

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7214>



Reviews

Conceiving Decolonization

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Thursday 8 July 2021

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

THIS IS A powerful and challenging text that poses as many questions as it answers — particularly at the terrible moment of Israel’s May 2021 assault on the all-Aqsa mosque, the pending ethnic cleansing of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem, and the latest round of murderous bombing of Gaza.

Jeff Halper asks:

“What does decolonization entail? What replaces a colonial regime? How do we overcome Israeli opposition to a single state (and no less Israeli indifference to the entire issue), as well as the unconditional support Israel receives from the world’s governments? What is our strategy for reaching a just, post-colonial reality?

“(N)o one has really thought through the entire process of decolonization, very different from conflict resolution but the only way out of a colonial situation, “ he maintains, “the one-state solution might, indeed, be ‘in the air’ (but) is not yet a viable alternative.” (7)

This entire book is presented as “really a kind of working paper” (11) to think through some answers. Importantly, the ideas are not Halper’s alone, but what he describes as the collective efforts of some 50 Palestinian and 20 Israeli intellectuals and activists gathered in the One Democratic State Campaign (ODSC) that Halper co-founded in 2018.

The author identifies as a “colonizer who refuses” (i.e. refuses to happily accept the benefits of privileged status) in the spirit of the Tunisian anti-colonial Jewish writer Albert Memmi. This reminds me of Michael Warschawski, the Israeli activist whose memoir *On the Border* discusses a double struggle trying to defend the Palestinian “border” against Israeli depredations, while fighting to open the Israeli side of the same “border” from its exclusion of Palestinians. Halper of course wants to erase that border altogether, to the degree it still exists.

He explains that the initial intention was for this book to be co-authored “with a Palestinian colleague, but as we approached the work...we thought it better that an Israeli analysis of Zionist settler colonialism should stand separately from an analysis by a Palestinian, since we would raise different but no less important issues from our different perspectives.” (11)

Halper is an American-Israeli anthropologist by training and from Hibbing, Minnesota — also the birthplace as he likes to point out of Robert Zimmerman (Bob Dylan) and U.S. Communist Party leader Gus Hall. Halper moved to Israel in 1973 and became involved in anti-occupation and peace activism. He’s been the longtime organizer of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHN —), whose direct-action work on the ground deserves to be widely known.

Anatomy of Settler Colonialism

In the course of this work, Halper has theorized and extensively documented the Israeli “Matrix of Control” over the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). He extends this analysis here to a total “Dominance Management Regime”

over the colonized population, the “mechanism for completing the task of colonization” with “the rise of a hybrid regime over Palestine, a deadly combination of settler colonialism, occupation and apartheid.” (94)

Halper's previous book is the absolute must-read *War Against the People. Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification* (Pluto Press, 2015), which explains the mystery of “How does Israel get away with it?” In fact Israel's experience, technique and technology of population control and repression, refined in the laboratory of the OPT, has become extraordinarily “useful” to global elites of many varieties. (The book was reviewed in ATC 187, “A Global Matrix of Control.”)

Of course a short review cannot capture the details and depth of Halper's treatment of settler colonialism both globally and in the specific circumstance of Palestine/Israel.

The first five chapters, comprising two sections on “Zionism as Settler Colonial Project” and “Three Cycles of Zionist Colonial Development” naturally contain a lot of material also available in numerous other excellent sources, but are also a masterful introduction for readers new to the subject.

The overview of settler colonialism as a global phenomenon is thought-provoking in itself. Halper cites the obvious and well-known cases of North America, Australia and New Zealand, Spanish and Portuguese colonization in the Caribbean and Latin America, and European powers in Africa, as well as the takeover “of Tibet by the Chinese. Lesser known cases include the Russians in the Kazakh steppe, Central Asia and Siberia...the Indonesians in New Guinea, and the Scandinavians among the Sami.” (19)

There are wide differences among these cases as to whether the goal was to simply loot territories of natural resources, to enslave and exploit their populations, or to transfer a sector of the population of the conquering state to the new land (Karl Marx, by the way, called these “colonies properly so-called”).

In the distinctive Zionist case, the minority of the Jewish population emigrating to Palestine from Eastern and Central European countries wasn't dispatched by those states, but enabled by other colonial interests and propelled both by the general rise of European nationalist movements and by growing antisemitism. Nonetheless, “(w)hatever its justification, the Zionist takeover of Palestine resembled other instances where foreign settlers, armed with a sense of entitlement, conquered a vulnerable country.”

