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The racial logic of Palestine's partition

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ABSTRACT

The partition of Palestine was first proposed more than eight decades ago. It remains a consensus international approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Why was Palestine the only settler-colonial context outside Europe in which partition became a dominant “solution”? This article argues that the explanation is found in European racial attitudes towards Jews and Arabs in the first half of the twentieth century. British and international policy makers regarded (European) Jews as a non-European, Semitic race. This led them to view Jewish Zionist migrants and native Palestinian Arabs as somewhat comparable groups. Rather than a clash between European settlers and Arab natives, they saw in Palestine a conflict between two nations living side by side. Reading through key documents – the Balfour Declaration, the Palestine Mandate, and the Partition Reports of 1937 and 1947 – I show how this racial logic informed the framework of partition.



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A “peaceful and just solution” to the Israel-Palestine conflict can “only be achieved” through two States “living side-by-side in peace and security”.

UN General Secretary, 15 February 2019. (UN News [2019](#))

Since the early 2000s, there have been mounting challenges to partition as a “solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some critics of the failed Oslo peace process argue that the root of the problem is Zionism’s character as a settler colonial project, which expelled and dispossessed indigenous Palestinians to make way for a Jewish society. They maintain that the right path forward is through decolonisation, rather than partition. The term “Apartheid” is increasingly used to describe Israel’s control over Palestinians, and in 2021–2022, was adopted by leading human rights organisations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Apartheid is defined in international

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law as a regime of systematic domination and oppression by one racial group over another. These formulations define the relations between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in terms of vertical domination, in contrast with the horizontal discourse of partition, which portrays the problem as a conflict between two peoples living “side by side”.

The concept of partition was first put forward in 1937, by the British Palestine Royal Commission (commonly known as the Peel Commission). In November 1947, partition received the United Nations General Assembly’s endorsement. In the early 1990s, it resurfaced as the “two state solution”: the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, alongside Israel. This became a cornerstone of the international diplomatic consensus. However, in more than eight decades, partition failed to materialise. With the entrenchment of Israeli occupation and the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the “two state solution” is increasingly seen as impracticable or unjust, and yet this framework remains remarkably resilient to challenge.

What are the reasons for the strength and durability of the partition framework? And how can we explain the fact that Palestine was the only settler-colonial context outside Europe in which partition received international endorsement? Since World War I, partition has been implemented in a variety of countries: from the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire to Sudan. As the division of a single political unit into two (or more), partition is primarily understood as a framework to resolve, or at least to stabilise, ethno-national conflicts. How did a conflict between mostly European settlers-migrants and a native Arab population become understood in Palestine as a national conflict?

This article argues that the partition framework in Palestine, as it developed in British and international policy circles in the 1930s and 1940s, relied crucially on a series of racialised assumption: that (European) Jews were a non-European race, whose origins were in Palestine; that unlike natives in sub-Saharan Africa or the Pacific, Arabs were sufficiently advanced to deserve self-rule; and that a racial proximity existed between Arabs and (European) Jews, as members of the Semitic race, even if European Jews were considered more advanced in developmental terms. Taken together, these assumptions allowed the conceptualisation of Jews and Arabs as somewhat equivalent groups, with equally valid historical rights in Palestine. Britain and the League of Nations viewed the Zionist enterprise as a form of “return”, rather than as European settler colonialism. This meant that unlike white settlers in Africa, Zionists could not claim straightforward racial hegemony in Palestine; but they could claim self-determination there.

This article opens by showing how the scholarly discussion in settler colonialism studies, international relations and global history, has not adequately explained why partition, a framework for “national conflicts”, was adopted in the settler-colonial context of Palestine. I then look at British and European

racialisation of Jews as Oriental and Semitic, as a crucial background to the Balfour Declaration (1917) and the Palestine Mandate (1922). A close reading of the 1937 Palestine Royal Commission report, and the report of the 1947 United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), reveals the racial logic underpinning partition. The two reports, noting cultural and developmental differences between Jewish European migrants and Palestinian indigenous society, nonetheless presented Jews and Arabs as somewhat commensurable, due to their racial positions. I conclude with a comparison to two other settler-colonial contexts, Algeria and South Africa, in which partition was raised as a potential solution but never achieved legitimacy, due to a sharper and more explicit racial hierarchy.

The literature on settler-colonialism and partition

Arab scholars have long understood Zionism as a European settler colonial enterprise, albeit with its specific traits (Sayegh 2012). In the early twenty-first century, the concept of settler-colonialism assumed greater popularity as an analytical and comparative framework for the study of Palestine/Israel. It is widely recognised that Zionism, from its very inception, was also a national movement (Rouhana 2018; Khalidi 1997); but its means of achieving Jewish self-determination, and its mode of operation in Palestine, were distinctly settler-colonial. As it took shape during the British Mandate (1920–1948), the Zionist project was geared towards mass immigration of European Jews, takeover of land, and colonisation, while building a separatist Jewish society (the *Yishuv*) and later Jewish statehood, against the opposition of the native Arab Palestinian society. This led to the dispossession and expulsion of most Palestinians in the 1948 Nakba.

