

Parallels of Settler Colonialism: A Comparative Analysis of the United States and Israel

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I. Introduction: Defining Settler Colonialism and its Analytical Framework

Settler colonialism represents a distinct and pervasive system of oppression, fundamentally rooted in genocide and colonialism. Its defining characteristic is the explicit objective to displace an existing population, frequently indigenous peoples, and subsequently replace them with a new settler population.¹ This differentiates it from other forms of colonialism, such as exploitation colonialism, where the primary aim is the extraction of resources or the exploitation of labor without necessarily replacing the native inhabitants.³ The key features that delineate this particular form of colonialism include the systematic displacement and erasure of indigenous peoples, the imposition of settler culture, institutions, and values, the expropriation of indigenous land and resources, and the pervasive use of violence and coercion against indigenous populations.³

A foundational understanding of settler colonialism stems from Patrick Wolfe's seminal conceptualization of it as an "ongoing structure, not a historical event".⁵ This perspective, often termed the "logic of elimination" ⁸, is not merely a definitional nuance but a critical analytical observation. It implies that the systemic erasure and replacement of native populations are not accidental or past occurrences but inherent, continuous preconditions for the settler society's establishment, expansion, and perceived legitimacy. This reframes the understanding of impacts from historical injustices to ongoing structural violence. Consequently, current policies, social structures, and power dynamics in both the United States and Israel are examined not as post-colonial developments, but as continuous manifestations of the settler-colonial project itself. This analytical approach posits that decolonization is an ongoing, rather than a completed, imperative, requiring continuous efforts to dismantle these enduring structures of oppression.¹³

The core objective of settler colonialism—to replace the indigenous population entirely and establish a new, permanent society modeled on the colonizer's country of origin—marks a significant departure from classical colonialism.⁴ Settlers do not merely migrate; they bring their "nomos"—their own laws, institutions, and administration—and seek to impose them on the indigenous population. Should the native inhabitants refuse this imposition or decline to leave, they are then positioned as "candidates for annihilation".⁶ This fundamental distinction reveals a core, often unstated, drive within settler societies: to shed their "settler" identity and claim the position of "native".¹⁰ This process involves not only physical displacement but also

the systematic erasure of indigenous cultures and identities ⁴ and the suppression of indigenous languages, religions, and ways of life.⁴ The ultimate goal is to normalize the continuous settler occupation and exploit lands to which indigenous peoples have deep genealogical relationships.⁸ This drive for nativization represents a psychological and political imperative for settlers to legitimize their presence. This helps explain the intense ideological work—such as the promotion of narratives like "terra nullius" or "divine mandate"—that accompanies settler colonialism. It is not solely about acquiring land, but about constructing a legitimate historical and moral claim to it, thereby attempting to resolve the inherent contradiction of being a "settler" on someone else's ancestral land. A settler colonial project that has "successfully run its course" is often no longer perceived as settler colonial, even if its underlying structure persists.¹⁰

This report undertakes a comprehensive, evidence-based comparative analysis of settler colonialism in the United States and Israel. It will explore their distinct historical trajectories, shared ideological justifications, specific mechanisms of land dispossession and cultural erasure, and the enduring impacts on indigenous populations. Furthermore, it will examine the diverse forms of indigenous resistance in both contexts and engage with the significant academic debates surrounding the application of the settler-colonial framework to Israel.

II. Settler Colonialism in the United States: Historical Trajectories and Enduring Structures

The United States was founded upon a process of permanent European migration aimed at establishing a new society, frequently at the direct expense of existing indigenous populations.⁴ English and French settlers in the 17th and 18th centuries actively engaged in displacing indigenous communities and claiming vast lands for agriculture and resource extraction.⁴ As the nascent United States expanded in population, the federal government increasingly prioritized the displacement of Native Americans to facilitate aggressive westward expansion.¹⁵

