Structures of settler colonial domination in Israel and in the United States

Johanna Fernandez

Introduction

In March 2016, a U.S. delegation traveled to Palestine to witness firsthand Israel’s settler-colonial project and to stand in solidarity with an Indigenous people’s diverse struggles for survival.

Like many others who have traveled internationally to advance the cause of justice, we went to uphold one of humanity’s highest principles and aspirations—the notion that we should care for the freedom of others, be willing to stand with them, and bring home their voices and messages. Our nineteen-member delegation included three former U.S.-held political prisoners, two former Black Panthers, trade unionists, university professors, and a younger generation of prison abolitionists and organizers. The trip was planned and led by Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi, the indefatigable author and professor at San Francisco State University, who identified prisons, labor, and academic freedom as the delegation's focal points.

We met and documented conversations with teachers and labor organizers whose recent strikes highlighted the savage economic disparities that define Palestinian life; we learned about the ongoing efforts of activists and scholars to reclaim the history, political identity, and culture of the Palestinian people. The delegation’s special focus on political imprisonment and solidarity between Palestinian and U.S. prisoners made it the first of its kind. The injustices we witnessed in Palestine—of ongoing Palestinian displacement and demolition of homes by the Israeli state, of attempts at dehumanizing the Palestinian people through educational policies designed to erase their culture and history, of stark economic disparities between Palestinians and Israelis, of
mass incarceration and political imprisonment, and of the tragic and farcical deployment by Israelis of Holocaust-like instruments of control against Palestinians—shocked the conscience. Although Zionist policies have not yet reached the Final Solution organized at Wannsee 1942, they certainly do resemble Kristallnacht 1938; while Gaza is not yet the Auschwitz death factory, it does resemble the Warsaw Ghetto.\(^1\) The current stage of Israeli genocide can easily reach those later Nazi manifestations. And even if they don’t, it's still genocide.

Although the suffering imposed on Palestinians is concentrated and acute, a consequence of the state of war and Israeli military occupation that define their lives, the delegation was struck by structures of Palestinian oppression that resemble both contemporary and historical structures of oppression here in the United States.

**Land and labor**

At our first meeting, our hosts offered critical reflections on the use of language and analytical framework in discussions of Palestinian grievances. They reported that, in the years since the uprisings that began in Tunisia in 2010 and spread across the Arab World, a broad coalition of the Palestinian left has convened a series of conferences with international supporters present. These gatherings addressed, among other things, the limitations of political discourse internationally—and even in Palestine—with its tendency to link the contemporary crisis in Palestine to the Six Day War of 1967 and the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that followed.\(^2\)

Convened in a new political period, these conferences sought to widen and reframe public dialogue to illuminate root causes. Our hosts, who participated in these sessions, explained that the harrowing conditions of Palestinian life today are not just a product of the ongoing Israeli occupation. The decisive chapter of the crisis, they noted, dates back to the Israeli military invasion of 1948, which usurped the vast expanse of Palestinian lands upon which the state of Israel was erected that same year. The invasion consummated the Zionist, settler-colonial project envisioned and begun much earlier, in the late 19th century, with the backing of the

---


British Empire in the early 20th century and U.S. hegemony after World War II. Its aim was—and remains—the creation of an exclusively Jewish state.

The 1948 invasion displaced 85% of Palestinians from their lands to the West Bank, Gaza, and nearby Arab countries of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Palestinians call this event the Nakba, or “catastrophe.” Those Palestinians who remained were internally displaced in their own country, confined to its poorest regions, forbidden from moving freely, stripped of land rights and subjected to a brutal system of racial apartheid. This strategy was deployed by the Israelis to maintain social control and military rule for the entire period spanning 1948 to 1966. After 1948, Arab Palestinians—who had been the majority population in that region—soon became demographic minorities within the 1948 borders through the ongoing confiscation of their lands, forced expulsion, and a vast and ongoing project, designed and funded by the state of Israel, to settle European Jews in Palestine.

While primarily a European Jewish settler state, Zionists have also promoted immigration of entire Jewish communities from across the Arab-Muslim world. The diverse activists with whom we met, who held differing political perspectives and approaches, were unified in their belief that justice in Palestine can only be achieved through redress of the root cause of their oppression, which is found in the Nakba.