The settler-colonial analytical approach has a distinct political edge, allowing comparisons to other settler colonial contexts such as North America, Australia, Algeria, and South Africa. Zionism is thus seen to belong to the family of European or White settler colonial enterprises. The settler-colonial “turn” has led to growing interest in race and racialisation in modern Palestine/Israel (Lentin 2018; Abu-Laban and Bakan 2019; Ben Zeev 2021). Partition, for this literature, was a product of the Zionist praxis of separatism, and was anchored in a racial logic of European Jewish superiority versus Arab inferiority (Ben-Arie and Svirsky 2019). Zionist support for partition in 1947 was tactical in nature, and a step towards the conquest of entire Palestine and the elimination of its native Palestinian society (Khalidi 2006). In its more recent permutation, the “two state solution” partition framework is no more than a “charade” (Pappe 2013), allowing colonial control and demographic engineering, and as a strategy of Bantustanisation (Veracini 2006; Wolfe 2016). The partition paradigm relies on a false symmetry between Israelis and Palestinians as two sides of a national conflict, while the real issue is asymmetric relations of power between settlers and natives (Rouhana

2018). The rejection of partition is tied to a shift from “conflict resolution” to decolonisation (Busbridge 2018).

This analysis could explain why partition has repeatedly failed to materialise, and why Zionists supported it in 1947, while Arabs opposed it. However, it does not explain why partition emerged in the first place, as a colonial, and later internationally-backed “solution”, and why it has proven so durable. Given British and European support for Zionism, why was partition necessary in the first place? Why wasn’t Palestine simply transformed into a Jewish dominion, ruled by European settlers, as was the case in South Africa? How is it that Palestine was the only settler-colonial context outside Europe in which partition became a dominant framework?

Political partition involves a “fresh cut, an at least partially novel border, ripped through at least one national community’s homeland” (O’Leary 2007). Partition is a division of a single political unit into two or more sovereign units. The list of modern examples typically includes the partitions of multi-national empires such as the Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, following World War I; the partitions of Ireland, Palestine, India, and Cyprus, all in the British Imperial sphere; the “ideological” Cold War partitions, in Germany, China, Korea, and Vietnam; and recent partitions, such as Sudan. Other than Palestine, Ireland was the only other partition which can be described as settler colonial, although it is widely seen as a distinct case. Ireland’s history was shaped by medieval and early modern colonisations, but it was part of Christian Europe. Its proximity and inclusion in Britain make it difficult to compare to settler colonies outside Europe (Connolly 2016).

In the disciplines of political science, security studies and international relations, partition is understood primarily as a “solution” (good or bad) to “ethnic wars” or “wars of nationalism” (Kumar 1997; Sambanis 2000; Johnson 2008). Alternative accounts consider partition an instrument of Imperial hegemony, designed to maintain influence and control or as a “colonial exit strategy” (Kattan 2022). Yet even if partitions are read as Imperial interventions, they still relied on a legitimating discourse as “solutions” for ethno-national conflicts.

The comparative historiography of partition is relatively thin and concentrates on the British Imperial sphere (Fraser 1984). The most important contribution in this regard is the recent edited volume on partitions, focussing on Ireland, Palestine and India (Dubnov and Robson 2018). The volume places a special emphasis on the circulation of the “travelling theory” of partition, in a variety of colonial and national contexts, through networks of ideas, practices and models connecting these different locales. The volume’s epilogue positions partition in the discussion on the ethnic logic of state formation, and the link between “national security” and the “danger” of minorities (Moses 2018). Partition appears as a tool of demographic engineering alongside

forced population removal. Moses shows that historical deliberations on partition pushed contemporaries towards comparative thinking, as they searched for analogies in other conflicts between “majorities” and “minorities”. For example, Muslim intellectuals in India made references to the German Sudeten in Czechoslovakia. Thus, the comparative study of partitions relied on the vocabulary of ethno-nationalism, placing the settler-colonial dynamics in Palestine, and the communitarian dynamics in India, on a parallel with the issues of national minorities in Central Europe.

But it is the case of Palestine which demands further explanation. The translation of local sectarian or communitarian groups into national difference is familiar not only in India but also in the Balkans and elsewhere. But the description of the Jewish settler society in 1930s Palestine as simply a national minority, equivalent to indigenous ethnicity, is highly unusual. To understand the origins of this formulation, we need to go back to European racialisation of Jews, and British support for Zionism.

British racialised understanding of Jews and Zionism

In November 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, announcing its support for the establishment of a “National Home for the Jewish People” in Palestine. The multifaceted motivation for the Declaration has been the topic of a rich, decades-long debate (Gutwein 2016). The chief British negotiator and Middle East advisor, Sir Mark Sykes, saw the commitment to Zionism as part of a post-war political architecture, in which the Ottoman Empire would be carved up between Allied powers. Adopting the language of self-determination, Sykes was keen to camouflage this exercise in divide and rule as the liberation of oppressed peoples of the Ottoman Empire, and he focussed on three groups: the Arabs, the Armenians, and the Jews, all three to enjoy national revival under Allied patronage (Renton 2007, 2017).

At the time, Jews constituted less than a tenth of the population of Palestine. Zionism was a Jewish European movement, whose base of support was overwhelmingly in Eastern Europe. Sykes, however, considered Zionism as somehow on par with Arab and Armenian nationalism, as belonging to the Near East. The Balfour Declaration contained no explicit reference to the settler-colonial nature of the enterprise. It promised a “Jewish National Home”, with no mention of migration, land allocation and settlement. Uninformed readers could have assumed that it referred to a population that was living in Palestine, not to Jews in Eastern Europe. The only hint to the settler-colonial dimension of Zionism was found in the description of the Arabs of Palestine as the “existing non-Jewish communities”. Existing, as opposed to those who were yet to migrate and settle there.

