settler colonial studies

Settler Colonialism and Conflict: The Israeli State and its Palestinian Subjects

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In this article I discuss the relationship between Israeli settler colonialism, group identities, conflict, and violence. The paper focuses on '1948 Palestinians', and the relationship between them and the state. I explore the relationship between settler colonialism and communal identity through a case study of an incident of communal violence that erupted in Galilee in 1981 between two different religious groups within the Palestinian Arab community. I investigate the different narratives that emerged to explain and frame the incident. I trace this event to a larger structure rooted in the history of settler colonialism in Palestine, thus shifting attention away from culturalist explanations of 'Arab violence'. In addition to the case in Kafr Yassif, I will briefly discuss other cases to illustrate the pattern in which the Israeli settler colonial state's policies are tied to issues of identity, conflict, and violence within the native Palestinian community. The essay also addresses the importance of this framework to Palestine Studies.

This article focuses on the question of settler colonialism in relation to '1948 Palestinians' – Palestinians who managed to stay on their lands after the 1948 War and became Israeli 'citizens'. The Palestine/Israel issue is better understood, in my view, by grappling with the predicament of these Palestinians as a settler-colonial condition, and by studying the origins of the Israeli state and its historical development in order to understand how it deals with its colonised subjects. My discussion will focus on communal identity and conflict among 1948 Palestinians through a theoretical analysis of Israeli settler colonialism, and its impact on communal relations and conflict, and through a discussion of how, despite Israeli claims and rhetoric regarding the 'rule of law', 'democracy', and 'modernity', Israeli policies have led to conflicts and violence within the Arab Palestinian native community.

In other words, I argue that the question of communal/group identity, conflict and violence among Palestinians in Israel is better

understood with reference to the ways in which religion was exploited to further the settler colonial project. Although the paper will focus on 1948 Palestinians, I will briefly refer to one similar case from the 1967 territories to highlight the way in which the Israeli state works to advance intercommunal conflicts. The case from Kafr Yassif is based on more than three years of fieldwork (2002-2005), interviews of eye witnesses, archival work in the village, and Israeli official reports on the incident. The other cases are based on media reports and on brief interviews with local witnesses and community leaders. The article will first discuss briefly the different religious communities in Palestine and their relationship to the Israeli state. In the second part, I will discuss the test cases.

THE RACIALISATION OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: MUSLIMS, CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

By end of WWI, Britain occupied Palestine, which had until then been part of the Ottoman Empire. It established what became known as the British Mandate in Palestine, facilitating over the course of two decades the economic, social, and political infrastructures for the establishment of the future settler colonial Israeli state, while repressing the economic, political, and social structure of the Palestinian native society.[1] The war on Palestine and the creation of the Israeli settler colonial state in 1948 led to the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian native society and to the destruction of Palestinian cities and villages.[2]

From close to one million Palestinians only around 150,000 remained in the newly created state. From 500 villages, only 100 remained undestroyed by the Zionist Israeli troops, and all major cities were emptied of most of their Palestinian residents. Those that remained became minority enclaves in the Jewish dominated environment.[3] Due to the Israeli and previous British colonial policies of imprisonment, deportation, and targeted killing of leaders, because of the challenge the leaders posed to the British-Zionist settler colonial project, the Palestinians who managed to remain on their lands found themselves almost leaderless. The remnants of the Palestinian society thus found themselves a minority in a state that was built on their own lands, and became citizens in a state that by its ideology and policies was and continues to be anti-Arab and anti-

Palestinian, that looks at them with contempt, as a threat, as a demographic 'time-bomb', and as an obstacle to Jewish rein state.

