

Arab Israelis Put the Lie to ‘Settler Colonialism’

by Robert Cherry

Even before Israel responded to Hamas’ October 7, 2023 massacres, numerous American college campuses erupted in protests promised on the claim that Israel is an apartheid state founded on “white settler colonialism.” Given that the theory of settler colonialism posits that Arab inhabitants are the indigenous people of Israel, were dispossessed of their land, disenfranchised, and continue to suffer genocide at the hands of “white” settlers, it is astonishing that few have attempted to study the actual experience of the Arab minority in Israel. Does it match the claims of the protestors? Or would it go some way towards persuading American students to reconsider their grievances?

The claims of student protestors and their comrades derive from the work of a number of academic and non-academic thinkers and activists, but are perhaps most clearly articulated by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the award-winning author and professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University. Coates’s book *The Message*, based

on a ten-day tour of the West Bank he took in summer 2023, is a focused attempt to demonstrate that Israeli practices amount to apartheid and that the country has numerous parallels to past South African and Jim Crow experiences. This enables Coates to view Israel as engaging in “white supremacy,” never acknowledging that the majority of Israeli Jews are nonwhite, descended from Arab countries or Ethiopia.

Coates believes that the recent national law that proclaimed Israel a Jewish state supports his case. The national law states that Israel is the home of all Jewish people who can immigrate and immediately become citizens. It certainly does privilege diaspora Jews over Palestinian refugees but in no way gives Jewish citizens living in Israel rights that are different than those of Arab citizens. In a 10-1 ruling, the Israeli Supreme Court declared that the law was constitutional and did not negate the state’s democratic character.

Coates’s claims have been strengthened by the recent book by Rashid Khalidi, the “dean” of Palestinian histo-

rians in the U.S. and Professor Emeritus of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University, *The Hundred Year War on Palestine* (2020) *The Forward* immediately praised it while Daniel Sokatch, CEO of the New Israeli Fund, wrote, "There is no better or more important introduction to this history from the Palestinian perspective than Khalidi's book."¹

Khalidi believes that in the late nineteenth century, Jewish settlers colonized the area which in 1920 became the British Mandate of Palestine. He claims that the Arabs who populated what became Palestine had long lived there, neglecting to mention that a large share were nineteenth century migrants from Egypt, Russia, and other areas in the Ottoman Empire. He never mentions that it was the Crusades that decimated the Jewish population which nonetheless rebuilt their numbers. Well before European immigration, Jews were a plurality of Jerusalem residents, as well as longstanding residents of other Palestinian communities.

Moreover, Khalidi also ignores the large internal migration of Arabs from the West Bank to the coastal areas during the Mandate period. These migrants married women from their West Bank home villages and often went there to help harvest crops. Thus, the notion that 1948 Palestinian refugees from present-day Israel were displaced from their ancestral homelands is a very problematic narrative.

Though the 1917 Balfour Declaration opened the door to Zionist national aspirations, the British government even-

tually rejected it. The British administration appointed Haj Amin al-Husseini as Grand Mufti of Jerusalem despite the pogroms he led in 1921 and 1929. Khalidi never mentions his antisemitic actions in Palestine nor while in exile in Iraq, nor why, given his activities in support of Hitler, the Mufti was given a hero's welcome when he found his way to Egypt after World War II where he was installed by the Arab League as the leader of the Arabs in Mandate Palestine.

In 1937, to quell a Mufti-led Arab uprising, the Peel Commission did recommend a two-state solution, with a Zionist state comprising only 12 percent of Palestine. Khalidi substantially understates the violence perpetrated by the Mufti and his supporters to suppress any support for this recommendation.

When the Woodhead Commission arrived to examine the prospects for implementing the partition plan, the Mufti's supporters were instructed "to kill every Arab who communicates with the commission in any form." When the Mufti learned that one of the notables planned to testify, he wrote: "Those who go to meet the partition commission should take their shrouds with them."² Indeed, Mufti supporters killed as many as a thousand Arabs to quell opposition. This led the British to withdraw its recommendation for a two-state solution.

