

# Special Issue: The Practice of Commemoration

## INTRODUCTION



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This essay argues that what has been going on in Palestine for a century has been mischaracterized. Advancing a different perspective, it illuminates the history of the last hundred years as the Palestinians have experienced it. In doing so, it explores key historical documents, including the Balfour Declaration, Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, and UN Security Council Resolution 242, none of which included the Palestinians in key decisions impacting their lives and very survival. What amounts to a hundred years of war against the Palestinians, the essay contends, should be seen in comparative perspective as one of the last major colonial conflicts of the modern era, with the United States and Europe serving as the metropole, and their extension, Israel, operating as a semi-independent settler colony. An important feature of this long war has been the Palestinians' continuing resistance, against heavy odds, to colonial subjugation. Stigmatizing such resistance as "terrorism" has successfully occluded the real history of the past hundred years in Palestine.

### Historical Landmarks in the Hundred Years' War on Palestine

MUCH HAS CHANGED FOR THE BETTER in recent decades where the representation of Palestine in the United States is concerned, whether in academia or among certain sectors of society. In the broader American political and public sphere, however, the Palestinians continue to be elided from the historical record; in the words of Edward Said, they have been denied "permission to narrate."<sup>1</sup> Not only is their perspective rarely represented, but it remains largely defined in the public mind by those who wish them ill. Even when Palestinians are allowed to appear on the stage in public forums or in the media, in the U.S. context, this is usually carefully "balanced" with the opposing point of view. (Needless to say, such balance is not required when an Israeli perspective is put forward.) This essay rejects these distorted ways in which the history of Palestine is usually depicted, whether from an Israeli point of view, or from a falsely "balanced" perspective, or in terms of a supposed conflict between two equal parties. In their stead, it puts forward an entirely different perspective, one that illuminates more objectively the history of the past century in Palestine, and as the Palestinians have experienced it (and as most of the world outside the U.S.-Israeli bubble sees

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it). It thereby provides a richer understanding of the real nature of the conflict today, and of the well-known historical landmarks in that process, including notably 1917, 1947, and 1967.

From this perspective, the period since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 has witnessed what amounts to a hundred years of war against the Palestinians. Like many other long-lasting conflicts such as the Hundred Years' War in France, or the Crusades, this one enjoyed long periods of apparent calm, interspersed with paroxysms of intense violence. However, this war was unique in that it was formally sanctioned and authorized by the greatest powers of the day but was mainly waged by others at different times over a century. An important feature of this long war, one which has been much distorted, has been the Palestinians' continuing resistance, against heavy odds, to what amounts to one of the last ongoing attempts at colonial subjugation in the modern world. Stigmatizing much of this resistance as "terrorism" has successfully occluded the real history of the past one hundred years in Palestine.

Taking the approach followed in this essay is not in any way to chronicle this history as one of the victimization of the Palestinians. Indeed, it gives them full agency as a people resisting a determined campaign to expunge them from their land and from history. Nor is it to whitewash the many mistakes made by Palestinian leaders. As I have written in my book *The Iron Cage*,<sup>2</sup> much of the history of the Palestinian people must be understood in terms of the bad choices these leaders made, albeit often in the most difficult of circumstances.

What the people of Palestine have experienced as a continuous war against them since 1917 is still under way today. It thereby constitutes a global anomaly. All other wars to uphold settler-colonial regimes in the second half of the twentieth century, whether in Algeria, southern Africa, or elsewhere, finally ended with the defeat of those regimes. This has not happened in Palestine. There, Israel has been extremely successful in forcibly establishing itself as a colonial reality in a post-colonial age, as it whitewashed its rich colonial legacy. At the same time, it has always assumed a piteous and utterly false posture of self-defense while almost always being on the offensive. The historian and theoretician of colonialism Patrick Wolfe wrote: "Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of the native societies. The split tensing reflects a determinate feature of settler colonization. The colonizers come to stay—*invasion is a structure not an event*."<sup>3</sup>

In Palestine, both that structure and the war that resulted from it are still ongoing today, after one hundred years (or more). It is central to Palestinians' own self-understanding—and it is essentially true—that since 1917, they have been the targets of a long war to which they have offered stubborn resistance, demonstrating remarkable steadfastness in the face of daunting odds. For them, this history blends seamlessly into the present and future. In their historical experience, the unceasing colonization of their country, and the constant resort to violence that is required for the maintenance of this colonial project is, to reprise the words of Wolfe, "*a structure not an event*."

