Colonial violence and the dangerous passivity of Western intellectuals on Palestine

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The latest assault on Palestine by the Israeli occupation, beginning in early October 2023, marked another instance of colonial violence supported by the West. Through material, ideological and political support, Western political figures, media, intellectuals and civil society organisations have facilitated the decimation of Palestinian society, historically and currently. This intervention argues that Western intellectuals have an important task; to break with this history and collectively engage in crucial solidarity with the Palestinian cause of liberation from Israeli colonial occupation. By connecting and engaging with Palestinian movements and organisations at the forefront of the struggle, Western intellectuals should demand an immediate and permanent ceasefire, call for boycotting, divesting from Israeli universities and Western institutions complicit in the occupation, recognise the illegitimacy of Israeli settler colonialism, and build long-lasting relationships with Palestinian counterpart institutions.

Keywords: Israel • occupation • Palestine • settler colonialism • Western intellectuals

The latest assault on Palestine

The ongoing genocidal violence (Lendman, 2010; ICJ, 2024; Law for Palestine, 2024) against and colonial occupation of the Palestinian people by Israel has once again shown the unrelenting legacy of Euro-American imperialism. The atrocities committed by Israel since the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023 are countless and any reported figures, whether deaths or injuries, immediately become outdated and need revising (ReliefWeb, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2024a). As we continue to receive official reports of Israeli forces attacking Palestinian civilians, residential areas, refugee camps, hospitals, religious buildings and intellectual institutions, and individuals such as academics and journalists in Gaza (ICJ, 2024; Law for Palestine, 2024), the weakened responses of Western institutions continue to be alarming. While political leaderships in Europe and the US proclaim their support of Israel, professional organisations, educational and academic institutions, have been late in response, expressed concerns with reservations, or stayed silent on Israeli crimes. The lack of mobilisation by intellectual forces against the complicity and silence of Western
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institutions is a terrifying sign of moral bankruptcy against which we as researchers should confront and mobilise.

The murders of Palestinian intellectuals should shake colleagues in the West to the core. The poet and academic Refaat Alareer, who live-commented the ongoing attacks on Gaza during his last days, was assassinated. The family of Al Jazeera journalist Wael Al-Dahdouh was killed, before Al-Dahdouh himself was severely injured by an Israeli attack (Time, 2023a; 2023b). Reports from the Committee to Protect Journalists show that from 7 October 2023 to 7 January 2024, Israel killed at least 72 Palestinian journalists (CPJ, 2024). The toll of damaged or destroyed school buildings continue to rise but reports (30 December 2023) suggest that 352 schools across the Gaza strip have been damaged in Gaza, rendering them inoperable (Al Jazeera, 2023a). As evidence mounts of Israel targeting Palestinian journalists as well as academic and intellectual institutions, we have yet to see professional organisations and universities in the West respond collectively, forcefully, and unconditionally to condemn the crimes of Israel. We have an obvious precedent in recent times, the war in Ukraine, that Western universities and other educational institutions can condemn violence against civilians, can cut ties with a state committing war crimes (along with their intellectual institutions) and offer affected colleagues material and moral support (Northwestern University, 2022; University College Roosevelt, 2022; Lund University, 2023a; University of Oxford, 2023).

This deliberate targeting of Palestine’s journalists, academic and religious institutions, and health facilities (Al Jazeera, 2024c; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024) should reveal to us all that the cruel intent of the Israeli state is to eliminate the four entities that represent the eyes and ears, mind and spirit, and the bodies and hearts of the Palestinian story. Without journalists to chronicle the crimes, the world will be kept blind and deaf to Palestinian suffering. Without an academic and religious presence, the intellectual and spiritual resistance of Palestinians will be decimated. Without health facilities to care for the wounded and the sick, Palestinian life itself is endangered. The United Nations states that it is alarmed by the unprecedented number of killings of UN staff (136 in total from 7 October to 21 December), failing to mention who bears the responsibility of ensuring the protection of civilians and humanitarian in occupied territories (UNSDG, 2023).