Although the idea of transfering those who managed to remain was and continues to be contemplated by Zionist and Israeli Jewish leaders, till this moment no such step was taken. This is due to several reasons. One is the rise of decolonisation movements worldwide since the mid-twentieth century. Another is the advancement of communication that could expose such actions much faster than previous genocides and ethnic cleansings performed by other settler colonial projects. Yet another is due to the fact that Israel heavily relies on Western support and works hard to make itself globally acceptable as a normal state. Such an action would harm such support and tarnish the Israeli self-presented image as a 'democratic peace loving state', and a state that respects Western modernity's mantra – 'the rule of law'.[4] Instead, Israel designed several policies and strategies aimed at repressing, marginalising and dispossessing its Palestinian citizens on the basis of national identity and religious affiliations.[5]

JEW AND PALESTINIAN

With the establishment of the Israeli setter colonial state, the policy regarding ethnicity, national identity, and religious affiliation became crucial. It continues to be so to this day. By defining itself as a state for the Jewish people, or a Jewish state, Israelis turned the Jewish religion into an official ethnic and national category. The fact that Judaism has been a religion for millennia, or that Jews have lived as a religious community among different societies, including the Arab and Palestinian societies, did not matter. This rupture in the history of Jews and Judaism was paralleled by the policy of turning the Palestinians who remained in the Israeli state into members of various religious communities lacking national identity. On the national identification cards, they were identified as a minority with one or another religious affiliation: Christian, Muslim, and Druze. The dominant terminology that was used and continues to be used to define them was that of 'Israeli Arabs'. The aim was not only to divide and rule, but also to disconnect them from the larger Palestinian community and the Arab people at large.[6] Internally, they are defined as a collection of religious sects; to the outside they are

branded as 'Israeli Arabs', so that they are disconnected from each other internally on a religious basis, and at the same time they remain disconnected from the Palestinian people and from the larger Arab identity. A policy of internal ghettoisation and of external disconnection defined the position of the Israeli state towards them from early on.

While the Jews became categorised as such (religiously and ethnically-nationally), the Palestinians were defined as 'Israeli Arabs' – a category that makes them belong fully to neither. It also defined them according to their religious affiliations and created new ones. Thus, as of 1948, they turned from being Palestinians, to become Christians, Muslims, and Druze.[7]

CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS, AND DRUZE

During the war of 1948 most Palestinians resisted the Zionist onslaught on their lands. They did so in a variety of ways. Some, as in most cases of colonial interventions, cooperated with the colonial power. Among those who cooperated were the Druzes, members of an Islamic religious sect who, as access to their lands and source of living was in the hands of Zionist troops, were forced to cooperate with the Israeli leaders. Once the military regime was imposed on this community in 1948, they could not leave their village without a permit from the local military governor. As Druzes worked primarily in farming, and as they needed to leave the village and go to work on the land, they fell under intense pressure. Collaborating allowed them to get permits and make a living. There were also those among the Druze leaders who took advantage of the new situation and helped in swaying the Druze community to the Israeli side. Soon after the creation of the state of Israel, they helped impose military conscription on the Druze community. This was the first major split between the Druze and the rest of the Palestinian community.[8]

Not only did the Israeli state recognise the Druze as a religious community, in the 1950s it recognised them as an ethnic group. Their religious identity was thus ethnicised, politicised, and directed towards hostility against Arabs and Palestinians. While the Druze sect was only formed in the 10th century Fatimid Egypt, the myth of an ancient affinity between Druze and Jews, who both suffered under

the hands of Muslim Arab rule, became established in the Israeli official narrative. But myths are never enough to solidify identities; more measures were taken to further split Druze, Muslims, and Christians. In addition to the official definition of 'the Druze' as a separate community, first religious, and then ethnic, conscription in the Israeli military also helped creating and advance an anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab identity. Furthermore, the Israeli state took several economic and educational measures to ensure the further separation of Druzes from the rest of the Arab Palestinian community.[9]

EDUCATION, SEGREGATION, AND DIVIDE-AND-RULE POLICIES

While the Israeli state created a separate educational system for Jews and for Palestinians, it also aimed to create a separate educational system for the Druze community. The separate educational system for the Druze community emphasised conflict with Palestinians and Arabs and affinity with Jews and Israel. The one developed for the rest of the Arab community emphasised the positive character of Jews and Israel to the detriment of Islam and Arabs.[10] In addition, the Israeli state gave more funding to Druze localities than to Christian and Muslim ones. Also, as members of the Druze community serve in the Israeli military, they receive some benefits, including subsidised housing loans, access to Israeli academic institutions, and privileged access to some jobs.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that while religious Jews are by law exempt from military service, they still enjoy preferential treatment in education, jobs, loans, and state funding for their localities. Thus, the preferential and exclusionary category of military service is only used against the Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike. Having said that, one should note that Druze are not treated on equal footing with Jews in Israel. Rather, they remain discriminated against. While they are generally treated better than the rest of the Palestinian community, they fall behind vis-à-vis the Jewish community when it comes to access to quality of education, jobs, and funding for localities. Druze land was also the subject of land confiscation, which is never practiced against Jews.