## **Balfour and the League of Nations: Declaration of War on Palestine**

During this long colonial campaign, there have been historical landmarks linked to authoritative international pronouncements that amounted to repeated declarations of war on

the Palestinians. The first of these was issued on 2 November 1917 on behalf of the British cabinet by Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour. British troops were then in the process of conquering Palestine. They occupied Jerusalem five weeks later, on 9 December 1917. The Balfour Declaration—and the League of Nations Mandate granted to Britain on the basis of this declaration, and which repeated its terms verbatim—arrogated national rights in Palestine exclusively to Jews, who constituted 6 percent of the population at the time. It thereby denied the national existence and political rights of the vast Arab majority of Palestine's people. Neither the Declaration nor the Mandate ever named this population, which had lived in Palestine for generations. The Balfour Declaration has been considered historically in terms of various paradigms, mainly in terms of Zionist or British considerations. Looked at in the context of its time, and in a comparative perspective, it was in fact a quintessentially colonial proclamation by the greatest power of its era of its intent to replace an indigenous people with another, whom it proposed to bring into existence on their territory.

For two decades, Great Britain carried out to the letter the terms of the Balfour Declaration and of the 1922 League of Nations Mandate that defined and regulated British rule over Palestine by embodying and amplifying these terms. Under the Mandate, Britain supported Zionist immigration and land purchase, and granted self-governing institutions and international diplomatic status to the Jewish minority, while refusing self-government or diplomatic status to the Arab majority. Provoked by Britain's denial of their rights and indeed of their very existence, the Palestinians belatedly rebelled in 1936–39, liberating large areas of their country for a brief period starting in 1937. It was an abbreviated victory. The British Empire responded ruthlessly, deploying one hundred thousand troops, extensive airpower and all the cruel, repressive tools in their colonial arsenal to crush the uprising. In the process, the British killed, wounded, deported or imprisoned an estimated 10 percent of the adult male Palestinian Arab population, exiling or jailing most of their leaders, and confiscating large quantities of weapons.<sup>4</sup> This was the delayed military implementation of Britain's original 1917 declaration of war on the Palestinian people.

To understand what was happening in Palestine then, a close textual analysis of key documents from the era, starting with the Balfour Declaration, is in order. Defining Britain's Palestine policy for decades after it was penned, the declaration states that there is only one people with national rights in Palestine: the Jewish people. The Arab Palestinians in 1917 (94 percent of the population as noted earlier) are not described as a people, nor are they named, but only referred to as "existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." The declaration promised this vast majority of Palestine's population "civil and religious rights,"<sup>5</sup> but crucially *not* political or national rights. This denial determined the course of events in subsequent decades.

A second key document is Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, promulgated in June 1919, which described the Arab peoples of the regions of the former Ottoman Empire as "independent nations." This provision of the Covenant, which supposedly governed the entire mandate system, was subsequently violated by Great Britain, along with the League of Nations, as both consistently interpreted Article 22 to exclude Palestine, except insofar as the Jewish population was concerned. Thus, the majority was not eligible for the self-determination promised in the Covenant: only the "Jewish people" were. The third is a confidential August 1919 Foreign Office

memo in which Balfour confided: "In Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country. . . . Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far greater import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."<sup>6</sup> The fourth document is the 1922 League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, which reiterated the words of the Balfour Declaration verbatim, and amplified its terms, thereby creating an operational plan for the effective elimination of an existing people in Palestine and their replacement with another. It is clear from all these documents that for all practical purposes the Palestinians and their rights simply did not exist as far as Great Britain or the League of Nations were concerned.

Taken together, these statements of British and League of Nations policy constituted in effect the justification for "politicide," meaning the destruction of the emerging Palestinian polity, to use the term coined by the late Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling.<sup>7</sup> This process was implemented both by omission and by commission: the former, as the Palestinians were never mentioned by name in any of the documents that governed their collectivity; and the latter, as these documents explicitly declared that Palestine was to be transformed into a "Jewish national home." In spite of its vague and ambiguous nature, the Zionists and, eventually, the international community interpreted the term as meaning statehood for the ultimate Jewish majority they would create, which would then turn Palestine into a Jewish state. This is precisely what Lord Balfour, along with then-Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, privately told Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann during a meeting at Balfour's house in 1921.<sup>8</sup> The Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine in fact faithfully reflect the wording of Theodor Herzl's 1896 pamphlet, *The Jewish State*.<sup>9</sup> They constituted a watered-down and more palatable version of what was enunciated there as the core objective of the Zionist movement since its inception: to transform Palestine into a Jewish state.