This more accurate analysis, which links the contemporary crisis in Palestine to Israel’s settler-colonial apartheid project and regime, can prepare people of conscience around the world to recognize and reject bankrupt proposals for change. And given the historical precedent of the settler-colonial project in the U.S.—whose strategies and contemporary forms were studied and replicated by Israel in Palestine—those fighting against the legacy of colonial oppression in the U.S. stand to strengthen their own movements through comparative analysis.

Israel and the United States share common themes in their origin histories. Both are colonial-settler apartheid states, justifying their projects through the racialized dehumanization of the Indigenous people they displaced from their lands. In the U.S. this included the mass enslavement of Africans and acquisition by war of other territories during the Spanish American War of 1898, among them the island of Puerto Rico. This shared history is the basis of solidarity between the Palestinian people and internally colonized people in the U.S.—Native Americans,

---


African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Chinese, and other Asian laborers.

In both Israel and the United States, the emergence of industrial capitalism would not have been possible without the land grabs that accompanied the settler-colonial project. There is, however, a notable difference between the subsequent capitalist projects that emerged in the U.S. and Israel and also in the characteristics of the multi-racial working class that each state has produced. Clarity on these differences is important for an identification and analysis of the social forces that could lead to change.

With the exception of Native Americans who have been historically isolated from the country’s economy, the U.S. capitalist project was built on the labor of racially oppressed groups and their super-exploitation. By contrast, Palestinian labor has not played a necessary and integral function in the Israeli economy. In fact, historically, the Israeli state has sought to isolate the mass of Palestinian workers from its economy. In this sense, the Palestinian experience is most like that of Native Americans, who suffered genocide through sporadic military raids and wars deployed preemptively by a stronger military power, as well as engineered containment, isolation, and economic strangulation in Indian reservations beginning in the 19th century.6

With the exception of Native Americans, however, the U.S. capitalist project depended heavily on the labor of racially oppressed groups. The main engine of U.S. economic growth in the 19th century came from the cotton produced by African slaves.7 The Chinese worked in the railroads and mines in the 19th century, and many Filipinos and East Indians labored in chain gangs. During the same period, Mexicans were indispensable in agricultural plantations in Southwestern lands. Puerto Ricans served a similar function both on the island and in East Coast and Midwest tomato and tobacco plantations during the first half of the 20th century.8

These labor experiences differed from those of European immigrants, who also faced conditions of poverty and discrimination but had the advantage of working in urban centers in the most dynamic sectors of capitalism as free-laborers, which over time allowed them to better their lot as they acquired semi-skilled and skilled jobs.9

The Civil War, which ended slavery except in U.S. prisons, began the process of transforming the relationship of African Americans to the nation’s industrial economy.10 Still,

---


9 For a discussion of the forces that have historically influenced white working-class consciousness in the U.S. see, Mike Davis, Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class (New York: Verso, 2000).

the early concentration of African Americans and other people of color in the most backward sectors of the U.S. economy structured race and color onto the American workplace and society as a whole. The mass of poor and working people within these groups were forced into spatial isolation through law and custom. And regardless of class, their life experiences have been circumscribed by racialized state violence and institutionalized racism in education, employment, housing, and in the courts. For these reasons, organizers and scholars alike have used the term *internal colonies* to describe the relationship of these groups to the nation.

In the 20th century, during and immediately after the World Wars, these groups were urbanized and proletarianized in successive waves of migration. Although they were disproportionately set back by the advent of deindustrialization after WWII, the civil rights and labor movements of the 20th century expanded their employment in the new service economy, in healthcare, and in the public sector and appreciably decreased wage differential between white workers and workers of color. In addition, these movements eliminated laws erected to bar African Americans and other people of color from civic life and employment in the economy’s most advanced sectors.

