

# Anti-Zionism as Decolonisation

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Lara Kilani

As horrifying scenes from Gaza have been recorded, published, and replayed around the world, people have been jolted into action and have thrown themselves into solidarity work. This surge of activism is fuelled by visceral reactions to the harrowing realities of Israel's ongoing genocide unfolding on the global stage. People are realising, by the thousands, that

zionism is a political program of indigenous erasure and primitive resource accumulation.

Many new activists and reactivated organisers seek to translate their emotional responses into tangible support. They are also searching for community hubs, often in the form of organisations, that confront zionism and colonialism – the root cause of this genocide. Whether activists know it or not, they are looking for an anti-zionist home for their organising efforts. It is exactly the moment, therefore, to provide an honest discussion on some of the essential characteristics of this organising, firmly rooted in the principles of Palestinian liberation and decolonisation, peeling away any remaining layers of confusion or mystery. This essay aims to open the overdue conversation with some suggestions for individuals to consider as they search for their anti-zionist organising home.

If we accept, as those with even the most rudimentary understanding of history do, that zionism is an ongoing process of settler-colonialism, then the undoing of zionism requires anti-zionism, which should be understood as a process of decolonisation. Anti-zionism as a decolonial ideology then becomes rightly situated as an indigenous liberation movement. The resulting implication is two-fold. First, decolonial organising requires that we extract ourselves from the limitations of existing structures of power and knowledge and imagine a new, just world. Second, this understanding clarifies that the caretakers of anti-zionist thought are indigenous communities resisting colonial erasure, and it is from this analysis that the strategies, modes, and goals of decolonial praxis should flow. In simpler terms: Palestinians committed to decolonisation, not Western-based NGOs, are the primary authors of anti-zionist thought.

We write this as a Palestinian and a Palestinian-American who live and work in Palestine, and have seen the impact of so-called 'Western values' and how the centring of the 'human rights' paradigm disrupts real decolonial efforts in Palestine and abroad. This is carried out in favour of maintaining the status quo and gaining proximity to power, using our slogans emptied of Palestinian historical analysis.

Anti-zionist organising is not a new notion, but until now the use of the term in organising circles has been mired with misunderstandings, vague definitions, or minimised outright. Some have incorrectly described anti-zionism as amounting to activities or thought limited to critiques of the present Israeli government – this is a dangerous misrepresentation.

Understanding anti-zionism as decolonisation requires the articulation of a political movement with material, articulated goals: the restitution

of ancestral territories and upholding the inviolable principle of indigenous repatriation and through the right of return, coupled with the deconstruction of Zionist structures and the reconstitution of governing frameworks that are conceived, directed, and implemented by Palestinians.

Anti-Zionism illuminates the necessity to return power to the indigenous community and the need for frameworks of justice and accountability for the settler communities that have waged a bloody, unrelenting hundred-year war on the people of Palestine. It means that anti-Zionism is much more than a slogan.

### **A liberation movement**

Given the implications of defining anti-Zionism, we must reorient ourselves around it within the framework of a liberation movement. This emphasises the strategic importance of control over the narrative and principles of anti-

zionism in the context of global decolonial efforts. As Steven Salaita points out in ' Hamas is a Figment of Your Imagination ', zionism and liberal zionism continue to influence the shape of Palestinian resistance:

Zionists (have) a type of rhetorical control in the public sphere: they get to determine the culture of the native; they get to prescribe (and proscribe) the contours of resistance; they get to adjudicate the work of national liberation. Palestinians are entrapped by the crude and self-serving imagination of the oppressor.

We have to wrestle back our right to narration, and can use anti-zionist thought as a guide for liberation. We must reclaim anti-zionist praxis from those who would only use it as a headline in a fundraising email.

While our collective imaginations have not fully articulated what a liberated and decolonised Palestine looks

like, the rough contours have been laid out repeatedly. Ask any Palestinian refugee displaced from Haifa, the lands of Sheikh Muwannis, or Deir Yassin – they will tell that a decolonised Palestine is, at a minimum, the right of Palestinians’ return to an autonomous political unit from the river to the sea.