As we have seen, the military campaign that enforced these declarations of policy was prosecuted by the might of the British armed forces, with their main effort taking place in 1936–39, in response to the violent form taken by growing Palestinian resistance to British rule and to the colonial project supported by Britain. One of the clearest analyses of what was at stake at the time was offered by Vladimir Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky was the founder of the militant Revisionist wing of the Zionist movement, out of which grew the current Likud Party that since 1977 has dominated Israeli politics with few interruptions. (It is worth noting that the father of Benjamin Netanyahu, Benzion Netanyahu, whom the Israeli prime minister reveres, was Jabotinsky's private secretary.)

Jabotinsky was explicit in stressing the need for what he called an "iron wall" of British bayonets if Zionism was to succeed. He frankly recognized that in "the history of colonization in other countries . . . every native population, civilized or not, regards its lands as its national home. . . . This is equally true of the Arabs."<sup>10</sup> It is well worth noting Jabotinsky's candid use of the terms "colonization" to describe Zionist activity, and "the native population" to describe the Palestinians. He concluded that overcoming the natural resistance of this population to their subjugation and displacement required an "iron wall, which is to say a strong power in Palestine that is not amenable to any Arab pressure."<sup>11</sup> Until it handed the Palestine question over to the United Nations in 1947, Great Britain provided the iron wall without which Jabotinsky freely admitted that Zionist colonization could not be successfully pursued.

## 1947 Partition Plan and Then the Nakba

After this handover took place, the new superpowers of the post-World War II era, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), were responsible for two further international pronouncements that amounted to declarations of war on the Palestinians, constituting two new landmarks in the history of Palestine. These pronouncements were once again issued via the ostensibly “neutral” medium of an international organization similar to the League of Nations. This time, it was the newly established United Nations that gave the patina of legal sanction to further violations of the inalienable national rights of the indigenous Arab population of Palestine. This was more a reflection of power politics than of any international consensus, as from its inception, the UN was fully subject to the predominant influence of the emerging superpowers.

The first of the two new declarations of war on the Palestinians came on 29 November 1947 via UN General Assembly Resolution 181 for the partition of Palestine. This resolution, also known as the Partition Plan, was essentially engineered by the United States and the Soviet Union, which manufactured a General Assembly majority by ensuring that their compliant allies and satellites voted for it, some of them as a result of outright compulsion.<sup>12</sup> UNGA 181 handed over most of an Arab-majority country to its Jewish minority without the consent of that majority, thereby violating the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter. This was analogous to the way in which the Mandate for Palestine had violated Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. UNGA Resolution 181 led to the war of 1947–49, which devastated Palestinian society and resulted in the expulsion of more than half of the country’s Arab population from their homes. They were never allowed to return.

The partition resolution allocated nearly 55 percent of the territory of mandatory Palestine to a “Jewish state,” which in principle if not in extent, represented a realization of the Zionist dream of sovereignty and statehood in Palestine. The Arabs, over two-thirds of the population, were supposed to have a so-called Arab state divided into three noncontiguous segments, which together comprised less than 45 percent of a country whose entirety the indigenous Palestinian majority naturally saw as their own. For these contrasting reasons, the resolution was accepted by the leading elements in the Zionist movement, and was rejected by most Palestinians and by all the Arab states, with the sole exception of Jordan. Palestinian and Arab disunity then contributed to the crushing defeat suffered first by the Palestinians themselves in the months leading up to the British evacuation of 15 May 1948, and subsequently to the resounding defeat of the four Arab armies that entered Palestine after the British withdrawal.

