

It Is Dark Before the Dawn, but Israeli Settler Colonialism Is at an End

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Professor Ilan Pappe spoke at IHRC's annual Genocide Memorial Day in London, UK on 21st January 2024, on the need to understand that the genocide of Palestinians we are currently witnessing, as brutal as it is, is also the demise of the so-called Jewish state. We need to be ready to imagine a new world beyond it.

The idea that Zionism is settler colonialism is not new. Palestinian scholars in the 1960s working in Beirut in the PLO Research Centre had already understood that what they were facing in Palestine was not a classical colonial project. They did not frame Israel as just a British colony or an American one, but regarded it as a phenomenon that existed in other parts of the world; defined as settler colonialism. It is interesting that for 20 to 30 years the notion of Zionism as settler colonialism disappeared from the political and academic discourse. It came back when scholars in other parts of the world, notably South Africa, Australia and North America agreed that Zionism is a similar phenomenon to the movement of Europeans who created the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This idea helps us to understand much better the nature of the Zionist project in Palestine since the late 19th century until today, and it gives us an idea of what to expect in the future.

I think this particular idea in the 1990s, that connected so clearly the actions of European settlers especially in places such as North America and Australia, with the actions of the settlers who came to Palestine in the late 19th century elucidated clearly the intentions of the Jewish settlers who colonised Palestine and the nature of the local Palestinian resistance

to that colonisation. The settlers followed the most important logic adopted by settler colonial movements and that is that in order to create a successful settler colonial community outside of Europe you have to eliminate the natives in the country you have settled. This means that the indigenous resistance to this logic was a struggle against elimination, and not just liberation. This is important when one thinks about the operation of the Hamas and other Palestinian resistance operations ever since 1948.

The settlers themselves as the case of many of the Europeans who came to North America, Central America or Australia, were refugees and victims of persecution. Some of them were less unfortunate and were just seeking better life and opportunities. But most of them were outcasts in Europe and were looking to create a Europe in another place, a new Europe, instead of the Europe that didn't want them. In most cases, they chose a place where someone else already lived, the indigenous people. And thus the most important core group among them was that of their leaders and ideologues who provided religious and cultural justifications for the colonisation of someone else's land. One can add to this, the need to rely on an Empire to begin the colonisation and maintain it, even if at the time the settlers rebelled against the empire that helped them and demanded and achieved independence, which in many cases they obtained and then renewed their alliance with empire. The Anglo-Zionist relationship that turned into an Anglo-Israeli alliance is a case in point.

The idea that you can remove by force the people of the land that you want, is probably more understandable - not justified - against the backdrop of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries - because it went together with full endorsement for imperialism and colonialism. It was fed by the common dehumanisation of the other non-Western, non-European people. If you dehumanise people you can more easily remove them. What was so unique about Zionism as a settler colonial movement is that it appeared on the international arena at a time where people all around the world had begun to have second thoughts about the rights of removing indigenous people, of eliminating the natives and therefore we can understand the effort and the energy invested by the Zionists and later the state of Israel in trying to cover up the real aim of a settler colonial movement such as Zionism, which was the elimination of the native.

But today in Gaza they are eliminating the native population in front of our eyes, so how come they have almost given up 75 years of attempting to hide their eliminatory policies? In order to understand that we have to appreciate the transformation in the nature of Zionism in Palestine over the years.

At the early stages of the Zionist settler colonialist project, its leaders carried out their eliminatory policies with a genuine attempt to square the circle by claiming that it was possible to build a democracy and at the same time to eliminate the native population. There was a strong desire to belong to the community of civilised nations and it was assumed by the leaders, in particular after the Holocaust, that the eliminatory policies will not exclude Israel from that association.

In order to square this circle, the leadership insisted that their eliminatory actions against the Palestinians were a 'retaliation' or 'response' against Palestinian actions. But very soon, when this leadership wanted to move into more substantial actions of elimination, they deserted the false pretext of 'retaliation' and just stopped justifying what they did.

In this respect, there is a correlation between the way the ethnic cleansing in 1948 developed and in the operations of the Israelis in Gaza today. In 1948, the leadership

justified to itself every massacre committed, including the infamous massacre of Deir Yassine on 9th April, as the reaction to a Palestinian action: it could have been throwing stones at the bus or attacking a Jewish settlement, but it had to be presented domestically and externally as something that doesn't come out of the blue, as self-defence. Indeed, that is why the Israeli army is called "Israeli Defence Forces". But because it is a settler colonial project it cannot rely all the time on 'retaliation'.

The Zionist forces began the ethnic cleansing during the Nakba in February 1948, for a month all these operations were presented as retaliation to the Palestinian opposition to the UN partition plan of November 1947. On 10th March 1948, the Zionist leadership ceased talking about retaliation and adopted a master plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. From March 1948 to the end of 1948 the ethnic cleansing of Palestine that led to the expulsion of half of Palestine's population, the destruction of half of its villages and the de-Arabisation of most of its towns, was done as part of a systematic and intentional master plan of ethnic cleansing.