For all of these reasons, multi-racial solidarity between workers of color and their white counterparts is objectively possible, despite the long history of racism in the U.S. and its persistence today among many white workers. In addition, the evisceration of working-class life since the 1970s means that the shared class interest of the nation’s multi-racial working class is more evident today than ever before. Over the last fifty years the country’s already feeble welfare state was all but eliminated by neoliberal policies while employers launched an unrelenting offensive that weakened unions, reduced wages, eliminated benefits, and increased output for most workers, regardless of race, even though workers of color began to experience these changes in the preceding period.

Whereas the labor of racially oppressed groups has played an integral productive function in the U.S., the same is not the case in Israel. In 48, Palestinian labor is used out of necessity, remains peripheral, and is seen as an obstacle to a settler-colonial project in progress. Pending elimination altogether, Israel has historically sought to contain its reliance on Indigenous workers. These were the instructions of Zionism’s founder, Theodor Herzl, who, on June 12, 1895, wrote in his diary: “We shall try to transfer the poorer section of the [Indigenous]


13 For one recent historical study, see Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

population across the border, without raising noise, by giving them employment in the transit countries, but in our own country we shall deny them all work.”

Israel’s relentless recruitment, employment, and settlement of Jews from abroad has advanced Herzl’s goal. This has been the chief assignment of the Histadrut, Israel’s sole trade union until recently and a major pillar of the Zionist project. Formed in 1920 under the British Mandate for Palestine, the Histadrut reserved all labor rights as the exclusive privilege of Jewish workers, and until its decline in the last decade, it was a major player in the development of state labor policies. As late as 2011, it procured the exclusion of Palestinians and immigrants in the labor market. But history hasn’t happened in circumstances of Zionism’s own choosing. In 1967, when it launched preemptive war, Israel achieved phenomenal territorial expansion with the capture, in six days, of the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula—lands under the control of its neighboring Arab states: Jordan, Syria, and Egypt. But, in addition to land, Israel also acquired a “demographic problem”—Israeli parlance for the looming threat posed by the massive Palestinian population it inherited during the war. Although hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled from these territories, a larger number stayed. Almost twenty years earlier, during the war of 1948, these Palestinians had settled in adjacent Arab territories as exiled refugees, but in 1967 they chose to weather the ravages of war. Fortified by historical connection to these lands, they remained rooted in their residences. Today, the majority of this population remains under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, the territories from which Israel never withdrew after 1967.

Shortly after the war, Israel offered citizenship to Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and Golan Heights, which it incorporated into the national borders it established during the war of 1948. Although most refused Israeli citizenship, those who accepted joined approximately 150,000 others who gained citizenship in 1948. These Palestinian Arabs form approximately 20% of Israel’s population and the majority live in East Jerusalem. They suffer harsh racist discrimination, second-class citizenship, earn 30–40% less than Jewish workers and are not hired in a wide range of sectors.


Since 1967, the Israeli government has also imposed quotas and restrictions on Palestinian migrant workers who travel from the occupied territories to work in 48, where they are only allowed to work in construction and agriculture. Although quotas have fluctuated over the last fifty years, the number of permits granted to Palestinian migrant workers has declined significantly since 1967; today Palestinian migrant workers make up a little over 2% of Israel’s total labor population.\(^\text{19}\)

In addition to enjoying higher wages and civic and labor rights denied to Palestinians, Jewish workers enjoy a standard of living that their industrial production does not sustain. This material advantage is made possible by the massive, yearly influx of U.S. foreign aid. Despite these material advantages, Jewish workers have not been immune to economic insecurities produced by neoliberalism in the last thirty years. The Israeli state has responded to Jewish workers’ needs with heavily subsidized, western-styled housing in the form of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories—a project of ethnic cleansing through the displacement of Palestinians from their lands, which the Jewish working class supports and on which its living-standard depends.\(^\text{20}\)

Ever committed to dehumanizing the dispossessed, Israel employs Palestinian migrant workers in the very industry that rips their people off their lands—in the building of the settlement projects. In sum, the objective interests of Jewish workers in Israel are different from those of Palestinian workers.

Since 1967, Palestinians who stayed rooted in the West Bank have posed the greatest threat to Israel’s Zionist project. In the occupied territories, Israel controls every aspect of Palestinian life through a labyrinthine apparatus that includes the infamous wall, checkpoints, surveillance towers, the highest incarceration rates in the world, and restricted access to water, work, and housing.

