

The Myths Surrounding Palestine, Explained

By Leila Katibah

Surrounding the question of Palestine, or as some call it, the "Israel/Palestine Conflict," are discourses characterized by myths and propaganda across public spheres such as media, politics, and academia. While by no means exhaustive of all the mythologies surrounding Palestine, this list debunks some of the most commonly-held misconceptions.



Elderly Palestinian couple looking at the home they once lived in, now occupied by an Israeli Jewish couple (Najwan Simri/Al Jazeera, 2020).

Is it really so complicated and exceptional?

In almost all discussions of Palestine, there is an obligatory disclaimer that it is just so complicated. It is as though Palestine is a uniquely convoluted issue, requiring years of dedication in order to comprehend and give an informed opinion on. In this sense, Palestine is arcanized, or framed as so exceptional that just a few can understand it. This means that our normal judgments and moral compass are supposed to go out the window, as they do not apply to these unique circumstances. Our conventional approaches to morality and law are thus framed as lacking nuance and ill-fitting. Such appeals to complexity serve to silence your own conscience, especially among liberal Zionists, who claim to have progressive beliefs, but jump through hoops justifying racist Israeli demographic obsessions, ethnic cleansing, and military occupation, none of which they would support under any other circumstance.

In other circumstances, it would be difficult to argue against the right of refugees to return to their homes, but the case of Palestine is supposedly "special." Palestinian prisoners are unique, not viewed as prisoners of war, nor as civilians deserving of civilian court and due process. This is quite convenient, as it would allow Israel to argue that the [Geneva conventions](#) do not apply either, thereby justifying international war crimes committed against Palestinians.

The tale of Palestine is actually a simple story of colonialism and dispossession, yet it is portrayed as though it is difficult to understand and even harder to solve. The story of European settlers coming to a foreign land, settling there, committing genocide, and expelling natives has been told far too often. Zionists have not created anything new in this respect, but Israel, with the help of its allies, continues to succeed in developing a multifaceted explanation that is so complex only Israel itself can understand it. To clarify, Palestine is just as deep and worthy of study as any other anti-colonial struggle, the objection lies in the framing of it as too complex in an effort to mystify and obscure the issue. Palestine is not unique and exceptional; the trajectory of its origins, events, and politics can be

easily traced and analyzed, and they have been through decades of academic scholarship. We must reject the arcanization of Palestine, and any other anti-colonial struggle should it occur. If something is rendered an injustice elsewhere, then there is no question on whether it is an injustice when inflicted upon the Palestinian population.

Who is native to the land? Who was there first?

A recurring theme when discussing Palestine's history is the question of "who was there first?" with the implication being, whoever was there first deserves ownership of the land. This is usually followed by claims that Jewish people have been in Palestine before the Arabs or Muslims. Their argument is that Palestinians today are mostly Arabs, and Arabs came to the Levant following the Muslim conquests of the region, thereby Arabs, and Palestinians by extension, have only been in Palestine since the seventh century AD.

There are several issues with this common argument. First, it conflates Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians, despite none of them being interchangeable. Arabs have had a long history in the Levant, before Islam. Conflating Islamization with Arabization of the region is also an issue, as Islamization occurred first, with its spread to the Levant taking several centuries. The Arabization of conquered provinces occurred after, during the Marwanid dynasty of the Umayyad caliphate, when Arabic-speaking state officials made it law that the language of state and commerce would become Arabic, making it advantageous to assimilate. So, while the vast majority of the population of these lands were not ethnically Arab, over a millennium, they came to identify as such. Rather than being a purely ethnic identity, "Arab," has transformed into a mainly cultural and linguistic identity. This was a different process from European colonialism of the Americas, in which natives were eradicated to make place for colonizers, as the process that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa is one of conquered peoples mixing with and coming to identify with their conquerors, if not as Arabs, then as Muslims, without being physically removed one way or another.

This means that the Palestinian Arabs of today did not suddenly settle from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, but rather are the same indigenous people living there, who have changed how they identified over time. When regions change rulers, it is not typical that they change populations, but rather populations change how they identify politically, as the Sardinians eventually became Italians, and the Prussians became German. It is necessary to remember no region is a closed container, with trade, immigration, intermarriage, and invasion all playing a role in shaping current Palestinian society. However, the fact remains that there was never a historical process in which Arab or Muslim conquerors completely replaced native populations of the lands they conquered; they only added to them.