Long before Arab troops entered Palestine in mid-May 1948, as many as three hundred thousand Palestinians had already been driven from their homes. Some left because of terrorist bombings of public places and unceasing mortar bombardments of urban areas, with others fleeing as news spread of massacres like Deir Yassin in April 1948, when about 100 residents, mostly women, children, and old people, were slaughtered after the village fell.<sup>13</sup> Those who were driven out even before the Mandate ended and Israel was formally established included most of the Arab residents of two of the cities with the largest Arab populations in Palestine, Jaffa and Haifa, as well as much of the Arab population of the third, in the western part of Jerusalem. The same fate befell the

Arab population of smaller cities and towns. With these centers of industry, commerce, and political, intellectual, and cultural life gone, Palestinian society was effectively decapitated even before 15 May 1948. After that date, marking the establishment of Israel, in the wake of further massacres and the defeat of the Arab armies, over four hundred thousand more Palestinians were expelled. More cities and towns were overrun and ethnically cleansed, as were over four hundred Palestinian villages, and 78 percent of Palestine was forcibly transformed into the new State of Israel. This destruction of most of their society and the theft of their land and property has since been known by Palestinians as *al-Nakba*, the Catastrophe.

The only true concern of the superpowers that engineered UNGA Resolution 181 was to complete Herzl's colonial project and create the Jewish State of Israel. Even though the creation of an "Arab state" is mentioned in the resolution, everything beyond the establishment of Israel was window-dressing.<sup>14</sup> The "Arab state" was quickly strangled in its cradle through the well-documented collusion of Israel, Jordan, and Britain, as Israeli troops took over the bulk of the territory allotted to it, while the Jordanian army came to control most of the rest. This gross violation of the partition resolution was met with indifference, passivity, and inaction by the powers that had supposedly mandated the purported state's creation.<sup>15</sup> The actual acts of war against the Palestinians in this phase were carried out first by Zionist militias and then by the newly established Israeli army, with arms supplied mainly by the two superpowers. This marked a major shift from the previous phase, when most of the warfare against the Palestinians to secure the Zionist colonial project was carried out by the British.

The UN Partition resolution updated the 1917 declaration of war on the Palestinians, under different sponsors. Following the decline of the old European colonial powers after World War II, colonialism was in bad odor, and national liberation was in the air, so the Zionist project was shrewdly repackaged as self-determination for the national movement of a people that had been cruelly oppressed in Europe. This appeared to be an incontrovertible argument in the immediate aftermath of the revelation of the horrors of the Holocaust, and it retains its strength in the United States and much of Europe to this day.

## Resolution 242: Palestinians Just Refugees

The second superpower-mandated pronouncement constituting a new historical landmark, and amounting to a declaration of war on the Palestinians, was UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 242 of November 1967. This resolution was supposedly meant to produce peace between the Arab states and Israel in return for evacuation of territory the latter had occupied during the June 1967 war. To this day, the resolution has not produced a comprehensive or lasting peace. Instead, UNSC Resolution 242 consecrated and aggravated the results of the 1948 war, both in terms of Israel's expulsions of Palestinians and its territorial aggrandizement. Resolution 242 never mentioned any of the basic political issues raised by the 1948 war, or the steps that had been mandated by earlier UN resolutions, such as refugee return and compensation or Israel returning to the lines laid down by the Partition Plan and giving up the gains of the 1948 war in excess of that plan. Instead UNSC Resolution 242 referred only to a "just settlement of the refugee problem." There was no specific mention of the Palestinians, and no specification of what this vague proviso meant, nor did the

measure have any explicit political content. Resolution 242 thereby helped to further efface the Palestinians from their own country and from history.

Like the Balfour Declaration, UNSC Resolution 242, which has become the universally accepted basis for a resolution of the entire conflict via its “land for peace” formula, does not even mention the Palestinians as a people or as a party to the conflict. This is the case despite the fact that they represent the core of the problem in Palestine, going back to their displacement in 1948 to create a Jewish-majority state in a country with a large Arab majority. By shunting the Palestinians aside with the wording “a just settlement of the refugee problem,”<sup>16</sup> UNSC Resolution 242 treats the entire issue as a conflict between the Arab states and Israel. Again like the Balfour Declaration, the resolution completely ignores the ongoing colonial process in Palestine, which was exacerbated by Israel’s 1967 occupation of the remaining parts of Arab Palestine. UNSC Resolution 242 thus constitutes another great power act of what Kimmerling called “politicide,” and amounts to another declaration of war on the Palestinians.

