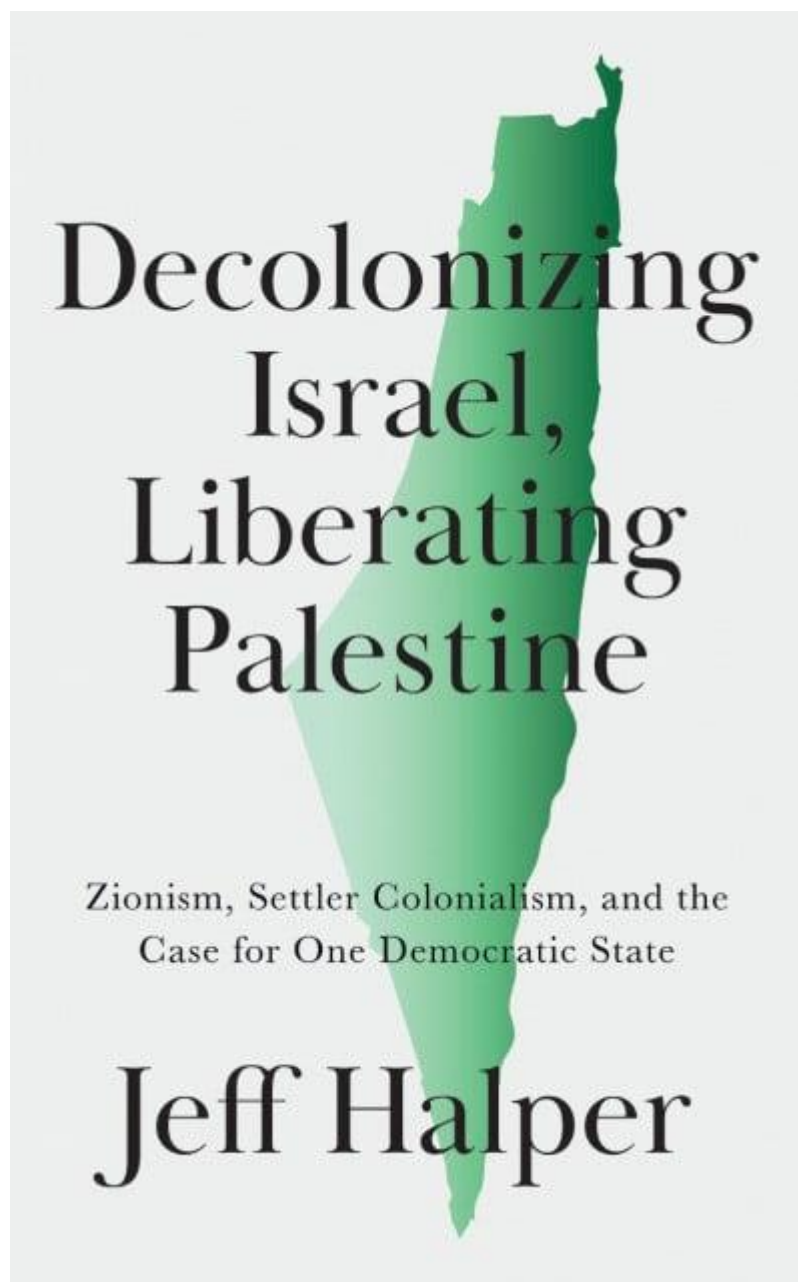


# Envisioning a post-colonial Palestine

Josh Ruebner The Electronic Intifada 23 March 2021



*Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine: Zionism, Settler Colonialism and the Case for One Democratic State* by **Jeff Halper**, Pluto Press (2021)

Early in his tenure as President Barack Obama’s Secretary of State, John Kerry delivered a stark warning to Congress. “I believe the window for a two-state solution is shutting,” he said. “I think we have some period of time – a year to year-and-a-half to two years, or it’s over.”

That alarm bell, rung eight years ago, sent Kerry on a frenetic yet fruitless quest to broker an Israeli-Palestinian accord in 2013 and 2014. His failure prompted him to admit that Israel now risked becoming an “apartheid state,” a comment he later walked back.

Ever since, Washington officialdom has largely given up the ghost on finding that most elusive of political chimeras: a two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Most Democrats still pay the concept unenthusiastic and ritualized obeisance, while growing numbers of Republicans openly embrace the Israeli triumphalist vision of one-state apartheid rule in perpetuity.

The unjust two-state paradigm – which has served as the reigning international consensus since the UN General Assembly recommended in 1947 to partition Palestine against the wishes of its indigenous majority population – has run its course.

## **Anti-colonial analysis**

Into this political stasis steps Jeff Halper with a bold vision to end Israel's privileged settler-colonial existence; decolonize the state and its institutions; and transform Palestine into a democracy based on liberal notions of individual citizenship rights and separate collective identities.

As Halper admits, this is hardly a new concept.

Palestinian nationalist leaders petitioned unceasingly for such a majoritarian unitary state throughout the British Mandate of 1920 to 1948. The Palestine Liberation Organization held this position from its founding in 1964 until its 1988 Declaration of Independence unambiguously set forth its adherence to a two-state program.

Halper pays homage to the Palestinian and Israeli scholars who spearheaded an anti-colonial analysis decades ago. He also traces a relatively recent resurgence of this discourse in academic circles to Kerry's failed diplomatic initiative.

The author bemoans the fact that this anti-colonial discourse, however, has failed to penetrate much beyond the academy. "‘Settler colonialism’ is far too academic-sounding and complex for even activists to adopt and use easily," he writes. He suggests overcoming this hurdle by "integrating settler analysis into a political program, its concrete elements being far easier to ‘digest’ and support than theory."