Ideological Justifications: Manifest Destiny and Terra Nullius

The expansionist project in the United States was underpinned by powerful ideological justifications. "Manifest Destiny," a pervasive 19th-century belief, asserted

that American settlers were divinely ordained to expand across the North American continent.¹⁷ This concept was deeply rooted in American exceptionalism, Romantic nationalism, and white nationalism, implying the inevitable spread of republican government and the "American way of life".¹⁸ This self-serving concept was strategically employed to rationalize the forced removal of Native Americans, portraying them as impediments to "progress" and their uncultivated lands as "wasted".¹⁷ President Andrew Jackson, a staunch advocate, explicitly argued that removing tribes would "promote their welfare and happiness" while simultaneously opening millions of acres for white settlement and the expansion of slavery.¹⁷

Complementing Manifest Destiny was the doctrine of *terra nullius*, a legal fiction meaning "land belonging to no one." This concept was used to justify British claims to indigenous lands, leading to widespread dispossession.⁴ This narrative effectively erased the prior presence, sovereignty, and complex land tenure systems of indigenous peoples, portraying the continent as an "empty" frontier ripe for settlement.²⁰

The ideological constructs of Manifest Destiny and *terra nullius* were not merely abstract beliefs; they served profound economic and racial interests. The observation that land speculators were "most active supporters" of Manifest Destiny and Indian removal¹⁷ clearly demonstrates the material gain driving these ideologies. The Lockean idea that land only becomes "property" when "mixed with labor" or "cultivated"²² conveniently dismissed indigenous land use practices, racially devaluing their stewardship and justifying expropriation. This reveals a direct causal link between the economic desires of settlers, such as for agriculture, resource extraction, and wealth accumulation, and the development of racialized ideologies that dehumanize indigenous populations and legitimize their dispossession. The "divine mandate" thus functioned as a powerful moral and legal veneer for what was fundamentally a project of land theft and racialized violence.

Mechanisms of Land Dispossession and Displacement

The US government employed a series of legislative acts to systematically dispossess Native Americans of their lands. The **Indian Removal Act of 1830** mandated the forced relocation of approximately 100,000 Native Americans from their ancestral territories in the eastern states to "unsettled" lands west of the Mississippi River, primarily to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).¹⁶ This policy directly facilitated the opening of 25 million acres of eastern land for white settlement, significantly contributing to the expansion of slavery in the American South.¹⁹ The Cherokee Nation's legal challenge to this act, though successful in the Supreme Court, was infamously defied by President Andrew Jackson.²³

Following this, the **Indian Appropriations Act of 1851** confined Native peoples to smaller, designated tracts of land known as reservations.¹⁶ This policy strategically freed up vast amounts of indigenous land, making it more readily available for redistribution to white settlers and business ventures.

A pivotal piece of legislation was the **Dawes Act (General Allotment Act of 1887)**. This act aimed to assimilate Native Americans by dissolving communal tribal land ownership and dividing reservations into individual plots for families.¹⁶ Any land remaining after these allotments were made was declared "surplus" and sold off to non-native citizens.²⁵ This act resulted in the staggering loss of over 90 million acres of tribal land.²⁵ It also created "checkerboarding" of land ownership within reservation boundaries, severely impairing tribal self-governance and economic development.²⁶ Furthermore, it led to "fractionated ownership," where land parcels became increasingly divided among numerous heirs, rendering them economically unviable for individual Native Americans.²⁶

The sequence of these policies—from direct forced removal to confinement and then to the dismantling of communal land tenure through privatization—demonstrates an evolving, yet consistently effective, legal strategy. The "surplus" land provision of the Dawes Act, coupled with the encouragement of "homesteading" ²⁵, directly translated legal mechanisms into massive, systematic land transfers. The constitutional basis for federal power over territories and tribes, derived from Article IV, Section 3, Clause 2, and the Commerce Clause ²⁸, provided the essential legal scaffolding for these actions, legitimizing them within the settler state's own legal system. This progression illustrates how legal and policy frameworks are not static or neutral instruments but are actively constructed and adapted to serve settler-colonial objectives. They systematically transformed indigenous land tenure systems, weakened tribal

sovereignty, and facilitated continuous dispossession, creating enduring economic and social disadvantages for Native Americans.