Sykes's framing of Jews as one of the oppressed peoples of the Ottoman sphere relied on a discourse of common Semitic identity, uniting Arab and Jews in kinship (Renton 2017). The notion of Semitic race developed in early modern and Enlightenment philological scholarship and was tied to Christian and Biblical understanding of Jewish origin in Palestine. Jews were crucial to the ways Christian Europeans imagined "the East" (Kalmar and Penslar 2005). With the development of racial pseudo-science in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of modern antisemitism, the Semitic label was used to Orientalise contemporary European Jewry as a foreign body that did not properly belong in Europe. The Orientalising discourse was often negative, and yet was also ambivalent or even idealising (Valman 2007).

British officials considered Jews as an intermediary race, which could be put in the service of the empire, not unlike the Maltese, the Armenians and other groups (Norris 2013). Jews were seen as entrepreneurial, highly mobile, skilled, and well suited for "cross-cultural" trade. Baghdadi Jews played the role of "middle-men of colonial development" in India and China; European Jews could do the same as settlers in Palestine. This, however, put them in a very different category than Anglo-Saxon settlers. For colonial officials, "Jews were never fully endorsed as a white settler population and were only encouraged to migrate to particular types of territory where British settlement was not entertained. Despite their self-declared loyalty to the Crown and despite coming mainly from European countries, Jews belonged to that ambiguous type of settler who seemed to stand somewhere on the threshold between Europe and Asia" (Norris 2013, 91).

Support for Zionism was often expressed in Christian vocabulary, which should be seen not only as a religious discourse but also as a racialised one. Evangelical Christian Zionism, for whom Jewish "restoration" to the Holy Land was part of a divine plan, was marginal to mainstream Christian culture in Britain (Bar-Yosef 2003). What was far more common was a fascination with and sympathy to the idea of Jewish "return" to Zion, as a humanist, aesthetic, and ethical concern – that was undoubtedly buttressed by Christian religious education, but marked Jews as an Oriental race, which did not truly belong in Europe (Bar-Yosef 2003; Stroumsa 2018). The biblical narrative of Jews' origin in the Holy Land was not just a religious account: it was also a form of racial categorisation.

Our focus here is on British and international policy discourse, and a detailed analysis of Jewish and Arab racialised self- and mutual-understanding is beyond the scope of this article. It should be noted however that among Zionists, there was a wide spectrum of understandings of Jewish position in the racial matrix vis a vis (Christian) Europeans and Arabs. For Theodor Herzl, the founding leader of political Zionism, the establishment of a Jewish colony outside Europe would enable the world to recognise European Jews

as truly European (Boyarin 2000). Herzl famously asserted that the Jewish State would be a “portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism” (Herzl 1988). In contrast, other early Zionist intellectuals believed that the “return to the East” would allow Jews to return to their true Oriental essence, and spoke of the racial affinity between Jews and Arabs (Eyal 2006). At the same time, Arab intellectuals of the Nahda (“Awakening” movement), championed the idea of a Semitic civilization, while rejecting European claims of Semitic racial inferiority (Bashkin 2021). Some spoke of Jews (including in Europe) in terms of kinship, as they offered critiques of European antisemitism (Gribetz 2014). However, Jewish and Arab political visions based on “Semitic affinity” were quickly marginalised after the British occupation of Palestine, as the new political reality took shape and Jewish immigration and colonisation expanded.

The Palestine Mandate

With the establishment of the Mandates system, the territories occupied during the First World War were placed under the tutelage of Allied powers, who were supposed to prepare them for self-determination. The peoples formerly under Ottoman rule (Class A Mandates) were recognised as “advanced” and ready for provisional independence, unlike those in former German colonies in Africa (Class B Mandate) and the South Pacific (Class C). This was part of a racial matrix that placed Arabs and Turks on the developmental hierarchy, below Europeans, but higher than black Africans and Pacific islanders. In the US, Arab migrants from Syria and Palestine were usually recognised as white and allowed to naturalise (although not without contestation). US advocates for Arab “whiteness” argued that the Semitic race (including Arabs but also European Jews) was a branch of the white race (Gualtieri 2009).

The Mandates of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, provided a horizon of Arab self-rule for their respective populations. But in Palestine, the League of Nations charted a path to ethnonational sovereignty for Jewish European migrants while only promising civil and religious rights for native Arab Palestinians (Robson 2017, 111–112). The Palestine Mandate not only incorporated the Balfour Declaration; it also spelled out the contours of the “Jewish National Home” in manner that resembled more explicitly a settler-colonial project: facilitation of Jewish immigration; encouragement of “close settlement by Jews on the land, including State lands” (article 6); and formal recognition of the Zionist Organisation as an official agency representing the Jewish people. How could this preferential treatment of non-natives – a blatant violation of the League of Nations Covenant – be allowed? The answer is found in the preamble of the Palestine Mandate, which recognised “the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and [...] the grounds for

reconstituting their national home in that country" ("The Palestine Mandate" 1922). Zionism was understood in terms of restoration, rather than claiming a new territory. Jewish immigrants were thus placed on the same level of the occupied peoples of the former Ottoman Empire, deserving self-determination in their historical homeland.

