Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine

Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine

Zionism, Settler Colonialism, and the Case for One Democratic State

Jeff Halper

Foreword by Nadia Naser-Najjab

PLUTO PRESS

Contents

PART III
DECOLONIZING ZIONISM, LIBERATING PALESTINE

Introduction:
The Colonist Who Refuses, the Comrade in Joint Struggle

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

– Karl Marx

The times, they are a-changin', even when it comes to the interminable Israeli-Palestinian "conflict." No less than the *New York Times* has taken notice. On January 5, 2018, it ran a piece entitled: "As the 2-State Solution Loses Steam, a 1-State Solution Gains Traction." Mustafa Barghouti is quoted as saying: "It's dominating the discussion."

Certainly the latest flurry around Israeli Premier Netanyahu's plan to annex up to 30 percent of the West Bank, taking advantage of the opening offered by Trump's "Deal of the Century," has changed the equation, whether or not it actually happens. It has forced liberal Zionists like Peter Beinart and Gershon Baskin, two leading lights of liberal Zionism, to confront Zionism's inability to reconcile its exclusive claim to the Land of Israel with the national rights of the Palestinian people. "Now Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to annex parts of the land that Israel has brutally and undemocratically controlled for decades," he writes.[1]

And watching all this unfold, I have begun to wonder, for the first time in my life, whether the price of a state that favors Jews over Palestinians is too high. The painful truth is that the project to which liberal Zionists like myself have devoted ourselves for decades – a state for Palestinians separated from a state for Jews – has failed. The traditional two-state solution no longer offers a compelling alternative to Israel's current path. It is time for liberal Zionists to abandon the goal of Jewish – Palestinian separation and embrace the goal of Jewish–Palestinian equality.

He followed his piece with another in the *New York Times* (July 8, 2020) entitled plainly: "I No Longer Believe in a Jewish State" (although he followed that with an interview in *Ha'aretz* (July 22, 2020) proclaiming that he is still "a Zionist." Gershon Baskin, too, published in the right-wing newspaper *The Jerusalem Post* (June 3, 2020) a piece entitled "With the Two-State Solution Dead, We Must Build for a New Future."

Such sentiments seem to reflect a fundamental shift in the views of young Jews abroad towards Israel, and their concerns with the human rights of Palestinians. The Jewish Voice for Peace, one of the largest and fastest-growing Jewish organization in the United States, issued an explicitly anti-Zionist position paper in 2019. Entitled "Our Approach to Zionism,"[2] it states:

> Jewish Voice for Peace is guided by a vision of justice, equality and freedom for all people. We unequivocally oppose Zionism because it is counter to those ideals …. Through study and action, through deep relationship with Palestinians fighting for their own libera- tion, and through our own understanding of Jewish safety and self-determination, we have come to see that Zionism was a false and failed answer to the desperately real question many of our ancestors faced of how to protect Jewish lives from murderous antisemitism in Europe. While it had many strains historically, the Zionism that took hold and stands today is a settler colonial movement, establish- ing an apartheid state where Jews have more rights than others. Our own history teaches us how dangerous this can be.

The prospect of annexation also shook the international community, for whom the notion of two states is essential for perpetuating an eternal "peace process," its strategy of cost-free conflict management. Heads of State from Boris Johnson and Angela Merkel in the West to Xi Jinping of China urged Israel not to annex. The European Union (EU) warned that it

> will spare no diplomatic efforts to help Israel understand the risks of proceeding with the unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank …. Annexation would constitute a violation of international law; it will cause real damage to the prospects for a two-state solution; it

would also negatively influence regional stability, our relations with Israel, the relations between Israel and Arab states and, potentially, the security of Israel.[3]

