Colonization in Zionist and Israeli History

In this article the Israeli Historian Ilan Pappé discusses the historical and Jewish Israeli contemporary colonisation of Palestine and the resultant ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.¹ Pappé is one of the so-called New (Israeli) Historians who questioned the Israeli official Zionist narrative and present alternatives to its presentations of history and of the image of the state of Israel.

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WHEN ZIONISM APPEARED in Palestine in the late 19th century, Colonialism was deemed as a positive process by which enlightened Western powers coach non-Western societies on the way to modernization and westernization. The early founding fathers of Zionism, including the first prophet and leader of it, Theodore Herzl, were therefore quite happy to talk about the colonization of Palestine as part and parcel of the Zionist project. They did indeed view Zionism first and foremost as a national project – the revival of Hebrew-Jewish identity – which was meant to be the best means of confronting anti-Semitism and the persecution of the Jews. When Zionism developed from its early centers of Eastern and central Europe and focused on Palestine as the territory on which the new Jewish national identity would develop, the movement became a colonialist one. At first there were serious discussions about which territory would be the most suitable to serve the Zionist cause – but all the destinations had something in common – they were outside Europe in a world that was in an ever increasing pace colonized.

Palestine was an understandable choice.

It was the biblical land of Israel in the eyes of religious Jews and the cradle of their faith, as well the coveted land on which at the end of times, all the exiles of Israel would return and be redeemed for their sins. From a strictly religious point of view, Jews were not allowed to seek control of sovereignty of this land until this apocalyptic period arrived. This was why most of the Orthodox Jews rejected Zionism, once it became clear that this was a project that sought to build a Jewish state in Palestine. Ultra-Orthodox Jews reject it until today for the very same reasons.

Some of the destinations considered by Zionism in the 19th century were already in the process of being depopulated from their indigenous populations – the United States or Latin America. Palestine was different as it was part of a sovereign state – the Ottoman Empire – fully protected by the web of alliances and codes of the world in the 19th century.

Thus colonizing Palestine was both confronting the presence of a native population and the sovereignty of an Empire. The latter problem was dealt with by diplomatic negotiations, which were meant to secure the beginning of Zionist settlement and colonization of Palestine. These were not always successful. The native population of Palestine had representatives in the Ottoman parliament and many outside Palestine, Arabs and non-Arabs, who were loyal to the Ottoman state and rejected by and large any European or foreign colonization projects in the Empire's territories. The leaders of the Zionist movement used bribery and offers of being able to strengthen the Empire's statues in Europe through the connection of rich bankers and leading politicians to try and persuade

Istanbul to allow the colonization of Palestine. With these means, scores of Zionist settlement project began to appear in Palestine in the late 19th century. This first phase of Palestine's colonization that began in 1882 and lasted into the 20th century is referred to in Israel historiography as the First Aliya.

Aliya means «ascendance» in Hebrew. Jews who left their home-countries and went to Palestine were ascending from low life – as a nation – into an elevated life of redemption and return. It was one of the first of many words and terms that produced a language that covered the project of colonization, when Colonialism lost its legitimacy and attractiveness in the Western world.

But for that to happen, the Zionist leaders had to deal with a far more serious problem than that of the Ottoman sovereignty, or the changing moods in the world about colonization. And this was the fact that not only the land they coveted was not empty – the people who lived on it for a millennium regarded it as their homeland and was also developing a national identity and discourse.

But in the first two decades of colonization, in fact until Palestine was occupied by the British Empire in 1918, all three actors on the scene were not as yet aware that the collision between the newcomers and the indigenous population was to become the main problem, or rather the principal outcome of the Zionist colonization of Palestine.

The Ottoman Empire was content with laws limiting the colonisation to only Jewish citizens of certain countries and under a strict quota; the Zionist movement could only recruit a small number of poor

young Jews to commence the colonisation and the Palestinian notables who formed the local elite did not as yet see the Zionist penetration as a severe one. In their newspapers they blamed Europe for throwing at their threshold the most wretched and poor Europeans, instead of dealing with it on European soil.

