

History: Palestine, Dilemmas of Decolonization

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After its defeat in the First World War the territories of the Ottoman Empire in Syria (today Syria and Lebanon), Mesopotamia (today Iraq) and Palestine were divided in 1920 between France and Great Britain by means of the San Remo Conference, under the authority of the League of Nations. The British Mandate over Palestine incorporated the Balfour Declaration of 1917, under which the British government had undertaken, in a completely arbitrary manner, to establish a Jewish national state on the territory of Palestine. 30 years after the Balfour Declaration, on November 29th 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 181 authorizing the partition of Palestine and thus emerged the state of Israel. There was no democratic consultation process with the native Arab population of Palestine, which at that time numbered twice the Jewish population.

At the time of the vote, only 56 member countries of the UN participated, while the UN now has 193 member countries. Of those 56 countries, 33 voted in favor of the resolution, 13 countries, mainly Arab countries, voted against and 10 countries abstained. Precisely at the beginning of the era of decolonization in the majority world, the United Nations Organization, dominated by the imperialist powers, created a colonial state based on a supremacist ideology, Zionism, with a government determined to expel the Arab population to ensure a Jewish majority. Even before the end of the British Mandate on May 15, 1948, the Zionist forces had initiated an ethnic cleansing of more than 200,000 people of the Arab population by applying tactics of terrorism and massacre.



ETHNIC CLEANSING: Palestinian refugees in 1948 Photo: Public Domain

That was the context in which the neighboring Arab countries then declared war against Israel during which the Israeli forces expelled another part of the Palestinian population, more than half a million Arabs, and occupied their lands. The conquest and occupation of the Palestinian lands by the Zionists vindicated the prophetic words of Vladimir Jabotinsky, leader of Haganah, the Zionist armed organization, who wrote in 1925,

“A voluntary reconciliation with the Arabs is out of the question now or in the future. If you want to colonize a land on which people already live, you need to provide a garrison for the land, or find some rich man or benefactor who will provide a garrison on your behalf.”

In fact, the benefactors and protectors of Israel have been the Western countries who have ensured that the numerous UN resolutions and any other measures of international law in defense of the rights of the Palestinian people have not been implemented. All this history demonstrates the colonial roots of the founding of Israel and the systematic Western neocolonialism that maintains, protects and defends it, even in the face of the genocidal massacres in process in Gaza at the moment. The partition of Palestine occurred in the period of the end of the colonial era that saw the creation of independent nation-states, mostly based on colonial borders.

During the same period, the partition of many other countries was also imposed, Lebanon from Syria, Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland, the partition of Korea and, until 1975, the partition of Vietnam. The legacy of 500 years of European colonialism and its gradual replacement by United States domination over the last 150 years has been decades of bloody conflicts and destructive wars. In the case of Palestine, the creation of Israel allowed the United States and its allies to have their “unsinkable aircraft carrier” in the heart of a region strategic for their geopolitical interests, due to its location and its hydrocarbon resources.

At the moment it is impossible to know the political-military outcome of the ongoing fighting in Gaza, much less of the looming regional war in the making. However, many governments have defined their proposals for a possible resolution of the conflict. The majority advocate

the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. That Security Council Resolution was adopted fifty-six years ago, promoting the creation of a Palestinian state on a par with the Israeli state.

As the prominent former United Nations official Alfredo de Zayas has commented

“Israel’s obligation under Security Council Resolution 242, dated November 22, 1967, is to withdraw from the occupied territories and allow the practical implementation of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination, [which is] inalienable and enshrined in articles 1 and 55, chapters XI and XII of the Charter of the United Nations, as well as in article 1 common to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)”.

Several observers have commented that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) reaffirmed in 2004 the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and condemned the countless violations of international law by Israel. Moreover, as the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the UN Vasily Nebenzia has noted, Israel has no right to self-defense in the territories it has illegally occupied for decades. So the Palestinian resistance has full legitimacy to claim the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people in their occupied lands, including by armed resistance.

The proposal of the majority of the governments of the world to solve the protracted conflict between Israel and Palestine in accordance with international law is to create a Palestinian state. Despite this international majority consensus for the so-called “two-state solution” there is an influential body of opinion in the world questioning its viability and advocating the creation of a single state. The reasoning of this position follows the argument of Muammar al Gaddafi who argued that the Oslo Accords of 1993 were a deception whose logical culmination would be the assimilation of the Palestinian population into a single state. The most optimistic one-state proposals raise the possibility of a unitary or federated state capable of accommodating the aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians on the basis of equality and non-discrimination.