Tellingly, while annexation disquieted a few Israelis – mainly liberal *Ha'aretz* readers – for the vast majority it came off as a non-issue. For all its potential political significance, few could see how annexation of the major settlement blocs on the West Bank would change Israel's ongoing occupation in any fundamental way. Although such a move would garner the approval of 103 of the 120 members of the Israeli parliament (all the parties except the Joint Arab List and Meretz), it was (and is) considered a cynical attempt by Netanyahu to distract public attention from his criminal trial. Yet even the readers of *Ha'aretz*, as liberal as Israelis come, took the comments of Beinart and others who question whether the two-state solution is still viable as "utopian dreaming." Anshel Pfeffer, a senior *Ha'aretz* columnist, dismissed Beinart's views as, indeed, "utopian," but for a particular reason that will concern us as we move towards visions, programs and strategies for achieving a single democracy between the River and the Sea. Beinart, says Pfeffer,

> isn't talking to anyone who will actually live in "Israel-Palestine." He's having an internal conversation with a handful of Palestinian American academics and, with their blessing, has created a utopian half-Jewish state which can serve as safe space for a section of young American Jews … who are trying to reconcile their Jewish identity, their inherent affinity with Israel and their progressive values, in a period of ideological and racial turmoil in the U.S.

In other words, so disconnected are Israelis from both the moral and political concerns raised by Beinart that they dismiss his concerns, if not his analysis, with a sense of bemusement at the naivete of American Jews and other foreign critics. Israeli Jews have removed themselves as political actors. Convinced that only they "know the Arabs" and that the international community will in fact do nothing to sanction them, they perceive the status quo as more or less permanent and sustainable. In fact, two-thirds of Israeli Jews don't believe the West Bank is occupied at all.[4] Having dumped Palestinians, the occupation,

Iran, Hezbollah and related issues into the bag of "security" which is better left to the army, the Israeli Jewish public has moved on to more pressing matters such as the economy, religious-secular relations, the Covid virus (as of this writing), the latest political scandal and consumerism. When asked what issues concerned them most, Israeli Jews ranked the occupation and their "conflict" with the Palestinians seventh out of eight.[5]

All this creates an anomalous situation. The more the Israeli-Palestinian "Conflict" disrupts regional and even international stability, contributing to the polarization and militarization of an unstable yet geo-politically crucial region of the world, generating intensive initiatives for peace over the past five-and-a-half decades, the less of a concern it is to the Israeli public. And so, as urgent the need for a resolution is – for Palestinians first and foremost – the less the chance that that resolution will come from Israelis themselves. The fact that Israel has succeeded in reducing one of the world's great conflicts to a "non-issue" domestically does not mean that it is any less urgent or critical, however. There are at least four good reasons why we must concern ourselves with what happens in Palestine/Israel:

1. The suffering of the Palestinians calls out for our intervention. Indeed, the Palestinians living in historic Palestine labor under a hybrid regime of triple repression: settler colonialism since the turn of the twentieth century, the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza since 1967 and, country-wide again, an ever-tightening regime of apartheid. Much of this book details that hybrid regime and its implications for Palestinians.

2. We must not lose track of the fact that only half the Palestinians remain in the country. Massive waves of expulsion and displacement, particularly in 1948 and 1967, have generated a refugee population of 7.2 million people: 4.3 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants displaced in 1948 live mainly in United Nations (UN)-sponsored refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria (where many have been displaced once again by the civil war); 1.7 million refugees of 1948 live outside of the UN system; 355,000 Palestinians and their descendants remain internally displaced inside present-day Israel; with another 834,000 persons displaced in 1967. In addition, Israel continues to generate new

refugees every day. Almost 60,000 homes and livelihood structures have been demolished by Israel in the Occupied Territory since 1967 according to the UN, B'tselem and the figures my organization, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, have collected; 15,000 have been displaced by the construction of Israel's "Separation Barrier"; and tens of thousands more (Arab) *citizens of Israel* have had their homes demolished on an ongoing basis.[6] The refugees must be brought home (or given the choice to remain in the countries where they found refuge or emigrate somewhere else) and provided with equal rights and adequate, secure housing.

3. The Israeli-Palestinian "Conflict" ("Conflict" in quotes because, as we will discuss later, the "conflict" is actually unilateral colonialism) disrupts the entire Middle East and beyond, preventing any movement towards stability, democracy and development. It is not the only cause of instability in the region, of course, but its role as a surrogate of American interests, pursued through the export of arms and technologies of repression to repressive American-allied regimes throughout the region and occasionally by their actual use makes it a major (and not constructive) player. Not only would resolving the Israel-Palestine "conflict" go a long way towards reducing militarization and polarization in the region, it would give more progressive Palestinian and Israeli voices an opportunity to link up with progressive forces throughout the Middle East to produce genuine change – something that is today foreclosed by the "conflict."

