

Significant Factors Related to the Colonization and Decolonization of Palestine

Gemini 2.5 Flash

Executive Summary

The historical trajectory of Palestine is characterized by an intricate interplay between processes of external colonization and the indigenous struggle for decolonization. This report examines the significant factors that have shaped this dynamic, from the pre-Zionist Ottoman era through the British Mandate, pivotal conflicts, and ongoing contemporary challenges. Modern colonization efforts in Palestine are rooted in the late 19th-century emergence of political Zionism, a movement influenced by European nationalism and settler-colonial ideologies, which aimed to establish a Jewish state with a demographic majority. The British Empire played a critical role in facilitating these aspirations through the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent Mandate, creating an inherent contradiction that fueled inter-communal conflict.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War, known to Palestinians as the Nakba, marked a profound demographic transformation, leading to the mass displacement of Palestinians and the expansion of Israeli territory, thereby solidifying the colonial reality and creating an enduring refugee crisis. The 1967 Six-Day War further intensified this dynamic by bringing all of historic Palestine under Israeli control and prompting a shift towards greater Palestinian self-reliance in the struggle for self-determination. Contemporary factors, including the continuous expansion of Israeli settlements, the persistent gap between international legal recognition of Palestinian rights and the lack of enforcement, and internal Palestinian political fragmentation, continue to define the ongoing decolonization efforts. Ultimately, the path toward a just and lasting peace necessitates a re-evaluation of historical injustices, a commitment to international law, and robust support for Palestinian self-determination and unity.

Introduction: Defining Colonization and Decolonization in the Palestinian Context

Understanding the complex historical and ongoing processes in Palestine requires a conceptual framework that moves beyond simplistic definitions of "colonization" and "decolonization." This report defines colonization in this context as the systematic process by which an external group seeks to establish political, economic, and demographic control over an existing indigenous population and their land, often involving displacement, dispossession, and the imposition of new societal structures.

Decolonization, conversely, refers to the indigenous resistance and pursuit of self-determination, aiming to dismantle these imposed structures and reclaim sovereignty and rights.

Palestine, situated between three continents, possesses a tumultuous history as a crossroads for religion, culture, commerce, and politics.¹ The region was among the earliest to witness human habitation, agricultural communities, and civilization, with various empires, including the Romans, Muslim dynasties, Mamluks, and Ottomans, ruling the area over centuries.¹ This long history underscores the continuous presence of diverse populations in the region.

Modern Zionism, a political ideology that emerged in Europe in the 19th century, fundamentally altered this historical landscape. It is described as a form of Jewish nationalism, profoundly influenced by European settler-colonial thinking.² Early Zionist thinkers explicitly articulated their vision of a Jewish state in Palestine as a European colony, akin to the British presence in India.² This conceptualization of the project as a settler-colonial endeavor is crucial. Theodor Herzl, a central figure in modern Zionism, framed the envisioned Jewish state as "a portion of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism".⁴ This language aligns with classical colonial discourse, which often justified conquest and settlement by portraying indigenous lands as empty or uncivilized and the colonizers as bringers of progress. Such a framing served to legitimize the Zionist project within the broader European imperial context, simultaneously constructing indigenous Palestinians as outside the norms of inclusion and civilization.⁴ The explicit aim of establishing a Jewish demographic majority, often through the expulsion of Palestinians, further reinforces this settler-colonial character.⁵ Viewing the conflict through this lens provides a robust analytical framework for comprehending the persistent patterns of land confiscation, demographic policies, and the denial of indigenous rights, suggesting that decolonization in this context is a process of dismantling these systemic structures.

The profound divergence in national narratives further complicates any resolution. The Palestinian national narrative defines the events of 1948 as the "Nakba" (catastrophe), characterized by ethnic cleansing, mass displacement, and ongoing persecution.⁶ This stands in stark contrast to the Israeli national narrative, which views these same events as the "War of Independence" that established Israel's statehood and sovereignty.⁶ This deep-seated difference in how the foundational events of the conflict are understood and remembered is not merely an academic disagreement; it profoundly impacts political discourse, national identity, and the potential for genuine reconciliation. Efforts by the state, such as the "Nakba Law" and "Jewish Nakba Law," aim to prioritize one group's memory over another's, actively avoiding a

comprehensive acknowledgment of historical truths.⁸ This ongoing struggle over historical memory and narrative legitimacy is a significant obstacle to any lasting peace, as ignoring these fundamentally opposed interpretations perpetuates the conflict by denying the foundational experiences of one side.

