International Politics (2024) 61:385–391
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00527-8

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Settler colonialism, memory politics, and the Trump–Netanyahu deal

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Accepted: 26 September 2023 / Published online: 6 November 2023
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Abstract
Azmi Bishara's *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* is essential reading for understanding Palestine today. Initially, the book was supposed to be an English translation of a lecture on what Bishara calls the Trump–Netanyahu deal. Fortunately for the English reader, the lecture is now upgraded with eight chapters that build on decades of Bishara's political and intellectual engagement with the question of Palestine. These chapters contextualize Trump's so-called "deal of the century" within the longer history of the region and its geopolitical transformations. The task is ambitious but wonderfully executed. One leaves the book with a deeper understanding of contemporary developments, informed by the weight of history, and with a vision for justice in Palestine/Israel.

Addressing all these dimensions in one symposium, let alone one contribution, is impossible. I will therefore focus on a specific topic that runs through the book, namely, the politics of memory in Palestine/Israel. In his introduction, Bishara notes that the book's different themes will be discussed in conjunction "with the questions of memory and forgetting" (p. 9). Below I will discuss four of these themes: the theoretical framework of settler colonialism, Bishara's analysis of the Trump–Netanyahu deal, Palestinian resistance to the deal, and Bishara's vision of justice in Palestine/Israel.

Keywords Memory politics · Settler colonialism · Palestine · Israel

Settler colonial memory

The question of Palestine, writes Bishara in his introduction, began with settler colonialism. This entailed "occupation, expropriation, ethnic cleansing and the force displacement of the native population to pave the way for the establishment of a Jewish state and for the transformation of the Jewish minority in Palestine to a

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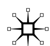

Jewish majority" (p. 3). From the onset, Bishara posits this as the proper framework to understand Palestine/Israel. If we begin the question with the occupation of 1967, Bishara warns the reader, we have bought into a faulty framework, confusing a "question of liberation" with that of a "border dispute."

In the often-quoted words of Patrick Wolfe, settler colonialism is premised on a logic of elimination (Wolfe 2006). What settlers seek is not the labor of indigenous people, as with classic colonialism, but their land. This requires eliminating the native through physical extermination or ethnic cleansing, but it can also entail assimilation and even peace treaties that erase the political distinction between settlers and natives. The goal is not so much the physical death of a people but their social and political disappearance. If successful, elimination allows settlers to themselves become natives. Collective memory plays an essential role in these processes of elimination and nativization. It eliminates the indigenous past by erasing it, co-opting it, inverting it, or even avowing it while denying its political significance. At the same time, it nativizes the settler by sealing an exclusive relationship to the territory and history (Bruyneel 2021; Maddison 2019; Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khoury 2019; Sabbagh-Khoury forthcoming).

The uses of the past to fulfill a project of settler colonialism are thoroughly examined in the opening chapters of *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice*. Bishara is especially interested in the collective memory forged by the Yishuv and the Israeli state, the "myths, historiography, ceremonies, choices of dates and places to commemorate, literature and textbooks that try to pass off manufacturing a collective consciousness" (p. 3). This includes Israel's "Independence Day", its use of archeology, its erasure of the Nakba, its narrative of national rebirth, its secular-nationalist construction of the "new Jew," its negation of exilic Judaism, and its instrumentalization of the Holocaust.

Bishara rejects the very logic on which these narratives are based. Jewish nationalism, he argues in chapter two, did not reclaim historical rights but created them retrospectively through a nation-building project. The very idea of historical rights, he argues moreover, is nonsensical. Historical claims cannot ground modern political rights. For the same reason, Bishara criticizes Palestinian attempts to hark back to imagined Canaanite ancestry to justify their rights to the land (p. 64). The Palestinian nation, like all nations, he argues, is a modern construct, one that emerges at the end of the nineteenth century (p. 67). Palestinian rights to the land are not premised on historical rights, but on continuous presence, a presence that was already morphing into a national consciousness when Zionist settlers first reached the shores of Palestine.

Bishara's discussion on the uses of the past and the evolution of Jewish and Palestinian nationalism are rich in detail. They build on scholarship familiar to those who study the history of Palestine/Israel (the works of Walid Khalidi, Rashid Khalidi, Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, Nur Masalha, Simha Flapan, Amnon Raz-Kratkotzkin to name a few). The purpose is to set up the background for his analysis of the Trump–Netanyahu plan, where the politics of memory, and especially the politics of forgetting, play an important role.

The "peace process" and the politics of the past

According to Bishara, Trump's "Peace to Prosperity" represents a qualitative change in diplomatic initiatives to "solve" the question of Palestine. Key among these changes are the legitimization of facts on the ground (e.g., moving the American embassy to Jerusalem), the de facto nullification of the Oslo accords, and the shift in US foreign policy from an unconditional commitment to Israel's security to an outright identification with the Israeli right. Regarding the latter, Bishara spends considerable time showing how the plan embraced and promoted an Israeli right-wing narrative that casts the Torah "as some combination of international law," catering to both Netanyahu's right-wing and Trump's evangelical constituencies. The "Peace to Prosperity" plan, writes Bishara, presented the Israeli historical narrative as "the rule to which everything is an exception" (p. 208). It adopted a narrative of overriding Israeli victimhood (p. 212) and presented Israel as the party that has offered territorial concessions in the face of Arab rejectionism. The plan did not contain a single word reflecting the Palestinian narrative and never mentioned the word "occupation." What Bishara finds, after a detailed reading of the text, are the founding myths that were essential for the Zionist settler-colonial project he documented in the first chapters. These are now enshrined in a "peace plan," bringing a project of settler colonialism full circle. Should Palestinians want to exist as a polity, a state, and a people, they must first accept the narratives that deny them these same qualities.