4. Israel is exporting not only weaponry, surveillance systems and tactics of militarized policing throughout the world, technologies and structures of repression perfected on its Palestinian guinea pigs in its West Bank and Gaza labs, but a broader model of a Security State. As I detail in my book *War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification*,[7] Israel is universalizing, weaponizing (literally) and exporting its model of a militarized democracy based on the permanent repression of Palestinians. Defining them as "terrorists" gives Israel the ability to "sell" a sophisticated police state driven by the logic of permanent war, in which the demand for "security" trumps all democratic protections. Whether a government and its military/police structures are already police states who merely need the weaponry and justification that

Israel provides – unfortunately the case in much of the Global South – or are democracies who feel besieged by crime, immigration or restlessness on the part of its working poor or young people increasingly excluded from the job market and seeking internal "security" and pacification, Israel's concept of a Security State holds great attraction. Israel's exporting of its militarized Security State to *your* country directly threatens *your* civil liberties. Dismantling Israel's laboratory would send a strong message that Israel's model of militarized democracy is unacceptable.

The problem, then, is that this untenable and repressive hybrid regime of settler colonialism, occupation and apartheid, which threatens us all, whether locally or globally, seems immune from resolution. By making itself useful to the world's hegemons, employing skillful lobbying, the strategic use of the massive financial resources, manipulation of the Holocaust and strategic accusations of anti-Semitism, Israel fears no international sanctions from any quarter. Having marginalized the Palestinians politically and militarily, it feels it has rendered the "conflict" to the sidelines, among the Israeli Jewish public as well as internationally (although, as I argue later in this book, this need not be true). And it has done so in large part through conniving with governments to keep the "two-state solution" alive as an effective means of perpetual conflict management, by separating the process of (seeming) negotiating from its actual resolution. In addition to all this, because the Zionist/Israeli settlers have become so deeply embedded in the country, having worked to marginalize the indigenous Palestinians and so Judaize the country, they have rendered Zionist settler colonialism difficult to dismantle.

But this is not a book about settler colonialism or Zionism *per se*. It is a book about summoning power and *decolonizing*, about dismantling a settler regime and replacing it with something more equitable. The two-state solution has always been merely a cynical tool of conflict management never intended to actually resolve the "conflict." The good news is, as Beinart's articles, JVP's anti-Zionist manifesto and appreciation of what annexation all imply, that the two-state solution is becoming less and less tenable, even among "pro-Israeli" supporters. People aware of how important it is to actually resolve this issue are therefore asking: So where do we go if the two-state solution is no

longer viable and the current regime of growing Israeli apartheid is unacceptable? The only just and workable alternative appears to be transforming Israel's apartheid regime into a single democracy for all the country's inhabitants, including refugees and their descendants who choose to return. A one-state solution. It is this position that this book argues for.

While the one-state solution might, indeed, be "in the air," it is not yet a viable alternative. No one has really thought through the entire process of decolonization, very different from conflict resolution but the only way out of a colonial situation. What does decolonization entail? What replaces a colonial regime? How do we overcome Israeli opposition to a single state (and no less Israeli indifference to the entire issue), as well as the unconditional support Israel receives from the world's governments? What is our strategy for reaching a just, post-colonial reality? Without a long-term vision and a political end-game, without organization and strategy, and without the active leadership of Palestinians supported by their critical Israeli Jewish allies, those of us who seek justice and peace in Palestine/Israel are not political actors. We are simply not in the game.

This book attempts to "think through" the process of decolonization and suggest ways of actually getting there. Since the anti-colonial political analysis and program set out in the book was written by a settler and not an indigenous Palestinian, some contextualization is necessary before we start. As Patrick Wolfe said so clearly: in settler societies there can be no innocent academic discourses about Indigenous knowledge and experiences.[8] Positionality is critical if my remarks are to be properly understood.