I. Historical Foundations: Palestine Under Ottoman Rule (Pre-Zionist Era)

For over four centuries, from 1516 until its defeat in World War I in 1918, the Ottoman Empire exercised nearly uninterrupted rule over historic Palestine.¹ A brief interlude between 1831 and 1840 saw the region occupied by Egyptian forces under Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha.¹⁰ During this extensive period, Palestine did not exist as a single administrative unit within the Ottoman Empire. Instead, it was a geographic area divided into several districts, primarily the Sanjaqs of Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre.⁹ Notably, the Sanjaq of Jerusalem gained special administrative status in 1872, being governed directly by Istanbul, the Ottoman capital.¹³

Despite the absence of a unified administrative province, the region was a vibrant and inhabited land. Ottoman census figures from 1878 for the Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre districts indicated a total population of 472,455. Muslims constituted the overwhelming majority at 85.5% (403,795), followed by Christians at 9.2% (43,659), and Jews at 3.2% (15,001).⁹ These figures did not include an estimated 10,000 foreign-born Jews or over 100,000 Bedouins, suggesting an even larger indigenous presence.⁹ More broadly, estimates for 1860 suggest that Arabs comprised approximately 90% of Palestine's population.¹⁵ Most Jews residing in Palestine during this period were observant orthodox communities, primarily concentrated in cities of religious significance such as Jerusalem, Hebron, Safad, and Tiberias, and were minimally engaged with the nascent Zionist movement.⁹

The assertion of "A land without a people, for a people without a land" was a foundational narrative propagated by supporters of Zionism from its inception.¹² This slogan, widely repeated in the 19th and early 20th centuries, deliberately downplayed the existence of a healthy indigenous population in historic Palestine.¹² The detailed demographic data from the 19th century, which consistently show a significant indigenous Muslim and Christian majority, directly refutes this claim.⁹ The propagation of this myth was not an innocent misunderstanding but a premeditated narrative tool for the Zionist movement, serving to delegitimize the presence and claims of the indigenous population. Its widespread repetition in Europe facilitated the colonization project by creating a perception of an empty or underutilized land, thereby justifying the subsequent displacement and demographic transformation. This demonstrates a

deliberate ideological preparation for colonization, aiming to erase the existing inhabitants from the narrative.

The late 19th century also witnessed significant shifts within the Ottoman Empire that inadvertently laid the groundwork for future European involvement. A series of Ottoman administrative reforms, known as the Tanzimat, sought to centralize governance and emulate European nation-state models.¹⁴ Concurrently, European powers gained increasing influence over the weakening Ottoman state, exploiting economic and political concessions under the framework of "capitulations".⁹ These capitulations granted foreign subjects in Ottoman lands privileged status, exempting them from local taxation or prosecution.⁹ While not direct colonization, these internal reforms and external pressures created conditions that facilitated foreign presence and engagement with the region. The privileged status of foreign subjects, for instance, allowed for easier land acquisition by early Zionist groups, and the administrative reconfigurations, such as the direct governance of the Sanjaq of Jerusalem, provided a nascent "Palestine" as a distinct entity that the British could later formalize into a Mandate, even if it wasn't a unified political entity under the Ottomans. These geopolitical shifts, therefore, inadvertently prepared the ground for subsequent colonial endeavors.

Furthermore, the identity of the inhabitants of Palestine during this period was dynamic and evolving, rather than static. Historical records and oral traditions indicate significant waves of Muslim migration, encouraged by the Ottoman Empire's policy to repopulate and develop the region.¹⁷ Migrants from Albania, Bosnia, and the Caucasus contributed to the diverse origins of the people who would later be identified as Palestinians.¹⁷ For instance, the prevalence of the surname "Masri" (meaning "Egyptian" in Arabic) among Palestinians today attests to Egyptian forces' occupation of the region in the 1840s, prompting many Egyptians to settle there.¹⁷ These interwoven connections suggest that identity in the region was historically fluid, shaped by social and economic relationships rather than by modern political boundaries.¹⁷ People identified as Muslims, Arabs, and, significantly, as part of families, tribes, and clans, rather than by the monikers "Palestinians" or "Jordanians," which did not exist then.¹⁷ This dynamic perspective challenges a static view of "Palestinian identity" as primordial, highlighting a more historically constructed formation. This fluidity would later be profoundly impacted and redefined by the external pressures of Zionist immigration and subsequent conflicts, leading to the crystallization of a distinct Palestinian national identity in opposition to these forces. This historical context is crucial for understanding the contemporary debate over identity politics and the roots of nationalism in the region.