Similarly, after the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in June 1967, whenever Israel wanted to change fundamentally the reality or engage in a full scale ethnic cleansing operation, it dispensed with the need of justification.

We are witnessing a similar pattern today. At first the actions were presented as retaliation to operation Tufun al-Aqsa, but now it is the war named "sword of war" aiming to return Gaza under direct Israeli control, but ethnically cleansing its people through a campaign of genocide.

The big question is why politicians, journalists, and academics in the west fell into the same trap they had fallen into in 1948? How can they still today buy into this idea that Israel is defending itself in the Gaza Strip? That it is reacting to the actions of 7th October?

Or maybe they are not falling into the trap. They might know that what Israel is doing in Gaza is using 7th October as a pretext.

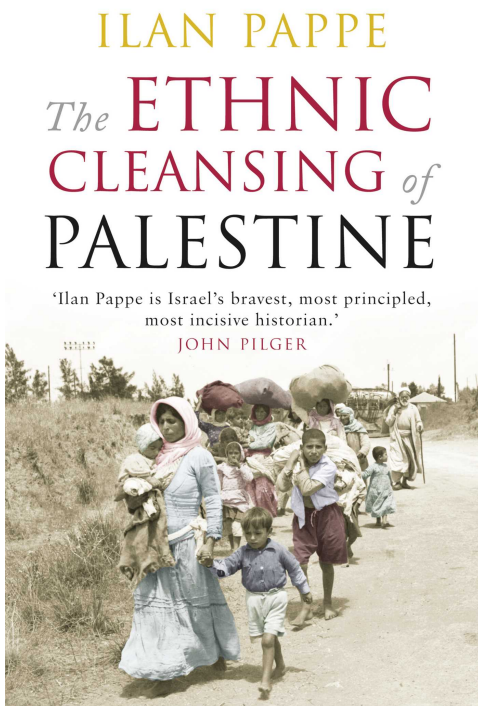
Either way, so far, the Israelis claim to a pretext every time they assault the Palestinians, has helped the state to sustain the immunity shield that allowed it to pursue its criminal policies without fear of any meaningful reaction from the international community. The pretext helped to accentuate the image of Israel as part of the democratic and western world, and hence beyond any condemnation and sanctions. This whole discourse of defence and retaliation is important for the immunity shield that Israel enjoys from governments in the Global North.

But as in 1948, today too, Israel as its operation lingers on, they dispense with the pretext, and this is when even their greatest supports find it difficult to endorse its policies. The

magnitude of the destruction, the massive killings in Gaza, the genocide, are on such a level that Israelis find it more and more difficult to persuade even themselves that what they are doing is actually self-defence or reaction. Thus, it is possible that in the future more and more people would find it difficult to accept this Israeli explanation for the genocide in Gaza.

For most people it is clear that what is required is a context and not a pretext. Historically

and ideologically, it is very clear that 7th October is used as a pretext to complete what the Zionist movement was unable to complete in 1948.



In 1948 the settler colonial movement of Zionism used a particular set of historical circumstances that I have written about in detail in my book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, in order to expel half of Palestine's population. As mentioned, in the process they destroyed half of the Palestinian villages, demolished most of the Palestinian towns, and yet half of the Palestinians remained inside Palestine. The Palestinians who became refugees outside the boundaries of Palestine continued the resistance of the Palestinians and therefore the settler colonial ideal of eliminating the native was not fulfilled and incrementally Israel used all its power from 1948 to today to continue with the elimination of the native.

The elimination of the native from the beginning to the end includes not just a military operation, by which you would occupy a place, massacre people or expel them. Elimination needs to be justified or become an inertia and the way to do it is constant dehumanization of those you intend to eliminate. You cannot massively kill people or genocide another human being unless you dehumanise them. Thus, dehumanisation of the Palestinians is an explicit and an implicit message conveyed to the Israeli Jews through their educational system, their socialisation system in the army, the media and the political discourse. This message has to be conveyed and maintained if the elimination is to be completed.

So we are witnessing a particular cruel new attempt to complete the elimination. And yet, it is not all hopeless. In fact, ironically, this particular inhuman destruction of Gaza exposes the failure of the settler colonial project of Zionism. This may sound absurd, because I'm describing a conflict between a small resistance movement, the Palestinian liberation movement and a powerful state with a military machine and an ideological infrastructure that is focused solely on the destruction of the indigenous people of Palestine people. This liberation movement does not have a strong alliance behind it, while the state it faces, enjoys a powerful alliance behind it - from the United States to multinational corporations, military industry security firms, mainstream media and mainstream academia - we're

talking about something that almost sounds hopeless and depressing because you have this international immunity for the policies of elimination that begin from the early stages of Zionism until today. It will seem probably the worst chapter of the Israeli attempt to push forward eliminatory policies to a new kind of level into a much more concentrated effort of killing thousands of people in a short period of time as they have never dared to do before.