POSITIONALITY: ACTIVIST/SCHOLAR, COLONIST WHO REFUSES, COMRADE

I am an engaged academic who has researched and written about Palestine/Israel for many years.[9] My political activity "on the ground" since 1997 has been as the head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. ICAHD is an Israeli organization that fights Israel's policy of demolishing Palestinian homes – some 55,000 in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) since 1967, more than 130,000 in historic Palestine since 1948. It is one of the cruelest, most superflu-

ous aspects of Zionism. But ICAHD also takes what it's learned from house demolitions to address major political questions. Why is Israel demolishing homes throughout the country? What is Israel's intent towards the OPT and the Palestinian people? How is the occupation being constructed and how does it operate? What is the human cost of colonization, occupation and apartheid? That work has led me into involvement as a founding member of the Palestinian-led One Democratic State Campaign, about which more later.

I am not a Palestinian (although my friend Uri Davis would characterize me as a "Palestinian Hebrew),[10] and I certainly cannot speak for Palestinians – or for 98 percent of Israeli Jews, for that matter. I am an anti-Zionist Israeli Jew, a settler/immigrant from the US, a White cis-male, whose political commitments were forged in the 1960s. For our purposes here, what defines me most appropriately is a "colonist who refuses."[11]

I settled in/immigrated to Israel in 1973, for many reasons I will not go into here. I did so with my eyes open, believing I could reconcile my desire to become an Israeli with my readiness to work for "peace" with the Palestinians. I was active on the Palestine/Israel issue on campus in the US. Upon my arrival as a settler/immigrant (I had not yet understood the difference), I became involved in *Siakh*, the Israeli New Left. Over the years, as my political awareness has grown along with Israeli apartheid, I have accepted my colonial status – although I still identify myself as an Israeli. I have entered into the anti-colonial struggle with my Palestinian victims/comrades, in the hope of "redeeming" my Israeliness, giving it expression within a post-colonial society in which the Palestinian refugees return and we all share a common society and citizenship in equality. But I am faced with the fundamental dilemmas of every settler colonial, as expressed eloquently by the late Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi:

> Once he has discovered the import of colonization and is conscious of his own position ([vis-à-vis] that of the colonized and their necessary relationship), is he going to accept them? Will he agree to be a privileged man, and to [merely] underscore the distress of the colonized? Will he be a usurper and [still] affirm the oppression and injustice to the true inhabitant of the colony? Will he accept being a colonizer under the growing habit of privilege and illegiti-

macy, under the constant gaze of the usurped? Will he adjust to this position and his inevitable self-censure?[12]

Even after answering these questions "no," after years of inner struggling and political growth, yet other critical questions remain. Should I simply leave, as some suggest, or focus on changing Israeli society, policies and attitudes? Or (the path I chose) become a co-resister, a (junior) partner in a joint Palestinian/Israel struggle for decolonization. I reached the latter conclusion out of the conviction that decolonization of a settler state like Israel is possible, must be an inclusive endeavor, and that in a post-colonial reality I can find a just and meaningful place as an Israeli Jew in a new, inclusive civil society – in which I will integrate my present political identity with the new one of my new country. I can do this, I believe, through establishing political and personal relationships predicated on joint struggle. Anti-colonialism divides the "sides" differently from conflict resolution: not Jewish versus Palestinian, but anti-colonial versus colonial. As Palestinian activist Muhannad Abu Gosh phrased it, we are in a "common liberatory struggle; … everyone is welcomed to join it as long as they renounce the privilege of being a 'Jewish side in Palestine.'"[13]