Israeli settlers often refute the notion of Palestinians as indigenous, claiming they themselves are the descendants of those who lived in Judea. Such an argument fails to understand what it means to be indigenous, as indigeneity is not some mythical identity; it simply denotes your place in a colonial society, hence the fact that every Palestinian within Palestine is indigenous, and every Jewish settler within occupied Palestine is a colonizer. Within a colonial society, you cannot be indigenous if you are a colonizer, regardless of how long ago your ancestors may have lived in Palestine. The fact remains that, following the inception of the Israeli state, the majority of Israeli settlers arrived from Europe, with minorities arriving from the Middle East and Africa, and subsequently created an ethnostate. Therefore claims to indigeneity are nothing more than part of a settler-colonial playbook to erase Palestinian history in their homeland, while also suggesting that beliefs of Jewish indigeneity justify the expulsion and massacres of Palestinians.

So what does this mean for Palestine? Absolutely nothing. This argument of who was there first is nothing more than a trap. This is because it assumes that if the Jewish people were in Palestine before the Arabs, then the land belongs to them, thereby justifying the creation of Israel. In my experience, whenever this argument is used, many Palestinians' automatic response is that their ancestors, the Canaanites, were there first. But, this idea that Palestinians are the descendants of only one particular group in a region with mass migrations and numerous empires and peoples is not only ahistorical, but indirectly legitimizes the original argument they are fighting against by implying that the only reason Israel's creation is unjustified is because their Palestinians were there first, not because of the atrocities committed by the Israeli state.

The ethnic cleansing, massacres, and colonialism required to establish the state of Israel can never be justified, regardless of any claim of indigeneity or whoever was there first. Even if it were true that Palestinians have only

been there for 1300 years, is this supposed to suddenly legitimize mass expulsions and genocide? Absolutely not. Human rights apply to people universally, regardless of how long they have inhabited a region. By rejecting the "we were there first" argument and disavowing it as a legitimizing factor for Israel's existence, we can focus on real history rather than ideological agendas. We must stop viewing Palestinian and Jewish histories as competing or mutually exclusive, because for most of history that was not the case, and instead trace how our pasts intersected throughout centuries. We can maintain these positions while simultaneously rejecting Zionism and colonialism, as the ideologically driven impulse to believe ancestors of Palestinians are some closed, unchanging homogenous group with exclusive ownership of the land is based on notions of modern ethnic nationalism and colonialism rather than the actual history of the region.

Is the Palestinian question a religious struggle?

There is a common misconception regarding the question of Palestine, in which it is assumed to be a holy war between Muslims and Jews. Assigning a purely religious motivation to the root causes of the Palestinian issue is incorrect. Rather, the beginning of the question of Palestine is rooted in the Zionist movement and its goal of colonizing Palestine to establish a Zionist state there. Zionism posits Judaism as not merely a religion, but as an ethnicity, hence their argument that Jewish people like all other peoples are entitled to an ethnic nation-state, a popular thought among European intellectuals at the time. This means that a sizable majority of early Zionist thought was secular, not based in religion.

Zionism's founding fathers, like David Ben-Gurion and Theodore Herzl, did not view their aspirations in Palestine as religious, as many were atheists or agnostic. Zionism emerged during the late 19th century Eastern and Central Europe as a radical break from the 2,000 years of rabbinical Judaism. The 'land of Israel' was revered by generations of Jews as a place of holy pilgrimages, not as a future secular state. While generations of Jews expressed their yearning for "Zion," through traditions and prayers, this yearning has only recently become understood as literal. Rather, the early Zionists framed their aspirations in Palestine with a colonial framework that was popular at the time, with the idea of Zionists as westerners were better equipped to cultivate and govern the land more than the natives.

Therefore, the idea that the foundation of Israel stems from the realization of centuries of religious longing is mostly an ex post facto justification for settler-colonialism and the violence it entails. Like previous forms of European nationalism, Zionism exemplifies nation-building through the invention of tradition, manipulating a religious past and collective memory for political gains. There were some religious Zionist streams, but it was secular Zionism that managed to gather the resources of European Zionism and centralize their efforts to colonize Palestine. It is this form of Zionism that succeeded in establishing colonies and carrying out the [Nakba](#) starting in 1948, in which 800,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from over 500 villages, the majority of which were decimated.

