

## Gaza Stripped: the Familiar Atrocities of Settler-colonialism

Chantal Zabus, Alessandra Capperdoni, Esther de Bruijn, and Souhir Zekri

“This has been an especially harrowing year of war and human suffering across the planet,” says *The Guardian* in its Saturday (7 December 2024) edition. “As well as the horrors in the Middle East, Ukraine and Sudan, armed conflicts elsewhere – including those in Haiti, Columbia, Central African Republic, Myanmar, Syria, Ethiopia, and Democratic Republic of Congo – leave in their wake a trail of terror, chaos, and grief.” Yet, it is Gaza, which is home to some 2.3 million people spread over 141 square miles and only 25 miles long, that gives us pause.

The Middle East has grappled with a series of empires—from the Ottoman Empire to the British—and with the concomitant rise of various forms of nationalism that played a role in shaping regional politics. Because the British and French Orientalist discourse led to both anti-Semitism and anti-Arabism, we need a less polarized dialogue. Noam Chomsky’s work on the British and French erection of the ‘Arab façade,’ and its American continuation, highlights a consistent pattern in the way that imperial powers install particular leaders to do their bidding, including quashing nationalist movements, whether in European-colonized territories or settler-colonial states.

As a journal, *Postcolonial Text* is committed, in its very name, to address the colonial nature of any project worldwide, whether residual or long-lasting. Postcolonial countries in the Global South have displayed empathy for ‘the Palestinian cause’ (more so than for the Herrero, Nama, Rwandese, Bosnians, or Rohyngas) and its fight for national or statal sovereignty, because they recognize in it their own independence movements symbolically crystallized in the 1960s. Yet the Palestinian case goes beyond Rwanda or Bosnia’s civil wars, as it is a victim of settler colonialism. Britain played a central role in facilitating Israel’s occupation of Palestine, not only via the ‘contradictory promises’ of a set of mandates from 1915-1938 including the Balfour Agreement,<sup>1</sup> but also through the brutal colonial legal and military tactics which Britain modeled for Israel in Palestine up to British withdrawal in 1948, and which Israel adopted in the 1948 Nakba—the Arabic word for catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

In the words of Avi Shlaim, “Britain actively created the conditions for its own selfish imperialist ends, in which the Palestinian catastrophe—‘the Nakba’—could unfold. An unbroken thread of duplicity, mendacity,

chicanery and skullduggery connects British foreign policy from the beginning of its mandate to the Nakba.”<sup>3</sup>

Israel is a late-stage settler-occupier whose recent displays of military and ecocidal violence against Palestine and Southern Lebanon belong in with colonial atrocity. This evidence, which some have wrongly identified as anti-Semitic, is also accepted by Israeli leftist intellectuals and academics such as Ilan Pappé, Shlomo Sand, and Norman Finkelstein, to name but a few.<sup>4</sup> Calls for de-escalation and restraint also emanate from the Israeli left and even the families of the dead in Israel after Hamas’s attack on 7 October 2023.

The foundational violence of the Israeli settler state is inscribed in the Zionist project and its tools: dispossession, displacement, and ethnic cleansing. Even though Zionism was originally a young liberation movement and several Zionist projects have envisioned co-habitation with Arabs, albeit in a region ancestrally cross-cultural,<sup>5</sup> the settler-state’s ethno-nationalism, rooted in deep, historical trauma (the Shoah) and its ‘imagined community’ à la Anderson, have been given a cruel twist. Because Zionism was coopted by the right-wing rise in Israel at different moments of its history and especially today, it bears a major responsibility in Israel’s current genocidal war.

As we write, new developments such as Israel’s kicking out UNRWA from the Palestinian territories is another example of genocidal intention. The elections of Donald Trump in the United States and of Keir Starmer as Prime Minister of Great Britain make it especially important to talk about the relationship between the US and Britain (as its junior partner) and their joint long-standing economic investments in Israel as a military base for maintaining control over the Arab petro-states. Trump’s obsession with ‘liquid gold’ as a resource he is determined to control (though not necessarily to possess) is newly worrying, many global states beyond these having investments in Israel. Yet, the United States and the United Kingdom are not the sole perpetrators of ‘the Arab façade,’ for centers of power are now dispersed across the globe and all nation-states are involved in one way or another.

Hamas’s attack on 7 October 2023 has to be firmly condemned as heinous; ignoring or denying the horrors of the attack creates major impediments to an honest negotiation of grievances. However, Hamas’s assault on Southern Israel is a reactance to specific Israeli provocations in the immediate lead-up to 7 October 2023. Among these we number Israeli military-backed gangs carrying out five days of attacks on a dozen Palestinian villages in June 2023; in the year leading up to May 2023, over 234 Palestinians being struck by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank and 89 in Gaza,<sup>6</sup> and similar acts of unilateral violence.