The next question becomes: How does a settler, one of the dominant, oppressive population, properly engage with the colonized? On one level, what is the political agenda? What does coexistence entail, and is it really possible? And how do we, the ever-privileged settler/activists, enter into the political equation? "Solidarity should be directed to decolonization," writes Clare Land of her work with the Indigenous of Australia, "and the way solidarity is undertaken needs to be decolonized."[14] On another level, how do we, the powerful, establish genuine working relations across power differentials? A new relationship must emerge. Those aspiring to surmount their colonial position, like me, must adopt a mix of critical self-reflection and a willingness to submit to, or at least accept, the agenda of the colonized, their priorities, their decisions, even their ways of working. The goals are three-fold. Agency and sovereignty must be restored to the Indigenous. The colonial structures of domination and control must be dismantled. And the settlers themselves must be liberated, indigenized in a post-colonial society after they relinquish their privileges and become citizens of the new polity, but without having to sacrifice their own identities, col-

lective memories, symbols or associations. "This new way of relating," says Land,[15] "includes non-Indigenous people seeing their interests as linked in with those of Indigenous people, though not in a way which appropriates Indigeneity."

These were the personal and political considerations that went into my political work. We, the Israeli Jewish activists who founded ICAHD a quarter-century ago, have, over the years, managed to forge close working relationships across the power differentials by "being there" for the Palestinians. We physically resist Israel's demolition of Palestinian homes, and we have rebuilt almost 200 homes that have been demolished. Through our work "on the ground," we have developed a powerful political analysis which we share, including such useful concepts as the Matrix of Control. We produce maps, brochures, booklets, books, films, PowerPoint presentations and other informational materials, bringing them to the international community through our strategic advocacy. And we are actively engaged in anti-colonial work with our Palestinian partners, endeavoring to transform a settler colonial regime into a democratic state of all its citizens. Through all this we have focused on decolonization ourselves and our methods of working with Palestinians and other oppressed peoples. The fact that we, as Israelis, have managed to sustain our close working relationships with our Palestinian partners despite the strains of ever-greater Israeli repression and violence speaks well to our attempts to be relevant, sincere partners in decolonization. Although we remain colonists-who-refuse until the conclusion of the process of decolonization, the decolonization project must be a shared one between the Palestinians and their Israeli Jewish allies. We must become comrades in a joint struggle – and I believe our Palestinian colleagues have come to see us in that light.

I have tried to take my critical abilities as a colonizer-who-refuses into my work with the One Democratic State Campaign, from which this book emerges. Being an Israeli Jew has its advantages in the struggle for decolonization. I am a stakeholder in the process, an ally coming from the oppressor's side. I can bring to the table an intimate and critical understanding of Israeli society, its history and ideologies, its internal differences and its aspirations and fears. These can make a crucial contribution in our collective effort to end the Zionist settler project and transform the country into an egalitarian polity. As a

trained anthropologist with extensive experience in both research and activism, I am well placed to contribute to communicating both the issues at stake and an inclusive way forward – to harness the power of knowledge production for liberation, instead of as a tool of control.[16] The program of decolonization and reconstruction I present in this book reflects the discussions we have had within the One Democratic State Campaign. It is augmented by my own academic analyses and views gained through my years of "being there." The process of "thinking it through" must be a collective one in the end. It is to that task that this book – really a kind of working paper – is offered.

FOCUSING ON DECOLONIZATION

In terms of the intent and focus of this book, it is not meant to be "academic," that is, a book whose main purpose is theoretical analysis, although it does apply critical theory to the task at hand: decolonizing Zionism and establishing a single democracy between the River and the Sea. As the book's subtitle indicates, its purpose is to "makes a case" for a particular political program. To that end, I ground my analysis in the academic literature, taking from it what serves my purpose, but careful to respect the substance of the analyses and the views of their authors. Because my purpose is to "make my case" in a clear and focused way – my intended audience is more activists and the informed public than fellow academics – I try to apply theory, analysis and concepts in ways that are comprehensible and accessible to my readers. I also validate non-academic sources of knowledge and analysis; the views of my Palestinian and Israeli Jewish comrades with whom I have been politically engaged over the past half-century, whether "on the ground," in political forums or in personal interactions. My own experience as an engaged anthropologist is certainly reflected in the ways I put together this book and in the analysis and political program it presents. I have thus gone beyond purely academic sources to "make my case" for a single state, especially as works dealing with the form of decolonization Palestine/Israel calls for are sorely lacking.

