. This is followed by an excerpt taken from Palestinian intellectual and political activist Fayez A. Sayegh's *Zionist colonialism in Palestine* (1965). Sayegh's description of the structural features underpinning Zionist colonisation – and the consequences for the Palestinian nation – is arguably one of the clearest and most potent analyses of its generation. Finally, hoping to expand the conversation on settler colonialism within Palestine studies, we offer the Arabic translation of Patrick Wolfe's seminal essay, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native'. This is a foundational text for comparative settler colonial studies, and we hope that it will speak to Arab scholars and activists alike.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Omar Jabary Salamanca is completing a PhD in political and human geography at the Middle East and North Africa Research Group, Ghent University. His research examines spatial modalities of settler colonialism and uneven development in Palestine, with a particular focus on the socio-economic and political histories of infrastructure networks. Mezna Qato is completing a DPhil in history at the University of Oxford. Her thesis is a social history of the formation and development of educational regimes for Palestinians. Kareem Rabie is completing his PhD in the Department of Anthropology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. His dissertation research examines the present push towards privatisation in the housing market, and the contemporary state-building project in the West Bank. His research interests include state theory, political economy and uneven development, and the formation of political ideology. Sobhi Samour is completing his PhD in the department of economics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. His thesis is on settler-colonial responses to the forces and relations of production in indigenous societies, with particular reference to the Palestinian economy.

NOTES

[1] F. Bateman, and L. Pilkington (eds), *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); C. Elkins, and S. Pedersen, *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies* London: Routledge, 2005).

[2] See, e.g., R. Blecher, 'Citizens without Sovereignty: Transfer and Ethnic Cleansing in Israel', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 47 (2005): pp. 725-754; N. Masalha, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians: The Politics of Expansion* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

[3] Interview with Benny Morris, 'Survival of the Fittest', *Haaretz*, 09/01/04.

[4] Some of the notable exceptions include, N. Abdo, *Women in Israel: Race, Gender and Citizenship* (London: Zed Books, 2011); N. Abdo, and N. Yuval-Davis, 'Palestine, Israel and the Zionist Settler Project', in D. Stasiulis, and N. Yuval-Davis (eds), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*

(London: SAGE, 1995); J. Collins, *Global Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); R. Greenstein, *Genealogies of Conflict: Class, Identity, and State in Palestine/Israel and South Africa* (Hanover, NH: University Press New England, 1995); S. D. Hassan, 'Displaced Nations: Israeli Settlers and Palestinian Refugees', in F. Bateman, and L. Pilkington (eds), *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture, London* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): pp. 186-203; and S. Makdisi, 'Zionism Then and Now', in F. Bateman, and L. Pilkington (eds), *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture, London* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): pp. 237-256; J. Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians* (New York: Routledge, 2006); G. Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel* (London: Verso, 2008); L. Veracini, *Israel and Settler Society* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

[5] Much of the literature published by the Research Center of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the 60s and 70s explicitly framed the conflict as a settler colonial one. Founded in 1965, its publications intended to educate cadres, forge strategic relationships with other anticolonial movements and disseminate its narrative to the outside world. For one such publication, see Fayez Sayegh's essay published in the document section. In this context, the Socialist Organization in Israel (Matzpen, founded in 1962) must also be mentioned. Matzpen offered a robust analysis of the settler colonial nature of Israeli society and unpacked the regional context of the conflict. See A. Orr, H. Hanegbi and M. Machover, 'The Class Nature of Israeli Society', *New Left Review,* January-February (1971), pp. 3-26, and for a recent contribution by its co-founder, Moshé Machover: 'Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution'. Available at: http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/articles/moshe%20machover%20%202006lecture_b.pdf Accessed: 15/03/12. For the nature of early radical scholarly analysis of settler colonialism in Palestine, see: B. Abu-Laban, I. Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Settler Regimes in Africa and the Arab World: The Illusion of Endurance* (Wilmette, IL: Medina University Press International, 1974); A. Emmanuel, 'White Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism', *New Left Review,* May-June (1972), pp. 35-57; J. Hilal, 'Imperialism and Settler-Colonialism in West Asia: Israel and the Arab Palestinian Struggle', *UTAFITI: Journal of the Arts and Social Sciences, University of Dar Es Salaam*, 1, 1 (1976), pp. 51–69; G. Jabbour, *Settler Colonialism in Southern Africa and the Middle East* (Khartoum: University of Khartoum, 1976); M. Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial Settler-State?,* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973); F. Trabulsi, 'The Palestine Problem: Zionism and Imperialism in the Middle East', *New Left Review,* Sept-Oct (1969), pp. 53-90.

[6] P. Wolfe, 'Palestine, Project Europe and the (Un)Making of the New Jew: In Memory of Edward W. Said', in N. Curthoys, and D. Ganguly (eds), *Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), p. 333.

[7] J Collins, *Global Palestine*, p. 10.