Cultural Erasure and Assimilation Policies: Boarding Schools

Beginning in the 1870s, the US government implemented a widespread system of off-reservation boarding schools, forcibly separating American Indian children from their families and communities.¹⁶ The explicit aim of these institutions was to eradicate indigenous languages, cultural traditions, and spiritual ties to the land, famously articulated by Richard Pratt's dictum: "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man".¹⁶ This deliberate cultural destruction was a strategic component of the broader settler-colonial project, designed to weaken indigenous identity and resistance, thereby making further land acquisition and redistribution easier.¹⁶

The boarding school system was far more than an educational initiative; it was a direct and brutal assault on the very fabric of indigenous existence—their cultural identity, languages, spiritual practices, and family structures.¹⁶ The explicit goal of "killing the Indian" directly links cultural annihilation to the broader objective of land acquisition and the dismantling of indigenous sovereignty. By severing cultural ties and traditional knowledge, the government sought to dismantle the collective identity and resistance capacity of indigenous communities, rendering them more vulnerable to land dispossession and assimilation into settler society. This highlights that settler colonialism operates on multiple, interconnected fronts—physical, legal, and cultural. Cultural erasure, achieved through coercive institutions like boarding schools, serves as a strategic precondition for solidifying settler control over land and resources. It underscores the profound and intergenerational trauma inflicted by such policies, which continue to impact indigenous communities today.

Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

The profound and devastating impacts of settler colonialism on indigenous peoples in the US include: extensive loss of ancestral land and vital resources, systematic cultural erasure and suppression, pervasive violence and intergenerational trauma, severe economic marginalization and entrenched poverty, and significantly poorer health outcomes compared to the settler population.³ The disruption of traditional land use practices and self-sustaining economic systems led to widespread poverty and marginalization.⁴ Settler colonialism is increasingly recognized as an "enduring structure" that fundamentally determines and perpetuates health inequities for indigenous communities.²⁹

Forms of Indigenous Resistance: Historical and Contemporary Movements

Indigenous peoples in the US have a long and continuous history of diverse forms of resistance against settler-colonial domination, demonstrating remarkable resilience and agency. This resistance has manifested in various ways:

- **Armed Resistance:** Notable historical examples include the Pueblo Revolt (1680) against Spanish colonizers, the Apache Wars (1849–1886) marked by guerrilla warfare tactics, and Geronimo's sustained resistance.³¹
- **Spiritual and Cultural Movements:** The Ghost Dance Movement (1890) was a spiritual revival seeking to restore traditional ways of life and resist Euro-American imperialism.²⁷
- **Political and Activist Movements:** The Red Power Movement (1960s–1970s) emerged as a significant cultural and political force advocating for Native American rights and self-determination, focusing on issues like land rights, cultural preservation, and social justice.³¹ The American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, continues to address issues of sovereignty, treaty rights, and social justice for Native Americans.²⁷
- **Direct Action and Occupations:** Key events include the Alcatraz Occupation (1969–1971), where Native American activists occupied the island to protest government policies and demand land return ²⁷, and the Wounded Knee Occupation (1973), a 71-day standoff that drew national attention to Native American issues and treaty obligations.²⁷
- **Environmental Activism:** Contemporary resistance is exemplified by the Standing Rock protests (2016–2017) against the Dakota Access Pipeline, which threatened sacred lands and water sources for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, uniting diverse groups in the struggle for indigenous rights and environmental justice.³¹
- **Cultural Revitalization:** Ongoing efforts include the establishment of Native American schools and educational programs, the revival of traditional ceremonies and spiritual practices, the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages, and the creation of cultural centers and museums to educate and preserve heritage.⁴

The extensive record of indigenous resistance movements demonstrates that the settler-colonial project in the US has never been fully "complete" or unopposed.²⁷ Indigenous agency actively contests the "logic of elimination" and the settler narrative of "triumph".³⁴ This resistance forces adaptations in settler strategies, for instance, from direct removal to more subtle assimilation policies, and continuously

reasserts indigenous sovereignty and claims to land and culture.³⁵ This highlights a reciprocal relationship: settler-colonial policies provoke resistance, and this resistance, in turn, influences the evolution and ongoing challenges to the settler state. The persistence of indigenous cultures and claims prevents the full "nativization" of settlers and ensures that the historical injustices remain contemporary issues, underscoring that settler colonialism is a dynamic and contested process, not a static historical event.