During the rest of the Mandate period, the British administration put substantial restrictions on further Jewish immigration and never again proposed an independent Zionist state. Only after

the British turned the situation over to the UN and President Truman championed Jewish national aspirations was a two-state solution proposed and eventually adopted.

Khalidi spends no time explaining why Zionist forces defeated Arab forces in the six-month civil war stage, before the Arab armies invaded. The simple reason was that there was virtually no Palestinian consciousness among the rural populace and the Mufti's previous efforts led many villagers to reject the call for armed struggle. The anti-Zionist historian Ilan Pappé claims Palestinians made up as little as 10 percent of the volunteers.³

There are many problems with the Nakba narrative that focuses on the Arab refugees that the war created. First, a significant share of Arabs voluntarily left their homes; the wealthy went to Lebanon or Jordan while the working class went to their West Bank villages. When Haifa and Jaffa fell, Arab leaders pressured Arabs to leave rather than live in a Zionist-controlled city. This despite serious efforts by the Zionists to accommodate, such as keeping Jewish bakeries open on Passover to bake bread for Arabs. The noted historian Meron Benvenisti believed that the vast majority of the 380,000 refugees who left their homes by the end of May reflected the effects of the fighting rather than any ethnic cleansing policy.⁴ While ethnic clearing became widespread in the latter stages of the war, it still remained that the majority of the exodus was not caused by this policy.

Most importantly, pan-Arabism was the overriding meaning of the Nakba when first enunciated in 1948 with the publication *The Meaning of the Nakba* by Constantin Zureiq, the most important Arab intellectual at the time. He saw the defeat of the Arab armies as a catastrophe for allowing an alien Jewish state within Arab lands. In 1958, the Nakba was commemorated by radio stations of the United Arab Republic calling on the world's Arab and Muslim states to hold a symbolic five minutes to mourn the establishment of Israel *without any mention* of the refugees.⁵

This original characterization of the Nakba continues today among Islamists, like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. It continues throughout the Muslim world where in 2022, the rate of refusal to recognize Israel was over 90 percent in Algeria, Libya, Jordan, Iraq, and Tunisia.⁶ It continues among today's activists who label Israel as a colonial, settler state.

During the 2000 Camp David negotiations, Yasir Arafat made the right-of-return a non-negotiable demand. Living in squalid refugee camps for forty years, unable to integrate themselves into the local population, only a generous right-of-return would better their lives. To strengthen this position, he shifted the meaning of the Nakba to the war's creation of a refugee population.

Now another thirty years later, few of the actual refugees are alive. Nonetheless, the UN Human Rights Commission demanded that the right-of-return

should continue to be given priority.⁷ Political scientist Nour Cherif contends,

The romanticised memories of exile and life before the Nakba are transmitted to future generations, who, although they no longer recognize themselves in these testimonies, use them as a driving force to claim the right of return.⁸

Khalidi's book has little discussion of the situation of the two million Arab citizens of Israel, focusing on the Palestinians living in the occupied territories. After the 1948 war, a leaderless Arab community was under military rule with a substantial share of their land confiscated, at least partially to make room for the 800,000 Jews who fled Muslim countries. Over the following decades, a modest effort was made to enable Arab citizens to prosper, but a policy of benign neglect dominated.

When the Second Intifada began after the failure at Camp David, the situation of Arab citizens deteriorated dramatically. Arab employment and enterprises suffered as the two sectors most responsible for their well-being—tourism and construction—collapsed. Between 1997 and 2005, the inflation-adjusted median Arab household net income fell by 1.6 percent, while Jewish net incomes rose by 15.5 percent.⁹

In response, Arab social and academic organizations issued position papers, collectively known as the 2006 Vision Statements. They called for autonomy in cultural and educational areas, as well as aspects of local governing. While these ideas were not pursued by

their political or religious leadership, it was a wake-up call for Jewish leadership: the status quo of benign neglect was no longer viable.