The book is divided into three sections. Part I: Zionism as Settler Colonial Project (Chapters 1–2) describes settler colonialism in theory and then shows why Zionism is best understood in that light. Strate-

gies for dismantling Zionist colonial structures and then reassembling a truly liberatory post-colonial reality require us to examine how settler colonialism works, how it is structured and in what ways a program for summoning focused power may decolonize it. Towards that end I suggest focusing on what I call Zionism's Dominance Management Regime.

Part II: Three Cycles of Zionist Colonial Development (Chapters 3–5) traces the development of the Dominance Management Regime through its cycles of expansion and development: the pre-state cycle (1880s–1948), the Israeli state cycle (1948–67), and the occupation cycle (1967–present). This part reveals the governing "logic" of Zionist settlement and shows that decolonization, not conflict resolution, is the only way out of colonization towards genuine liberation.

Part III: Decolonizing Zionism, Liberating Palestine (Chapters 6–10) focuses on the process of decolonization, of summoning power through popular international mobilization and effective strategy revolving around a comprehensive political program, and the completion of the liberation project through the establishment of a democratic polity, a common civil society and, ultimately, a shared political community. It is to that undertaking that this second half of this book is devoted.

A book that attempts to "make a case" for a democratic state between the River and the Sea must set out clearly its terms of reference, its theory and its analysis before moving on to possible ways of getting there. Some readers may prefer to get the theory and overview in Part I and then jump to the nitty-gritty of a political program in Part III, skipping (or skimming) over the history and structural details of Zionist colonialism in Part II if that is of less interest.

So as to ground my discussion as much as possible in "real" political terms, I take the One Democratic State Campaign's 10-point program as the starting point of my discussion of decolonization. I do this for two reasons. First, it is the product of a two-year process of intensive deliberation by a core group of some 50 Palestinian intellectuals, academics, political figures and activists representing all the Palestinian communities, including Palestinians involved in researching and resisting Zionist colonialism and in formulating previous one-state programs – although initiated by Palestinian citizens in Israel. Their labor was supported by the active participation of 20 or so Israeli

Jewish comrades, myself included. Thus the Palestinian voice in all its diversity (gender included) was paramount in formulating the political program that forms the basis of this book's analysis.

Second, I am keenly aware that, as the author, an Israeli voice occupies a disproportionate space. The original intent was to write this with a Palestinian colleague, but as we approached the work we understood that a joint analysis should come at a later time. Not that we disagreed in our analysis, but we thought it better that an Israeli analysis of Zionist settler colonialism should stand separately from an analysis by a Palestinian, since we would raise different but no less important issues from our different perspectives. As an Israeli I can't approach settler colonialism as a Palestinian would, and if I tried I would suppress elements of Zionism I would otherwise consider critical. And vice versa. This work, then, is but a step towards a shared analysis somewhere down the line. Still, my engagement with Palestinian sources and my reliance on a political program produced by Palestinians in the consideration of decolonization means that a meaningful amount of integration took place (although I acknowledge that there is a large literature in Arabic to which I have access only through translations). This is not a book a Palestinian would write, but hopefully it is one a Palestinian would find useful, containing insights that might otherwise be lost. In the end I take umbrage as an anthropologist in the comparative method: it is clear that no ethnography can be complete and that no one researcher, Indigenous or not, can cover everything. It is in our collaboration that the best and most effective analysis emerges.

Just one word about the seeming inconsistency in capitalizing – or not – the terms "Indigenous" and "Native." I tried to follow the *Indigenous Peoples Terminology Guidelines for Usage*,[17] which specifies: "Always capitalize Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nation, Inuit, Métis as a sign of respect the same way that English, French, Spanish, etc. are capitalized." There's one complication, however. Unlike "English," etc., "indigenous" or "native" can also be adjectives (e.g., indigenous rights, native peoples) that apply to a category of people but not to a specific one, or a generic description (my Israeli kids are indigenous to Jerusalem, where they were born, but are not part of the country's Indigenous population). So I tried to capitalize when referring to particular populations but not when referring to indigenous people generically. I

know this creates some apparent confusion – in fact, the line gets very fine sometimes and I might make a misjudgement based on context – but the usage attempts to be consistent with the *Guidelines*.