Halper sets himself to this task of attempting to popularize an anti-colonial analysis and concrete program for a one-state resolution through this book and the One Democratic State Campaign's 10-point political program, a campaign with which he is involved.

A few words about Halper's positionality in this struggle are necessary, which he acknowledges at the outset of his book.

"I am not a Palestinian ... and I certainly cannot speak for Palestinians – or for 98 percent of Israeli Jews, for that matter. I am an anti-Zionist Israeli Jew, a settler/immigrant from the US, a White cis-male," Halper relates.

"What defines me most appropriately is a ‘colonist who refuses,'" he writes, quoting the late French-Tunisian-Jewish paradoxically anti-colonial and Zionist writer Albert Memmi.

Halper is also "keenly aware that, as the author, an Israeli voice occupies a disproportionate space." He reveals that he intended to write the book jointly with a Palestinian "but as we approached the work we understood that a joint analysis should come at a later time."

He concedes that "this is not a book a Palestinian would write, but hopefully it is one a Palestinian would find useful."

## Deexceptionalizing Israel

That determination will have to await a different reviewer. But I found Halper's theoretical, comparative and historical frameworks extremely useful in buttressing the case for a one-state resolution.

The book is divided into three parts: a theoretical and comparative analysis of Zionism as a settler-colonial movement; a historical account of how Zionism and Israel have imposed themselves as a settler-colonial reality on the Palestinian people; and a political program for decolonization.

Halper presents an intellectually rigorous yet lucid and comprehensible theoretical and comparative analysis of Zionism as a settler-colonial movement in the first part of the book. Ironically, this demolishes his later claim that settler-colonialism is too abstruse of a concept to rally around politically.

Drawing on the works of Patrick Wolfe, Lorenzo Veracini and other scholars of settler-colonialism, as well as comparative examples of settler-colonialism ranging from the US colonization of Turtle Island to Russia's colonization of Chechnya, Halper situates Zionism and the policies of Israel in a global context.

By thus deexceptionalizing Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people, Halper is able to draw upon the successes and failures of other decolonization struggles to help point the way forward.

Before doing so, Halper presents a practical historical overview of how Zionism has imposed a settler-colonial reality on the Palestinian people.

Just as he previously popularized the term "matrix of control" to describe Israel's military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Halper coins the phrase "dominance management regime" to describe settler-colonial policies toward the Palestinian people writ large. This regime is broken down into components of population, land, economic and legitimacy management.

In the book's final section, Halper presents and comments upon the One Democratic State Campaign's plan for decolonization and elucidates the contours of a post-colonial polity. I found myself nodding along in agreement with the principles and vision of Halper's compassionate and optimistic outlook but finished the book with a sense of incompleteness. Yes, but how?

While recognizing that Israel's land management regime has alienated state land from the Palestinian people, Halper intriguingly argues that "the Israeli system actually offers a model that might be retained. The land of the country is held in custodianship by the state, which allocates it for public purposes as the need arises."

State custodianship of land could be reworked equitably in a post-colonial polity that does not privilege or discriminate between individuals of different collective identities after refugees' private and communal lands are restored to the greatest extent possible, Halper suggests. The constitution of this polity would prohibit discriminatory statutes and presumably, its supreme court would strike down arrangements based on exclusivity.

But what would be done about technically private organizations such as the Jewish National Fund, which today operates as a quasi-governmental apartheid arm of Israel's land management regime? Would the supreme court invalidate its license to operate in the new polity? Would the new polity reclaim JNF-controlled land?

Perhaps it is too much to expect of Halper to address the concrete practicalities of moving toward a post-colonial polity in this book. Maybe the type of detailed planning necessary awaits further deliberation by the One Democratic State Campaign and others working toward this goal. Possibly Halper's acute sense of his own positionality precludes him from making these prescriptions.

## **PLO thorn**

Halper also dances around the thorniest of issues for proponents of the one-state resolution: the stubborn refusal of the Palestine Liberation Organization to concede that the two-state resolution is no longer, or was never, an option.

“Can a moribund PLO be revived? ... Must we invent a new political vehicle entirely?” Halper asks, but does not answer. Perhaps those answers await the book to be written by a Palestinian colleague in the One Democratic State Campaign.

While Halper's hopeful book is a much-needed palliative to the morass of today's political stasis, in places it oversimplifies the complexity and arduousness of a transition to a post-colonial, just polity.

Halper rosily asserts that “it might take less time than expected” for Palestinians to achieve economic parity with Israeli Jews in a one-state framework.

He points to Israel's GDP of \$370 billion versus that of \$16 billion in the West Bank and Gaza. Halper writes that this means that the Israeli economy is merely 250 percent larger than the Palestinian economy and that Palestinians are “in a strong position to achieve parity with Israelis in a relatively short period.”

However, these statistics show that Israel's economy is nearly *25 times* larger than the Palestinian economy, or nearly 2,500 percent, deflating this overly buoyant prediction.

As the South African transition from apartheid to democracy demonstrates, getting right the constitutional fundamentals of a post-colonial polity is a precondition, but not a determinant, of a just society. Three decades after its transition to democracy, South Africa is still grappling with the legacy of apartheid-era economic inequities.

Despite the arduous challenges involved, Halper makes an extremely convincing and persuasive argument that the only conceivable future for justice and peace necessitates a process of decolonization and equal rights for all. His book is an excellent addition to the growing contemporary body of scholarly and activist literature laying the groundwork for that future.

*Josh Ruebner is adjunct professor of justice and peace studies at Georgetown University.*

- Jeff Halper
- one-state solution
- apartheid
- two-state solution
- One Democratic State Campaign
- zionism
- settler-colonialism
- Palestine Liberation Organization
-