The League of Nations, which approved and monitored the Mandate, generally did not view the Jewish National Home as a white settler colonial enterprise. The body entrusted with overseeing the Mandates, the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) showed favourable attitude to Jewish settlers in Palestine, compared with a far more critical approach to white settlers in African Mandates. As Susan Pedersen has shown, the PMC monitored with concern the activities of South African settlers in South West Africa, and British settlers in Tanganyika. Attempts to expand settlement and entrench settlers' privilege were seen by the PMC as contradictory to the Mandates' commitment to native self-determination. In contrast, most (though not all) members of PMC were explicitly supportive of Jewish settler practices in Palestine. Unlike white settlement in Africa, Zionism was a non-state movement, of settlers from third countries (mostly Eastern Europe) and not of the Mandatory power; and it represented a desperate need of Jews facing discrimination and persecution in those countries. But in addition, PMC members "saw the Jews as a diasporic but also putatively indigenous population, one whose claim to Palestine was equal to that of the Arabs currently living there" (Pedersen 2005, 128). This racial understanding transformed the question into a clash between two native nationalisms.

Faced with Arab opposition to the Jewish National Home, British officials adopted a discourse of "dual obligation" towards Jews and Arabs. The PMC, however, explicitly prioritised the Jewish National Home as the main prerogative of the Mandate. Paradoxically, it was the commensurability of Arab nationalism and Zionism as two national movements that made it possible to prioritise the latter over the former. In the new world order, organised around the Mandates system and the discourse of self-determination, naked prioritisation of settlers over natives was no longer defensible. And yet in Palestine, the PMC allowed just that, because it did not view European Jews as white settlers. Preferring Zionism in Palestine was justified, argued PMC members, given that Arab self-determination was already being realised in Palestine's neighbouring countries, and that Jews in Central Europe were facing increasingly precarious situation (Pedersen 2005).

Some British supporters of Zionism were more willing to recognize it as a form of European settler colonialism. Josiah C. Wedgwood, a Labour MP, advocated for the transformation of Palestine into the "Seventh Dominion", alongside Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. This vision, charting a path to settler self-governance, put the Jewish National Home on par with white settler states (Dubnov 2016; Freeman-Maloy 2018). Wedgwood's ideas

were met with enthusiasm in some Zionist circles, but never received serious backing in Britain. The Hebrew-speaking, East European Jewish *Yishuv* looked too foreign to be considered as equivalent to Anglo-Saxon colonies.

But as the conflict between Jewish settlers and dispossessed Arab Palestinian natives intensified, the similarities became visible to some officials on the ground. In 1935, Archer Cust, a veteran official in the Palestine Administration, argued that in Palestine, like in East Africa, the problem was “white immigration [...] that belongs to a far higher plane of civilisation than the indigenous communities into whose territories they have penetrated” (Sinanoglou 2019, 55). He argued that like in East Africa, the Mandatory Government in Palestine should step in to protect Arab farmers from dispossession by Jewish settlers. Cust called for the division of Palestine to “cantons”, with some areas designated for Jewish settlement, and others where Arab farmers would be protected. This proposal for a soft division of the country met with the opposition of the Palestine government. Officials argued that Jews and Arabs could find ways to live together “in amity and concord” (Sinanoglou 2019, 61). It is hard to imagine a British official describing relations between white settlers and indigenous Africans in such horizontal terms. It evinces the difficulty of colonial officials to think of relations between Jews and Arabs as analogous to settler-native relations elsewhere. Cantonisation was rejected – only to make way for a more radical partition plan.

Race in the Palestine Royal Commission’s Report

The Peel Commission was appointed in 1936 following an unprecedented six-month-long general Arab strike, driven by Arab concerns over intensified Jewish immigration from Central Europe, Zionist colonisation, and the British failure to establish representative self-rule. Like many commissions of enquiry before and after, the Peel Commission was instructed to suggest ways to improve the implementation of the Mandate in line with British “dual obligation” to Jews and to Arabs. But the Commission stepped outside its remit and recommended the termination of the Mandate and its replacement with two sovereign states: a Jewish state in the coastal plain and the Galilee; an Arab state in the rest of Palestine, appended to the Emirate of Transjordan (Figure 1).

The British would retain control over an enclave including Jerusalem and Jaffa. The Commission also recommended an unequal “population exchange” in which 250,000 Arabs would be removed from the Jewish state, and 1,250 Jews from the Arab state. The Jewish Agency, after intense internal debate, agreed to the principle of partition, while rejecting the terms of the offer (Galnoor 1995; Katz 2014). On the Arab side, the plan was fiercely opposed,