Since the creation of the Israeli state, a military regime was imposed on the native Palestinian community. Under this military regime, the Palestinian community faced restrictions on movement, political organising, and also faced economic and social repression. The military regime not only helped segregate them from the Jewish citizens of the state, but also from each other, as no person was allowed to leave his/her village without a permit, which was not often given without pressure to co-operate with the state. The military period also witnessed many curfews, especially during the nighttime, so as to prevent Palestinians from socialising, visiting each other, or holding events and meetings. Over time, the 1948 Palestinians were estranged not only from the rest of the Palestinian and Arab communities outside the borders controlled by Israel, but even from their own land and from each other internally. They became ghettoised, familiar only with nearby villages, while the Jewish localities that they visited or lived in remained alien to them.[11]

Instances of communal conflict and violence among Palestinians in Israel must be understood in this context. They remain within a supremacist ethnic settler colonial state that favors Jews (even those who live worldwide) over them, which works to marginalise and fragment them from each other and from the rest of the Palestinian and Arab peoples. They lived for more than 20 years without any contact with the rest of the Palestinian community in the 1967 territories disconnected from those who live in exile. They are also disconnected from the rest of the Arab culture around them. Ongoing repression of their national identity, and of their economic and social cohesion and development should also be considered.[12]

INSTANCES OF COMMUNAL CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE AMONG PALESTINIANS

I will now discuss three cases of communal conflict and violence; one at length, two others more briefly, in order to illustrate the link between Israeli settler colonialism and communal conflict. I will discuss these cases of communal violence – two among 1948 Palestinians, one from the 1967 areas – as a way to examine patterns of internal communal conflicts and violence, as well as the behavior of state security forces. I will illustrate the way these

conflicts erupt, and, more importantly, how the state encourages them. I will also outline community responses.[13]

1. KAFR YASSIF

It happened on the 11 of April 1981, in relation to a football game between teams from two adjacent Palestinian villages in Galilee. One village was Julis – a Druze village, the other was Kafr Yassif – a majority Christian village with Muslim and Druze inhabitants. The Israeli police are present at all sport events. The game was decisive because it would decide which of the two teams would be promoted to the upper division of the Israeli football league. The night before the game, the manager of the Kafr Yassif team received a threatening phone call that appeared to be from someone in Julis. The caller warned of possible violence should the team from Julis not prevail. The manager, as result of this phone call, contacted the regional police station and the mayor of Kafr Yassif. Both the team manager and the mayor called again asking for a police presence that would prevent violence from taking place during or after the game. Only 4 policemen were present at the Kafr Yassif football ground the following day.

As news about threats spread around the village at night and the next day, the atmosphere became tense. As Druze serve in the Israeli military, they often carry arms, and have used them on several occasions, even in the context of internal fighting within the Druze community. It is worth nothing that such misuse of arms is not allowed within the Jewish community, but it is tolerated within the Druze community and no one has been punished for such offenses.

Halfway through the game, the Kafr Yassif team scored one goal. The fans from Julis started to shout and make threats. Some individuals from Kafr Yassif, including members of the management of the team, asked Kafr Yassif team members during the break to let the team from Julis win the game. Julis then won the game by scoring two goals. Unappeased, Julis fans attacked Kafr Yassif fans. This led to mass fighting. One man from Julis was stabbed, and a grenade killed one young person from Kafr Yassif. Several others were injured. Although sport related violence is not unprecedented,

the use of arms was unusual. While Israeli police were present at the game, they did not interfere to prevent or stop the fighting.

The story did not end here. The mayor and leaders in Kafr Yassif complained to the police for not sending enough police force as requested. Yet, the head of the police station in the area claimed he had not expected violence. Then the mayor and leaders of Kafr Yassif also asked the head of the regional police station to send reinforcements to the village in order to prevent further escalation, as individuals from Julis had threatened further violence. They also contacted leaders from the larger Palestinian community in order to initiate a *Sulha* – a local method of conflict management used in communities that cannot rely on the Israeli security structure for safety, or on its judicial system for justice.[14] At the same time, they called on members of parliament from the Israeli Communist Party (the only party at the time representing the Palestinian community), who in turn called on the Israeli Minister of Interior (responsible for interior security, and for the police department) asking for more police force to be sent to Kafr Yassif.