That's why Halper insists, in this and other cases of “unilateral, asymmetrical invasion,” that the inevitable Indigenous resistance “can hardly be called a ‘conflict.’” The discourse of “Israeli/Palestinian conflict” must be rejected. Rather, “we must speak of Zionist settler colonialism.” (19)

Language matters! By the conclusion of “The Occupation Cycle (1967-Present),” Israel has turned to constructing a massive hasbara or propaganda apparatus that Halper labels “the Management of Legitimacy.” This strategy deploys the language of “conflict” between “sides,” conveying “the image of Israel as the victim fighting for its existence,” and its treatment of Palestinians as “an internal matter” — which anyone witnessing mainstream media knows has been swallowed hook, line and sinker. But:

“If the Management of Legitimacy has had some success in convincing governments that a two-state illusion that leaves Israel free to colonize the OPT is the best tool for conflict management...it has taken an ominous and cynical turn over the past two decades, since the collapse of the Oslo process. Finding it increasingly difficult to argue its case on its merits, especially in light of its massive settlement drive and the specter of annexation, together with more effective Palestinian advocacy, the Israeli government and its advocates have come to portray any criticism of Israeli policy as anti-Semitism.” (107-8)

Those of us in the United States know this too, as a number of state governments and universities, as well as the Trump administration (Biden is more ambiguous) are weaponizing the appalling IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) declaration on antisemitism to criminalize Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) activism in support of Palestinian rights.

In response to all this, Halper insists that “resistance on its own is not sufficient...unless it is accompanied by a political program. That is lacking today.” (109)

The concluding five chapters on “Decolonizing Zionism, Liberating Palestine” boldly set out to formulate the decolonization program, and constitute the book’s most innovative and challenging section. While I’ll try to summarize this program and what I see as its difficulties, it’s a rich and essential discussion to read and grapple with.

Challenges of Decolonization

To enter the complexities of the problem, we might begin with Jeff Halper’s principled self-identification as the “colonizer who refuses” — in his own case, someone who could freely leave any time and has chosen instead to remain committed as a “co-resister,” a “(junior) partner in a joint Palestinian/Israeli struggle for decolonization” and a survivable future society. (9)

It’s a bit less clear how that choice applies, say, to Jeff’s Israeli-born children and grandchildren. Much more important is the question of what it means for the great majority of Israel’s 6.8 million or so Jewish citizens, the majority non-Ashkenazi or Russian, who have no alternative “home” to which to return or relocate.

We are not speaking here of privileged middle-class Jews coming from America, or the highly subsidized settler thugs who move from places like Brooklyn so they can act like a Jewish Klux Klan in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and now as vigilante mobs in Palestinian neighborhoods inside Israel. (If these goons were acting on their own, they could be dealt with in criminal courts like the January 6 U.S. Capitol mob — but of course that’s not the situation.)

That Israeli-Jewish majority, as Halper would say “indigenous” (small i) to the country but not (large I) “Indigenous” Palestinians, are “colonizers” in the context of a settler-colonial reality. But the decolonization program that Halper seeks must answer the question of what’s in it for them — as he knows of course.

One big question is recognizing that, like it or not, there actually is now a distinct Israeli “Hebrew” or Jewish nation in historic Palestine — an oppressor nation over the oppressed Palestinian one, but with a class structure and economic reality, i.e. not equivalent to the French colons in Algeria or the case of South Africa which depends (under both apartheid and post-apartheid regimes) on black labor.

The historian Rashid Khalidi for example, whose work *The Hundred Years War on Palestine* is also reviewed in this issue of ATC, is forthright about this reality. Halper knows it too; but as I read his text (I may be wrong about this) he seems to concede it in passing, and somewhat hesitantly: in a decolonized democracy Jews would freely “carry on their lives as Jews and as members of diverse ethnic, religious, voluntary or even national communities.” (199)*

Might this be one of the difficult pro-grammatic issues in forging agreement among the Palestinian and Israeli participants in the ODSC? To be clear, at a time when Israel refuses recognition of the Palestinian nation and its right

to self-determination, it's obscene to demand Palestinian recognition of the Israeli one — although on more than one occasion the official Palestinian leadership has done so!

In the blessed event of Israeli recognition of Palestinian nationhood, however, I can't imagine any way out of the mess unless Israeli-Jewish nationhood — not Jewish supremacy or “the nation-state of the Jewish people” globally, of course — is mutually recognized too. But this is far from what I see as the biggest problem, to which I'll return.

Plunging into the thicket of the discussion, Halper draws both on general theories of decolonization and on the specific issues of Palestine. The general tenets of decolonization revolve around the guiding principle that the strategies, tactics, language and needs of the Indigenous struggle must never be assimilated to or constrained by those of the colonizers, whether sympathetic or otherwise. This insistence infuses the entire text.