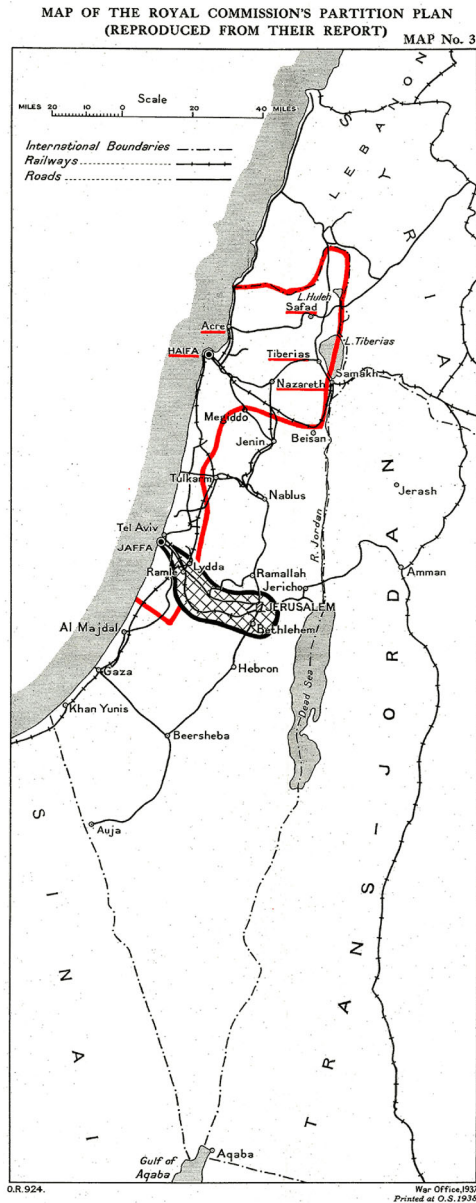


Figure 1. Royal Commission partition plan, 1937. Source: Wikipedia.

triggering a full-scale violent revolt. In 1938 the Peel partition plan was abandoned by the British Government.

The historiography on the Peel Commission has centred on the intellectual genealogy of the partition as a political framework. Some scholars have highlighted earlier ideas of “Cantonisation” (Dotan 1980; Sinanoglou 2019).

Reginald Coupland, Beit Professor of Colonial History at Oxford, was the most influential member of the Commission. He is described as the progenitor of the partition scheme, who persuaded the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann to accept it (Fraser 1984). An alternative account suggested that, in fact, it was Weizmann who surreptitiously planted this idea in Coupland's mind (Golani 2018). Most recently, a study of the Peel Commission's secret evidence (discovered in 2017), demonstrated that a developed concept of partition was first put forward to the Commission by a mid-level officer in the Palestine Administration, and was then embraced and championed by Coupland (Parsons 2020). For our purposes here, however, the scheme's original author is secondary to the question of partition's legitimising discourse. For this, we turn to a close reading of the racialised language of the Royal Commission's Report (*Palestine Royal Commission Report* 1937).

The case for partition rested on both equivalence and difference. Arabs and Jews were comparable as equally legitimate national groups with valid rights and claims. But they were too different in civilisational terms to be accommodated in a single polity. From its first page, the report framed the problem of Palestine as "a conflict between Arab and Jewish Nationalism" (*Palestine Royal Commission Report* 1937, 1), a clash between two peoples or "two races" (the terms were used interchangeably), both seeking self-determination. It was "a conflict between right and right" (2). On the other hand, the report repeatedly emphasised civilizational differences between the "backward" Arabs, and the "modern" Jews. Arabs and Jews were too different from each other, and so their national aspirations could not be accommodated within a single unit. The Arabs were separated by "centuries" from "the educated, resourceful, Western-minded" Jewish immigrants (46). "The Arab community is predominantly Asiatic in character, the Jewish community predominantly European. They differ in religion and in language. Their cultural and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations" (370). The description of the Arabs was Orientalist and overwhelmingly negative, while the cultural and scientific traits of the Yishuv were lauded and celebrated. Sitting in a concert of the Jewish Palestine Symphony Orchestra in Jerusalem, one could imagine oneself "in Paris, London or New York" (117).

The Daniel Sieff Research Institute at Rehovot is equipped with the most delicate modern instruments [...] yet from its windows can be seen the hills inhabited by a backward peasantry who regard it only as the demonstration of a power they hate and fear and who' would like, no doubt, when their blood is up, to destroy it. (117)

But despite defining Arabs and Jews as "Asiatic" and "European" respectively, the report does not discuss the antagonism between Jews and Arabs as a conflict between settlers and natives. Zionist colonization efforts are

discussed in some detail, as well as the risk that the Arab cultivator could be dispossessed by “the richer and more enterprising colonist” (235). Jewish immigrants after 1918 are referred to as “colonists and settlers” (311). And yet, the settler colonial dimension of the Zionist enterprise appears as epiphenomenal. The report makes no comparisons between the situation in Palestine and settler-colonial dynamics in East Africa or elsewhere, even though such comparisons were made during its deliberations. In his evidence before the Commission, the Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky explicitly compared Zionists colonists to East African settlers, and suggested that they were equally threatened by the native population. He protested that in Kenya, Europeans are trained for self-defence, while Jews in Palestine were not (Jabotinsky 1937). Such comparisons, however, do not appear in the Report. Instead, the relations between Jews and Arabs are compared to the schism between Muslims and Hindus in India (91, 135, 136, 375) the division between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (135, 361), the plight of Assyrians in Iraq, and the conditions of Greeks in Turkey. All these are understood as conflicts between equivalent national groups.

To be sure, by 1936, the Jewish Yishuv and the Arab Palestinian society acquired clear national characteristics, as two separate societies (Sinanoglou 2019). However, this is not sufficient to explain the astonishing “slippage” of presenting a society of largely recent migrants from Europe as a local ethno-national minority (Robson 2017). Closer attention should be given to the central place of British racial imagination in framing Arabs and Jews as comparable national groups.

It should be noted that Palestine’s indigenous Arab population, despite its negative and Orientalist depiction in the report, was still considered well above the “politically backward races in the tropical or sub-tropical world”, (122) that is in sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific. The report recognised Arab nationalism, in Palestine and throughout the region, as a genuine national movement, built on a nineteenth century cultural revival. The Arabs of Palestine belonged to Class A Mandates, and as such they were as “advanced” as the Arabs in Iraq and Syria, who were already on the path for national independence (358).