It all changed with the beginning of the British mandatory era in Palestine (1918-1948). In those thirty years, the basic concepts underlying the Zionist colonisation project, and indeed its principal goals became clear and replaced the vaguer ideas of the previous century.

In simple terms, one can say that the Zionist leadership was aiming for having as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians on it as feasible. Two means were chosen for implementing this strategy: Bringing in new Jewish immigrants and purchasing land for building on it Jewish settlements. Zionist and Israeli historiography would later refer to the purchase of land as proof that although the Zionist movement did not possess the land, it was given the land by the local people. But in fact, only a very small portion of the land which became Israel, less than 6%, was purchased. The remaining 94% was taken by force of the UN partition resolution of 1947 and through the 1948 ethnic cleansing. Furthermore, most of the land the Jewish community was able to buy was sold by absentee landlords who did not live in Palestine, but in neighbouring Arab capitals. The real owners were the Palestinian tenants of the lands that in some cases had to be evicted by force during the mandatory period.

But the Zionist colonisation project in the mandatory period was not only about

land purchase and bringing in Jewish immigrants. It was also an attempt to build a future state and with the British assistance, an economic and political infrastructure for such a future state was constructed including: Autonomous school and medical systems, and a market, which was segregated from the Arab one. The immigration brought by the end of the British mandate the overall Jewish population to 660,000, living next to 1.3 million Palestinians, controlling less than 6% of the land, but with a solid basis for creating a state.

The United Nations took over the question of Palestine from Britain, after the latter had enough of endless futile attempts to solve the growing problem between the indigenous Arab population and the new Jewish settlers. Moved by the Holocaust and oblivious to the rights of the native society, the UN suggested the partitioning of Palestine into two states, almost equal in size. The fact that this suggestion was totally rejected by the Palestinians did not deter the UN that decided to impose the solution – or rather allowed the Jewish forces to impose it by force. In fact, the rejection by the Palestinians of the proposal paved the ground for a Jewish take-over of Palestine beyond the areas allocated to the future Israel by the UN. Despite a military attempt by neighbouring Arab armies to prevent Jewish forces from occupying large parts of Palestine, 78% of the land became Israel. Most of the one million Arab Palestinians living in Palestine became refugees after they were ethnically cleansed from their villages and towns.

Thus, when the 1948-war over in the beginning of 1949, the Zionist colonisation project became a success story. Almost

80% of the land was now in Jewish hands. Two years after the state of Israel was declared, new laws were passed by the Israeli parliament to ensure that the vast majority of this land would be exclusively Jewish. For this purpose much of the land was entrusted in the hands of the Jewish National Fund, which made the ownership of the land not only state-lands, but also land exclusively belonging to the 'Jewish people'. This meant that the land could not be sold or leased to non-Jews, namely the Palestinians citizens remaining in Israel after the 1948 ethnic cleansing.

Some of the Palestinians left behind had still held a large share of ownership of the land, especially in the Galilee. The colonisation project in between 1948 and 1967 was complimented by an extensive policy of expropriation of land by the state for the budding of new Jewish settlement. Indeed the colonisation orientation of Israel in that period was in two geographical directions: In the north, where the worried Israeli officials wanted to Judaize the Galilee, as it was still a region where the majority of the population was Palestinian. Even today in 2006, despite additional campaigns of Judaization, the area has an equal numbers of Palestinians and Jews in it.

The second drive, also not much of a success story was towards the south, where according to the vision of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, the arid Negev should become a blooming garden. Although very few Jewish citizens were attracted to the new settlements built, the Israeli authorities continued to cleanse the Negev of its Bedouin tribes, who until then led sedentary lives; as they had done for many centuries before the advent of Zionism to Palestine.

Far more important within a context of a survey of Israeli colonisation is the transformation of the rural Palestinian area into an Israeli one. The Israeli forces destroyed Five hundred and thirty-one villages. In a very short time, they were demolished and wiped off the face of the earth. They were turned either into new Jewish settlements or into recreational forests. The new settlements were quite often given a Hebrew name that resembled the Palestinian one – Lubyā became Lavi and Saffuriyya became Zipori. The names were granted by the naming committee that was a sub-division of the Jewish National Fund.

