

Settler Colonialism: 'It Ends With Us' In Palestine And Israel



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01-30-2025 ~ My birth emerged from European capitalism's fascistic catastrophe in the 1920s-1940s. That catastrophe also produced Israel's experiment with settler colonialism in Palestine. This article refers to both these incidents to analyze the current Palestine-Israel catastrophe.

My reasons or qualifications to write such an article start with the fact that my maternal grandmother and grandfather were killed at the Nazis' Mauthausen concentration camp. My father's sister was killed in Auschwitz. My mother and her sister spent years in different concentration camps. Because of these events, my parents fled Europe and started a family in the United States. Like some other descendants of victims who witnessed such atrocities, I have tried to understand their victimization and the complex effects this had on my life directly and indirectly.

Descendants differ in their responses to what happened. Some turn inward seeking safety in a survival-focused disengagement from the larger world and its history. Some try for comfort by believing that part or all of the world has moved beyond the conditions that produced fascism's victimizations. Some suffer long-simmering mixtures of impotence, rage, and fear that it will happen again. Among them are those who fight fascism wherever they see it reemerge and also those who perpetrate further cycles of victimization against others. Still others try to work out an understanding by writing articles and books.

Israel tried to operate settler colonialism on the pattern of earlier European settler colonialisms established around the world. That effort linked to me

indirectly in a remarkably personal way. Without grasping why, I chose to participate in a program for Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates that took 20 of us to East Africa in the early 1960s as volunteers for a summer of teaching. I began to learn there what settler colonialism meant. Further studies grew into my doctoral dissertation later at Yale based on research in the records of London's Colonial Office and the British Museum. My resulting book, *The Economics of Colonialism: Britain and Kenya, 1870-1930* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974), tried to analyze Kenya's settler colonialist economy.

Britain had expelled the native population and reserved the nation's fertile highlands for a few thousand of its white émigrés. In addition to land and police protection, Britain provided its émigrés with coffee seeds, transport, and a market to operate a Kenya-grown coffee export economy. The millions of Kenyan Blacks forcibly relocated into constricted reservations found them to be inadequate to sustain their lives. Their survival thus required them to do low-wage labor on the coffee plantations of the white settlers. Taxes on those low wages helped finance the British colonial government that enforced a ruthlessly exploitative settler colonial system. This economic and racialized apartness in Kenya paralleled the better-known apartheid in South Africa.

Such economic systems provoke constant resistance ranging from desperate individual and small group acts to mass movements to organized rebellions. These acts of resistance occurred in Kenya, South Africa, and elsewhere too. Britain routinely repressed them. In Kenya, eventually, organizers gathered around Jomo Kenyatta and mobilized the so-called Kenya Land and Freedom Army to rebel. Their fight widely came to be known as the 1950s Mau Mau uprising against the British government. That uprising's death counts included 63 British military officers, 33 settlers, more than 1,800 native policemen and auxiliary soldiers, and the widely held guesstimate of more than 11,000 Kenyan rebels. The British repressed the rebellion, imprisoned Kenyatta, and loudly declared victory.

Britain's victory, however, sounded the death knell for its Kenya colony. Mau Mau showed the British the rising levels of resistance and rebellion they would face indefinitely from the settler colonies they had created. British politicians saw these as mushrooming costs of the colonies they could not afford. Since the end of World War II, European colonialisms had been dissolving almost everywhere. British leaders could not escape accommodating the historical reality. Shortly after Mau Mau, Britain acknowledged Kenya's national independence, freed

Kenyatta, and accepted him as Kenya's new leader. Independence ended Kenya's settler colonialism.

The Kenya lesson in settler colonialism deeply impacted British leaders but proved one that Israeli leaders refused to learn from. Given the particular histories of Zionism and European Jews, most Israeli leaders were determined to impose settler colonialism on the Palestinian people and to preserve it by force.

Israeli leaders' declaration of independence in May 1948 provoked immediate Palestinian and Arab resistance that has continued to this moment. Mass movements and broad rebellions have punctuated that resistance and enjoyed increasing external support (from Arab, Islamic, and other sources). The demise of previous European settler colonialisms left a legacy of immense difficulties for Israeli efforts to erect and sustain another.

One crucial aspect of their response to those difficulties was to form an alliance with a world power that could help defend its settler colonialism. The resulting close alliance with the United States positioned Israel as its front-line agent in the Middle East, the United States's dominant military extension to where major global energy resources were located. Undercutting Israel's early socialist, collectivist, and kibbutzim components was facilitated by the alliance with the United States. Most Zionist leaders willingly paid the price of this alliance. Another price was Israel's military, economic, and political dependence on the United States. Finally, Israeli leaders cultivated strong cultural and family connections to financially and politically influential partner communities inside the U.S. and Europe. In these ways, Israeli leaders hoped that settler colonialism might survive and grow despite many examples in history that proved otherwise.

For some decades it seemed, to many inside and outside Israel, that its leaders' strategy and connections might secure its settler colonialism. But then what happened in Kenya began to repeat itself in Israel (each in different conditions). Palestinians resisted, mass movements followed, and finally, powerful, organized rebellions arose. Israeli victories over each in turn proved to be mere preludes to later, higher forms of opposition with ever more global support. Israeli victories resembled those achieved by their British counterparts in Kenya.

It is equally clear now in Israel and Palestine that the prospect of endless warfare into the future is going to likely cost ever more lives and injuries, physical and

psychical damages, and economic and political losses. The victims who survived Israel's extreme violence in Gaza are already surfacing more motivated, better trained, and with more effective weapons to take up their fight. The children of those victims will likewise include many determined to end Israel's settler colonialism.

History, and now time itself, is on the Palestinians' side. Even a staunch Israeli supporter like former Secretary of State Antony Blinken had to admit a stark reality (although he neither admitted its historic meaning nor its political implications). He [said](#), "Indeed, we assess that Hamas has recruited almost as many new militants as it has lost. That is a recipe for an enduring insurgency and perpetual war."

Britain's dying empire forced its acceptance of Kenya's independence in 1963 and the end of its settler colonialism. The current decline of the United States empire is forcing something similar in Israel. After the latest and the worst Gaza war, Israel's crucial ally is inching closer to the conclusion Britain reached in Kenya after the Mau Mau uprising.

For growing numbers of United States leaders, the risks and costs of its alliance with Israel are rising faster than the benefits. Many have been persuaded, including United States citizens, that providing Israel with funds and weapons rendered the United States "[complicit in a genocide](#)" and, therefore, isolated globally. The ceasefire imposed by Donald Trump has followed. Whether and how it functions and how Israel resists and evades the ongoing criticism will matter far less than the more basic trajectory underway now. History suggests that Benjamin Netanyahu or his successors will eventually be disconnected from the United States. Their lost alliance will hasten the end of Israel's settler colonialism.

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