The racial ambiguity of the Jews was arguably even more crucial in this respect. The report opens with a biblical narrative of Jewish history in Palestine, guiding readers through the Exodus from Egypt, the first Temple and the exile to Babylon, and eventually to the Roman destruction of the Temple, following which Jews spread over the entire world. In Muslim Spain, relations between “Arab and Jew were quite harmonious [...] the *common Semitism of the two people* could operate unhindered” (8, italics mine). These formulations placed Jews and Arabs in a relation of distant kinship. Alongside straightforward descriptions of Jews in Palestine as “European”, in crucial segments the Report strikes a more qualified note, talking about Jews as

“Western-minded” (119) rather than simply Western. Jewish immigrants from Poland and Germany were “self-reliant, progressive people, European for the most part in outlook and equipment, *if not in race*” (122, italics mine). Jews in Europe were a “peculiar people”, “foreigners, foreign-looking, keeping to themselves” (8). They were not truly European, but rather descendants of “Semitic tribesmen”, and Zionism was their “return to the old homeland” (42).

This racial typology meant that Jews and Arabs could still be considered as somehow similar, as two national groups competing over the same land, with equivalent claims for self-determination. Partitioned Palestine was therefore, in the report’s words, “half a loaf better than no bread” (394). This reading failed to appreciate the centrality of colonisation to Zionist ethos and praxis. Arab leaders and intellectuals cautioned that partition would fail to contain Zionism. They understood Zionism as an expansionist settler-colonial enterprise, geared toward the takeover of the entire country. A small Jewish state was unlikely to be the end of Zionist expansion (Osheroff 2021). Their concerns were well founded. Zionist leaders who supported partition saw it merely as a steppingstone and made clear that they planned to continue Jewish settlement also in the territories designated for the Arab state (Morris 1999, 138–139).

Minority questions: from Peel Commission to the UN

The novelty of the Peel Report was its forceful formulation of the Palestine problem as a “minority problem” (Robson 2017). If Jews were to remain a permanent minority in Palestine, would their rights be respected by an Arab majority? Alternatively, if further Jewish immigration was allowed, could Palestine become a Jewish majority country, and the Arabs forced into minority position? The formulation placed Palestine in relation to interwar Europe’s minorities question. After the Great War, the Minority Treaties were supposed to protect the rights of ethno-national groups in the newly created states of Central Europe, under the oversight of the League of Nations. This model did not prevent escalating tensions in the 1930s around discrimination and irredentism.

In the former Ottoman Empire, the Allies adopted more radical measures of ethno-national engineering, including partition and population transfer (Robson 2017). In the French controlled area, Lebanon was carved out of Syria, to protect the Maronite Christian minority; the British considered similar ideas to establish an Assyrian-Kurdish state in northern Iraq (Robson 2017, 110). The 1923 Lausanne Treaty ended the conflict between Turkey and Greece through the “compulsory exchange” of two million people. Orthodox Christians from Turkey were expelled to Greece (and those who already fled there were denied the right of return), while Muslims living in Greece were expelled to Turkey. Among international policy circles, Lausanne

was held up as a success. The Royal Commission Report mentioned the forced exchange as an “instructive” model, in which the “ulcer” of nationalism had been “clean cut” (*Palestine Royal Commission Report* 1937, 390). It sought to replicate it in Palestine, by removing indigenous Palestinians from the Galilee, to make room for Jewish settlers from Europe; but the precedent was the “population exchange” of native minorities in Turkey and Greece. This was not about settlers and natives, but rather about two nations that needed each its own viable state.

Following the Arab Revolt, the 1937 partition proposal was shelved, and the British returned to the framework of Palestine as a single political unit, in which both Arab and Jewish aspirations would be accommodated. The 1939 White Paper severely limited Jewish immigration, land purchasing and settlement. In the summer of 1947, facing a Jewish insurgency, political impasse and their looming departure from India, the British referred the question of Palestine to the United Nations.

The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine was clearly influenced by the Royal Commission Report in its framing of the Palestine problem. “The basic conflict in Palestine is a clash of two intense nationalisms [...] Only by means of partition can these conflicting national aspirations find substantial expression and qualify both peoples to take their places as independent nations in the international community” (UNSCOP 1947). The majority plan divided Palestine to a Jewish state in the coastal areas, the plains and the Naqab/Negev desert (55% of the territory); an Arab state in the highlands (43%); and an internationally ruled enclave of Jerusalem (Figure 2). The plan was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 29 November 1947, with US and Soviet support.

The partition of Palestine was one among many examples of the Great Powers’ drive to solve the question of nationalities and minorities through radical means, in the aftermath of World War II (Drew 2017). The failure of the interwar Minority Treaties to stabilise national conflicts in Europe led policy makers to adopt the principle of population “unmixing” to create homogenous nation states, through the redrawing of borders and mass population transfers (Frank 2017).

The UNSCOP majority report was predicated on the supposed symmetry between Arabs and Jews, as two peoples with historic roots in Palestine. Despite identifying Jewish immigration and Zionist settlement as key issues of contention, the report refrained entirely from using the terms “colonization” and “colonies”. Such terms were still prevalent in Zionist discourse: the Biltmore Programme, which was endorsed by the Zionist movement in 1942 and called for the establishment of Palestine as a “Jewish Commonwealth”, proudly proclaimed that Zionist settlers “have written a notable page in the history of colonization” (“Zionist Congresses: The Biltmore Conference” 1942). And yet this term was missing from the UNSCOP report.