The government funded training programs, improved educational support, subsidized employment, expanded transportation networks and built industrial parks near Arab towns. One focus was on bringing more Arab women into the workforce. One of the more influential liberal NGOs reported that these and subsequent initiatives had “resulted in an unprecedented increase in the employment rates of Arab women from 21 percent in 2010 to approximately 43 percent in 2022 and in the reduction of the poverty gap between Jewish and Arab families by approximately 19 percent.”¹⁰

By 2017, Arab citizens comprised 16 percent of university students compared to 8.3 percent in 2000.¹¹ By 2016, Israeli Arabs comprised 17 percent of the country's doctors, 24 percent of nurses and 47 percent of pharmacists. At the Technion—Israel's MIT—its Arab graduates reflected their 20 percent share of the populations.¹² Government support facilitated their employment and other subsidies, including funding of an industrial park, led Nazareth to become a hi-tech hub, especially for foreign firms setting up Israeli divisions.

A group of revisionist Zionists, including Naftali Bennett, were committed to fulfilling their vision of an Israel with equal opportunity for all citizens. They aided the expansion of Arab citizens in hi-tech and teachers in Jewish

schools. They were crucial to the enactment of the 2016 922 legislation that provided unprecedented targeted funding to rectify imbalances between Jewish and Arab communities, and improved the funding formula so that these disparities would not be reproduced. Indeed, the preamble to the legislative bill included a 1926 statement by Zev Jabotinsky, the founder of right-wing Zionism:

After the formation of a Jewish majority, a considerable Arab population will always remain in Palestine. If things fare badly for this group of inhabitants, then things will fare badly for the entire country. The political, economic and cultural welfare of the Arabs will thus always remain one of the main conditions for the well-being of the Land of Israel.¹³

Among the program's achievements has been providing enough money to get 85 percent of homes in Arab towns connected to modern sewer networks, up from less than 40 percent in 2015; overseeing a substantial increase in public transportation and new road construction; and creating new preschools and vocational-assistance centers that have helped boost Arab employment. It also funded substantial improvements in government Arab employment. In 2007, Arabs comprised only 6 percent of government employees. By 2020, they compromised 13.2 percent.¹⁴

One of the impediments to Arab well-being is the high crime rates in Arab towns. In 2021, murder rates were at all-time highs. Besides family feuds, criminal gangs and domestic violence were major problems. The director of

Na'am/Women's Center exclaimed, "You find criminals paid to kill women who were in line to receive a good inheritance, women who wanted to get divorced, and so on."¹⁵

To combat this Arab crime problem, Jamal Hakroush was promoted to deputy police commissioner and delegated to head the anti-crime initiative. A priority was the recruitment of Arab women. To make clear how welcoming the force would be, new rules allowed them to wear a hijab while on duty. Within two years, 728 Arabs had joined the force, seventy-four were women.

Khalidi does make one reference to the situation of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem. The more than 300,000 Palestinians living there do not automatically have Israeli citizenship but as Jerusalem residents, they can vote in the municipal elections, and have the same social and health benefits of Arab citizens, including the ability to travel throughout Israel. Referring to its declining influence on the West Bank, Khalidi writes: "Due to its physical isolation and the strict Israeli permit policy, the city has largely ceased to be the economic, urban, and commercial center that it once was."

This declining influence reflected East Jerusalem becoming increasingly tied to the Israeli state. Over the last decade, East Jerusalem's educational system has substantially replaced the Jordanian curriculum with Israeli curriculum, enabling thousands of Palestinians there to attend Israeli universities. At the Hebrew University alone,

710 East Jerusalem Arab students were enrolled in 2022, compared with only 36 five years earlier.¹⁶

Another focus has been bringing jobs to East Jerusalem. The municipality's Silicon Wadi plan established an innovation quarter for hi-tech companies. Jerusalem City Council member Laura Wharton of the leftwing Meretz party said: "The thinking here now is to develop high-tech and other industries that will allow people from East Jerusalem to find employment in Jerusalem." Not surprisingly, a 2022 poll found that more East Jerusalem Palestinians favor being citizens of Israel than part of a Palestinian state.¹⁷

It is important to note that through 2021, all of these funding initiatives and affirmative action efforts were undertaken under Netanyahu-led administrations. The Arab Joint List—a coalition of four Arab parties—minimized these reforms and even fought them. Though becoming the first Arab to head a permanent committee in 2016, Aida Touma-Sliman criticized the 922 legislation as being too meager and made clear her priorities: "Ending the occupation is a basic condition for our people to gain equality."¹⁸ Members also fought against the targeted efforts to increase Arab police officers, and urged Arab police to not serve in East Jerusalem, ignoring the gains made there.