II. The Genesis of Modern Colonization: The Rise of Zionism and British Imperialism

The late 19th century witnessed the emergence of modern Zionism as a political force, a development intrinsically linked to rising antisemitism in Europe, particularly violent pogroms in Russia, and the broader European trend of nation-state formation.² Theodor Herzl, widely recognized as the founder of modern Zionism, envisioned the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine as the ultimate solution to the "Jewish problem".² His vision was explicitly influenced by European settler-colonial thinking, portraying the future Jewish state as a "portion of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism".⁴ This perspective positioned the Zionist project within the framework of imperial expansion, seeking to establish a new society and sovereignty on existing indigenous land.

The formalization of this aspiration occurred at the First Zionist Congress, convened by Herzl in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897.¹² The Congress declared its aim "to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law" and established the World Zionist Organization to pursue this goal.³ Early Zionist settlement waves, known as the First and Second Aliyah, began in the 1880s and early 1900s, driven by Eastern European Jews fleeing persecution.¹⁶ These settlers focused on land acquisition, often facilitated by organizations like the Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901, and established all-Jewish agricultural cooperatives (kibbutzim).⁹ By 1914, approximately thirty Zionist colonies had been set up, and the total Jewish population in Palestine reached about sixty thousand, with more than half being recent immigrants.⁹

A pivotal moment in the colonization process was the Balfour Declaration, issued by the British government on November 2, 1917.²² This public pledge expressed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people".²² The declaration was subsequently incorporated into the terms of the British Mandate for Palestine.¹ This act, made by a European power concerning a non-European territory, disregarded the presence and wishes of the native majority, who constituted over 90% of the population.²² This highlights a fundamental moral and legal contradiction at the heart of British policy. The inherent clash between a historical-religious claim (Zionist) and the rights of an indigenous majority (Palestinian) was not resolved but rather institutionalized by the British Mandate. By legitimizing one claim over the other through an external decree, Britain effectively "promised away" a populated territory, creating an intractable conflict from the outset that continues to define the struggle for decolonization.

The Balfour Declaration was also one of three conflicting wartime promises made by

Britain. Alongside assurances to Arab nationalists for independence, Britain had also entered into the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 with France, which initially envisioned Palestine under international administration.¹⁰ This demonstrates that British policy was driven by imperial pragmatism rather than consistent principles. The British Mandate, formally granted by the League of Nations in 1922, was explicitly designed to facilitate Jewish immigration and land acquisition, aiming to equip Jews for self-rule, often at the expense of Palestinian Arabs.¹ This "dual mandate," as it was termed, contained an "integral contradiction".²⁴ While it proclaimed support for a Jewish national home, it also obligated Britain to protect the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities.²² The primary motivation for the Balfour Declaration was not altruistic but rooted in British strategic imperial interests, particularly in securing its influence over Egypt and the Suez Canal.²¹ The British policy, rather than mediating a peaceful transition, effectively exacerbated the conflict by creating a zero-sum game. By prioritizing the establishment of a Jewish national home, the British undermined the indigenous population's aspirations for self-rule, leading to escalating inter-communal violence. This "dual mandate" was inherently unworkable and designed to fail in achieving peace for all inhabitants, thereby fueling the very tensions it purported to manage.

Under the British Mandate, Jewish immigration to Palestine dramatically increased. Between 1920 and 1945, a total of 367,845 Jewish immigrants entered Palestine, constituting 91.70% of all immigration during that period.¹² This influx significantly altered the demographic landscape, laying the groundwork for the establishment of a Jewish majority.

The Holocaust, the Nazi genocide of European Jews during World War II, profoundly impacted international opinion and significantly diminished any remaining Jewish opposition or antipathy to Zionism.³ The immense tragedy and the plight of 250,000 Jewish refugees stranded in displaced persons camps after WWII created immense pressure for a solution.²⁶ This global sympathy and sense of responsibility enhanced international support for the creation of a Jewish state.³ The Holocaust, therefore, served as a powerful moral and humanitarian catalyst for international backing of a Jewish state. This shifted the global political landscape, making the establishment of Israel seem like a necessary and urgent humanitarian solution. However, this urgency often came at the expense of the self-determination aspirations of the existing Palestinian population, creating a profound ethical dilemma where one group's historical trauma was addressed by impacting another group's rights, a tension that remains central to the decolonization discourse.