Reference to the colonizing nature of Zionism can only be found in the dissenting opinion of Sir Abdur Rahman, representative of India, who rejected partition (Rahman 1947). The majority report authors remained committed to a racial typology that viewed Jewish immigrants from Europe not as Europeans but rather as belonging to Oriental heritage. As such, the racial affinity between Arabs and Jews was crucial to suggesting equivalence between them. This is particularly evident towards the end of the UNSCOP report, when the authors abandon their pedestrian tone in favour of a grand historical narrative:

[I]n the larger view, here are the sole remaining representatives of the Semitic race. They are in the land in which that race was cradled. There are no fundamental incompatibilities between them. The scheme satisfies the deepest aspiration of both: independence. [...] the setting is one from which, with good will and a spirit of cooperation, may arise a rebirth, in historical surroundings, of the genius of each people.

[...]

The Jews bring to the land the social dynamism and scientific method of the West; the Arabs confront them with individualism and intuitive understanding of life. Here then, in this close association, through the natural emulation of each other, can be evolved a synthesis of the two civilizations, preserving, at the same time, their fundamental characteristics. [...] Palestine will remain one land in which Semitic ideals may pass into realization. (UNSCOP 1947)

Like the Peel Commission, UNSCOP used racialised and Orientalist language, contrasting between “instinctive” Arabs and “scientific” Jews. At the same time, it played down racial differences between Jews and Arabs, insisting that they had “no fundamental incompatibilities”. While Jews were presented as superior to Arabs in developmental terms, the common Semitic origin was assumed to have the power to bind them together in harmony, through rhetoric of “racial determinism” (Strawson 2010, 98).

Partition pipe dreams: South Africa and Algeria

It is useful to compare Palestine to two other settler-colonial contexts in which partition was raised as a possible “solution” to the conflict between settlers and natives – in Algeria and South Africa. In the first half of the twentieth century, the European minorities in both countries enjoyed white minority hegemony, in a manner that was unavailable to Zionists in Palestine. British Mandatory endorsement of the “Jewish National Home” never amounted to supporting straightforward Jewish domination. In the 1950s, with decolonisation, white minority rule could no longer be defended in Africa. In Algeria and South Africa, partition-like scenarios were floated in response to

demands for self-determination and equality. In both cases, the idea of partition was explored by settlers or the settler state, but never received meaningful backing or international legitimacy. In this it was strikingly different from the Palestine partition, which received the support of major international powers as well as the UN. In the rich literature on Algeria's decolonisation and South Africa's anti-Apartheid struggle, the possibility of partition has only recently attracted historiographic attention. This is an indication that partition sits outside the frame of settler-native relations.

The idea of dividing South Africa between blacks and whites to two states was raised in the 1930s by white liberal intellectuals, who believed equality within a single polity was unlikely given entrenched white domination and segregation. This thinking was never translated to a fully-fledged political vision (Zollmann 2021). When the Apartheid regime established the Bantu "Homelands" in the 1950s, the South African press named them "Bantustans" in reference to the creation of Pakistan, suggesting parallel between South Africa and partitioned India. The term "partition" was never used by the Apartheid regime, which, initially, ruled out full sovereignty for the Homelands. Critics emphasised that the Bantustans had nothing to do with an equitable partition, as whites retained control over land, power and resources (Zollmann 2021). Anti-Apartheid activists feared that the discourse of Bantustans as "partition" would take root. Writing in 1959, Nelson Mandela offered a full refutation of the proposed model, showing that the establishment of Homelands was not comparable to the partition of India (Mandela 1959). In India, Mandela argued, partition was agreed by the two parties, and resulted in two sovereign states, in which all citizens were promised full equality. The Bantustans, on the other hand, offered no real self-determination; were not negotiated or agreed upon with black South Africans; and promised no equality to Africans outside the Bantu reserves. Mandela stressed that the African National Congress remained committed to a free South Africa, in which all were equal. Internationally, the Bantustans were never accepted as a form of partition. They were never recognised by the international community, even when granted "independence" by the Apartheid regime in the 1970s. Partition returned towards the end of Apartheid, as Afrikaner nationalists threatened to retreat into an Afrikaner homeland – the *Volkstaat* – a fantasy that was never close to materialising, and, again, never received international support (Ramutsindela 2002).

In Algeria, the possibility of partition was raised in the final years of the Algerian war of independence, with the aim of splitting French Algeria into an Arab Muslim state, and a European province on the Western coastal area, where the bulk of the European population lived (Asseraf 2018). David Ben Gurion, Israel's Prime minister, raised the idea of creating a "French Israel" in Algeria, in a 1960 meeting with French President Charles De Gaul. But as Arthur Asseraf shows, such ideas had been floated by

French bureaucrats already in 1956 and received ample consideration, typically through comparison to other examples of partition. For the French, partition between Europeans and Arab (Muslim) Algerians was a difficult idea, as it exposed the racial logic of the French state, and the emptiness of its Republican promise for equality. While keen to escape comparisons to white settlers in Rhodesia and South Africa, French officials preferred to compare the situation to one of ethno-religious difference. Israel was particularly useful as an ambiguous case, whose racial political nature they considered “hopelessly confused”: it involved a European settler population, but one that had historical origins in Palestine. The partition of Palestine was widely seen as a justified international intervention. However, what was ambiguous for French bureaucrats was not at all so for Algerian nationalists. They considered Israel most clearly a colony, and warned against a scenario of Algerian partition, along the lines of Palestine’s partition plan.