So how can it be also a moment of hope? First of all, this kind of a political entity, a state, that has to maintain the dehumanisation of the Palestinians in order to justify their elimination is a very shaky basis if we look into the more distant future.

This structural weakness was already apparent before 7th October and part of this weakness is the fact that if you take out the elimination project, there is a very little that unites the group of people who define themselves as the Jewish nation in Israel.

If you exclude the need to fight and eliminate the Palestinians, you are left with two warring Jewish camps, which we saw actually fighting on the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem up to 6th October 2023. Huge demonstrations between secular Jews, those who describe themselves as secular Jews – mostly of European origin – believing that it's possible to create a democratic pluralistic state while maintaining the occupation and the apartheid towards the Palestinians inside Israel, were confronting a messianic new kind of Zionism that developed in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, what I called elsewhere the state of Judea, which suddenly appeared in our midst, believing they now have a way of creating a kind of a Zionist theocracy with no consideration for democracy, and believing that this is the only vision for a future Jewish state.

There is nothing in common between these two visions apart from one thing: both camps don't care about the Palestinians, both camps believe that the survival of Israel depends on the continuation of the elimination policies towards the Palestinians. This is not going to hold water. This is going to disintegrate and implode from within because you cannot in the 21st century keep together a state and a society on the basis that their shared sense of belonging is being part of an eliminatory genocidal project. It can work for some definitely, but it cannot work for everyone.

We have seen already the indication for that before 7th October, how Israelis who have opportunities in other parts of the world due to their dual nationality, professions and their financial abilities, are thinking seriously of relocating both their money and themselves outside of the state of Israel. What you will be left with is a society that is economically weak, that is led by this kind of fusion of messianic Zionism with racism and eliminatory policies towards the Palestinians. Yes, the balance of power at first would be on the side of the elimination, not with the victims of the elimination, but the balance of power is not just local, the balance of power is regional and international, and the more oppressive the eliminatory policies are (and it's terrible to say but it's true) the less they are able to be covered up as a 'response' or 'retaliation' and the more they are seen as a brutal genocide policy. Thus, it is less likely that the immunity that Israel enjoys today would continue in the future.

So, I really think that at this very dark moment what we are experiencing – and it is a dark moment because the elimination of the Palestinians has moved to a new level, is unprecedented. In terms of the discourse employed by Israel, and the intensity and the

purpose of the eliminatory policies – there wasn't such a period in history, this is a new phase of the brutality against the Palestinians. Even the Nakba, which was an unimaginable catastrophe does not compare to what we are seeing now and what we are going to see in the next few months. We are in my mind in the first three months of a period of two years that will witness the worst kind of horrors that Israel can inflict on the Palestinians.

But even in this dark moment we should understand that settler colonial projects that disintegrate are always using the worst kind of means to try and save their project. This happened in South Africa and South Vietnam. I am not saying this as a wishful thinking, and I am not saying this as a political activist: I am saying this as a scholar of Israel and Palestine with all the confidence of my scholarly qualifications. On the basis of sober professional examination, I am stating that we are witnessing the end of the Zionist project, there's no doubt about it.

This historical project has come to an end and it is a violent end – such projects usually collapse violently and thus it is a very dangerous moment for the victims of this project, and the victims are always the Palestinians along with Jews, because Jews are also victims of the Zionism. Thus, the process of collapse is not just a moment of hope it is also the dawn that will break after the darkness, and it is the light at the end of the tunnel.

Collapse like this however produces a void. The void appears suddenly; it is like a wall that is slowly eroded by cracks in it but then it collapses in one short moment. And one has to be ready for such collapses, for the disappearance of a state or a disintegration of a settler colonial project. We saw what happened in the Arab world, when the chaos of the void, was not filled by any constructive and alternative project; in such a case the chaos continues.

One thing is clear, whoever thinks about the alternative to the Zionist state should not look for Europe or the West for models that would replace the collapsing state. There are much better models which are local and are legacies from the recent and more distant pasts of the Mashraq (the eastern Mediterranean) and the Arab world as a whole. The long Ottoman period has such models and legacies that can help us taking ideas from the past to look into the future.

These models can help us build a very different kind of society that respects collective identities as well as individual rights, and is built from scratch as a new kind of model that benefits from learning from the mistakes of decolonialisation in many parts of the world, including in the Arab world and Africa. This hopefully will create a different kind of political entity that would have a huge and positive impact on the Arab world as a whole.

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