III. The Emergence of Palestinian National Identity and Organized Resistance

The increasing Zionist presence and British imperial policies acted as powerful catalysts for the crystallization of a distinct Palestinian national identity and the emergence of organized resistance. Palestinian nationalism, as a defined political movement, emerged in the early 20th century, primarily in direct opposition to Zionism.³¹ The term "Filastini" (Palestinian) to describe the region's Arab inhabitants was recorded as early as 1898, indicating a nascent sense of collective identity.³¹ While early inter-community coalitions against Egyptian conquest in 1834 prefigured a singular Palestinian identity, the direct challenges posed by Zionist immigration solidified this consciousness.³¹

Initially, the First Palestine Arab Congress in January 1919 still viewed "Palestine as part of Arab Syria".³¹ However, by the Third Congress in December 1920, calls for a distinct "native government" emerged, signaling a developing unique identity separate from broader Arab nationalist aspirations.³¹ This reactive formation underscores the inherent defensive and resistance-oriented character of Palestinian nationalism as a decolonization movement. The very existence and intensification of the Zionist project directly spurred the development of a distinct Palestinian national consciousness, transforming a diverse indigenous population into a unified "people" with a collective political aspiration for self-determination against a perceived colonial imposition.

Palestinian Arabs vehemently opposed the British Mandate, viewing it as a betrayal of their aspirations for self-rule, and actively resisted mass Jewish immigration, which they perceived as a direct threat to their demographic and political position in their homeland.²⁵ The British Mandate, by incorporating the Balfour Declaration and actively facilitating Zionist goals while nominally upholding Arab rights, created an environment where the two communities were forced into direct competition for finite resources: land and political control. Both communities understood that "by the end of the mandate period the region's future would be determined by size of population and ownership of land".²¹ This structural imbalance directly led to escalating "violent confrontations".²⁴

Increased Jewish immigration, coupled with land purchases, particularly by the Jewish National Fund, often from absentee Arab landowners, led to the eviction of Arab peasants (fellahin).²¹ These displacements fueled escalating tensions and violent confrontations between Jewish settlers and Arab peasant tenants.²⁵ Significant clashes occurred throughout the Mandate period, including the Nebi Musa revolt in 1920, the Jaffa riots of 1921, and the Wailing Wall Riots in 1929, which resulted in

hundreds of casualties on both sides.²² The British policy, rather than mediating a peaceful transition, effectively exacerbated the conflict by creating a zero-sum game. By prioritizing the establishment of a Jewish national home, the British undermined the indigenous population's aspirations for self-rule, leading to escalating inter-communal violence.

Palestinian resistance culminated in the Arab Revolt of 1936-39, a widespread uprising against both British control and Zionist settlement.²⁵ This revolt was brutally suppressed by British forces, often with the assistance of Zionist militias like the Haganah, resulting in approximately 5,000 Palestinian deaths.²⁵ In response to the revolt, the British issued the White Paper of 1939, which limited future Jewish immigration and land purchases.²⁴ This policy was regarded by Zionists as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration, particularly in light of the desperate situation of Jews in Europe facing extermination.²⁵ Despite these limitations, Palestinian demands for independence and resistance to Jewish immigration continued, leading to ongoing violence from both sides before and immediately after World War II.³⁴ The suppression of the Arab Revolt further alienated Palestinians and inadvertently strengthened Zionist militias, setting the stage for the 1948 conflict. This highlights how external colonial powers can engineer conditions for internal conflict to maintain control or facilitate a preferred outcome.

IV. Pivotal Conflicts and Their Profound Consequences

Two seminal conflicts, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the 1967 Six-Day War, served as critical turning points that profoundly reshaped the demographic, political, and territorial landscape of Palestine, solidifying the processes of colonization and intensifying the struggle for decolonization.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War (The Nakba)

The origins of the 1948 conflict can be traced to the United Nations General Assembly's recommendation in November 1947 to partition Mandatory Palestine into two states—one Arab and one Jewish—with Jerusalem under a UN administration (Resolution 181).¹ This plan was vehemently rejected by the Arab world, who argued it was unfair and violated the UN Charter's principle of self-determination.⁶ At the time, Arabs constituted approximately two-thirds of Palestine's population and owned about 90% of the land, while the UN plan allocated 55% of the land to a Jewish state.⁶

Small-scale skirmishes began immediately after the partition plan's adoption in November 1947, escalating into a civil war.⁶ On May 14, 1948, the British Mandate officially terminated, and the State of Israel declared its independence.²⁴ The following

day, neighboring Arab armies intervened, transforming the civil conflict into a full-scale regional war.³³ Zionist forces, particularly the Haganah, had already mobilized able-bodied Jews and launched major offensives prior to the official end of the Mandate.³⁵

The war resulted in the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians, an event known as the Nakba (catastrophe).⁶ Approximately 700,000 to 957,000 Palestinians, representing over 80% of the Arab population in the territory that became Israel, either fled or were forcibly expelled from their homes.¹ Over 500 Arab-majority towns, villages, and urban neighborhoods were destroyed or depopulated, and thousands were killed in massacres.⁶ This was not a mere byproduct of war but a core objective, as Zionists understood that "the only chance their settler-colonial project had of survival was through the establishment of a Jewish majority by expelling the Palestinians".⁵ The demographic shift was stark: from 30% Jewish population in Palestine on the eve of the war to 81% Jewish population in Israel by November 1948, largely due to the expulsion of 760,000 Palestinians.⁵ The 1948 war was not solely a military conflict but a successful demographic transformation that fundamentally altered the character of the land and created the conditions for a Jewish state. This "demographic engineering" is a central, often overlooked, aspect of the colonization process, creating a permanent, unresolved refugee problem that remains a core challenge for decolonization and a just peace.