The Algerian partition option hovered “on the edge of possibility”, but never won much backing (Asseraf 2018). Strong factors worked against it: staunch opposition from European Algerian settlers; the fact that these settlers made up a minority even in the enclave that was considered for their state; and the likely negative international reactions to such move. The CIA considered the partition of Algeria as a dangerous scenario, that would harm US interests, and could lead to France’s international isolation (Central Intelligence Agency 1962).

It was De Gaul who chose to explain the impossibility of partition in Algeria in reference to Israel and the question of race. As he summed up the comparison: “Jews have a good reason: it is on this land that they have their roots, well before the Arabs; and they have no other national home. In Algeria, the Arabs have precedent [l’antériorité] ... The national home of French Algerians is France”. As Asseraf says: “In essence, de Gaulle seems to have argued that, while Israel was not a colony, Algeria was, and therefore it should become independent and not be partitioned” (Asseraf 2018, 116).

In Algeria and South Africa, partition demanded the redefinition of relations between settlers and natives, as equivalent ethnic or national groups who had comparable rights for self-determination. Yet this was clearly unacceptable to the settlers, for whom allowing real native sovereignty was as unthinkable as extending full equal citizenship to the indigenous population. For the international community the claim for equivalence between settlers and natives appeared as a thinly veiled attempt to maintain European/white domination and privileges.

The comparison to Palestine is illuminating in this regard. In the interwar period, Zionists were not seen as straightforward white settlers, and did not have the power and privileges of *colons* in Algeria and Whites in South Africa. This “deficiency” worked in favour of Zionism, as it allowed the League of Nations’ Mandates Commission to support the “Jewish National Home” as a

project of self-determination, that was not a form of outdated white settler colonialism; but it also meant Jewish minority hegemony could not be entertained. This led British and international policy makers to endorse partition, and to view the relations between settlers and natives as a national conflict. In Algeria and South Africa, the nature of white domination was clearly recognised. This was a key reason why, when pressures grew to dismantle white rule, partition never became a serious option.

Conclusion

The Jewish European movement of Zionism, seeking to establish national self-rule in Palestine through colonisation, emerged on the world stage in the late nineteenth century, in the zenith of European Imperialist expansion in Asia and Africa. When it won the endorsement of the British Empire (1917) and the League of Nations (1922), attitudes to colonialism were already changing and turning against the expansion of white colonial settlement. The Zionist movement was able to garner international support, in that historical moment, not because it was seen as a straightforward European settler enterprise, but precisely because it was not seen as such. What one critic called "Zionism's bizarre conflation of the discourses of settlement with those of 'return'" (Makdisi 2017) was foundational not only to Zionist self-perception but also to its international legitimacy. Only this understanding of Jews as "of Palestine" allowed the inclusion of a settler-colonial project into an international framework of self-determination, in the form of the Mandates system. This view was deeply anchored in the racialisation of European Jews as a Semitic and Oriental race, who were foreign to Europe. "Return to Zion" was not merely a rhetorical justification, or a convenient mythology; it was a racialised structure that both enabled Zionism but also constrained it. In the 1930s and 1940s, Zionists were not awarded the hegemonic status enjoyed by White settlers in Algeria and South Africa, but they could claim national rights and territory. As we saw in the case of partition, this racialisation played a crucial role in determining the horizon of political possibilities.

Palestine was the only settler-colonial context in which partition was accepted by the international consensus as a desirable outcome. In the eyes of the great powers, the Palestine conflict was not a clash between a European settlers and non-European indigenous population, but rather a national conflict between two non-European communities, one of them native to the land, the other "re-established" there. Palestine was formulated as a problem of nationalism and "minorities", to be solved through redrawing borders, creating states, and transferring population forcibly. It was a logic that put the Palestine conflict on equal footing with "minority" problems in the Indian subcontinent, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Balkans.

The failure to take seriously the Zionist ethos and praxis of settlement was one of the main factors in the failure of partition, in the 1940s and ever since. International advocates of partition believed that the main objective of Zionism was self-determination, and that Jewish statehood (alongside an Arab state) would meet these aspirations. But the impetus of territorial conquest and settlement proved stronger. In the 1948 war, Israel occupied territories well beyond the partition plan boundaries and incorporated them into the new state. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the Sinai and the Golan heights, and established settlements in all these territories. Even during the 1990s heyday of Oslo negotiations, Israel continued to expand its settlements in the West Bank. Israel remains committed to Jewish settlement as a “national value”, as enshrined in the 2018 “Nation State” Basic Law. The imperative of colonisation and territorial expansion renders hollow any talk of partition.

But it is also true that the failure to take seriously the enduring legacy of European racialisation of Jews, and the way it has shaped discussion and policy over Zionism and Palestine/Israel, is undermining our ability to understand historical and contemporary trajectories. The lasting power of the partition framework in Palestine, despite its eight-decade failure as a “solution”, owes much to European racialisation of Jews and Arabs as somehow equivalent and related groups. This explains why, despite undisputed Israeli hegemony between the river and the sea, and a clear system of hierarchical domination, described by many as Apartheid, the dominant international discourse remains one of partition, and of two nations living “side by side”.

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