

## Settler Colonialism in Palestine

*Direct expropriation of the land and promotion of outright extermination*

### The Editors of Monthly Review

**T**he genocide being inflicted by the Israeli state on the Palestinian people has now (as we write this in late November 2023) reached a particularly lethal stage, giving rise to a second and perhaps final Nakba, akin to the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their land in 1948. Under these circumstances, it is crucial to turn to the concept of settler colonialism as it emerged over the last century and a half from the Marxian critique of colonialism/imperialism.

In his chapter on “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” in the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx placed special emphasis on the notion of colonialism proper—that is, settler colonialism (from the Latin *colonus*, meaning settler). In his words, “The treatment of the indigenous population [of the Americas] was...most frightful in plantation-colonies set up exclusively for the export trade.... But even in the colonies properly so called,” by which he meant settler colonies, “the Christian character of primitive

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way for settlers. Settler colonies, whether ancient or modern, directly expropriate the land and, in the process, promote the outright extermination—in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sense of the term, encompassing both extinction and expulsion—of the Indigenous population. Referring to “those sober exponents of Protestantism, the Puritans of New



Israeli military personnel and settlers in Burin, Palestine. Author: [ISM Palestine](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SettlersSoldiersIraqBurin.jpg), CC BY-SA 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

England,” Marx pointed to the “extirpation” at their hands of the original inhabitants through such means as the passage of laws setting prices on the scalps of Indigenous people, men, women, and children. In relation to the English “war of conquest” directed at Ireland, he knowingly noted that the English employed the very same means as they later used “against the Red Indians.” In the times of Elizabeth I and Oliver Cromwell, “the plan was to exterminate the Irish at least up to the river Shannon, to take their land and settle English colonists in their place.” Nevertheless, the attempt to carry this out was unsuccessful due to combined Irish resistance, and the result was the mere imposition of a land-owning aristocracy (Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 [London: Penguin, 1976], 915–18; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question* [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971], 127; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, “[Marx and the Indigenous](#),” October 2023).

By the late nineteenth century, the main English settler colonies in what is now the United States, Canada, and Australia had largely completed their respective genocides directed at the Indigenous inhabitants, whom the settlers greatly outnumbered. Despite this, the struggles of First Peoples in these lands persist to this very day. (The experience in New Zealand was somewhat unique since the resistance of the Māori was effective to a degree, leading to their greater continuing presence.) Sub-Saharan African states colonised by Britain, such as South Africa, Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), and Kenya, were also subjected to forms of white settler colonialism, although this could not be effected completely due to the size of the populations the colonists confronted, leading to institutions of apartheid. Similar conditions faced French settler colonialism in Algeria beginning in the 1830s (and criticised by Marx), which culminated in the mid-twentieth century French-Algerian War and subsequent decolonisation.

Israeli apartheid in occupied Palestine, following the 1948 Nakba, was a product of conditions resembling those experienced by British and French settler colonialists in Africa, given the size of the Palestinian population relative to that of the incoming settlers. Nevertheless, apartheid in the occupied territories was always regarded as a stopgap, while the long-term objective of Zionist settler colonialism has remained the elimination of the Palestinians. Indeed, what mainly

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caused settler colonialism to re-emerge as a major historical and theoretical concept was its growing presence in Israeli-occupied Palestine in the twentieth century. The settler colonial project arose historically out of the reaction (“Zionism”) of many Eastern European Jews to a renewed virulent antisemitism in late nineteenth-century modernity, which August Bebel famously referred to as the “socialism of fools.” This reaction was then manipulated by the British as part of their long-term policy in the region, beginning with the 1917

Balfour Declaration.

As explained by Rosalind Petchesky in the introduction to *A Land with a People*, “The settler colonial project to ‘de-Arabise’ Palestine and bring all of historic Palestine under Zionist sovereignty long pre-dated both the Nakba and worldwide knowledge of the Nazi holocaust. The 1929 constitution of the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the parastatal agency that basically manages distribution of land throughout all Israeli-controlled territory to this day, declared JNF land to be ‘the inalienable property of the Jewish people’ and that ‘[the JNF] is not obliged to act for the good of all its citizens [but] for the good of the Jewish people only.’” Following the Holocaust, the Second World War, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of European Jews, those subscribing to Zionism actively pursued the creation of a new “Jewish homeland” in Palestine, then the home of more than a million Palestinians with very different cultural and religious backgrounds. Zionist settler colonialism was increasingly directed at turning all of Palestine into a Jewish state,

and found a new hegemonic backer in the United States (Esther Farmer, Rosalind Petchesky, and Sarah Sills, [A Land with a People: Palestinians and Jews Confront Zionism](#) [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021]).