Delegation members were struck by the similarities between the contemporary mechanisms of Palestinian subjugation and those used historically and even today against internally colonized racialized people in the U.S. What surfaced immediately as we walked through Palestine were the structures of colonial subjugation in both contexts. The land confiscations that began in Palestine in 1948 continue today with methods old and new. As in the U.S. historical context, wherein sacred Indian lands acquired by war in the 19\(^{th}\) century were


turned into national parks, from Yellowstone Park to Mount Rushmore, for the purposes of “landscape preservation,” Israel has taken a page from the U.S. handbook.

Israel’s Nature and Parks Authority routinely confiscates lands tilled by Palestinians by giving notice of intent to acquire Palestinians lands “required for public purposes.” The land confiscations that began in Palestine in 1948 continue today in new forms. The ongoing construction of the 280-mile apartheid wall in the West Bank is strategically designed to seize Palestinian residential and agricultural lands in its path. Other patterns of land displacement in Palestine, however, mirror the mass acquisition of prime real estate by developers in poor, urban African American and Latino neighborhoods in the U.S. Gentrification is well under way in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poor Palestinians, like Jaffa, one of the oldest ports cities in the world. As we walked through many of these neighborhoods we saw that in their emerging architecture and aesthetic they strikingly resembled gentrified Harlem, Brooklyn, the South Bronx, and Oakland—a clear sign that real-estate development is globally coordinated and designed.

And in the Bedouin Village of Um El Heran in the Naqab dessert, we observed conditions resembling those of Indian reservations back home where poverty is rampant, the possibility of economic survival dismal, and children learn in underfunded and separate schools. As in the case of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which was established by the U.S. government in the 19th century, Israel has established a bureaucracy to manage matters pertaining to Bedouin Arab life. Neither of these bureaucracies, however, recognized the sovereignty of these native peoples or their rights to lands outlined in treaties signed in the past. For its part, the BIA facilitated the confinement of Native Americans in reservations and established boarding schools for Indian children who were compelled to relinquish their Indian names, culture, and language. The BIA was but one part of a much larger apparatus of Native American displacement from the western plains of North America following passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, a program of public land grants that consolidated U.S. westward expansion through the settlement of railroad companies and small farmers in lands previously held by Native Americans. Back in the village of Um El Heran, a modern rendition of the Homestead Act was underway.

On a nearby mountain we saw a menacing bulldozer with the Israeli flag planted next to it. Um El Heran is one of the many Bedouin villages that have been erased from Israel’s map; it is therefore subject to demolition to make room for impressive European-style condominiums with shopping malls and luxuries of all kinds that the state of Israel builds to house the continuous flow of Zionist settlers from Europe that it lures into Palestinian lands. Upon our return to the U.S., we read news reports that Um El Heran was demolished by the very bulldozers we photographed.
Culture

Human beings have, historically, grappled with the complexities of their life experiences through “cultural production.” Through popular culture, history, and art, human beings interpret themselves, make sense of social relations, and access their humanity. In cases where the very existence of a society is contingent on the subjugation of a particular group of people, that society must control cultural production and historical representations of those on whose subjugation it depends. For this reason, the suppression of the culture and history of the oppressed has been a key instrument of domination in the colonial project.

Because culture and shared history are intrinsic to the human experience, they are contested terrains, which human beings routinely reclaim in their struggle to survive soul-slaying conditions. Culture and history are vehicles of group definition, autonomy, and resistance to domination. In the face of Israel’s attempt at ethnic cleansing, Palestinians retain their humanity with levity in everyday acts of cultural resistance. One of the most culturally hilarious and defiant references we heard repeatedly during our travels in Palestine was the term 48. The delegation kept on hearing, “Oh, that’s in 48” or “we are now entering 48,” or “there are check points en route to 48.” After a while, we realized that 48 is the designation used by many Palestinians to refer to the state of Israel and the borders it carved out of the lands it colonized in 1948—a powerful example of how Palestinians have humorously etched resistance to the Nakba in language.