As a result of the war, Israel significantly increased its territory by 21% compared to the boundaries proposed in the UN partition resolution.⁶ Post-war, only the West Bank (annexed by Jordan) and the Gaza Strip (occupied by Egypt) remained under Arab control.¹ The conflict also triggered a significant exodus of Jews from Arab countries to Israel, further altering regional demographics.³⁸ In December 1948, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 194, calling for Palestinian refugee return, property restitution, and compensation.³⁵

The 1967 Six-Day War

Tensions in the region escalated significantly in the months leading up to June 1967, culminating in the Six-Day War. Key causes included Egypt's closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, which Israel considered a *casus belli*, and the formation of mutual defense pacts among Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.⁴²

On June 5, 1967, Israel launched a sudden preemptive air assault that destroyed over 90% of Egypt's air force, securing immediate air supremacy.⁴² This was followed by rapid ground advances into Arab territories. Within six days, Israel captured substantial territories: the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, the

Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, and the Syrian Golan Heights.¹ This conquest meant that, for the first time, all of historic Palestine came under Israeli control.⁴⁵ The war resulted in significant loss of life for Arab forces, with over 15,000 fatalities, compared to fewer than 1,000 for Israel.⁴³ A further 200,000 to 360,000 Palestinians and 100,000 Syrians were displaced or expelled from the newly occupied territories.⁵ In November 1967, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, which called for Israel's withdrawal from the territories occupied in the war in exchange for lasting peace and the recognition of all states' secure boundaries.⁴⁰

The 1967 war, despite being a military defeat for Arab states and a further territorial loss for Palestinians, paradoxically strengthened Palestinian national identity and self-determination efforts. The "Arab defeat bolstered the rise of Palestinian nationalism even as it inevitably led to the gradual decline of Arab support for the Palestinians".⁴⁵ Palestinians, disillusioned by Arab governments after Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, decided to take matters into their own hands.⁴⁵ The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) notably broke free from direct Arab state control immediately after the war.⁴⁵ This marked a significant turning point in the decolonization narrative, shifting the primary agency of the Palestinian struggle from reliance on external Arab armies to independent Palestinian political and armed movements. This also led to a strategic shift in Arab priorities, focusing on regaining their own lost territories rather than solely on the Palestinian issue, thereby isolating the Palestinian cause to a greater extent.

The enduring refugee crisis is a central and persistent component of the decolonization struggle. Both the 1948 (Nakba, 700,000-957,000 refugees) and 1967 (200,000-360,000 refugees) wars resulted in massive, repeated displacements.¹ UN Resolution 194 (1948) explicitly called for refugee return and compensation.³⁵ This issue is described as the "world's longest running unresolved refugee crisis".⁷ The denial of the right of return for millions of Palestinians signifies an ongoing dispossession and denial of self-determination, directly linking the historical acts of colonization to the present-day reality and preventing a comprehensive and just resolution. For many Palestinians, the Nakba is not a past event but an ongoing process, continually shaping their collective memory and national identity.⁶

Table 1: Demographics of Palestine (19th Century to 1948)

Year	Total Population	Muslim Population	Christian Population	Jewish Population	Percentage Jewish	Source Snippets

1878	472,455	403,795	43,659	15,001	3.2%	9
1914	~690,000	-	-	~55,200	8%	11
1922	757,182	590,390	73,024	83,694	11.05%	15
1948	~2,000,000	~1,364,000	-	~608,000	30.4%	5

Note: Figures for 1878 represent the Jerusalem, Nablus, and Acre districts, excluding Bedouins and foreign subjects. The 1914 figure for total population is an estimate, with the Jewish population being a calculated 8% of that total. The 1922 figures are from the first official British Mandate census. The 1948 figures are estimates for the eve of the war. These figures clearly demonstrate the significant indigenous majority prior to the British Mandate and the substantial increase in Jewish population during the Mandate period.

V. Contemporary Dynamics: Ongoing Occupation and Decolonization Efforts

The legacy of the 1967 Six-Day War continues to shape the contemporary dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, characterized by ongoing occupation, the complexities of international law, and the evolving landscape of Palestinian political movements. These factors collectively define the enduring struggle for decolonization.