When it comes to the issue of narratives and memory, it is worthwhile comparing the "Peace to Prosperity" plan and the Oslo accords. On the one hand, there is some continuity between the two. The "Peace to Prosperity" plan pursued a project of historical erasure already set in motion by the Oslo peace process. The Oslo accords, Bishara notes, were not the historical compromise its proponents claimed it to be. Instead, it was a compromise over history. Palestinians had to forget the Nakba of 1948 and its victims—the refugees and the Palestinians that remained in what became Israel—to negotiate a state behind the Green Line. "Forgetting the Zionist occupation of Palestinian territories in 1948," he writes, "makes it possible to turn the Palestinian and Arab demand of an Israeli withdrawal from 22 percent of the land (the whole of the West Bank and Gaza) into a starting point for negotiations" (p. 73). It did more than this. The Oslo peace process should be read as part of a settler-colonial drive to nativize. "The two-state solution," Bishara insists, "makes it necessary to normalize, or nativize, the pre-1967 Israeli state" (p. 241).

On the other hand, the Trump–Netanyahu deal departs from the Oslo peace process in two ways. The first is formal. On paper, the Oslo accords purposely excluded issues related to narratives. The document is dry and legalistic, and the negotiators themselves claimed to have sidestepped issues related to the past in the name of "pragmatism" (Savir 1998, p. 15). "In all the negotiations I was involved in," noted the Palestinian negotiator Hussein Agha, "I argued that Israelis had their narratives and Palestinians had their narratives, and we should not waste time disputing them" (Agha 2018). Trump's peace did not do that. Instead, it committed itself head-on to

the Zionist narrative.[1] The second difference relates to the politics of forgetting. In fact, the amnesia created by the Oslo accords was productive of a truncated and partitioned Palestinian memory. With the Oslo accords, Palestinians had to forget 1948, but in exchange, they could create an "imagined community" behind the Green Line, despite not having sovereignty over it. This is the kind of memory work that has been promoted by the Palestinian Authority (itself a product of the Oslo process), the peace industry, and Western countries (with the strict the condition that it did not “incite” against its Israeli “neighbor” (Khoury 2016).

The Trump–Netanyahu deal broke with this approach. It no longer treated the Green line as an “epistemological” or “narrative border” and thus completed a project of historical erasure. If Trump’s “peace to prosperity” explicitly embraced an Israeli right-wing religious narrative, then one could argue that the Oslo accords implicitly embraced a liberal Zionist narrative. The same settler-colonial ethos animates both. The Israeli left, however, concedes the 1949 armistice line as a *symbolic* border, whereas the former does not. A defining feature separating the Israeli right and the left is how they relate to the Green Line at the discursive level (in reality, both have pursued colonizing efforts beyond it). The Green line is a symbolic border that has defined the identity of the Israeli left and its relations with its many others, not only Palestinians but also Sephardi, religious, and right-wing Israelis (Shenhav 2012).

Memory and resistance

Bishara is not only interested in how the politics of memory fulfill a project of settler-colonialism, whether through conquest or so-called peace deals. Explicit about the fact that there can be no hope or justice in negotiation, collective memory, for him, plays a role in Palestinian strategies of resistance. Of particular interest for Bishara is the rise of the Nakba commemorations since the late 1990s, especially among Palestinian citizens of Israel but also among Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and the diaspora. Bishara interprets the rise of this counter-memory as a reaction to the Oslo peace process: its denial of the Palestinian right of return, its fragmentations of Palestinians, and its shrinking of the Palestinian question to a border dispute. Commenting on the 60th anniversary, Bishara refers to it as a “back to basics” campaign that reconnects with the root of the Palestinian question (the Nakba and the right of return).

Bishara’s claim invites the following question: do these commemorations point to increased Palestinian unity beyond fragmentation or do they partake in the very fragmentation Bishara so carefully analyses and decries? In what was dubbed the

[1] Despite explicitly buying into the Zionist narrative, the “Peace to Prosperity” plan echoes the same claims made during the Oslo accords about leaving the past aside. “Reciting past narratives about the conflict is unproductive,” reads the document, and “the solution must be forward-looking.” (White House 2020, p. 10). Here is yet another inconsistency one can add to the many others Bishara identifies: It asks the “parties” to leave the past narratives aside while taking the Zionist narrative as its point of departure.