From Gaza, we have received daily social media reports from young Palestinians on the crimes committed against their people. Journalists Bisan Owda, Hind Khoudary, Motaz Azaiza and Plestia Alaqad have all documented Israel’s horrific attacks, the defiant survival of Palestinians, and the tireless efforts of rescuers digging through the rubble for survivors (Time, 2023c). From occupied Jerusalem, writer and poet Mohammed El-Kurd has had the steadfast patience of explaining the fate of Palestinians amid a mountain of journalistic arrogance and wilful ignorance in Western media (The Nation, 2023). El-Kurd came (back) into international attention when he and his twin sister Muna El-Kurd were detained due to protests against Israeli evictions of Palestinian families in their neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem (Guardian, 2021). Such is the burden of Palestinians; having to chronicle the war crimes committed against their people when they have shelter to seek and mourning of loved ones to attend. In interview after interview, they are asked, or rather forced by those paying lip service to the occupation, to remain dignified in the face of the endless indignity of living under occupation, in order to retain somehow the attention and sympathies of the so-called International Community (Mondoweiss,
In the face of these glaring injustices, of horrific epistemic and material violence, the silence of Western intellectuals is contributing to the ongoing narrative that is being shaped in our institutions, where we seemingly are neutral and without tools to dismantle the narrative of violence.

The historical and present complicity of the West

We have seen the Israeli forces target universities, religious buildings, schools and hospitals, as well as media members reporting on these crimes with deadly outcomes (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024; ICJ, 2024; Law for Palestine, 2024). Yet the outrage from representatives of Western counterpart institutions seems relegated to individual or civil society-driven outbursts. Western institutions then either actively silence those demanding answers from them or respond with shrugs, feigned concern, or outright lack of support. The former is, for example, the case for some academics and students with courage to speak up for Palestinians at various American, British and German institutions, and the latter is increasingly the case in countries such as Sweden.

The US, with its long history of supporting Israel, has predictably demonstrated contempt to pro-Palestinian voices on university campuses and elsewhere in society. The New York Times reported that some US universities, such as Columbia University, Rutgers University, and Brandeis University have suspended student organising, while University of Pennsylvania and University of Vermont were forced to cancel cultural events that highlighted Palestinian voices and were critical of Israel (New York Times, 2023). In the UK, the Secretary of Science, Innovation and Technology called for the closure of an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion advisory group of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). This call came after social media posts made by academics in the group, who merely expressed concern over the UK Government’s attempt to restrict free speech, and who called Israel’s policies ‘genocidal and apartheid’ (Guardian, 2023). This prompted a response from the Chief Executive of UKRI, in which she vowed to take ‘swift and robust action’, including an investigation into the social media posts, as well as the advisory group’s very existence and a possible closure of the advisory group, depending on the outcome of the investigation (UKRI, 2023).

In Germany, the open hostility towards civilians advocating for Palestine has been staggering. For intellectuals that dare to criticise Israel’s latest assault as Germany remains staunchly committed to Israel, this has been a difficult few months. Some of the recent controversies include the Frankfurt Book Fair swiftly cancelling an award ceremony for Palestinian writer Adania Shibli (The Hill, 2023), and the Heinrich Böll Foundation withdrawing its Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought from Russian-American and Jewish journalist Masha Gessen, after they wrote an essay in which ‘they likened the Gaza Strip to World War II-era ghettos’ (NPR, 2023). In Sweden, Chalmers University of Technology decided to ban student protests with calls to cut ties with Israeli universities, and then rescinded its decision after heavy criticism. They did so despite the explicit support of Swedish Minister of Education Mats Persson, who contended that although free speech is essential, universities should focus on education and research and ‘not host political demonstrations in polarising times’ (Sydsvenskan, 2023). After an initial month of complete silence the Vice Chancellor of Lund University, Erik Renström, belatedly responded to concerns from students and staff about the University’s lack of statement with a non-statement of the
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university being committed to free speech, equality, and being a place of education and research, first and foremost (Lund University, 2023b).

Appalling as our Western academic passivity is, it seems to follow the tradition of liberal institutions in the West acting in accordance with the political status quo. Gone seem to be the words or at least semblance of independence that many universities evoke when discussing their vital role in society, because crucially, the occupation of Palestine is an example of colonialism. A colonial situation, actively supported (from the very beginning) by the great powers of the West, and passively by its intellectual institutions. Despite our insistence on human rights, academic freedom and the fad of decolonisation, we prove inept to confront this reality without resorting to empty buzzwords and fence sitting. When we go to our classrooms and we stand on ceremony under the usual slogans of academic freedom and independence in higher education, students will rightfully probe into how those pretty words are being materialised to confront settler colonial violence bankrolled by our taxes and politically supported by our institutions.

Perhaps our idleness stems from the underlying knowledge that the West was always present and supportive of Israel, paralysed by our subconscious sense of culpability. This is evident from the British Balfour Declaration in 1917 to the Western influence in the 1947 UN Partition Plan and ensuing Nakba of 1948 that fulfilled the Zionist project, the Six-Day War of 1967 to the modern supply of weapons and military equipment to Israel by corporations in countries like the US, Germany and the UK (Wolf, 2012; Khalidi, 2017). A history appropriately termed, a ‘hundred-year’s war on Palestine’ by Rashid I. Khalidi (2020), this war continues to be waged under the auspices of Western powers in their undying commitment to imperialism and their geopolitical interests of global hegemony (Khalidi, 2020).