When self-proclaimed ‘anti-zionists’ use rhetoric like ‘Israel-Palestine’ – or worse, ‘Palestine-Israel’ – we wonder: where do you think ‘Israel’ exists? On which land does it lay, if not Palestine? This is nothing more than an attempt to legitimise a colonial state; the name you are looking for is Palestine – no hyphen required. At a minimum, anti-zionist formations should cut out language that forces upon Palestinians and non-Palestinian allies the violence of colonial theft.

### **The settler/native relationship**

Understanding the settler/native relationship is essential in anti-zionist organising. It means confronting the 'settler' designation in zionist settler-colonialism – a class status indicating one's place in the larger settler-colonial systems of power. Anti-zionist discourse should critically challenge the zionist (re)framing of history through colonial instruments, such as the Oslo Accords and an over-reliance on international law frameworks, through which they differentiate Israeli settlers in Tel Aviv and those in West Bank settlements.

Suggesting that some Israeli cities are settlements while others are not perpetuates zionist framing, granting legitimacy to colonial control according to arbitrary geographical divisions in Palestine, and further dividing the land into disparate zones. Anti-zionist analysis understands that 'settlers' are not only residents of 'illegal' West Bank settlements like Kiryat Arba and Efrat, but also those in Safad

and Petah Tikvah. Ask any Palestinian who is living in exile from Haifa; they will tell you the Israelis living in their homes are also settlers.

The common choice to centre the Oslo Accords, international humanitarian law, and the human rights paradigm over socio-historical Palestinian realities not only limits our analysis and political interventions; it restricts our imagination of what kind of future Palestinians deserve, sidelining questions of decolonization to convince us that it is the new, bad settlers in the West Bank who are the source of violence. *Legitimate* settlers, who reside within the bounds of Palestinian geographies stolen in 1948 like Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem, are different within this narrative. Like *Breaking the Silence*, they can be enlightened by learning the error of colonial violence carried out in service of the bad settlers. They can supposedly

even be our solidarity partners – all without having to sacrifice a crumb of colonial privilege or denounce pre-1967 Zionist violence in any of its cruel manifestations.

As a result of this course of thought, solidarity organisations often showcase particular Israelis – those who renounce state violence in service of the bad settlers and their ongoing colonisation of the West Bank – in roles as professionals and peacemakers, positioning them on an equal intellectual, moral, or class footing with Palestinians. There is no recognition of the inherent imbalance of power between these Israelis and the Palestinians they purport to be in solidarity with – stripping away their settler status. The settler is taken out of the historical-political context which afforded them privileged status on stolen land, and is given the power to delineate the Palestinian experience. This is part of the historical occlusion of the Zionist narrative,

overlooking the context of settler-colonialism to read the settler as an individual, and omitting their class status as a settler.

### **Misreading 'decolonisation'**

It is essential to note that Palestinians have never rejected Jewish indigeneity in Palestine. However, the liberation movement has differentiated between Zionist settlers and Jewish natives. Palestinians have established a clear and rational framework for this distinction, like in the Thawabet, the National Charter of Palestine from 1968. Article 6 states, 'The Jews who had normally resided in Palestine until the beginning of the Zionist invasion will be considered Palestinians.'

When individuals misread 'decolonisation' as 'the mass killing or expulsion of Jews,' it is often a reflection of their own entanglement in colonialism or a result of Zionist propaganda. Perpetuating this rhetoric is a

deliberate misinterpretation of Palestinian thought, which has maintained this position over a century of indigenous organising.

Even after 100 years of enduring ethnic cleansing, whole communities bombed and entire family lines erased, Palestinians have never, as a collective, called for the mass killing of Jews or Israelis. Anti-zionism cannot shy away from employing the historical-political definitions of 'settler' and 'indigenous' in their discourse to confront ahistorical readings of Palestinian decolonial thought and zionist propaganda.

### **The zionist version of 'all lives matter'**

As we see, settler-colonialism secures the position of the settler, imbuing them with rights, in this case, a divine right of conquest. As such, zionism ensures that settlers' rights supersede those of indigenous people at the latter's expense.