III. Settler Colonialism in Israel/Palestine: Foundations and Ongoing Realities

The Zionist movement, which ultimately led to the establishment of Israel, has been described by numerous scholars as a form of settler colonialism in the region of Palestine.⁹ Notably, many early Zionist leaders and ideologues, including Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Ze'ev Jabotinsky, explicitly characterized Zionism as a "colonization adventure" or a "colonial" undertaking.⁹ This settler-colonial framework for understanding the conflict gained prominence in the 1960s during global decolonization movements and re-emerged within Israeli academia in the 1990s.⁹

Ideological Justifications: "Land with No People for a People with No Land," "Jewish Indigeneity"

The foundational Zionist slogan, "A Land with No People for a People with No Land," serves as a direct ideological parallel to the US concept of *terra nullius* and the "Virgin Land" narrative. It functioned to imaginarily depopulate the landscape of Palestine, thereby justifying the subsequent displacement and disappearance of indigenous Palestinians.²¹ This narrative was crucial for presenting the land as available for Jewish settlement without acknowledging the existing population.

Theodor Herzl's vision for the Zionist state was explicitly articulated as "a portion of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism".³⁷ This colonial mindset framed Palestine as a space requiring "transformation" and "progress," thereby legitimizing the Zionist project by aligning it with broader European imperial and civilizational discourses.³⁷

In contemporary discourse, particularly among settlers in the West Bank, claims of "Jewish indigeneity" are employed to morally and historically validate territorial annexation.³⁸ This narrative attempts to reframe Palestinians as "foreign occupiers" or "relative newcomers" to the land, despite their continuous historical presence, while simultaneously asserting Jews as the "true natives" with a lineage dating back to biblical times.³⁸ This ideological maneuver serves to obscure or morally justify ongoing displacement, dispossession, and military control.³⁸

These ideological constructs are not merely descriptive; they are performative acts that actively attempt to erase the existing Palestinian population from the historical and moral narrative. This is a direct parallel to the US's *terra nullius* and "wasted land" justifications. The contemporary claim of "Jewish indigeneity" by settlers further

reinforces this by attempting to reverse the roles of colonizer and colonized within the settler state's own self-perception. These narratives function as powerful tools to morally justify violent acts of dispossession, ethnic cleansing, and ongoing control. By constructing the indigenous population as absent, inferior, or illegitimate occupants, these ideologies facilitate the imposition of settler values, legal systems, and exclusive control, making the violence appear necessary or even divinely sanctioned.²¹

Mechanisms of Land Expropriation and Displacement

The **Nakba**, meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic, refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of approximately 700,000 to 750,000 Palestinian Arabs—constituting about 85% of the Palestinian Arab population—from territories that became Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.⁹ During this period, over 500 Palestinian villages and urban areas were destroyed.⁹ The Nakba is widely viewed not only as a historical event but also as an ongoing process of Israel's expropriation of Palestinian land and dispossession of the Palestinian people.⁴¹

A pivotal legal mechanism for this expropriation was the **Absentee Property Law of 1950**. Enacted by the Israeli Knesset, this law legally expropriated the land and property of Palestinians who had fled their homes during the 1948 Nakba.⁴³ It declared any Palestinian who was away from their land during the war—even if seeking refuge in a neighboring town—an "absentee," thereby stripping them of all rights and ownership.⁴³ This law directly led to the demolition of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian homes and the expropriation of millions of acres, with properties subsequently transferred to Jewish Israelis, effectively preventing the return of original owners.⁴³ The law remains active and continues to be used for ongoing dispossession, particularly in East Jerusalem.⁴³