To secure its imperialist interests, the British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour and the British Government, in conjunction with a growing European Zionist movement, worked to ‘establish in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people’ that would be British-friendly in the Mediterranean region. Specifically it would be a friendly entity, in light of competition from Turkey and Germany, in the transit route of the Suez Canal and Red Sea in order to reach the British colony of India. This plan materialised in the 1923 British Mandate of Palestine, approved by the League of Nations that established a de facto British colony in Palestine (Mathew, 2013; Khalidi, 2017). In 1947, the United Nations, in essence headed by the powers that were victorious in World War II, approved a plan to partition the Palestinian territory into what was to become the Jewish State of Israel and a collection of territories designated to the Arab population without the consent of the Palestinian people (Shlaim, 1987; Bennis, 1997; Khalidi, 1997). The British retreat from Palestine then saw the breakout of a war of land grab between neighbouring Arab states and Israeli forces (Shlaim, 1987). This resulted in Israeli conquest of a majority of Palestinian land and the mass expulsion, ethnic cleansing and massacres of Palestinians by Israeli forces; events referred to as al-Nakba, the Catastrophe (Nofal et al, 1998; Hallaj, 2008; Khoury, 2012; Khalidi, 2017). This development of occupying Palestinian land continued in 1967, when Israel invaded the neighbouring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria during the Six-Day War and conquered the Syrian Golan Heights, and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula (which it relinquished in 1982), in addition to the territories of West Bank and Gaza Strip (Nassar, 1997; Popp, 2006). This is only a brief overview of the history of the occupation of Palestine. The present political support of Israel’s latest war on Palestine by the US and European...
nations, with the recurrent phrase of Israel having a ‘right to defend itself against Hamas’, is the latest iteration of Western complicity. Ursula von der Leyen of the EU Commission (European Commission, 2023), UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (Sky News, 2023), American president Joe Biden (Associated Press, 2023), and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (German Federal Government, 2023), have all parroted this line as if it was a written script to be followed regardless of circumstances involving Israel. Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, has refuted these reprehensible justifications by pointing to the fact that in international law a country’s right to self-defence is not applicable when the invoked threat (that is, Hamas) comes from territories that the country in question belligerently occupies (Al Jazeera, 2023b; CEIRPP, 2023a). We should certainly acknowledge that international laws and conventions are, in a capitalist-imperialist world order, selectively applied by the West and their allies. Western states’ lack of consistent application of international law in the situation of Palestine is not surprising. It is closely tied to the ongoing colonial occupation of Palestine, and the historical support of colonial occupation by these countries.

The functions of (settler) colonialism

It is the word occupation, as in colonial occupation, which seems to elude those justifying or accepting Israeli crimes against Palestinians. A 75-year Israeli colonial occupation preceded 7 October and this cannot be divorced from what is now unfolding into a genocidal campaign against Palestinians by Israel (ICJ, 2024; Law for Palestine, 2024). Unlike during the Nakba in 1948, the old European empires have few colonial holdings left, however, the legacy of colonialism is still present on the issue of Palestine in Europe and North America. Not only through the material and political support of the West’s client state Israel by the political and corporate establishments, but also by the intellectual community in the West and our failure to treat the issue as a case of a colonial occupation that must end (Abraham, 2014).

Moreover, if the word colonialism seems terrifying to use, it is because colonialism is a terrifying ordeal, for the colonised. It is what Frantz Fanon called ‘naked violence’ (Fanon, 2021). Settler colonialism, as in the case of Palestine, is the brutal displacement and dispossession of the native population for the benefit of the colonising population. Because, make no mistake, settler colonialism as a part of the great architectures of imperialism and capitalism is about dispossession and theft of the natives’ existing resources, as much as it is the erasure of the natives’ very identity and home (Wolfe, 2006; 2012). Historically, this took the form of the influx of foreign capital in the new settlements in Mandate Palestine and presently, for example, of speculation on natural gas off the coast of the Gaza Strip and, of course, the huge investments of the military industrial complex in Israeli war machines (Berrigan, 2009; Ajl, 2023; Euronews, 2023; Mondoweiss, 2023b).