Colonisation in Post-1967 Israel

Some of the patterns characterising the colonisation history of Zionism and Israel were reactivated in the areas Israel occupied in 1967. But this is in many ways a different chapter, also because it was implemented in a very different historical period from that of the late 19th century when Zionism took its early steps in Palestine.

There were two ideological camps struggling inside Israel after the June 1967-war and the end result of their struggle determined the colonisation map of the West Bank and the Gaza strip seized by Israel. The first camp was comprised of the redeemers; they believed that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were the heart of ancient Israel and saw their occupation as the redemption of the ancient homeland. Therefore they demanded full Jewish colonisation of these areas and acted on their own to implement this demand, while successive Israeli governments hesitated to treat the legality of this demand; the reason being uncertainty regarding the status of the West Bank that was officially

part of Jordan since 1950, and of the Gaza strip, which was declared occupied military area by the Egyptians pending its return to a future independent Palestinian entity.

The redeemers were moved by messianic religious and national dogmas and were organised within an ex-parliamentary movement called Gush Emunim, the block of the Faithful. Many of their partisan settlements were legitimised in hindsight by the Israeli governments and by the Supreme Court in clear violation of international treaties and conventions. For a few years between 1967 and 1974, the Israeli government was trying to limit Gush Emunim's drive, but then gave up.

The redeemers' camp was confronted by the camp of the 'custodians'. People who subscribed to this position believed that the areas Israel occupied in 1967 could serve as bargain cards with the Arab world for return for peace agreements. Hence, they wished to keep the areas under their custody for future peace negotiations. However, both because of energetic activity of the settlers' movement, the Gush Emunim people, inside the occupied territories, and because of their own ambiguity of how much of the areas should be returned for peace, the custodians were never clear in their position. Politically the custodians could be found within the Labour party and within the ex-parliamentary Peace Now movement (whereas the redeemers clanged to the Likud party). They drew maps for a future Israel that regarded certain areas of the West Bank as legitimate areas for future Israeli colonisation projects. These included what Israelis called the Greater Jerusalem area – a very flexible concept that kept growing and nowadays covers almost one third of the

West Bank, as well as the Jordan valley where Labour and Likud governments encouraged colonisation very early on after the region was occupied. Also included is what the Israelis call the Large Settlement blocs: most notable of which are the Gush Ezion area north of Hebron and Ariel south of Qalqilya. Many of the custodians also regarded a new Jewish town build next to Hebron, called Qiryat Araba, as part of this colonisation project.

Less controversial for the domestic Israeli scene were the colonisation projects in the Sinai and the Golan Heights – two additional regions captured by Israel in the 1967-war. There too, new settlements and towns were built, but both ‘redeemers’ and ‘custodians’ did not question their legitimacy or necessity. The custodians believed wrongly that Egypt and Syria would be willing to swap territories or find alternative compensations for these settlements, which seemed crucial for strategic reasons for the survival of Israel.

Colonisation and the Palestine Peace Process

In 1970, the United States began seriously to push Israel and the Arab states towards a resolution of the conflict. This move was welcomed by the ‘custodian’ camp in Israel. On three fronts bilateral discussions commenced, each potentially affecting the future of the Israeli colonisation projects. The most successful one, in fact the only successful one, were the bilateral negotiations with Egypt. It took a while for it to materialise, and it needed a dramatic visit by the late Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat, to Jerusalem in order to persuade the Israeli governments, of both Likud and Labour, of the need to hand back the who-

le of the Sinai to Egypt in return for a full diplomatic relationship. As the deal included a total Israeli withdrawal from the settlements built after the 1967-war, this was objected by the custodians. But a determined Israeli government persuaded the majority of the Jewish settlers to leave and receive lavish compensation deals, and evicted by force a handful of more militant settlers from the north and south of the Sinai.