What much of the discussion of both possibilities at the international level tends to dismiss, omit or even deny is the insistence of the Palestinian people on the imperative of ensuring a decolonization process that corresponds to the profound historical injustice they have suffered. And it is instructive to compare the colonial situation and the neocolonial context of the struggle of the Palestinian people for their liberation with other revolutionary liberation struggles that achieved their goal. The examples of the anti-colonial struggles in Angola, Algeria, Mozambique and Zimbabwe clarify the various dilemmas that accompany the struggle against colonial systems based on racist supremacy.

The genocide of the Palestinian people and the total annexation of their territory follows the historical practice of the colonial elites and their European governments. Simone Weil, distinguished French philosopher, once commented that the main innovation of Nazi Germany was to apply the practice of genocidal conquest by European colonialism to the European population itself. Certainly, this was the experience of the four national liberation struggles in Angola, Algeria, Mozambique and Zimbabwe which went through different phases of resistance, open war and negotiation until achieving victory.

The war in Algeria ended with the Evian Accords of 1962, in Angola with the Alvor accords of 1975, in Mozambique with the Lusaka Accords of 1974 and in Zimbabwe with the Lancaster

House Accords of 1979. All these agreements included measures to guarantee the full recognition of the national sovereignty and the right of self-determination of the liberated people, the transfer of power in a consensual, programmed way that would allow the peaceful departure in each case of hundreds of thousands of settlers. They also included measures for the due transfer of administrative functions, the orderly renewal of the national police and the armed forces and a balanced management of land and property redistribution. The agreements also included amnesties for the events that occurred before their signing, and guarantees of protection and non-discrimination against the settlers who decided to stay.

In all cases, the corresponding metropolitan governments accepted the right of their former colonies to independence. In France, President De Gaulle faced a violent right-wing terrorist rebellion against his decision to agree to Algeria's independence in 1962. It was the overthrow in 1974 of the fascist government in Portugal by the Carnation Revolution that allowed the new Portuguese socialist government to agree on peace in Angola and Mozambique. And in the case of Zimbabwe it was the resolute support of the British government of the Labour Party that agreed to the decision to facilitate the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 despite the resistance of the rebel, racist settler regime.

For the moment, the case of Palestine is different, even more complex and challenging, because the Israeli government has the unconditional support of the US government which occupies the role of a metropolitan state sustaining the Zionist colonial regime in Israel. With the strategic defeat already suffered by the United States and its European subordinates in Ukraine, time favors the Palestinian cause. This may well explain the Israeli decision to intensify the pace of its genocidal massacres in the face of the Palestinian offensive of last October 7th.



A view from the area after Israeli airstrikes on Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza, on October 31, 2023. [Stringer - Anadolu Agency]

Whatever the resolution finally negotiated to guarantee some measure of justice to the Palestinian people, two-state or one-state, the most intractable issues are going to be of the same kind as in previous decolonization processes. Mainly these are the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination on their national territory and the recovery of their national territory from the Zionist occupation. The proposal of the Palestinian movement Hamas at the moment is for a ceasefire, the opening of borders, especially with Egypt, and an exchange of prisoners. The Palestinian leadership hopes to establish a political peace process culminating in an independent Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem and the right to self-determination.

It seems inevitable in the current historical context of the development of a multicentric world that the logic of decolonization in one way or another will prevail in the case of Palestine. It remains to be seen how profound dilemmas, for example, regarding the right of return of the millions of Palestinian families displaced for decades by the Zionist ethnic cleansing will be resolved. The Zionist settlers are going to have to accept giving up the lands they have usurped and those among them who cannot tolerate being in a state recognizing their Palestinian counterparts as equals are going to have to leave to wherever will take them, just as happened in Angola, Algeria, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

The political and institutional changes that all parties will have to facilitate and assimilate will be enormous and profound. Among them is the colossal challenge of how it may be possible for Palestinian families to overcome the unimaginable psychosocial consequences of the pain and injustice they have suffered for more than a century. In the end, all the antecedents of decolonization show that it is inevitable that Palestine will be free, thanks, as in all struggles for national liberation, to the extraordinary strength and insurmountable resistance of its People.

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