Furthermore, if we find the usage of the terms colonialism, colonial occupation, or even apartheid too strong, exaggerated or perhaps overly antagonistic for our feeble liberal sensitivities, we can consult our coveted human rights organisations and sacred international laws and conventions. Amnesty International, United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and international laws all point in the direction of Israel being a colonial occupation, applying apartheid policies (Amnesty International, 2022; CEIRPP, 2023b).
In 1950, Martinican intellectual Aimé Césaire wrote the seminal and decisive indictment on the European project of colonialism, *Discourse on Colonialism*. In this text, he succinctly exposes the twisted logic of Europe’s claim of civilising the ‘uncivilised world’ through colonialism by showcasing what colonialism really is: a project of resource and human exploitation through the racialisation and de-humanisation of non-white peoples (Césaire, 2000). Although written at the early stages of many independence movements from colonialism, the text still had a prophetic and lucid air of knowing the future of colonialism by an astute understanding of its dispositions.

In this text, Césaire’s refusal to excuse the complicity of European citizens and institutions in the imperialist looting and colonial violence of their governments and corporate ruling classes is equally palpable. Here he was alluding to both the active participation in colonialism by members of the metropole societies, and the passive acceptance by the progressive forces of European societies. This led him to conclude in *Discourse on Colonialism* that ‘… no one colonises innocently, that no one colonises with impunity either; that a nation which colonises, that a civilisation which justifies colonisation – and therefore force – is already a sick civilisation, a civilisation which is morally diseased’, and that “Europe” is morally, spiritually indefensible (Césaire, 2000).

The responsibility of intellectuals

We should, however, not take this historical example in a defeatist way. Rather, we should learn from Césaire, to understand our responsibility and commit ourselves to break with history and its haunting determinism. The situation that confronts Western intellectual institutions is clear: colonialism and colonial violence is not in the past, it is very much alive, actively and passively supported by our governments and our institutions. Therefore, we cannot evade the charge against us of unresponsiveness by arguing that we cannot answer for the colonial sins of our Western predecessors and that we indeed feel guilty for these past crimes.

Universities in the West, who want to keep their reputation as defenders of human rights and as a moral and intellectual consciousness of society, must take action against the current forms of colonialism. For what is the role and responsibility of the intellectual, whether individually or collectively? For those intellectuals that were and are currently living under the boot of colonial oppression, the responsibility is one of resistance. For us, in the imperial core, this is no different as Euro-American imperialism continues to cause unspeakable harm in our name. We must abandon the tranquillising drug of detachment, because detachment is not a luxury afforded to the colonised intellectual and neither should it be for us if we are to take our historical mission seriously, that is, to be at the service of society and contribute to its advancement.

Palestinian writer and intellectual Ghassan Kanafani, more than anyone, embodied the revolutionary spirit of resistance of the Palestinian intellectual. His intellectual mission as a novelist and literary critic was indistinguishable from his political work towards the liberation of Palestine (Coffin, 1996). His fictional works brought to life the daily struggle of the Palestinian people, while his non-fictional works chronicled both Palestinian resistance and the violence of Zionist colonialism and Western imperialism (Kanafani, 1956; 1998; Ebb-Magazine, 2022). A leading figure of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Kanafani declared that the ‘paintbrush, pen and gun – they are all tools of self-defence’ (Coffin, 1996), because in his position,
political resistance could not be separated from intellectual work in the fight against imperialism (Mondoweiss, 2023b). For those in solidarity with Palestine, he recalled that the struggle is against a common enemy because ‘the Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary… a cause of the exploited and oppressed masses in our era’ (Palestine Chronicle, 2017). Israeli agents killed Ghassan Kanafani, alongside his niece Lamis Nijem, in a car bomb on 8 July 1972 (Mondoweiss, 2023c).

Another well-known Palestinian intellectual who exemplifies the tireless fight against Israeli colonialism and oppression is Edward Said. Edward Said, writing from the imperial core of the US, accurately identified Western (or American) imperialism as massively complicit in the oppression of Palestinians, not only through material, ideological support of Israel but equally by its incessant silencing of Palestinian voices (Atshan, 2019). He argued that Palestinians were denied the ‘permission to narrate’ their story (Said, 1984) due to the overwhelming investment of the West in the demonisation of the ‘Oriental’, Arab Palestinian as having no history and no land, only primitive violent inclinations that need ‘civilising’ by the West and its partner in crime (Abraham, 2014). Both Said, who was a member of the Palestinian National Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for 14 years, and Kanafani demonstrated that intellectuals had no choice but to engage in the liberation struggle in the face of oppression. Other Palestinian intellectuals, such as the famous Mahmoud Darwish, Hanan Ashrawi, and later the likes of martyred Refaat Alareer, all reflect this spirit of political-intellectual struggle.