We were inspired by the cross-section of Palestinians with whom we met—people of different generations and with diverse political perspectives, who are committed to re-igniting an organized and rooted resistance. Everyone we talked to in Palestine spoke of the spirit of sumud as they reflected on the task ahead for Palestinians. Sumud is an Arabic term with historical ties to the Palestinian anti-colonial liberation movement. Its layered cultural and political meanings defy translation into English, but it roughly means steadfast rootedness. For a people whose 20th-century history has been disfigured by land expulsion and calculated attempts at ethnic cleansing by Israelis, the spirit of sumud is drawn from the deep cultural reservoir of a historically agrarian people. It calls on them to uphold their existence by standing their ground with strength, pride, beauty, and dignity.

We learned that Israel’s latest program of cultural and historical erasure has been institutionalized in the only school text books that are used in 48, all of which have systematically eliminated references to “Palestinians,” who are now referred to as Arabs or “other people.”21 The students among us of 19th-century westward expansion in the U.S. again found parallels in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We also found parallels in Puerto Rico, which was colonized by the U.S. in 1898, where English was imposed as the official language in the courts and in the schools, and the Gag Law of 1948 criminalized owning or displaying the Puerto

Rican flag. Africans also suffered great cultural losses under U.S. slavery, which separated families, prohibited religious practices, and among other restrictions banned drumming, a primary means of communication among African people. During the days of our visit to Palestine, we also learned that Israel had just ordered the Palestinian National Authority, its Indigenous surrogate agent in the occupied territories, to make illegal the playing of Palestinian music in Jerusalem’s taxicabs. And in meetings with cultural institutions, we were told that musicians and artists who release songs with references to Palestine’s history are subject to imprisonment, which has led young Palestinian artists to release their tracks anonymously on the Internet.

While Israel routinely issues notices to shut down theater, dance, and music performances that challenge its colonial rule, Palestinians persist in their determination to assert their humanity through cultural expression. The murals we saw in the Ibdaa Arts Center in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, at the Popular Arts Center in El Bireh, and everywhere in Palestine stand as visually stunning challenges to the ban on resistance art on public walls imposed by the Israeli occupation.

**Racialized dehumanization**

The European colonial project in the Americas, whose strategies Israelis have studied and deployed against Palestinians, is the architect of racism and white supremacy. The land grabs and barbaric project of oppression executed by both have historically been justified through the racialized dehumanization of the people it has sought to subjugate. The contemporary structure, logic, and ideology of racial oppression we witnessed in Palestine reminded us of that in the United States.

Palestinians are perceived in ways similar to African Americans: They can’t work and are unruly, violent animals “who live on dole.” In their interactions with Palestinians at checkpoints, in the streets, and in courtrooms we visited, we witnessed the disdain, hatred, and cruelty of very young Israeli soldiers who, disfigured and dehumanized by the colonial project, enforce barbaric rules of the occupation with smug self-righteousness. As in the case of police “stops and frisk” in New York, these daily interactions with armed foot soldiers of the state aim to crush the dignity of their subjects. This terror is exacerbated by the complex structures of economic and spatial isolation created in refugee camps, the siege and blockade of Gaza, and the restriction of movement and caging of communities behind the 280-mile apartheid wall in the West Bank whose ongoing construction is designed to seize Palestinian residential and agricultural lands. Such planned ideological and spatial dehumanization quashes the social value of Palestinian life.

Those who dare assert their humanity or interact with armed authorities pay with their lives. Between October 2015 and March 2016 alone, approximately 200 Palestinians, including

---

41 children, suffered summary execution in the streets at the hands of Israeli soldiers. These extra-judicial killings are justified under the guise of “safety and security,” the same language U.S. police officers use to justify the killings of young Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American men, women, and children. Since the terror attacks of September 11, 2011, at least 300 sheriffs and police officers in police departments across the country, from New York and Maine and Oakland to Chicago, have traveled to Israel to receive militarized and counter-terrorism training in the methods of brutal repression mastered by the Israeli Defense Forces, which label every Palestinian a threat to Israeli security. Not surprisingly, Muslim communities across the nation, and especially in New York, have suffered indiscriminate spying by police.