Knowing this, the liberal slogan 'equal rights for all people' requires deeper consideration. Rather than placing the emphasis on the deconstruction of the settler state and the violence inherent to it, which eternally serves the settler to the direct detriment of indigenous communities, the slogan suggests that Palestinians simply need to secure more rights within the violent system. But 'equal rights', in the sense that those chanting this phrase mean them, will not come from attempts to rehabilitate a settler state. They can only be ensured through the decolonization of Palestine, through the material restitution of land and resources. Without further discussion, the slogan simply serves as another mechanism of zionism, one that maintains the rights of the settler rather than emphasising the need to *restore* rights to indigenous communities, who have long been the victims of settlers' rights.

Anti-zionists cannot both denounce settler-colonialism and zionism, and centre advocacy on the claim that settlers should have equal, immutable rights. Zionists would have you believe that their state has always existed, that Israelis have always lived on the land. But a brief reference to recent history reminds us that anti-zionism must confront the ongoing mechanisms materially advancing the development of colonies in Palestine.

In 2022 alone, zionist institutions invested almost \$100 million, transferring some 60,000 new settlers from Russia, Eastern Europe, the United States, and France to help secure a demographic majority and ensure a physical presence on indigenous lands. This only happens by maintaining the forced displacement of Palestinians, and by violently displacing them anew as we see on a daily basis, particularly across the rural West Bank.

There is no moral legitimacy in the suggestion that these settlers have a 'right' to live on stolen Palestinian land, the theft maintained by force, as long as there has been no restoration of Palestinians' rights. No theories of justice exist in mainstream ethical or philosophical discourse that advocate for a person who has stolen something to rightfully keep what they have taken. The act of theft, by definition, violates the basic principles of theories of justice, which emphasise fairness, equitable distribution of resources, and respect for individual rights and property.

Reminding people that decolonisation is not a metaphor, some activists with Israeli citizenship, including Nadav Gazit and Yuula Benivolsky, have taken the initiative to tangibly support Palestinian liberation and renounced their claim to settler citizenship. When liberal NGOs champion 'equal rights for all people' with no further discussion of what this means, it

is the Zionist version of 'all lives matter', perpetuating – or at best, failing to question – the maintenance of systems of violence against Palestinians.

Having laid out some of the foundational concepts and definitions pertaining to Zionism and anti-Zionism, we can explore some essential strategies and tactics of anti-Zionist organising.

### **Structural changes to support liberation**

As anti-Zionism necessitates the systematic dismantling of Zionist structures, this process may include educational programs and protests, which serve as foundational activities.

However, it is essential to be cautious of organising spaces and activities that become comfort zones for activists, lacking the necessary risk and meaningful challenges to existing structures of Zionist violence. Anti-Zionist organising must involve strategic policy and legal reform that support

decolonisation from afar, such as targeting laws that enable international charities to fund Israeli settler militias and settlement expansion. After all, our aim from abroad should be to make structural changes to advance decolonisation, not simply shift public sentiment about Palestine.

Decolonial approaches abroad include changing the internal structures of institutions that support colonisation: charities, churches, synagogues, social clubs, and other donor institutions. This includes entities that many international activists are personally, professionally, and financially linked to, such as the nonprofits we coordinate with and large granting institutions like the Open Society Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York.

In the context of the United States, the most threatening Zionist institutions are the entrenched political parties which function to maintain the status quo of the American

empire, not Hillel groups on university campuses or even Christian Zionist churches. While the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) engage in forms of violence that suppress Palestinian liberation and must not be minimised, it is crucial to recognise that the most consequential institutions in the context of settler-colonialism are not exclusively Jewish in their orientation or representation: the Republican and Democratic Party in the United States do arguably more to manufacture public consent for the slaughtering of Palestinians than the ADL and AIPAC combined. Even the Progressive Caucus and the majority of 'The Squad' are guilty of this.

These internal challenges to the institutions and communities we belong to are, by definition, risky and sacrificial – but essential and liberatory. They require confrontation, and likely the withholding of support and

material resources, in order to usher in change. As we have seen over the last months, merely organising protests to pressure politicians without the explicit intent to withdraw electoral and financial support from political parties and institutions is fundamentally flawed. It also does not secure the desired result: on November 28, 2023, in the midst of Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, members of the US House of Representatives voted 421 to 1 (with the 1 unaligned to any decolonisation movement) to support a bill that equates anti-zionism to antisemitism.