The argument here, however, is not that intellectuals in the West should mindlessly engage in idealist saviourism. It is not a call to stand in front of those struggling for liberation in Palestine and in the diaspora and offer beautiful words and moralist views of how the independence struggle should be waged. It is a call to join those struggling at the forefront by inquiring into how we can serve the cause from our respective vantage points in the West. It is an urgent plea to step out of our comfortable ivory towers and serve those that sacrifice the most and that have already suffered unimaginable losses. Struggle and resistance is equally the story of Palestine, for where there is oppression, there is also resistance – from the 1936–1939 revolts against British colonialism, to the defence of Palestinian land during the Nakba, to the many organised resistance movements and Intifadas during the second half of the 20th century, and in the present day (Kanafani, 1980; Nassar, 1997; Hallaj, 2008; Ajl, 2023). After all, no one is more equipped with the knowledge of how to confront the oppressor than the oppressed. The oppressed have been forced to confront their oppressor daily, and they have developed understandings and strategies that those of us who are separated from the direct struggle, lack. It bears reiterating, however, that this is neither an invitation to resort to aloof observation, nor to engage in typical Western chauvinism, but with humility to educate and organise ourselves in order join those struggling towards Palestinian liberation.

What can we do?

Our solidarity actions need not be misguided or necessarily be a case of reinventing the wheel. We have ample precedence in previous campaigns targeted at situations of colonial occupation and violence such as apartheid South Africa (Rose, 2004; Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives, 2024). Most importantly however, Palestinians have
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laid out the blueprint for how to conduct international solidarity with Palestine. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), Palestinian institutions, and other Palestinian-led movements provide numerous measures academics and other intellectuals internationally can undertake for their cause. They call on international academics to demand an immediate and permanent ceasefire by Israel and ensure the entry of humanitarian aid and protection of civilians in Gaza and the other occupied territories. Crucially, they insist that we demand an end to Israeli settler-colonial occupation and the return of displaced Palestinians, as well as material support to the victims of this colonial violence (BDS, 2023a; Birzeit University, 2023).

Palestinian movements also appeal to academics to pressure their respective universities to boycott and cut all ties with Israeli universities, since they play an essential part in developing technologies of war and the ideological infrastructure of oppression, such as the suppression of Palestinian voices and anti-Palestinian sentiments (BDS, 2023b). In extension, universities internationally that cooperate with weapon and arms manufacturers that supply material or cooperate with Israel, are asked to immediately end these relationships. Finally, Palestinians are asking international academic institutions to build long-lasting solidarity with Palestinian higher education institutions (Birzeit University, 2023). These calls rest, however, on the proper recognition and condemnation of Israel as a settler-colonial project that operates on an apartheid system: the dispossession, displacement and violent repression of Palestinians, and which needs to be dismantled (Ebb-Magazine, 2023).

Notes

1 For reference on the use of the terms ‘genocide’ and ‘genocidal’ in this text, see South Africa’s 84-page application to the International Court of Justice invoking the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on the Gaza Strip on 11 January 2024 (ICJ, 2024), and the Law for Palestine database tracking incitement to violence and genocidal intent by Israeli officials and public figures (Law for Palestine, 2024). For an academic view, see Steve Lendman’s chapter Israel’s Slow-Motion Genocide in Occupied Palestine (Lendman, 2010).

2 In this text, I deliberately refer to ‘Israel’ as it encompasses the collective efforts of the country’s armed forces, political establishment, settler groups, lawmakers, journalists and public influencers that have facilitated, promoted and/or supported the ongoing violence against Palestinians in occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip (ReliefWeb, 2023; Law for Palestine, 2024).

3 See also here South Africa’s ICJ case (ICJ, 2024), the Law for Palestine database (Law for Palestine, 2024), as well as Professors Raz Segal and Penny Green’s analysis of South Africa’s ICJ case, and the ‘intent’ provision in classifying genocidal actions (Al Jazeera, 2024b).

4 Throughout the text, the ‘West’ refers mainly to Europe and North America with countries that share a history of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation of the rest of the world.

5 A Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor report from 20 January 2024 shows specifically the targeting of academic and educational institutions and individuals (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024); and Al Jazeera reported on the controlled demolition of Al-Israa University on 19 January 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2024c).

6 Western academia has seen a resurge of research on decolonisation, and this has brought valid critiques from researchers who question the employment of decolonisation as a mere
metaphor, without the implied praxis of dismantling the colonial structure and order. See, for example, Tuck and Yang, 2012; Gopal, 2021; and Moosavi, 2020.

7 I use the term ‘intellectual’ deliberately as a way to capture the public and prominent role that an intellectual, as opposed to an academic, is supposed to hold in society. See, for example, Edward Said in his book, Representations of the Intellectual (Said, 1996).

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