Like David fighting Goliath, in order to breathe, some young boys and girls have dared to challenge the atrocities perpetrated by Israel with stones during the intifada and, most recently, with knives in stabbings of Israeli soldiers. Farcically, these youth are portrayed as predators and killed for their acts of resistance, while the whole of the Palestinian people are criminalized, subjected to collective punishment and blamed for their oppression. During our trip we sat in harrowing meetings with the parents of Palestinian children killed by Israeli soldiers, whose homes were demolished by the Israeli state and on whom heavy fines were levied for their children’s alleged actions. And in an act that adds depravity to atrocity, the Israeli military freezes the bodies of these dead children in massive blocks of ice and refuses to release them to their parents, a macabre practice that violates international human-rights norms.

**Incarceration**

The inextricable link between incarceration and the standards of democracy in a country led the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky to observe that, “The degree of civilization in society can be judged by entering its prisons.” In its absolute assault on life and the most basic need for social interaction among humans, incarceration desensitizes society to oppression and erodes standards of freedom. Dostoevsky’s observation countermands the global posturing of Israel and the United States, which present themselves as beacons of democracy but which stand as the major prison capitals of the world. Israel touts itself as a nation of laws and the United States as the land of the free, yet the alarming rates at which these nations incarcerate their internally colonized populations make them the prison houses of nations. Our delegation witnessed, in plain sight, the mass deployment of incarceration as a contemporary tool of colonial repression.

Palestinians face the highest incarceration rates in the world. A little known fact is that one in five Palestinians has been imprisoned at some point in their lives by Israeli authorities. Similarly, the United States, with less than 5% of the world’s inhabitants, has 25% of the world’s prisoners, a disproportionate percentage of whom are the descendants of slaves. And since 1967, Israel has arrested, jailed, and tortured 800,000 Palestinian political prisoners. The first of these political prisoners included many who, radicalized by the fallout of the Six Day War of 1967, stopped relying on their neighboring Arab states to regain their homeland and launched the coalition of resistance groups that became the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). These
political prisoners were immediately declared terrorists by Israel. But they were young people who embraced guerilla warfare, the military strategy popularized by national liberation struggles against European colonial rulers from Vietnam and Algeria to South Africa and beyond. With the aim of avoiding direct military engagement, it was seen as the only poor people’s strategy that could be employed successfully against a modern military war machine.

Palestinians detained in the occupied West Bank are tried and sentenced in Israeli military courts where proceedings are conducted in Hebrew and 99% of those tried are convicted. Our delegation observed the prosecution of Palestinian youth in three different tribunals and learned that Israel is the only country in the world that prosecutes children in military courts. In one case, a 16-year-old Palestinian boy was tried as an adult and faced two life sentences for allegedly running over an Israeli soldier with a vehicle. The evidence presented against him included a video reenactment of the prosecution’s theory of the crime and statements likely extracted by torture, a routine practice legalized by the Israeli Supreme Court in 1987 as “moderate physical pressure.” As in the cases of Black detainees in the U.S. whose testimonies revealed how Chicago police coerced confessions of the innocent through torture between 1972–1991, the Palestinian prisoners with whom we met shared harrowing accounts of Israeli torture tactics. In Israel torture of Palestinian prisoners lasts approximately three months and includes the tying of prisoners in “stress positions,” severe beatings, lengthy interrogation sessions, sleep deprivation, threats to harm or kill prisoners’ family members, mock executions, and sexual abuse.

Israel’s transparent use of incarceration and torture as tools of political repression is instructive for those seeking carceral reform in the U.S. Here in the U.S., a well-coordinated campaign of law-and-order ideology and racially coded moral panic around crime deployed by the ruling class for over half-century has obscured the underlying objectives of incarceration and consolidated public support for locking people up.