Further mechanisms include the policies of Zionist organizations such as the Jewish National Fund, which acquired land under explicit restrictions that prevented it from ever passing into non-Jewish ownership.⁹ Kibbutzim, collectivist Jewish agricultural settlements, were developed as exclusively Jewish settlements and served as prototypes for future settlements, reinforcing the principle of Jewish-only land use.⁹ The continuous establishment and expansion of hundreds of illegal settlements and outposts in the occupied Palestinian West Bank⁴¹ represent a persistent form of ethnic cleansing and land expropriation.³⁵ These settlements are widely considered illegal under international law.⁴⁵

The Nakba (1948) is clearly a defining historical event of mass displacement and

violence.⁹ However, subsequent legal and administrative measures, such as the Absentee Property Law⁴³ and the ongoing policy of settlement expansion⁴¹, transformed this singular event into an "ongoing process" and an entrenched "structure" of dispossession.¹¹ The Israeli state's control of 93% of the land and its allocation prioritizing Jewish development⁴⁶ exemplify how legal and administrative frameworks solidify the gains of initial displacement and prevent return. This demonstrates how settler colonialism, even after an initial violent phase, perpetuates itself through a continuous legal and administrative scaffolding. This ensures that the initial act of displacement has reinforcing, long-term effects, preventing the return of refugees and solidifying settler control, thereby making the "event" of the Nakba a living and ongoing reality for Palestinians.

Citizenship Laws and Discriminatory Policies

Israel has intentionally avoided establishing a singular "Israeli nationality" that would grant equal status to all its citizens. Instead, full national rights are reserved for "Jewish nationals" through laws such as the Law of Return (1950) and the Israeli Citizenship Law (1952).⁴⁶ Palestinians, in contrast, are afforded an "inferior status" as mere "citizens of Israel" without equivalent national or group rights.⁴⁶ This distinction is reinforced by over 50 "racist laws" and administrative policies that systematically discriminate against Palestinian citizens.⁴⁶ The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law (2003), for instance, severely restricts family reunification for Palestinian spouses, effectively fragmenting Palestinian families.⁴⁶ Additionally, Israel is the only nation that routinely uses military courts to imprison children, prosecuting hundreds of Palestinian children annually.²²

The deliberate refusal to define a unified "Israeli nationality"⁴⁶ and the implementation of citizenship laws that privilege Jewish immigration while denying Palestinian return⁹ are not merely discriminatory; they are fundamental mechanisms of demographic engineering. This creates a two-tiered system where "Jewishness" is explicitly defined by heredity and grants automatic citizenship, while Palestinian rights are systematically diminished, and their presence is often viewed as a "demographic threat".²¹ The historical absence of a formal constitution in Israel, as argued by David Ben-Gurion, allowed for "maximum flexibility" to address challenges like "demographically re-engineer[ing] the country"⁴⁷, further highlighting the strategic role of law in settler-colonial governance. This reveals how legal frameworks, beyond direct land expropriation, are employed to control population demographics, restrict indigenous rights, and maintain a racial hierarchy that perpetuates settler dominance. These policies effectively continue the "logic of

elimination" through legal, administrative, and demographic means, rather than solely through physical violence.

Cultural Erasure and Control

Israeli policies have actively sought to co-opt and erase elements of Palestinian culture. This includes the rebranding of authentic Palestinian culinary dishes as Israeli and the stripping of traditional attire and Arabic music from their original cultural context to be presented as part of Israeli heritage.⁴⁸ The increased visibility of Hebrew in Palestinian public life—on street signs, currency, and official documents—asserts a growing Jewish presence and initiates a gradual "de-Arabization," contributing to Israel's broader agenda of cultural erasure.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the modification of city and place names serves as a direct method to erase indigenous historical tracks and legacies.²

Impacts on Palestinians

Palestinians continue to experience profound and ongoing dispossession and displacement ³⁵, leading to the loss of their homes, land, and traditional way of life.⁴² They face systematic cultural erasure and suppression ³, severe economic marginalization, and disproportionately poor health outcomes.³ The "destruction of food sovereignty" and the forced transition from traditional diets to highly processed market foods have contributed to epidemics like diabetes among Bedouin communities.²⁹ The ongoing "ethnic cleansing" of Palestinian land is a continuous process.⁹