So, why is it that when it comes to Zionist settler colonialism, it is deemed a holy war rather than colonized subjects resisting their occupiers? This misconception is based on an [Orientalist](#) understanding of the Middle East that assumes every issue there stems from religious sectarianism, as if Middle Easterners are just incapable of living among others. Christian Palestinians, Druze Palestinians, and secular Palestinians have also suffered and fought against Zionist settler colonialism, and it would be absurd to suggest they were participating in some 'Muslim holy war.' So, the question of Palestine is not some ancient holy war, but is rather a recent struggle as a result of settler-colonialism coupled with reactionary ethno-nationalism, both of which are relatively modern concepts. The notion of a holy war is not applicable in the analysis of a heterogeneous society's struggle against settler colonialism in an area rife with liberation movements.

Is Israel a democracy? Are all Israeli citizens equal?

Although it attempts to brand itself as the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel is actually an ethnocracy. This false mantra is meant to confer an automatic moral superiority, similar to claims that the Israeli military is the 'most moral army in the world,' which ultimately means to separate them from their 'backwards' neighbors, and serve as an ex post facto justification for its actions. A core aspect of democracy is equality. Even though Israel has elections, and not all of its citizens are Israeli Jewish (some are Palestinian Druze, Christian, or Muslim), many of the rights you are accorded are determined by your nationality rather than citizenship. Your nationality is determined by your ethnicity, and cannot be changed nor challenged hence the notion of an ethnocracy. Meaning an "Arab" Israeli

citizen and a Jewish Israeli citizen enjoy different rights and privileges determined by their nationality. This discrimination is not just by practice, but by law, compiled in [this database](#) by Adalah, disprivileging non-Jewish Israelis.

The truth is, almost all Palestinian citizens of Israel are living below the poverty line. They have lower life expectancies, higher infant mortality rates, less access to education and resources as well as less municipality and government funding. More detailed aspects of this discrimination can be found in Adalah's [Inequality Report](#). This [report by the Adva Center](#) illustrates how Palestinians are discriminated against in almost every aspect of life. Additionally, 80% of the land in Israel is [off limits](#) to Palestinian citizens of Israel, with most of it controlled by the Jewish National Fund or regional and local councils, who prohibit Palestinians from purchasing, leasing, or renting land.

For these reasons, it would make more sense to classify Israel as an ethnocracy, in which a democratic facade is maintained while promoting the expansion of a dominant group in contested territory and its domination of power structures. Israel is an ethno-state, and by definition will always support the dominance of one ethnicity by any means necessary.

Is Anti-Zionism the same as Anti-Semitism?

We cannot allow Israel to succeed in its conflation of Zionism with Judaism, nor speak in the name of and represent world Jewry. Certainly, anti-Semitism has been a vastly destructive force throughout history and that Jewish people have been persecuted, enduring attempts of systematic annihilation. This very real history of persecution is sometimes cynically weaponized by Zionists to legitimize their state and deny the reality of Palestinian suffering. Zionism has been utterly detached from its material history, and instead falsely conflated with Jewish identity and self-determination.

First, the notion that Zionism is merely Jewish self-determination is intellectually dishonest. This is especially evident when you try to apply this argument to another settler-colonial context, like the colonization of Turtle Island and the subsequent founding of the United States of America. Nowadays, if someone were to describe "manifest destiny" as settlers seeking better lives for themselves, or that the U.S. was founded upon liberty, equality, and justice for all, the average educated or socially aware person would immediately know what's missing from that statement, namely slavery and genocide. In the American case, these rights were only for white, male landowners, and everyone else's varying degrees of oppression was necessary in order to build the privileges and power of this class. When Zionists equate their political ideology with Jewish self-determination, they frame objections to the ethnic cleansing Zionism entails as an objection to Jewish self-determination as a concept, yet another intellectually dishonest claim, as anti-Zionists object to the oppressive costs of Israel's establishment, including ethnic cleansing and colonization of native lands.