These divisive efforts led the Arab Ra'am party to bolt the Joint List and become part of the Change government that came into power in 2022. This government quickly passed another bill,

twice as large as the 922 legislation, that would further benefit Arab communities, most especially the Bedouins. Unfortunately, much of its implementation was forestalled first by new elections in early 2023 followed by the IDF-Hamas war later that year.

What is most striking is how the war has brought Arab citizens *closer* to the state. For each year, 2016-2022, the share of Arab citizens who felt a part of Israel fluctuated between 39 percent and 43 percent. But directly after the Hamas attack, it increased to 70 percent.¹⁹ Almost immediately, Ra'am leader Mansour Abbas condemned the October 7th Hamas attack: "Any action that is taken against innocent people—against women, children, elderly—is inhumane and it goes against the values of Islam as well. We categorically condemn this."

An overwhelming majority of Arab citizens (86.5 percent) supported helping out with civilian volunteering efforts during the war.²⁰ These sympathetic and supportive actions of Arab citizens were recognized by many Jewish leaders.²¹

Once the war unfolded, there was even less sympathy for Hamas' actions. At the eight-week mark of the IDF offensive, a minority of Arabs held the IDF solely responsible for the harm to Gazan civilians. Among Muslims, 60 percent held the IDF and Hamas equally responsible with 15.5 percent holding the IDF solely responsible, compared to 12 percent who held Hamas solely responsible. This reflected the fact that

among Balad supporters, none held Hamas solely responsible but 29 percent held the IDF solely responsible. Among Christians and Druze, more than three times as many held Hamas solely responsible as those holding the IDF solely responsible.²²

On the morning of October 8, nationalistic Jewish youth were seen carrying flags and singing patriotic songs throughout Jaffa. An imam received “dozens of calls from Arab youth who were already organizing themselves to attack the group.” However, unlike 2021 when such behaviors sparked intergroup violence the imam told callers, “Let us handle this quietly.” He posted a similar message on social media and sent it to some 1,200 youths connected with the mosque. The imam then did something that would have been unthinkable in 2021: He called the police. What made this possible were unprecedented ties between local religious leaders, the municipality, and local police that held the social fabric together.

A May 2024 survey found “just over half of Arab Israelis (51.6 percent) felt that the prolonged war against Hamas had given rise to a sense of ‘shared destiny’ between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel.”²³ Another sign of their growing commitment to the state, more than two-thirds of Arab respondents believed that Arab parties should be willing to join a coalition government; 40.2 percent even if it was not a left-center coalition. Only 14.2 percent were firmly against Arab parties joining a ruling coalition. Finally, a recent survey found,

“Only 9 percent of Arab Israeli respondents said that ‘their Palestinian identity is the dominant component’ of their identity.”²⁴

The historical facts presented call into question the settler-colonial narrative that underpins the Palestinian claims to the land. Nineteenth century Arab migration to Palestine and West Bank migration to the coastal plains counters the image of the refugees being displaced from ancestral villages. Second, the Arab rejection of British partition proposals was dictated primarily by the Mufti’s vengeful behavior towards any Arab leader who was willing to seek accommodation with Zionists. It sowed fierce opposition to the Mufti, leading many to work with the Zionists, particularly during the early stages of the 1948 war. Third, for the first forty years after the war, the Nakba was having a Jewish state on Arab lands. It has been the driving force of Islamists and the vast majority of Arabs across the Muslim world.

Most importantly, the essay documented the remarkable improvement of the educational, occupational, and political position of Arab citizens. These improvements came as a result of substantial and sustained affirmative action policies enacted primarily by Netanyahu-led governments. These benefits are at some risk because this is the first Netanyahu-led government that includes anti-Arab parties that have been trying, with only marginal success so far, to reverse legislation to better the lives of Arab citizens. Hopefully, they will con-

tinue to be thwarted until there is a new government that represents more fully both Jewish and Arab citizens.

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