Forms of Palestinian Resistance: Political, Armed, Popular, Cultural

Palestinian resistance against Israeli settler colonialism is multifaceted and has evolved over time, encompassing military, diplomatic, popular, internationalized, and agitprop (agitation and propaganda) strategies.⁴⁹

- **Armed Struggle/Guerrilla Warfare:** Inspired by other national liberation movements (e.g., Algeria, Vietnam), various Palestinian organizations have engaged in armed struggle, including the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hamas.⁴⁹
- **Diplomatic Resistance:** This involves engaging in political negotiations, seeking international recognition, and advocating for Palestinian rights on the global stage.³⁷
- **Popular Resistance (Intifadas):** Characterized by grassroots uprisings, mass protests, and demonstrations, such as the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the Second Intifada (2000-2005).⁴⁸
- **Cultural Resistance:** This is a vital and enduring form of resistance, involving the preservation and championing of Palestinian traditions—from language, cuisine, and traditional attire to literature, films, art, and music.⁴⁸ Literary figures like Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani, and artists like Naji al-Ali, have used their work to document experiences, mobilize resistance, and assert Palestinian identity.⁴⁸ Efforts to revive folk songs and traditional dishes, despite persecution, also exemplify this resistance.⁴⁸

The persistence and diversity of Palestinian resistance directly challenge the "logic of elimination" and the settler-colonial project's aim to "triumph" by fully erasing the native population.¹⁰ Scholars argue that without this ongoing resistance, the ethnic cleansing initiated during the Nakba would likely have resulted in a "homogenous Jewish state".¹⁰ Resistance, particularly cultural resistance, actively asserts Palestinian identity and their deep ties to the land, directly countering settler narratives of erasure and "empty land".⁴⁸ This demonstrates that the "incompleteness" of the Zionist settler-colonial project—unlike in cases like Australia or the US where native populations were largely annihilated⁶—is precisely due to the enduring agency and resistance of the Palestinian people.¹⁰ This continuous struggle forces the settler state to maintain explicit colonizer/colonized boundaries and necessitates ongoing mechanisms of control, such as military occupation and discriminatory laws, thereby preventing the full "nativization" of settlers and the complete erasure of the indigenous presence.¹⁰

IV. Comparative Analysis: Parallels and Divergences

A comparative analysis of settler colonialism in the United States and Israel reveals both striking parallels in their underlying structures and significant divergences in their historical trajectories and outcomes.

Shared Characteristics

Both the United States and Israel fundamentally embody Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism as an ongoing "structure, not an event," aimed at replacing rather than merely exploiting indigenous populations.⁵ This encompasses various processes including physical elimination, forced assimilation, segregation, and incarceration.⁹ In both contexts, the acquisition and control of land are paramount. Settlers systematically claim ownership over indigenous territories, often through violence and legal mechanisms, and actively reshape the landscape to suit their needs.⁴ The drive to acquire land for agriculture, resource extraction, and exclusive settlement is a core shared objective.⁴

Both societies developed powerful, often transcendent, narratives to legitimize their actions. The US relied heavily on "Manifest Destiny" ¹⁶, while Zionism employed the slogan "A Land with No People for a People with No Land" ²¹ and the concept of an "outpost of civilization".³⁷ These narratives frequently invoked a divine mandate, portrayed indigenous peoples as "savages" or absent, and presented the settler project as bringing "progress".²¹ A common feature is the systematic replacement of indigenous social, economic, and political structures with those of the settler society.³ This includes privileging settler institutions and cultural practices over indigenous ones, leading to the suppression of native languages, religions, and ways of life.⁴ For both the US and Israel, settler colonialism is not a completed historical episode but an enduring system that continues to shape contemporary social structures, economic disparities, and political realities.¹¹ The profound impacts, such as persistent health inequities, are understood as foundational and ongoing outcomes of this system.²⁹ In both the US and Israel, indigenous populations have continuously resisted settler-colonial domination through a wide array of means, including armed struggle, political activism, cultural preservation efforts, and diplomatic engagement.¹⁰ This persistent resistance underscores the "incompleteness" of the settler-colonial project in both contexts.¹⁰