But prisons are mechanisms of state repression intended to control people at the bottom of society and those most likely to resist, especially during periods of political and/or economic crisis. During the 1960s, at around the same time that Israel intensified the lock-down of Palestinian dissidents, southern segregationists also began to craft a law-and-order ideology to undermine the political legitimacy of the civil-rights movement. For their part, northern authorities augmented law-and-order ideology by fomenting a moral panic around crime, the acceptable code for Black repression in the era of civil rights. In 1966, for example, the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association (PBA) of New York hired a public relations firm that

23 For an account of the torture of Black detainees by Chicago police, see introduction and conclusion in Elizabeth Daile, Robert Nixon and Police Torture in Chicago, 1871–1971 (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016). See also http://chicagotorture.org/history/

24 For further analysis see special issue of journal Socialism and Democracy, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Johanna Fernandez, eds. “Locking Up Black Dissidents and Punishing the Poor: The Roots of Mass Incarceration in the US” Socialism and Democracy vol. 28 no. 3 (September 2014).
crafted 30- and 60-second TV ads that featured the menacing gaze of African American and Puerto Rican youth with switchblades and guns, intercut with scenes of a white woman leaving a New York subway station at night and of the aftermath of a riot. The BPAs objective was to criminalize the mass urban rebellions of the period, to marginalize, through imprisonment, the influence of radicals of color, and to empower the police. The deployment of hysteria around the issue of crime and the association of crime with Black rebellion helped consolidate public support for legislation designed to suppress political dissent. In 1968 Congress passed the H. Rap Brown law that made it illegal to cross state lines and engage in speech that encouraged rioting. The defendants in the Wounded Knee occupation, who were members of the American Indian Movement, were prosecuted under this law. That same year, passage of the Safe Streets and Crime Control Act legalized wiretapping and bugging by federal agents and local police without a court order; legalized on-the-spot search and seizure by police—in essence enacting stop-and-frisk; and exempted law enforcement from having to meet the requirements of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This meant that police departments could continue to receive government grants and funding in the presence of racial discrimination.

The criminalization of U.S. dissidents reached a fever pitch in the 1960s, when the FBI declared the Black Panther Party as the nation’s major national-security threat. The state’s demonization campaign legitimized homicidal attacks against the Black Panthers, including the state killings of so many Black leaders, among them Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago in 1969.

Our trip to Palestine reminded us of this history. While in Palestine, members of Israel’s legislative body, the Knesset, put out an open call for the assassination of Omar Barghouti, a leading member of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction movement, which like South Africa’s historic and celebrated movement against apartheid seeks to “end international support for Israel’s oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law.”

Like Israel, the U.S. is still holding dozens of political prisoners who were given draconian sentences for political activism in the anti-imperialist struggles and liberation movements of racially oppressed groups during the 1960s and 1970s. The well-planned campaign of assassinations, criminalization, and incarceration deployed by politicians, police departments, and the FBI to distort and destroy the activities of the Black Liberation Movement

and other radicals of color in the 1960s would have far-reaching consequences for the carceral state as it developed in the decades that followed. This ideological attack was the scaffolding on which the largest carceral boom in U.S. history was built.

The mass expansion of incarceration in the U.S. was part and parcel of the state’s attempt to restore social control—a process that customarily follows on the heels of social uprisings. In this instance, however, the decline of the movements of the ’60s, which coincided with the economic recession and oil crisis of 1973, gave way to a more extreme conservative backlash. In the context of the deepening crisis of urban de-industrialization, the state moved to massively incarcerate poor African American and Latino communities—now deemed economically dispensable—for fear of their possible resistance. Today, unemployment figures remain at depression levels for African Americans and Puerto Ricans, among others.

Historically, when the state is incapable of meeting the basic needs of its citizens, it responds by asserting its authority with force. That has been the experience of urban communities of color since the 1970s. The War on Drugs became the lynchpin in the massive expansion of American prisons. The policy disproportionately targeted Black and Latino urban communities, imposing different sentences according to the kind of drug used, such that in the 1980s and 1990s offenders apprehended with crack, a drug found mainly in the inner city, received ten times the sentence of those arrested for cocaine possession, who are disproportionately white. As a result, although African Americans make up only 15% of illicit drug users and are mostly petty dealers, they represent 75% of all drug-related imprisonment.

