

Allegation: Israel is a Settler Colonialist Enterprise

The term “settler colonialism” conjures historical memories of exploitative white European empires militarily invading lands in the Middle East, Asia and Africa^[1], implanting their citizens in colonies through the use of force, subjugating the native and indigenous populations and stealing their natural resources.

Many anti-Israel activists and academics use the term “settler colonialism” to describe the political and demographic changes over the last 150 years in what today is the State of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They argue that Jews were only a small minority of the population in the late 19th century (in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire) and that European Jews subsequently “colonized” and seized Palestinian land and resources.

But using the term “settler colonialism” to describe what transpired since the late 19th century misses vital facts and information:

- Jews, like Palestinians, are native and indigenous to the land. The Land of Israel is integral to the Jewish religion and culture, the connection between Jews and the land is a constant in the Bible, and is embedded throughout Jewish rituals and texts. The Europeans who settled in colonies in the Middle East and North Africa were not indigenous or native to the land in any way.
- From the time of the exile the religion, language, culture, holidays, rituals, liturgy, and history of the Jews are permeated with a yearning for a return to the Land of Israel. No colonialists came to a homeland and revived the ancient tongue they had spoken there.

- There is no “motherland” to which the Jewish population in the land of Israel may otherwise return. Whereas, for example, the French in Algeria could return to France, and the British in India could return to the United Kingdom, many Jews in Israel, including the many who fled persecution, have no other country to which they may return. Instead, most Jews who immigrate to Israel use the word “return” to describe the act of making their home in the Jewish state. (The tragic irony is that Israeli Jews are told by some detractors to return to Europe, whereas Diaspora Jews are in turn told to return to Israel.)
- Until the State of Israel was established in 1948, Jews immigrated to the Land of Israel of their own volition, not directed nor overseen by any state or military power like colonialists.
- Many Jews came and still come to Israel escaping antisemitism and other forms of persecution. Typically, European settler colonists were not escaping persecution or bigotry.
- The modern state of Israel enjoys international legitimacy including recognition by the United Nations. It is a democracy that extends rights and protections to all its citizens – Jews and non-Jews alike. European settler colonial powers rarely if ever did so.
- Unlike European settler colonial powers, the modern Zionist movement’s *raison d’être* was never to subjugate the existing population and steal their resources and land holdings. Instead, attempts were made at coexistence and interdependent development, for examples: the Zionist movement’s acceptance of the 1947 [United Nations partition plan](#) which would have established an Arab independent state alongside a Jewish state.
- Both inside and outside Israel there is much criticism of Israel’s settlement policies in the West Bank. But ascribing the term “settler colonialism” to such activity is also a distortion. Should a mutually negotiated two-state solution establish a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel, it will likely encompass most of the West Bank, but such an outcome does not

negate the spiritual, historical, and cultural connection to that land, that Jews cherished for millennia.

Some critics call for Israel's dissolution or allege that Zionism itself is inherently nefarious by simplistically pointing to the fact that Zionist leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries used variations of the word "colonial" or "colonize" to describe their actions to build the yishuv (the pre-1948 Jewish infrastructure). But the use of such terms only signified an effort to promote Jewish immigration to the Jewish people's historic homeland, establish communities and fulfill the universal right of self-determination. Zionist leaders did not view their actions as identical – ethically or practically – to the European settler colonial projects of that time.

Bottom line: the pre-state Zionist movement and later the State of Israel may certainly be criticized for missteps and particular policies. But ascribing the term settler colonialism to Jewish self-determination and statehood is inaccurate. And linking Israel to historical actions that the international community has rightfully renounced often serves as part of the effort to chip away at or negate Israel's legitimacy.

^[1] Of course many colonialist empires were not European or White, including Japan, Brazil, Turkey, China, India, Persia and many others.