In the meantime, the *Sulha* initiative was making progress in securing a *Hudna* (truce), which is the first step towards conflict resolution. Suddenly, and after two days of talking to leaders in Julis, the *Sulha* delegation members called the mayor of Kafr Yassif for a meeting (which took place in Kafr Yassif), and informed him that the leadership in Julis had changed its opinion, that they were no longer observing the truce, and that the *Sulha* initiative had failed to secure a resolution to the conflict. Members of the *Sulha* committee (which is normally composed of community leaders, including heads of large families, experts in the conflict management method, politicians, and even poets) argued that their initiative failed because influential leaders within the Druze community, individuals who had strong connections with the Israeli establishment, were advising against it. They further asked the mayor and leadership in Kafr Yassif to continue making calls to the police and asking for more police to be sent to the village. At the same time, they promised to send as many people as they could from neighboring villages to help Kafr Yassif if further attacks took place.

Three days after the game, Julis residents attacked Christian residents of Kafr Yassif using Israeli military arms, vehicles,

equipment. As a result of the attack, two more individuals from Kafr Yassif died, over 20 were injured, and scores of houses and property were bombed, burned, and or damaged. This attack occurred under the eyes of the Israeli police but without any intervention. More than 20 policemen were present in the village, but they withdrew in a manner that eyewitnesses perceived was coordinated with the attackers. The attackers were allowed to move from one neighborhood to the next, shooting and bombing, and using military communication equipment. Eyewitnesses recognised an organised military operation. Memories of the past came to the fore for many in the village: the events of 1948, the Kafr Qassim massacre in 1956, and the Land Day of 1976 massacre committed by Israeli forces against Palestinians who demonstrated in opposition to land confiscations.

While the police force that was present inside the village acted in complicity with the attackers, and while it let the entrance between the two villages open, which allowed the attackers to enter Kafr Yassif, police detachments were present at the other two entrances of the village, preventing aid from coming from neighboring villages. The official Israeli narrative is contradictory: while it argues that 'the police did not expect violence to erupt', it also reports that 'violence is part of Arab society and culture' (suddenly, Druze are talked about as part of the Palestinian Arab community and culture – they are no longer separate religious and ethnic group with ancient ties to Jews).

Furthermore, while the police were unable to prevent the attack, they were able to prevent the hundreds from neighboring villages who tried to enter the village to help the residents of Kafr Yassif. While the police were unable to block the narrow entrance road between Julis to Kafr Yassif, through which the attackers entered the village, they were able to block the other two wider entrances of the village, from which those who came from neighboring villages to help were trying to enter Kafr Yassif.

Soon after the attack, the local council in Kafr Yassif demanded an independent investigation to look into police actions, but the Israeli government refused to respond. Instead, it appointed its own investigation committee that absolved the Israeli government and the security forces from any responsibility. It only recommended: 'such incidents should be taken more seriously in the

future by the police'. Of course, this would not happen as we will see in the other cases I discuss here. Not one official was held responsible. It is also significant that the investigation committee only talked to Israeli security officials and ignored eyewitnesses who might have contested the narrative provided to them by the police.

After the report was issued, the local council in Kafr Yassif intensified its activism within the Arab community, the Israeli public, and even internationally in an attempt to allow for an independent investigation. Instead, the Israeli government forced the leaders in Kafr Yassif to accept a *Sulha* framework different from the one initiated earlier by the community itself. The *Sulha* agreement initiated by the government and its men in the region was accompanied by threats of more violence. While normally *Sulha* procedures require the naming of those who are responsible for the violence, they need to formally apologise, the *Sulha* imposed on Kafr Yassif ended without naming those who were responsible. On the contrary, it hinted at the responsibility of Kafr Yassif and its mayor, and some unnamed 'irresponsible individuals'.