The Palestinian national movement suffered successive crushing military defeats at the hands of Britain, and then of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel backed by both superpowers, starting with the 1936–39 revolt and ending with the war of 1947–49. In the wake of these catastrophes, it may have seemed as if that movement, and perhaps even the Palestinian people themselves, had disappeared. Their traditional leadership under the discredited Mufti of Jerusalem had been shattered and dispersed, more than half of the entire Palestinian Arab population had been made refugees, and most of their country had been absorbed into Israel, with Jordan and Egypt in control of smaller parts. The Palestinians appeared to have no voice, no central address, and no champions. Partisans of the Zionist movement’s takeover of Palestine and the replacement of the country’s indigenous inhabitants with a Jewish settler population had long fervently hoped for such an outcome. In 1969, Golda Meir told the *Sunday Times* of London categorically: “There were no such thing as Palestinians. . . . They did not exist.”<sup>17</sup> Israel’s prime minister thereby took the negationism that is characteristic of every colonial project to the highest possible level: for Meir, the Palestinians not only did not exist, they never had.

Even as Meir spoke, however, events were proving that contrary to the hopes of those who wished them ill, the Palestinians were still very much in existence. Following a decade-long hiatus after 1948, young middle-class Palestinian professionals inside and outside their homeland resuscitated their shattered national movement on a very different basis than that of the elite-dominated Palestinian politics in the pre-1948 era. The 1967 war gave an enormous boost to these Palestinian nationalist militants openly advocating and practicing what they called “armed struggle” against Israel, later coalescing into the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This rebirth of their national movement in a new form constituted another episode of resistance by the Palestinian people to the long war against them. It was a forceful reaffirmation that they existed in the face of constant denial.

The nonexistence of the Palestinians was something Israel had not only proclaimed, as per Meir’s statement, but also had put into action, via the demolition after 1948 of over four hundred Palestinian villages whose population had previously been forced to flee their homes and were banned from returning, and the Hebrew renaming of sites all over the country. As grave as these Israeli actions was the considered decision of the United States and the other great powers, expressed through UNSC Resolution 242, to ignore the Palestinians entirely. It was not only against their physical

dispossession, but also against all of these denials and slights, that the newly galvanized Palestinians reacted in the 1960s and early 1970s. They did so primarily by violently asserting their existence via a series of spectacular attacks inside Israel and abroad.

The response in the United States, Israel, and parts of Europe to these Palestinian attacks was intensely negative, immediately stigmatizing the Palestinians as “terrorists.” By this stage, at least in the mind of the United States, Israel had erased its colonial past. It was seen instead entirely in terms of positive images assiduously propagated by the sophisticated propaganda of which Israel and its supporters are masters. Paradoxically, this period when the Palestinians were being thoroughly demonized in the United States was also marked by their success in internationalizing their struggle beyond the confines of the Arab world. The PLO was recognized by the Arab League in 1974 as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, while garnering worldwide recognition. These successes culminated in the opening of PLO missions in over one hundred countries, and in the invitation of Yasir Arafat to speak before the UN General Assembly in the same year. This was the first major international victory in Palestinian history, after so many years of nonrecognition.

However, the main response to the PLO’s armed violence and the organization’s growing international profile was a ratcheting up of the war on the Palestinians. Although Israel took the lead in this war, launching attacks on resistance bases and refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon from 1967 onward, many other actors were involved. Some of these actors were drawn into fighting the Palestinian resistance movement by unceasing Israeli military pressure, whose clear message was that if Arab host countries would not take on the PLO, Israel would continue to devastate their territory. A crucial early front in this war was in Jordan, where during what the Palestinians called Black September, Jordanian troops in 1970 crushed the PLO in Amman and other cities. Jordan was strongly backed in this effort by the United States. A few months later, in the spring of 1971, Jordan expelled all PLO groups from its territory.

Another front in this war on the Palestinians was initiated by a series of Israeli attacks on Lebanon and on the Palestinian refugee population there from 1968 onward. This intense Israeli pressure, subtly but staunchly supported by the United States, eventually produced offensives against Palestinian refugee camps and PLO bases by a variety of actors. The first of these attacks was launched by the Lebanese army in 1973, and followed by right-wing Lebanese militia groups starting in 1975 and by the Syrian army in 1976, concluding with major invasions of Lebanon by the Israeli army in 1978 and 1982. In all of this, the United States was far more than a mere onlooker. Driven by Cold War motives and its close alliance with Israel, U.S. policymakers actively supported and helped coordinate all of these new phases of the war on the Palestinians, often with arms and other forms of assistance, but always acting through proxies. Other powers were also engaged against the Palestinians at different times during this period, including the USSR, which supported the 1976 Syrian offensive against the PLO, as well as the shah’s Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, and Jordan, all of which supported right-wing Lebanese militia groups like the Phalange and the Lebanese Forces at one point or another during what was deemed the civil war in Lebanon.