The British imperial creation of the concentration camp became the model for the Shoah and for Gaza strip confinement. The European territorial displacements and ghettoizations of Jewish populations replicate those of their colonial displacements, justified in language rendering the others animal-like, dirty, and subhuman. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's statement on 9 October 2023 that "we are fighting human animals"—a statement that is unfair to both human and non-human animals—taps into that hateful discourse of Mbembean necropolitics. It is therefore not innocent that in its numerous operations such as Operation Protective Edge in 2014, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) coined the phrase "sterile zones," that is, zones that are off limits to Palestinians who are construed as zoological pathogens. Needless to say, this pattern of spatial segregation has characterized the politics of many, if not all, empires.

Benjamin Netanyahu's claim that Israel has the right to defend itself has been annihilated by the grotesquely disproportionate suffering that the IDF has meted out against the Palestinian people. The war on Gaza that has killed more than 40 000 Palestinians and injured over 100 000,<sup>7</sup> mostly civilians—and especially vulnerable ones. Nearly 40% of the population of Gaza, one of the most densely populated area in the world, is under 15 years of age, born after Israel imposed its blockade (by land, air, and sea) in 2007; also, *Save the Children* declared 2023 "the deadliest year on record for children in the West Bank."<sup>8</sup> Even though Gaza, more than the West Bank, has become a symbolic space of outright annihilation, the attention of the UN should be drawn to the forlorn rural areas, which are the object of attacks from either side (e.g., religious minorities that settled from Lebanon in Israel were attacked by Hezbollah; the continuous attacks on Palestinian rural settlements at the fringe of the West Bank). There is a commonality here with all Indigenous struggles: all the attention goes to cities or urban areas and the isolated settlements, no matter on whose side they reside or which identity they represent, are left as open targets by militias of any kind. It is a constant given in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as it was a constant in European history that resurfaced during recent conflicts, and these cannot be sidelined.

Israel's 18-year-long occupation of Southern Lebanon has produced Hezbollah. Israeli occupation has produced Hamas. In postcolonial parlance, Hamas's action can be considered a form of resistance. There is a historical consistency in the labeling of all those who resist occupation and apartheid as terrorist. Supporting Palestine often leads to allegations of supporting terrorism. This, too, we have seen before: the imperial position of the United States, Britain, and the British-Dutch-settler South African Nationalist party also named anti-Apartheid and Civil Rights activists terrorists in their time. With historical distance, those resistance movements are now celebrated not just by anti-colonialists but by

conservative parties. After all, the UN allows colonized populations to defend themselves with weapons. Though the UN has made colonialism and apartheid ‘illegal,’ the Palestinian situation confronts us with the reality that the readily identifiable violent tactics of the European colonial period continue to be deployed today to, at best, disempower, at worst, eradicate a people deemed threatening to global control of resources.

Our call is for the liberation of the many thousands of Palestinian detainees as well as Israeli hostages (which at this point are functioning as the sacrificial victims to the cause for either side, and no public call in the West, whose democratic façade has steadily deteriorated, seems to recall them any more), the immediate re-establishment of essential services, both in Gaza and in Southern Lebanon, and an open forum about the future of the region that includes workers across the political, socio-historical, and cultural spectrum.

Our call thus goes beyond the belabored question of one state, with Jews and Palestinians sharing the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, or two states. It is a call for university and cultural workers to persist in the ongoing effort at creating spaces for intercultural, political, interfaith, and social work to foster unbiased dialogue and understanding across different beliefs, politics, and identities.

Our call extends far beyond a ceasefire; it is a call for the end of the settler colonial project after 75 years of Occupation.

## Endnotes

1. “Britain in Palestine 1917-48.” Film. The Balfour Project, 2015. <https://balfourproject.org/film-of-britain-in-palestine-1917-1948>

2. From the Archives: Britain’s Suppression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine,” Jewish Voice for Labour, 15 May 2023 <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/from-the-archives-britains-suppression-of-the-arab-revolt-in-palestine/>

3. Emeritus Professor of International Relations at Oxford University, author of *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (2014) and *Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations* (2009). <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/nakba-britain-history-betrayal>

4. See also e.g. Gérard Haddad’s “Eloge de la Trahison: Lettres Enflammées sur le devenir d’Israel” (forthcoming 2025) and Lee Mordechai’s Report on Gaza’s war crimes, “Witnessing the war between Israel and Gaza” (5 December 2024).

5. See, however, Avi Beker's "The Forgotten Narrative: Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Fall 2005, Vol. 17, No. 3/4 (Fall 2005), pp. 3-19.

6. OCHA, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human affairs), 2023.

7. <https://www.statista.com/aboutus/our-research-commitment>; accessed 19 December 2024.

8. Statement by UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Adele Khodr <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/number-children-killed-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem-reaches-unprecedented>