Israeli Settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem

Following the 1967 war, Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.¹ Despite international objections, Israel immediately began establishing settlements in these territories.¹ These settlements are widely considered illegal under international law, violating Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring its own population into occupied territory.⁴⁶ The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2024 reaffirmed their illegality, calling for an end to the occupation, dismantling of settlements, and reparations for Palestinian victims.⁴⁸

Israel disputes the illegality of its settlements, arguing that the territory is not occupied since there was no internationally recognized sovereign prior to 1967, and that the Fourth Geneva Convention does not apply *de jure*.⁴⁸ However, these arguments have been refuted by the ICJ's 2024 ruling and repeatedly by Israel's own

Supreme Court.⁴⁸ The consistent construction and expansion of settlements, particularly accelerating since October 2023, with plans for thousands of new housing units and the legalization of outposts, are viewed as "essential" for the far-right ideology within Israel.¹⁰ This expansion is condemned internationally as a "deliberate obstacle" to Palestinian statehood.⁴⁶

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was established under the Oslo Accords as a "five-year interim body"⁵¹, implying a temporary arrangement towards statehood. However, Israeli settlement expansion has been continuous and accelerated since 1967, extending deep into the West Bank⁴⁶, making a two-state solution "far less likely".⁴⁶ The ICJ has declared the occupation itself unlawful.⁴⁹ This suggests that what began as a temporary military occupation has evolved into a de facto annexation and permanent control, undermining the very premise of the Oslo Accords. This "permanent temporariness" transforms the decolonization struggle from ending a temporary occupation to dismantling a deeply entrenched system of control and settlement that has effectively absorbed Palestinian land. It highlights how a seemingly temporary measure can become a tool for long-term colonization, fragmenting Palestinian territory and making genuine self-determination increasingly difficult to achieve. As of December 2024, approximately 529,455 Jewish settlers reside in 141 West Bank settlements, effectively confining 3 million Palestinians to smaller, fragmented areas under Israeli military rule, rendering the prospect of a viable independent state increasingly remote.⁴⁶

The Role of the United Nations and International Law

The United Nations has played a significant, albeit often challenged, role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The UN General Assembly's 1947 Partition Plan (Resolution 181) was an early, though ultimately rejected by Arabs, attempt at resolution.¹ Following the 1948 war, UN General Assembly Resolution 194 called for Palestinian refugee return and compensation.³⁵ After the 1967 war, UN Security Council Resolution 242 called for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories in exchange for lasting peace, forming a basis for future negotiations, a call reiterated by Resolution 338 in 1973.⁴⁰

Numerous UN resolutions consistently affirm the Palestinian people's inalienable rights to self-determination, national independence, and sovereignty.⁴⁰ Specifically, Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) condemned Israeli settlements as having "no legal validity" and constituting a "flagrant violation under international law" and a "major obstacle" to a two-state solution.⁴⁸ In 2012, the UN recognized Palestine as a non-member observer state.⁴⁰ The UN continues to play a vital role in humanitarian

aid, particularly in Gaza, and in peace efforts through entities like the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO).⁵⁰

Despite these consistent UN resolutions and authoritative ICJ rulings on the illegality of settlements and occupation, these pronouncements are "never fully implemented"⁴⁴, and Israel has "largely disregarded" ICJ rulings.⁴⁹ The United States, a key international actor, frequently vetoes Security Council resolutions critical of Israel.⁵⁶ This highlights a significant and persistent gap between international legal and political recognition of Palestinian rights and the effective enforcement of these principles. This "enforcement gap," often influenced by geopolitical interests and power dynamics, allows the ongoing colonization to persist despite its illegality, thereby prolonging the decolonization struggle and eroding Palestinian trust in international institutions and the rule of law.

Palestinian Political Movements: Evolution, Goals, and Internal Divisions

The Palestinian national movement has evolved significantly since 1967. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) gained international recognition as the representative of the Palestinian people, notably under Yasser Arafat.¹ While its original goal was a one-state solution (replacing Israel with a secular, democratic Palestinian state), the 1993 Oslo Agreement led the PLO to accept a two-state solution framework, limiting its goal to independence in the 1967 territories.³¹

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was created by the Oslo Accords (1993-95) as a temporary five-year interim body, intended to exercise partial civil and security control in designated areas of the West Bank (Area A) and civilian control in rural areas (Area B).³¹ However, the PA lost de facto control of the Gaza Strip to Hamas in 2007 following an internal conflict.⁵¹ The PA has faced criticism for human rights abuses, a lack of elections for over 15 years, and is widely perceived by many Palestinians as collaborating with Israel, particularly its security apparatus.⁵¹

Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, was founded in 1987 during the First Intifada, emerging as a distinct Sunni Islamist organization opposing Zionism and the peace process.³¹ It gained political power after winning the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections and subsequently took control of Gaza in 2007 following a conflict with Fatah.⁵¹ Its stated goals include waging holy war against Zionism and increasing religiosity among the youth.³¹

The ongoing Fatah-Hamas conflict represents a significant internal division, leading to a political and administrative split between the West Bank and Gaza, which weakens the Palestinian national movement.⁶² The international community, including the US

and the Middle East Quartet, imposed sanctions on the Hamas-led PA, further exacerbating this division.⁶² While external factors are dominant, the lack of a unified political leadership and strategy hinders effective collective action for self-determination. This internal Palestinian fragmentation significantly complicates their collective decolonization efforts. The fragmentation weakens their negotiating position, diminishes their international leverage, and impedes the development of a coherent, unified strategy for achieving statehood or full self-determination. This internal dynamic, while a consequence of occupation, also becomes a factor perpetuating the status quo.

Humanitarian Impact of Prolonged Occupation and Conflict

The prolonged occupation and recurring conflicts have had a catastrophic humanitarian impact on Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip. The entire population of Gaza, approximately 2.1 million people, faces a critical risk of famine and high levels of acute food insecurity.⁶⁰ Israeli authorities imposed a full blockade on Gaza since March 2025, severely hindering humanitarian efforts and the entry of essential supplies.⁵⁹ The UN and other aid groups have refused to participate in Israeli/US-backed aid distribution systems, citing violations of humanitarian principles and concerns that such systems could allow Israel to use food as a weapon.⁵⁹

In the West Bank, there has been an increase in Palestinian displacement due to settler violence and access restrictions.⁵⁰ The ongoing conflict has resulted in extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza, including 339 education facilities, 26 hospitals, 56 health-care facilities, 88 mosques, 3 churches, and 88 UNRWA shelters.⁵⁰ Israel's military campaign has led to the deaths of over 54,000 Palestinians in Gaza, predominantly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.⁵⁷ This ongoing humanitarian crisis is a direct and severe consequence of prolonged occupation and blockade, representing an active and acute dimension of colonization.

Table 2: Key UN Resolutions on Palestine

Resolution Number	Date	Issuing Body	Key Provision/Topic	Significance to Colonization/Decolonization	Source Snippets

181 (II)	29 Nov 1947	GA	Partition Plan for Palestine: creation of Arab & Jewish states, international Jerusalem.	Attempted to resolve conflicting claims by dividing land; rejected by Arabs as unfair, violating self-determination.	1
194	11 Dec 1948	GA	Right of return for Palestinian refugees to their homes, compensation for property.	Establishes the right of return as a core principle; remains largely unimplemented, central to ongoing dispossession.	35
242	22 Nov 1967	SC	Calls for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 in exchange for peace and secure boundaries.	Basis for "land for peace" approach; widely accepted framework for negotiations, but full implementation remains elusive.	40
338	22 Oct 1973	SC	Calls for end to Yom Kippur War hostilities and implementation	Reaffirmed the principles of Resolution 242, pushing for	52

			on of Resolution 242.	negotiations post-conflict .	
3236	22 Nov 1974	GA	Recognizes the right of the Palestinian people to self-determi nation, national independenc e, and sovereignty.	Explicitly affirms Palestinian national rights; provides international legal basis for decolonizati on efforts.	40
2334	23 Dec 2016	SC	Condemns Israeli settlements as having no legal validity, a flagrant violation of international law, and an obstacle to peace.	Strong condemnatio n of settlement activity; highlights international consensus on their illegality, yet largely unenforced.	48
67/19	29 Nov 2012	GA	Grants Palestine non-member observer state status in the United Nations.	Elevated Palestine's diplomatic standing; symbolic recognition of statehood aspirations.	40

Note: GA = General Assembly, SC = Security Council. This table demonstrates the consistent international legal and political framework addressing the conflict, while also implicitly highlighting the challenge of enforcement.