Here, the party accused (the Israeli government being responsible for the interior ministry and police) became the judge of its own actions. Unsurprisingly, it did not charge any Israeli official, and accused the victims for responsibility over an attack that took place against them. This pattern of Israeli official investigations of crimes committed against Palestinians and Arabs and against any group acting in solidarity with them continues to this day. Almost all investigations end with Israel taking hardly any responsibility, and often blaming the victims, as outlined by Edward Said.[15] Even worse, Israeli officials who are accused of responsibility for crimes against the Palestinian community are often promoted in their military and political careers, as Emile Habibi writes.[16]

To see whether the Kafr Yassif case was an exception or part of a pattern of Israeli policies, I will now briefly discuss two cases involving inter-communal violence in the Palestinian community; one from another village in Galilee, and another from a village in the West Bank near Ramallah.

2. AL-MAGHAR

Fighting took place in 2005 between Druze and Christian communities in the village of Al-Maghar in Galilee. Resulting from a conflict between two families, one Christian and one Druze, an attack on shops and homes belonging to members in the Christian community took place for a full day, and was renewed again the next day. While eyewitnesses indicated that the Israeli police was present in most places where the violence occurred, members of the police force at times even participated in the attacks. Much damage to property and injuries resulted from this incident; and shock and fear led many members of the Christian community to flee the village until a Sulha secured their return.

3. DEIT JARIR

Another case of inter-communal violence took place in the West Bank in 2006. It happened in Deit Jarir, a village near Ramallah, but located between area A (territory that is 'controlled' by the Palestinian Authority) and area C (territory controlled by Israel). In that instance, it was a conflict between a Christian and Muslim family that escalated. Leaders from Deit Jarir called on the Palestinian Authority to intervene. The Palestinian Authority immediately sent a security detachment to Deit Jarir, but was unable to reach the village because the Israeli military prevented it from going further. It took calls from the American Embassy in Jerusalem to allow this force to enter the village and stop attacks against property. While no one was injured or killed, the attack produced extensive damage.

SETTLER COLONIALISM, POLICE STATE, RESISTANCE

Immediately after its inception as a settler colonial state, Israel pursued different policies to repress, marginalise, and demobilise the Palestinian community. At first it created a military regime that officially lasted until 1966. During the period of the military regime, areas where Palestinians were concentrated were declared military zones and filled with military checkpoints. Restrictions on movement were paralleled by repression of any political organising. Furthermore, land confiscation was expedited. While confiscating lands from native Palestinians, the state was building Jewish

settlements in areas that limited the expansion of the Palestinian residential areas and destroyed the Palestinian farming sector. This same pattern took place later in the areas colonised by Israel in 1967. Land confiscation and house demolitions are still practiced against the native Palestinian citizens in the 1948 areas.

In addition to the policies of economic, social, and political repression, the Israeli-imposed and controlled educational system has been working to suppress Palestinian national history and identity while promoting a Zionist version of history that emphasises a very positive image of Judaism, its history, and Zionism and sought loyalty to the state. Although the military regime ended officially in 1966, hundreds of emergency regulations are still intact to this day. They severely constrain the political, economic and social empowerment of the Palestinian community.[17]

Of course, these policies did not go without resistance. Contrary to narratives emphasising acquiescence and co-optation, Ahmad Sa'di focuses on coalition building and resistance.[18] Resistance started immediately after 1948 and continues to this day. Interestingly, Ahmad Sa'di uses the case of Kafr Yassif to illustrate his argument.[19] From Ahmad Sa'di's study, as well as my archival work in Kafr Yassif, I found that from early on, a coalition was established between nationalists and communists in Kafr Yassif challenging attacks on the local council headed by Yanni Yanni, a well-known nationalist leader (of Greek origin). The residents of the village also challenged state policies of land confiscation, and, as importantly, the attempt by the local Israeli military governor to deport Palestinian refugees from neighbouring destroyed villages that had arrived in Kafr Yassif for refuge and protection. The struggle against these policies in the village led to publications in *Al-Ittihad* (the Communist Party Arabic newspaper), especially a well-known article by Emile Habibi calling on all Arabs to follow the example of Kafr Yassif. The news of the village reached Europe, and led to a visit by Simone De Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre.