While the great powers took the decisions that set the international framework for the war on the Palestinians, and there were Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian and other Arab combatants in different phases of this war, from 1947 onward the brunt of the fighting has been done by the State of Israel,



and its precursor, the Zionist movement. In every military operation, the backing of external powers was as vital to Israel's success as had been the might of Great Britain to the successes of Zionism before World War II. In Israel's victory in 1948, the diplomatic support of the United States and the USSR was as indispensable as were the weapons both superpowers supplied. British and French arms played similar key roles in the 1956 and 1967 wars. Israel's unbroken string of military victories over both the Arab armies and the Palestinians after 1967 was entirely dependent on U.S. diplomatic support and on the unlimited provision of advanced U.S. weapons systems.

## **Oslo: No Sovereignty, No Authority, No Jurisdiction**

A subsequent phase of the campaign against the Palestinians took an ostensibly peaceful and diplomatic form. Key events during this phase were the bilateral 1991–93 Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in Madrid and Washington, followed by talks in Oslo and elsewhere. Billed as an effort to peacefully and comprehensively resolve the conflict, in fact the core objective of both the Israeli and U.S. governments was simply to manage it while allowing the extension into the indefinite future of key aspects of the status quo of occupation and colonization. In the negotiations in Madrid, Washington, Oslo and subsequent venues, the Palestinians were in fact not dealing with Israel through a neutral American intermediary, but were actually up against two opponents, Israel and its close ally, the United States. The obstacles that the Palestinians faced in these forums included not only Israel and its formidable U.S. patron, but also autocratic Gulf regimes whose extreme feebleness vis-à-vis both domestic and external threats ensured that they remained pliable and reliable U.S. clients that could be counted on to put pressure on the PLO. They included as well the incompetence, lack of legal knowledge, and ignorance of conditions inside occupied Palestine of the senior PLO officials involved in the 1993 Oslo Accords. These officials at Oslo and afterward accepted terms that had been rejected by the delegation from the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem that the PLO itself had sent to Washington. The members of this delegation proved to be more realistic and hardheaded in dealing with the Israelis and the Americans than were the Tunis-based PLO leadership.

In consequence of all these factors, and most importantly because of Israeli-U.S. collusion, the regime that emerged from the 1991–93 Washington negotiations and the subsequent 1993 Oslo Accords had the effect of denying Palestinian self-determination, while allowing the unlimited continued expansion of colonial settlement and military occupation. The proof of this is the further entrenchment of the occupation, which has now entered its fifty-first year, and the growth in the number of Israelis living in illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem from around two hundred thousand at the time of the Madrid talks in 1991 to over six hundred thousand today. Thus, the so-called peace process in effect constituted another phase in the U.S.-Israeli campaign against the Palestinians. Its primary aim was to bring the Palestinians to accept their defeat in the long war that has been waged against them since 1917.

There was in fact what amounted to another international declaration of war on the Palestinians over the past dozen years. This came in the form of the joint U.S.-European Union (EU) and Israeli refusal to recognize the results of the 2006 Palestinian elections, won by Hamas, or to deal with the entirety of the Palestinian national movement, including Hamas. The ostensible reason for this

boycott was the refusal of Hamas and other militant factions to renounce violence, but its main impact, one that was clearly intentional, was to split and weaken the Palestinian national movement. The actual acts of war in this period were carried out by Israel, fully supported by the United States, the EU and several Arab governments, notably that of Egypt. These included a brutal siege and blockade of the Gaza Strip, and massive Israeli air, land, and sea attacks on this isolated enclave in 2008–9, 2012, and 2014, invariably with horrendously lopsided casualty tolls. This was combined with continued suppression of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem by Israel, as its colonization efforts proceeded apace in these regions.

Israeli suppression has taken place with the collusion and collaboration of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) created by the Oslo Accords, and mistakenly thought by some Palestinians to be the first step toward an independent state. Whatever illusions some Palestinians may have had, in fact, the PA was always essentially intended by Israel to protect the security of its occupation and colonization enterprise. The PA is a body that has no sovereignty, no jurisdiction, and no authority except that which Israel allows. Even today, the PA continues its close security coordination with the army of occupation and the Israeli intelligence services.