VI. Conclusion: Pathways to Decolonization and a Just Peace

The analysis of significant factors related to the colonization and decolonization of

Palestine reveals a deeply intertwined and protracted historical process, rather than a linear progression. The colonization of Palestine is rooted in the late 19th-century emergence of political Zionism, a movement influenced by European nationalism and settler-colonial thought, which explicitly sought to establish a Jewish state with a demographic majority through settlement and, ultimately, displacement.²

A pivotal factor in this process was the role of British imperialism. The Balfour Declaration and the subsequent British Mandate were instrumental in facilitating Zionist aims, creating an "integral contradiction" that fueled inter-communal conflict by simultaneously promising a national home for Jews while nominally safeguarding the rights of the indigenous Palestinian majority.²² This inherent contradiction embedded in the British Mandate laid the structural groundwork for perpetual conflict, rather than fostering a path to shared governance or independent self-determination for the indigenous population.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War, known as the Nakba, and the 1967 Six-Day War were critical moments of profound demographic transformation, mass displacement, and territorial expansion, solidifying the colonial reality and creating an enduring refugee crisis.¹ The demographic transformation of 1948 was not a mere consequence of war but a deliberate act of colonization, creating a permanent refugee crisis that remains central to the decolonization struggle and the denial of the right of return. This underscores that for many Palestinians, the Nakba is not a past event but an ongoing process of dispossession. Paradoxically, the 1967 war, while a military defeat for Arab states and a further territorial loss for Palestinians, strengthened Palestinian self-reliance and shifted the decolonization struggle from pan-Arabism to a more independent Palestinian agency.⁴⁵

The ongoing occupation, particularly the continuous expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, represents a persistent dimension of colonization. These settlements, widely condemned as illegal under international law by the UN and the ICJ, undermine the prospects for a viable two-state solution.⁴⁶ There is a significant and persistent gap between international legal and political recognition of Palestinian rights (e.g., UN resolutions, ICJ rulings) and the effective enforcement of these principles. This "enforcement gap," often influenced by geopolitical interests, allows the "permanent temporariness" of occupation and settlement expansion to persist, thereby prolonging the decolonization struggle and eroding Palestinian trust in international institutions and the rule of law. Furthermore, internal Palestinian political fragmentation and divisions, particularly the Fatah-Hamas conflict, complicate their collective decolonization efforts, weakening their unified voice and strategic capacity.⁵¹ The severe humanitarian crisis, especially in Gaza, is a

direct and acute consequence of prolonged occupation and blockade, representing an active and acute dimension of colonization.⁵⁰

Recommendations for Future International and Regional Engagement

Achieving a just and lasting peace in Palestine requires a fundamental shift in approach, moving beyond the perpetuation of existing frameworks that have failed to address the core issues of colonization and decolonization.

- 1. Prioritizing Enforcement of International Law and Accountability:** Given the consistent UN resolutions and ICJ rulings on the illegality of settlements and occupation, a fundamental shift is required from mere recognition to active enforcement. Without concrete, collective action by the international community to uphold its own legal frameworks and ensure accountability for violations, the current dynamics of colonization will persist. The ICJ's 2024 ruling explicitly calls for states to "immediately review all diplomatic, political, and economic ties with Israel" and consider measures like "an arms embargo" and "targeted sanctions".⁴⁹ This implies that perpetual negotiations, absent robust enforcement mechanisms, are insufficient to achieve a just resolution.
- 2. Re-centering Palestinian Self-Determination as an Inalienable Right:** International engagement should move beyond rigid adherence to a "two-state solution" as the *only* pathway if it is not genuinely achievable under conditions that respect Palestinian rights. Instead, it must re-center the fundamental right to self-determination in all its forms, including the right of return and equal rights for all inhabitants, as a non-negotiable principle.⁵⁰ The ICJ has refuted the notion that self-determination must be achieved solely through bilateral negotiations with Israel.⁴⁹ This necessitates a re-evaluation of past frameworks, such as the Oslo Accords, that have effectively perpetuated the occupation and a commitment to dismantling discriminatory regimes.⁵⁴
- 3. Facilitating Internal Palestinian Unity and Democratic Governance:** The internal divisions within the Palestinian political landscape significantly weaken their position on the international stage. International and regional actors could play a constructive role in facilitating genuine reconciliation efforts among Palestinian factions. This would involve supporting reforms that enhance democratic legitimacy, accountability, and inclusivity within Palestinian governance structures, thereby strengthening a unified Palestinian voice and agency in any future negotiations or decolonization processes.
- 4. Embracing Truth and Reconciliation for Addressing Historical Injustices:** A just and lasting peace cannot be achieved without a comprehensive process that acknowledges the historical injustices, including the Nakba and ongoing

dispossession, from all perspectives.⁸ This goes beyond mere political agreements to address the deep-seated trauma, competing narratives, and calls for justice. It requires engaging with "grief as a political resource" and moving past "Memory Laws" that suppress one narrative over another.⁸ Fostering a foundation for genuine coexistence and a shared future necessitates historical acknowledgment and a commitment to truth and reconciliation, rather than an imposed or superficial peace.

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