There is no reason to believe that the notion of self-determination can only be realized through a colonial ethnocracy sustained by the fact that native inhabitants of the land are in refugee camps around the world. Everybody should be able to determine their own destiny, but not if it comes at the expense of oppressing others. There is ample evidence, recorded by Zionist pioneers, that when Jewish settlers first arrived, the native Palestinian population was welcoming, showing them how to work the land, even if they saw the natives as inferior. Countless refugee populations have been hosted in Palestine, so the notion that Jewish people fleeing persecution could safely live in Palestine was never the issue. Rather, the issue is that these ideals of coexistence were never reciprocated by Zionists.

Is it really a righteous cause to end a diaspora by causing another one? You cannot attempt to right decades of historical wrongs and find solutions by ignoring the root causes. Such simplistic views that boil down the issue to a holy war erases Jewish allies of Palestine, such as the organization [Jewish Voice for Peace](#), and disregards Muslim and Christian allies of Israel, such as [evangelical Americans](#), or [Arab Gulf states](#).

Israelis have been raised with the idea that Israel is the only thing keeping them safe, and any challenges are tantamount to calling for mass genocide of Jewish Israelis [from the river to the sea](#), or even worse, the destruction of Jewish people entirely. Such anxieties are not unique to Jewish Israelis, as settlers across different colonies, such as South Africa, relayed similar ideologies. For example, proponents of apartheid argued that ending apartheid and

giving everyone an equal vote would be “a recipe for slaughter in South Africa” which is eerily similar to Zionist claims that giving Palestinians equal votes is tantamount to genocide. Ultimately, settlers always believe they are defending themselves. They build forts on other people’s land, and go haywire over the fact they are surrounded. The belief that a free and decolonized land will lead to genocide of settlers by the ‘barbaric’ colonized population is rooted in racist dehumanizing logics stemming from Orientalism and colonialism.

What can you do?

Despite confluences of anti-Zionism with Anti-Semitism being intellectually dishonest, the conflation prevails over western societies, to the extent that any form of Palestinian resistance is purported as terrorism, and any criticism of Israel is deemed a call to genocide, no matter how mild. Although across the other side of the world, the issue of Palestine has made its way onto North American college campuses. Pro-Palestinian activists on US college campuses are increasingly visible, but face opposition from well-funded Pro-Israel organizations, in turn causing student and faculty activists being doxxed and blacklisted on websites such as [Canary Mission](#) for their activism, where they are publicly and falsely labeled as anti-Semites and/or Islamist terrorists. This also touches upon larger issues of academic freedom and freedom of speech, which many call “[the Palestinian exception to free speech](#).”

Movements for Palestine face similar backlash and demonization. [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions \(BDS\)](#) is a Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice, and equality, taking inspiration from the freedom fighters in South Africa who overcame apartheid through these strategies. It campaigns to pressure institutions, unions, and companies to boycott or divest and to isolate Israel academically, culturally, economically, and militarily in order to pressure Israel to comply with international law. Below are some ways you can support Palestinians as a consumer, student, and global citizen.

1. You can be part of a targeted consumer boycott to help convince retailers across the world to stop selling products from companies that profit off of Israel’s war crimes. These companies play a direct role in Israel’s crime’s:
 - [HP](#)
 - [Siemens](#)
 - [AXA](#)
 - [Puma](#)
 - Israeli fruits and vegetables
 - SodaStream
 - Ahava
 - Sabra
2. You can also support BDS on your college campus, through Students for Justice in Palestine organizations. See how other students have supported the Palestinian cause [here](#). Divestment campaigns have occurred at over 40 student governments across the US and Canada, in which they voted to campaign for their university to divest from companies and individuals that aid and abet Israel’s violation of international law. In the past, students across the world have been successful in pressuring their universities to end contracts with Israeli companies. If you’re unsure where to get started on campus, here are some steps to get started:
 1. Start a new campaign using [this guide](#) on your campus to pressure your university to divest from companies targeted by BDS or to end a relationship with an Israeli academic institution.
 2. Get in touch with your student union/government and create a model resolution
 3. Organize a petition
 4. Get academics and staff on board
 5. Research collaboratively about your university’s institutional relationships with Israeli universities and companies

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