A very different picture emerged on the Golan Heights where Israel first ethnically cleansed more than 100,000 Syrian Druze who lived there and then built new settlements. The bilateral negotiations moved nowhere. The Israelis refused to apply the same principle they had accepted regarding the Sinai to and the Golan Heights. A political consensus seemed to emerge that the Heights will never be returned to Syria, not even for peace. A manifestation of this lack of will to return the Golan Heights was the 1981 parliamentary law that annexed the heights to Israel.

Similarly frustrating and far more complex were the negotiations over the fate of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. They began when Israel, with American mediations, contemplated a partial withdrawal from areas not viewed as important in the local consensus, in return for peace with Jordan. This position was mainly supported by the Labour party and was named «the Jordanian option». Labour governments in power between 1967 and 1977, and then jointly in coalition with Likud between 1984 and 1988, offered this as their peace plan. In terms of colonisation, it included the dismantling of very few isolated colonies. This deal was flatly rejected by the Jordanians. Needless to say, that this deal

totally excluded the Palestinians from any future say in the fate of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Likud came to full power for the first time in the 1977 elections. It suggested keeping in tact all the colonisation projects inside the occupied territories and suggested a limited political autonomy for the Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. It also officially annexed vast areas in Greater Jerusalem. This gambit totally failed and the negotiations froze more or less until the appearance of the Oslo initiative in 1993.

The Oslo Process and Colonisation

After years of avoiding the Palestinians – their rights and concerns – and looking elsewhere, the custodian camp in Israel was persuaded to negotiate directly with the PLO over the future of Palestine. Equally, the PLO already in the 1970s, was willing to begin a phased dialogue that would focus first on the fate of the areas Israel occupied in 1967 and only later evolve around the Palestine question as a whole. The trigger for rethinking for all parties concerned was the outbreak of the Intifada in December 1987, when it became clear that the people under occupation and colonisation demanded a change and had the potential of destabilising the Middle East as a whole.

The formula set by the architects of Oslo was fairly simple: The Palestinian demand to discuss the future of Palestine as a whole and especially the return of the refugees would not be on the table for five years in which the Israelis will only partially withdraw from the cities of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, freeze the construction of additional settlements and

allow a measure of autonomy in the evicted places. The Palestinians were asked to build a vast security network that would replace the Israeli secret service to prevent any armed resistance against Israel emanating from the occupied territories. This was all topped with a mutual PLO-Israel recognition.

The deal was not working. The Israelis and the Palestinians had different interpretations of what the Oslo agreement was meant to be. The former saw it a substitute for the occupation that would allow full control over the lives of the Palestinians, while the latter believed it was meant to give them a genuine end to the occupation.

Far more important was the reality on the ground. The occupation did not stop for a moment: the same roadblocks, the same army presence and the same total Israeli control – which included daily abuses of human and civil rights – continued unabated. The Palestinian reaction was not slow in coming in a form of a resistance movement that gradually became more Islamist and desperate in the means it chose for the struggle. The Israeli retaliation was severe and made life even more impossible and included a varied repertoire of collective punishments and restrictions. The Oslo accord was everything but a peace process for the people who lived under occupation.

And probably worse, from the point of view we are discussing in this article, the past features of the colonisation project were reactivated. First and foremost, the construction of new settlements did not stop. On the contrary, more settlements were built than in the decade before Oslo. They were not called given in new names, but were supposedly extensions of the old

ones. But the people on the ground were not fooled.

But colonisation was not only the building of new settlements. The presence of the colonialist power was felt in other areas as well. The local economy and industry were unable to find space to develop, while most of the products were still coming from Israel. The coloniser was also a major employer, but with the increase in suicide bomb attacks less and less Palestinians were allowed to work in Israel thus losing the source of living without any substitute. Finally, the army built bypasses and military camps that took more land from the Palestinian people.

No wonder that when, in total disregard for the reality described above, the Israelis and the Americans forced the Palestinians to enter final stage negotiations, and, allocated only two weeks in July 2000 for a summit meeting in Camp David, the whole process collapsed and a second uprising broke out.