As a critical concept seen as directly applicable to the Israel/Palestine conflict, settler colonialism was highlighted as early as 1965 in a pamphlet by Fayez A. Sayegh, titled *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*. Sayegh argued that “Zionist colonialism” had as its aim the establishment of a “settler community” in its own right, not dependent on a metropolitan country, which was “essentially incompatible with the continued existence of the ‘native population’ in the coveted country.” At the same time, the historian of the British Empire D. K. Fieldhouse published his indispensable work, *The Colonial Empires*, utilising a classification of colonies similar to that of Marx and placing heavy emphasis on “settlement colonies” (without discussing Israel/Palestine in that context) (Fayez A. Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* [Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965], 1–5; David K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* [New York: Dell Publishing, 1966]).

However, it was in June 1967, in the midst of the Arab-Israeli War, that Jean-Paul Sartre’s journal *Les Temps Modernes* published a special one-thousand-page edition titled “Le conflit israélo-arabe,” which included within it a book-length

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essay by the great French Marxist Middle East specialist, Maxime Rodinson, titled *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* Rodinson was the son of Russian-Polish Jewish immigrants who were active in the French Communist Party and died in Auschwitz. His analysis of Israeli settler colonialism made a favorable impression on radical journalist I. F. Stone in the United States who, in a review titled “Holy War” in the *New York Review of Books*, called Rodinson’s contribution “by far the most brilliant in the whole

volume.” Rodinson’s work on Israeli settler colonialism was to be published in English in 1973. Another landmark was the publication in 1972 in *New Left Review* of “White-Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism” by Arghiri Emmanuel (most famous for his work *Unequal Exchange*), though Emmanuel’s analysis was mainly concerned with settler colonialism in Africa, as opposed to the Middle East (Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial Settler-State?* [New York: Monad Press, 1973]; I. F. Stone, “Holy War,” *New York Review of Books*, August 3, 1967, 15–16; Arghiri Emmanuel, “White Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism,” *New Left Review* 1/73 [May–June 1972]: 35–57).

In *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?*, Rodinson began by stating: “The accusation that Israel is a colonialist phenomenon is advanced by an almost unanimous Arab intelligentsia, whether on the right or the left. It is one case where Marxist theorising has come forward with the clearest response to the requirements of the ‘implicit ideology’ of the Third World, and has been most widely adopted.” In assessing the situation in Israel/Palestine, he emphasised, like Marx, that the Zionist movement represented a “colonialism in the Greek sense” (as in the Athenian *cleruchy*), which involved the forcible elimination or exile of the dominated population and their replacement by settlers. In some cases, such as New England and Tasmania, he noted, settler colonialism involved outright exterminism, which was built into the very logic of settler colonialism. Israel’s existence as a settler colonial state in the modern world meant the country’s continuing dependence on the main imperial powers, Anglo and French, that were either creators of settler colonial states, or themselves settler colonial states. “There is no ‘revolutionary solution,’” he wrote, “to the Israeli-Arab problem.... It is possible that war is the only way out of the situation created by Zionism. I leave it to others to find cause for rejoicing in



this.” Referring specifically to Zionism, he wrote: “This kind of belief in the infallibility of one’s own ‘ethnic’ group is a frequent phenomenon in the history of human groups. It is called racism” (Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?*, 27, 78, 92, 95).

Not the least of the numerous ties of the United States to Israel, as Rodinson and others have suggested, is their common

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founding in settler colonialism. As Samir Amin pointedly expressed it in *The Reawakening of the Arab World* in 2016, “Like the nineteenth-century US, Israel thinks it has the right to conquer new areas for the expansion of its colonisation and to treat the people who have been living here for two thousand years—if not more—like ‘Redskins’ to be hunted or exterminated” (Samir Amin, [The Reawakening of the Arab World: Challenge and Change in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring](#) [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016], 182–83; see

also Harry Magdoff and Paul M. Sweezy, “[The Uprising in Palestine](#),” *Monthly Review* 40, no. 5 [October 1988]: 1–17).

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but a complete ethnic cleansing, accelerating the genocidal process of Israeli settler colonialism and its Zionist project, with the full support of the United States. Israel is in the process of systematically extending its carpet bombing of Gaza, including hospitals, schools, homes, and even refugee camps—everywhere people can be found—from Gaza City to southern Gaza. On November 16, 2023, Israeli forces dropped flyers all over southern

Gaza telling the population to get out or be eliminated. As Israeli Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter explicitly stated on November 11, “We are now actually rolling out the Gaza Nakba.”

Washington is the one entity, outside Israel itself, that has the power to stop the genocide immediately, as required by international law. However, rather than protesting like most of the world, it is providing arms for genocide, backed by both major political parties. This marks a turning point, not just for Israel or Palestine, but for the world as a whole (Emile Badarin, “[Israel-Palestine War: This is Not about Hamas. It’s a 75-Year Colonial War](#),” *Middle East Eye*, November 17, 2023, [middleeasteye.net](#); Andre Damon, “The Forced Evacuation of Southern Gaza: The Next Stage in the Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine,” *Defend Democracy Press*, November 18, 2023, [defenddemocracy.press](#)).

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