Even the policy of ethnicising the Druze community, the draft into the Israeli military, and the attempt to completely disconnect it from the rest of the Palestinian community was not unchallenged. From the beginning, resistance to that policy came from within the community itself. Opposition against the military draft started early

on, and a formal association against the military draft was established in the 1970s and is still active to this day. Members of the Druze community continue to be involved in Palestinian political organising. Druze opposition to state policies was not only due to a sense of belonging to the larger Palestinian and Arab peoples, however. Discrimination and land confiscation were also important.[20]

In other words, while the Israeli settler colonial state has been pursuing, since its inception, different policies aiming to marginalise, fragment, repress, and dispossess the native Palestinian community, and while these policies have taken several forms, from officially declared ones, to non-officially implemented others, from direct physical violence, to non-physical violence against the community's identity and well-being, the community has not been passive. The native Palestinian community has been challenging the violence of the state and its policies through continuous political organising and protests, coalition building, maintaining and developing its national identity, language and historical memory, and constantly connecting to the rest of the Palestinian community in the 1967 areas as well as in the diaspora. They have done this through poetry and other forms of artistic expression, through different official and non-official projects, and through direct as well as virtual means of communication. As Nadim Rouhana argues, among others, they remain alienated from the Israeli state.[21] Even the symbolic violence inherent in attempts to change the names of towns, villages, and other geographic locations is challenged by the community's resilience and memory of the original Arabic names. The dialectic between repression, erasure, denial, and memory continues to this day.

CONCLUSION

While my paper focused on communal identity, conflict and violence, there are other forms of conflicts and violence taking place within the native Palestinian community in Israel. Violence occurs within the same family, within families from the same religious community, between individuals and groups belonging to different political parties (especially around election campaigns), and in between gangs. In some instances, guns are used. These events are always

reported in the Arab media, as well as in the Israeli Hebrew media. Community leaders and political leaders in the Palestinian community continue to call upon the state to initiate policies that would address this problem. To this day, the Israeli state continues to ignore these calls. Israeli security forces seem to only focus on the Palestinian community through the perspective of a security lens, always monitoring what they call the 'radicalisation' of the Palestinian public. Israeli security forces only intervene forcefully to suppress political organising and protests.

From the cases discussed here, it appears that the Israeli state encourages internal divisions, continues to repress the Palestinian collective identity, and lets conflicts erupt into violence. On the other hand, some in the Palestinian community are dealing with this problem through continuing calls on the state to maintain internal peace and order. At the same time, local conflict management methods are also used to manage tensions. Many political parties and organisations also work on education and mobilisation for unity.

This paper argued that linking the historical development of 1948 and that of 1967 Palestinians is not only about countering the rupture that took place in 1948, but could also illustrate the intentions of the Israeli establishment, and possible scenarios for the future. In other words, learning about 1948 Palestinians can tell us more about the history of that community, as well as highlighting the pattern of relationships the state has established with the 1967 Palestinians.

Failing to focus on the origins of the state, and on relations between settlers and natives, has led to a flawed understanding of the Israeli state and its relations to native Palestinians in the field of Palestine Studies. By not grounding the analyses on the origin of the state (at least since 1948), much scholarly work ends up missing the impact of settler colonial structures and their ramification for the Palestinians who are citizens of the state and those who reside in the 1967 Territories. In some sense, this work even legitimates the settler colonial structure established in 1948. By not connecting the scholarship about 1948 and that of 1967 Palestinians, we fail to recognise a pattern that started in 1948 and was replicated in 1967. By studying 1948 Palestinians, we can better understand the intentions of the Israeli state for the future of the Palestinians living

in the 1967 areas, as well as those in exile. A state that was established as a setter colonial structure on the ruins of the native population, cannot allow for coexistence unless it dismantles a founding ideology and goes through an historical self-evaluation. This must include the acknowledgement of past wrongs and a commitment to reparation.

Settler colonialism, as many theorists have argued, is based on a genocidal attempt to displace indigenous peoples.[22] This produces endlessly conflicting relations with the native population, and can help explaining Israeli policies and positions towards the 1948 Palestinians, and all Palestinians in general. Furthermore, my work attempts, at least in part, to add to this field by linking the studies of settler colonialism with communal and group conflicts and violence. If the Israeli policy has been to divide and disperse, the Palestinian people, in response must be to unite and converge.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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NOTES

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