Colonisation in the Second Intifada, 2000-2006

Due to their own domestic problems, President Bill Clinton and Ehud Barak wished very desperately to conclude the Oslo accord and declare it as ending the Palestinian conflict once and for all. Clinton's reputation was running low due to the Lewinsky affair and Barak's ambitious policies left him with a minority government about to fall. The quickest way to end the conflict was to force a map on the Palestinians and thus provide conditions that would cater to many Israelis: keeping the big settlement blocs and Greater Jerusalem in the hands of the Israelis, evicting isolated settlements, and creating a 'Palestine' in the

Gaza Strip encircled by an electric fence and a West Bank divided into cantons. The result: No right of return for the refugees and no sovereignty or military power for the future 'Palestine'.

President Arafat's refusal to comply with this impossible dictate led to the American and Israeli dictate presentation as the most generous Israeli offer ever made and Arafat's refusal as almost an act of terror. The provocative march of Ariel Sharon, then in opposition, into the Haram al-Sharif started angry Palestinian demonstrations and protests that were brutally crushed by an Israeli army wishing to show the Arab world that it had not lost its power after it was forced out of Lebanon a few months before.

After 9/11, the Israelis associated Arafat and any Palestinian attempt to resist – from throwing stones to exploding bombs in civilian centres – with al-Qaida and world terror. Moreover, it seems that the newly appointed mediator – the Quartet – accepted most of the Israeli oppressive actions as part of the war against terror.

Colonisation continued to be a tool of oppression also in those years of the second Intifada. There was the wild new colonisation, unauthorised by a new Israeli government led twice by Ariel Sharon in 2001 and 2003. However, an old colonisation project, the Gaza settlements, deemed an obstacle in the eyes of Ariel Sharon who very confidently represented the Israeli consensus. Sharon declared very early on that he wished to see a final map of Israel that would include half of the West Bank, and that he hoped the Palestinians would be happy with the other half and the Gaza Strip. This absurd offer of course led to nowhere. So, Sharon began to imple-

ment it unilaterally and his successor Ehud Olmert is very likely to do the same.

The two halves of the West Bank (resulting from Sharon's division) are not coherent territories. They are bisected today by a new colonisation project: Concealed as natural expansion of existing settlements the Israelis built a belt of settlements that would cut the West Bank into two precisely in the middle. This is almost completed as this article is being written. Another belt under construction will cut the Jordan valley from the rest of the West Bank. When this new area of colonization is added to the older settlement blocs of Ariel and Gush Etzion, Qiryat Arba near Hebron, Greater Jerusalem and the Jordan valley, not much is left as pure Palestinian areas. And all these colonized areas, the present and future governments of Israel wishes to annex one way or another.

The international community and the Quartet in particular, seem indifferent to this most recent phase of the Israeli colonisation of Palestine. This recent colonisation is meant to prevent the return of any of the Palestinians ethnically cleansed in the previous phases in 1948 and 1967, and is one that would make life for those currently living under occupation almost impossible.

Worse, the Palestinians of Greater Jerusalem are today ethnically cleansed in a slow process, which turns even naive municipal felony – such as failing to pay taxes in time – into a crime, the punishment of which is expulsion.

The colonization effort continues also inside Israel in the Galilee and the Negev where Palestinians live. Building new Jewish settlements in the Galilee and driving the Bedouins out of their natural

habitat in the north, to make way for Jewish National Fund forests.

As in the past, colonisation of this kind produces an anti-colonialist movement and this movement brought the Hamas into power in 2006. But, for the sake of all those live there – Jews and Arabs alike, there is a need to revisit and reactivate the peace process on better foundations: acknowledgement of the Israeli ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 and the search for a political structure that would allow the people to move beyond the colonialist period.

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¹ According to the UN and State Department definitions, ethnic cleansing is the removal of one ethnic population from mixed areas in order to homogenize it. Every means, from the most peaceful to the most violent, can be used to achieve this objective.