## One Hundred Years' War

It is clear that what has been going on in Palestine for a century has been completely mischaracterized. In fact this long war on the Palestinians should be seen—in comparative perspective—as one of the last major colonial conflicts of the modern era, and as the last one devoted to the establishment of a colonial settler state in the non-European world. In this endeavor, the United States and Europe in effect serve as the metropole, with their extension, Israel, operating as a semi-independent settler colony. None of this is made any less true by the fact that over time, the conflict has also evolved into a national struggle between the indigenous Palestinian people and the Israeli-Jewish nation-state that has grown up and thrived in Palestine. This conflict has thus developed a vital national aspect but the deceptive way in which that one aspect is often depicted as the entire conflict—as a tragic struggle over the same territory between two peoples with equally valid competing claims—has served to obscure the essentially colonial nature of the enterprise. The veiling of this basic reality also elides the fact that like any colonial entity, Israel could never have been successful without the indispensable support of external powers, whether the old European colonial powers or the postwar superpowers. Operating directly through international bodies like the League of Nations and the UN, via a series of landmark decisions in 1917, 1947, and 1967, these large global actors have thrown a cloak of international legitimacy over what has basically been the last colonial war, one waged against the indigenous population of Palestine.

In conclusion, and notwithstanding their great strength, the international and regional powers that have been waging this century-long war on the Palestinians have been trying to do the impossible: to impose a colonial reality in Palestine in a postcolonial age. This was as true of Arthur Balfour, David Lloyd George, Harry Truman, and Lyndon B. Johnson as it is of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, all of whom have, at one time or another, extended full backing to the Zionist project. Were the Palestinians as few compared to their colonizers as were the native peoples of Australasia and the Americas, and were we in the eighteenth or the nineteenth century,

there might have been a chance of successfully implanting a colonial settler society in place of the indigenous one. But in the words of the late historian Tony Judt, Zionism has “imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on.”<sup>18</sup> It has done this by exporting a colonial Euro-American project to a non-European locale, with a large existing population. In view of the persistent and stubborn resistance of the Palestinians to their displacement and to their erasure from history, such a project simply cannot succeed in the twenty-first century.

Even though it cannot succeed, despite the hitherto successful concealment of the encounter’s basically colonial nature from most Americans and many Europeans, two difficult questions remain. In light of the history outlined, how can this obfuscation be dissipated so that the true nature of the ongoing struggle in Palestine is made clear? And how can these two peoples, the Palestinians and the Israelis, transit to a peaceful postcolonial future, on whatever political basis can be worked out, in which one of them does not use constant violence and massive external support to oppress and try to supplant the other?

#### About the Author

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#### ENDNOTES

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- 5 Letter from British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour to Baron Rothschild dated 2 November 1917. Its contents subsequently became known as the Balfour Declaration, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration>.
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- 8 Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews: A Lifelong Friendship* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), p. 71. This exchange is also recorded in the Weizmann papers.
- 9 Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State [Der Judenstaat]*, pamphlet originally published in Vienna, 1896 (New York: Dover, 1988), available at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/25282/25282-h/25282-h.htm>.
- 10 Vladimir (later Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, “The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs,” first published in Russian under the title “O Zheleznoi Stene” in *Rassvyet*, 4 November 1923, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-the-iron-wall-quot>.
- 11 Jabotinsky, “The Iron Wall.”
- 12 Eyewitness accounts by participants at the General Assembly session of the arm-twisting that took place, and one other account, are given by Khalidi in *From Haven to Conquest*, pp. 716–29; Richard

Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942-1947* (New York: Pageant Press, 1962), pp. 161-85; and John Snetsinger, *Truman, The Jewish Vote and the Creation of Israel* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), pp. 58-72.

- 13 The definitive study of this massacre, which establishes the correct number of those killed, and lists their names, is by Walid Khalidi: *Dayr Yasin: Al-Juma'a 9/4/1948* [Dayr Yasin: Friday 4/9/1948] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1999).
- 14 UN General Assembly, "Resolution 181 (2): Future Government of Palestine," A/RES/181(II), 29 November 1947, <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/7F0AF2BD897689B785256C330061D253>.
- 15 For more on this topic, see Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
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