At the same time, Halper posits that “A joint struggle against colonialism enables a vision of a shared future,” and that in Palestine after a century of struggle “we are dealing with a particular kind of settler colonialism, in which the settlers and the Indigenous have arrived at a draw. Neither can defeat the other, and both have constructed compelling national narratives.”

The close comparative case he sees is that of South Africa and “the process followed by the ANC (African National Congress) in formulating its detailed vision document and political plan, the Freedom Charter.” (134-5)

Based on this model, “(d)ecolonization aspires to uncouple national feeling and residence in the country from settler colonialism...offering the Zionists a ‘deal.’ If you go through a process of decolonization, then the indigenous Palestinians, now in a position of parity, will agree to integrate you into the new ‘national’ political community.” (137)

It's a powerful vision. One thing I like is how it corresponds to something that the longtime liberal Zionist Peter Beinart (himself with South African roots) who now supports “a single democratic state” has been putting forward: What matters now is not some “solution” that can be implemented right away, which doesn't exist, but a programmatic vision that can energize a movement.

Contradictions

What I can't share is Halper's optimism, laid out in his Chapter 9 titled “Toward Post-coloniality,” that “(T)he good news is that the campaign to decolonize Palestine is farther along than we realize,” and “in fact, the Palestinians enjoy an advantage over the resistance movement of South Africa.” (171, 172)

In fact, Halper's book is entirely clear in more than one place that the Israeli-Jewish public in its vast majority has checked out of any serious concern about the Occupation or Palestinian rights, let alone an equitable future on any terms. The implication — rightly, I believe — is that short-term change in Israeli behavior must be imposed from the outside, through the power of international civil society influencing global power, with Israeli-Jewish public opinion, we might hope, beginning to shift subsequently.

But here is a fundamental contradiction. While Israeli government action can — and must — be constrained by global outrage, the threat of sanctions and “pariah state” status, what can't be imposed from outside is democracy, much less “One Democratic State”! Nor will it arise from military forces.

Conceiving Decolonization

Halper observes that apartheid “South Africa hardly had the strategic importance that Israel has” (172), which did become true of South Africa at least with the end of the Cold War, but his own book *War Against the People* shows precisely that Israel’s export of the means and methods of state terror make it a powerful asset to global and regional oppressors.

What’s more, where Halper argues that “the Israeli/Palestinian issue has been viewed as a major source of disruption throughout the Middle East and thus of key interest to the global powers to resolve” (173), the debacle of the endless “peace process” suggests to me instead that Palestine has become increasingly marginal to the concerns of U.S. imperialism except for periodic explosions, while Europe is in too much of a mess to do anything serious about it.

Most important of all, I’m afraid, much of the pro-Palestinian solidarity movement has the illusion that South African apartheid was brought down by the power of international sanctions and boycotts, which can be replicated to free Palestine. This is radically mistaken: Democracy was “imposed” on the 20% South African white minority, but international pressure although important was secondary to the power of the African working class that could threaten to paralyze the economy and make the country ungovernable. Non-racial democracy, with its advances and its limitations, emerged in South Africa from the inside.

Indeed, it was that black working-class threat (moral pressure was secondary) that propelled imperialist regimes and global finance to break from their decades-long friendly tolerance — “constructive engagement,” in the sickening language of the time — with the apartheid regime.

Because of the way Zionist settlement and state construction proceeded, there is no such power of the Palestinian working class to challenge the Israeli state. Palestinian labor of course is exploited, because capital exists to exploit labor wherever it exists, but it’s not central to Israel’s capitalist economy or state structures. And that also helps explain global relative indifference.

The future is volatile and unpredictable, but it’s hard to see anything like “post-coloniality” in Palestine without a long, hard struggle on many fronts. None of this detracts from what Jeff Halper and his ODSC comrades are working to accomplish, which is part of that struggle, or from the value of his dissection of Zionist colonization and the entangled societies it has produced. An important read!

*In a complex discussion, Halper lays out concepts and problems of “binationalism,” “shared sovereignty” and “liberal democracy.” (156-162). Without drawing definitive conclusions, he states that “(i)n the ODSC proposal it is up to the collective in question to define the nature of its own identity,” conceding that this “leaves unresolved, however, the national element of Israeli Jewish identity.” The possibility of a socialist future isn’t raised here or elsewhere in the book, although Halper conceives that today’s struggle might become “a stepping stone to the interconnected and multicultural region that once existed” in the Middle East and North Africa. (201)

Source: [Against the Current](#)

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.