Members of 'The Squad' who did not vote for the bill did not vote against it.

Politicians, organisational leaders, and funding institutions must see the real political consequences of their decisions to support genocide.

Reluctance within the executive leadership of international solidarity organisations to hold elected officials accountable is a red flag, as we cannot

balance our loyalties between liberation and temporary political convenience. Anti-zionism requires more than political organising that is targeted at those intentionally maintaining white supremacy through zionism; it requires that we wager our access to power to dismantle mechanisms of oppression. We must stop betting on the longevity of zionism.

When we properly decouple zionism from Judaism and understand it as a process of indigenous erasure and primitive resource accumulation, the dominant political formations, the armaments industry, and the high-tech security sector are easily understood as indispensable institutions in the broader zionist project. These bodies also materially benefit from the status quo of zionist colonisation, and therefore wield their power to maintain it. This is part of a larger function of these formations to uphold white supremacy, imperialism,

and colonialism globally – systems that harm all communities, albeit unequally. This helps us recognise that zionism does not serve to benefit Jewish people, even if this is not the primary reason we should abolish it. Equating global Jewish communities’ safety and prosperity with the safeguarding of colonial violence is an antisemitic and fallacious argument. It contends that in order to thrive, Jewish communities must displace, dominate, incarcerate, oppress, and murder Palestinians.

This relates to the earlier discussion of understanding Palestinians as the authors and caretakers of anti-zionist decolonial thought. We must be cautious not to portray anti-zionism as belonging in any exclusive way to Jewish activists, or requiring Jewish organisations’ initiative. Characterising anti-zionism as a practice necessarily spearheaded by Jewish activists, rather than acknowledging it as a

decolonial praxis aimed at deconstructing the institutions maintaining the colonisation of Palestine, displaces Palestinian decolonial leadership. By placing undue emphasis on the role of Jewish organisations, we de-centre Palestinian knowledge, experience, and decolonial efforts in favour of non-Palestinian agencies. This is a grave error. Such a conflation not only misrepresents the objectives of anti-zionism but also inadvertently contributes to the continuation of antisemitic sentiments by equating Judaism and colonialism.

### **Bold solidarity**

In summary, anti-zionism is not a slogan, but a process of decolonisation and liberation. Palestinians committed to resisting zionism and erasure are the caretakers of this political movement. Cities such as Tel Aviv and Modi'in are settlements, just like Itamar or Tel Rumeida in the West Bank. Decolonisation does not imply the displacement of all Jewish

communities in Palestine; however, it is crucial to recognise that not every individual identifying as Jewish is indigenous to Palestine. This basic framework must be unabashedly articulated by anti-zionist organisations and allies in their advocacy. Anti-zionist organising should move towards dismantling the colonial structures through the changing of laws and policies of the institutions and formations most essential to the Israeli state project.

This essay is not an exhaustive manual; instead, it begins a much-needed conversation and presents central principles of anti-zionist praxis. These principles are non-negotiable and represent some of the markers of anti-zionist organising. These anti-zionist indicators should not be sprinkled about through emails or social media posts that one has to dig for, but should be glaringly evident in our work and analysis.

An organisation's commitment to solidarity and conceptualisation of resistance should be transparent. Its ideals should be clear to potential newcomers as well as its donors. We have seen, too many times, organisations intentionally obfuscate what they stand for so they relate to a broad mass of people while at the same time being palatable to liberal donors. They use vague language about the future they envision, describing 'equality, justice, and a thriving future for all Palestinians and Israelis' without a thoughtful discussion of what Palestinians will need to reach this prosperity. The dual discourse phenomenon, where contradictory messages are conveyed to grassroots supporters and financial donors, is a manipulative tactic for institutional or personal gain. It should be clear from the onset that a group's efforts have one ultimate goal: from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.

Anti-zionism and solidarity

should be bold. Palestinians  
deserve nothing less.

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Leila Shomali and Lara Kilani

Leila Shomali is a Palestinian  
PhD candidate in International  
Law at Maynooth University  
Ireland and a member of the  
Good Shepherd Collective.

Lara Kilani is a Palestinian-  
American researcher, PhD  
student, and member of the  
Good Shepherd Collective.

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