Unity Intifada of 2021, the Nakba was a rallying point for Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel, and the diaspora. At the same time, and since the late 1990s, the commemoration of the Nakba emerged out of different political realities. In the occupied territories, it partook in the state-building project of the PA (Frisch 2002; Hill 2005). Within Israel, it emerges from the shift from a two-state model to a "state of all its citizens" (Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khoury 2019). Transnationally, the commemoration of the Nakba was nourished by the standardization of transitional justice models and memorial practices (David 2020). In Palestinian refugee camps, it survived but also morphed following the peace process (Khalili 2007). It has also become more visible in Western countries where it partakes in transnational solidarities, and in some cases, even criminalized (e.g., Germany). Even among a small minority of Israelis, the Nakba has become the object of joint commemorations and the platform of NGOs such as Zochrot. One can interpret these as constituting a shift toward a united Palestinian project. However, they can also be read the other way around: as a memory that serves different purposes and responds to fragmented local, national, and transnational realities.

Memory and justice

Besides being an object of oppression and resistance, the past plays a role in Bishara's vision of justice in Palestine/Israel. Here, I would like to conclude with two challenges Bishara raises. The first has to do with Israeli acknowledgment of the past. If settler colonialism relies on the erasure of the indigenous past, then undoing the settler colonial narrative requires its acknowledgment. Bishara raises this essential requirement in the opening pages of the book. "Israeli settler colonialism," he writes, "will never be naturalized, no matter how much time passes, unless it first recognizes the historic injustice that it has perpetrated against the Palestinian people and acts to redress it." (p. 7). For Bishara, Israeli settler colonialism has consistently sought to naturalize itself through strength. The only way Israeli Jews can "become natives," however, is through justice. What kind of justice does Bishara have in mind? In his comment on recognizing and redressing historical injustice, he alludes to transitional justice without saying so explicitly. The allusion appears in other parts of the book: in its subtitle ("truth and justice"), in Bishara's unwavering commitment to democracy, and in his claim that there can be no absolute justice in Palestine/Israel because absolute justice means turning back the clock, which is impossible (p. 8). What one is left with is a "dealing with the past."

Other cases of settler colonialism and apartheid (e.g., South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada) have faced (and are still facing) the need to deal with the past, whether it be in the form of apologies, truth commissions, reparations, and other mechanisms. What can Palestinians learn from these cases as they devise their demands for justice? Demands to deal with the past, Nadim Rouhana has argued, can be put at the service of a larger project of decolonization in Palestine/Israel (Rouhana 2017), but the cases mentioned above also point out the limits of transitional justice in achieving this goal (Khoury 2021). In the case of Australia, transitional justice has been used in radically different ways by the state and

indigenous activists. The first uses it to put the past aside and move on, whereas the latter use it to connect past and present injustices (Maddison 2019). In the case of South Africa, moreover, transitional justice might have been successful in shedding light on the history of apartheid. However, it has occluded the roots of this history in settler colonialism (Park 2022).

The second challenge (among many others) that Bishara raises emerges from Bishara's endorsement of bi-nationalism. Just as Israeli Jews need to come to terms with the existence of an indigenous Palestinian nation on whose ruins their state was built, Bishara challenges Palestinian nationalism to accept the fact of an existing Jewish-Israeli identity in Palestine. Justice, for him, would ideally navigate the path between decolonization, democracy, and bi-nationalism. "If we are speaking theoretically," Bishara writes, "then a single democratic bi-national state is the model that best fulfils Palestinian national and civil rights while offering a democratic vision for Jewish Israelis" (p. 260). This is not to say that bi-nationalism and decolonization have always worked hand in hand. Early Zionist organizations such as *Hashomer Hatzair*, for example, have also partaken in settler colonialism as they supported a binational state (Sabbagh-Khoury, forthcoming). For this reason and others, some advocating decolonization are skeptical of bi-nationalism, whereas others see them as working together (on this issue, see Bashir and Busbridge 2019; Farsakh 2021).

Bi-nationalism, notes Bishara, is missing within mainstream Zionism because it challenges the exclusively Jewish nature of the state. Despite some exceptions in the 1920s and 1930s, it has been and continues to be a taboo in the Israeli political landscape. It is also absent from Palestinian political platforms. It was missing from the PLO's democratic secular state, where Jews were reduced to a religious identity and "no path was articulated to enable Jewish–Arab collaboration to transform the idea into a practical political programme" (p. 258). Bi-nationalism continues to be missing from the programs of established Palestinian forces, none of whom have adopted the "aim the establishment of a single state incorporating both Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Arab nationalities" (p. 258).

The fact of bi-nationalism raises a host of questions, some directly related to memory. What kind of memory work does bi-nationalism entail? How can the past serve a vision of decolonization and bi-nationalism? For example, there have been discussions on settler colonialism, bi-nationalism, and the memory of the Holocaust and the Nakba (Bashir and Goldberg 2018). Surely, these is a marginal attempt among academics, but one wonders how they square with Bishara's long engagement with these themes, many of which appear in *Palestine: matters of truth and justice.*

These are only some of the questions Bishara's book invites. There are many more. The book is intellectually, academically, and politically inspiring. Despite the bleak reality, it offers vision, direction, and hope. For this, the reader can only be thankful.

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