In this new period of global crisis and growing resistance to oppression the world over, there are moments when the state’s overreach exposes the actual underlying logic of incarceration. In the aftermath of the 2014 strangulation of Eric Garner by police in Staten Island, New York, the only person arrested for that crime was Ramsey Orta, the young witness who recorded the murder on his cell-phone. During our trip to the old city of Hebron in Palestine, we met a Palestinian man who witnessed and video-recorded the execution of a wounded and prone Palestinian youth by an Israeli military officer. Like Ramsey Orta, he was subsequently harassed by Israeli settlers and investigated by the Israeli military while we were still in Palestine. The same methods were deployed at Standing Rock, where numerous journalists were targeted, arrested, and shot by police at protests in the fall/winter 2016–17. In one episode, police called journalist Jon Ziegler by name before they shot at him with rubber bullets. Zeigler was livestreaming the relentless repression unleashed against the water protectors that followed after a series of repressive bills were introduced in the state legislature, including one that would exonerate drivers who “negligently” or accidentally kill protesters.

---

29 For a thorough analysis of the racial disparities in the application of the War on Drugs policy see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 49–69.
Conclusion

Despite Israel’s well-funded and heavily militarized project of repression, the Palestinian people are resilient. In Palestine we witnessed that “there is something in the soul that cries for freedom.” Yet, the daily oppression that Israel inflicts on Palestinians was, for those in our delegation, a sobering reminder of the work we must do back home to weaken, from the inside, U.S. imperialism and its support for Israel. The terrorism that the state of Israel deploys against Palestinians would not be possible without the approximately $5 billion it receives annually in U.S. military, ad hoc, and special aid.\(^{30}\)

If we build it, BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanctions)—like the movement against South African apartheid—is a platform for educating people of conscience around the world about the atrocities suffered by Palestinians at the hands of Israel’s lawless occupation. BDS is also an entry point for building broad international support for the right of Palestinians to reclaim their land, culture, history, and dignity without preconditions—a universally recognized right enshrined in international law which repeatedly reaffirms “the legitimacy of peoples’ struggle for liberation from colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation by all available means, including armed struggle.”\(^{31}\) These are rights historically accorded to all oppressed people, from the North American colonies that launched the American Revolution and Nat Turner’s slave rebellion to Vietnam’s National Liberation Front.

Because we witnessed structures of oppression in the Palestinian context that resembled those at home, we came closer to grasping the revolutionary principle that a victory for one is a victory for all. If the Palestinians win, we will win. This tradition of solidarity with Palestine and others around the world has a long history among oppressed persons in the United States. It reflects centuries of Black anti-colonialism and internationalism carried out through mass support for and/or alliance with the Seminoles, the Haitian revolution, the Philippine Insurrection, Ethiopian resistance to Italy, Vietnam’s National Liberation Front, and the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, among others. The young Black people who changed American society in the 1960s through their work in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did not stand silent in the aftermath of the Six Day War of 1967. In their statement of support for the Palestinian people, they wrote, “What happened in that war not only affects the lives of our brothers in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia but also pertains to our struggle here among Black people in America.” A few months earlier, Martin Luther King had denounced “the triple evils of capitalism, militarism, and racism,” in his historic speech against


\(^{31}\) General Assembly Resolution A/RES/3246 (XXIX) (November 1974).
the Vietnam War at the Riverside Church in New York. Before long the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, I Wor Kuen, and other activists were publishing analyses of Israel’s Zionist project and raising their fists for Palestine’s liberation. 

In a world fractured by racism and xenophobia and systemic state violence, the practice of solidarity promises to enlarge our global vision, foster communal values, and restore our humanity. Standing in solidarity with others and seeing others stand up against our suffering taps into our desires to fight for things greater than ourselves. But solidarity is also driven by a high level of social analysis, a deep understanding of history, and a clear grasp of the economic and political structures of subjugation across borders, which produce shared interests among the exploited and oppressed. Today, a new generation is making these global connections, and infusing new life into this tradition, from Native Americans fighting to save their water source at Standing Rock and the Movement for Black Lives to those who held their ground at Tahrir Square and those fighting austerity in Rio.

In these troubled time, we have the world and a free Palestine to win.

---