The observed parallels reveal a deep and often overlooked structural connection: the fundamental settler goal of acquiring and controlling land ⁴ inherently necessitates

the "elimination" of the native population.⁸ This elimination, in turn, requires the systematic destruction of indigenous cultural ties to the land and their collective identity.¹⁶ This chain of causality explains why violence—both direct, such as massacres and forced removals, and structural, such as discriminatory laws and cultural suppression—is not an aberration but an inherent and continuous feature of settler colonialism.² For indigenous peoples, the land is not merely property but integral to their very existence and identity⁵⁰, creating an inherent and irreconcilable conflict with the settler's desire for exclusive control and replacement. This suggests that addressing the profound impacts of settler colonialism requires not just acknowledging past wrongs but fundamentally challenging the ongoing structures that perpetuate land alienation, cultural erasure, and the denial of indigenous self-determination. It highlights that the struggle is not only for resources but for existence and identity.

A comparison of the ideological justifications employed by both states illustrates these shared patterns:

Ideological Theme	United States	Israel/Palestine
Divine Mandate/Exceptionalism	Manifest Destiny (divinely ordained expansion, moral virtue, "shining city upon a hill") ¹⁶	"Divine mandate," "Light Unto Nations," "miraculous" military victories as signs of God's hand ²¹
"Empty Land" Narrative	<i>Terra Nullius</i> , "unsettled" land, land "wasted" by "savages" (un-cultivated) ⁴	"A Land with No People for a People with No Land," "make the desert bloom," portraying land as requiring "transformation" ²¹
Civilizing Mission/Progress	Spreading "republican government" and "American way of life," bringing "progress" to "savages" ¹⁷	"Outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism," "vanguard of culture," bringing "blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants" ²²
Indigenous Status	Indigenous peoples as "obstacles," "inferior," needing "assimilation" or "elimination" ¹⁶	Claiming "Jewish indigeneity," Palestinians as "foreign occupiers," "relative newcomers," or a "demographic threat" ²¹

Key Divergences

Despite these parallels, significant divergences exist. The historical origins and motivations differ: the US originated primarily from European imperial expansion, with settlers establishing new societies explicitly modeled on their European "mother countries".⁴ In contrast, some arguments against the settler-colonial framework contend that Zionism was a voluntary movement of Jews fleeing persecution and seeking a homeland, rather than being directly orchestrated by an imperial "mother country".¹¹ Critics emphasize Zionism as the "repatriation of an indigenous population".⁹

The specific legal and political mechanisms employed also show variations. The US utilized policies like the Indian Removal Act, Indian Appropriations Act, and the Dawes Act as central to land transfer and assimilation.¹⁶ In Israel, the Absentee Property Law⁴³, the Law of Return⁴⁶, and the continuous expansion of settlements⁴¹ are specific to the Israeli context, creating a distinct legal framework for dispossession and demographic control. The historical absence of a formal constitution in Israel, unlike the US, allowed for greater governmental flexibility in shaping citizenship and land laws to explicitly privilege Jewish settlement and demographic engineering.⁴⁷

The most profound divergence lies in the demographic outcomes and the "completeness" of elimination. In settler-colonial contexts like the United States and Australia, the settler states were largely successful in "annihilat[ing] the native population"⁶, which, according to some scholars, reduced the perceived "need" for explicit apartheid regimes.⁶ In Israel, however, a significant indigenous Palestinian population remains within the state and occupied territories, marking an "incompleteness" of the ethnic cleansing.⁶ This "incompleteness"¹⁰ means that the state cannot simply "erase" the native population but must instead continuously

manage, control, and segregate it through explicit legal and administrative structures. This directly leads to the application of the term "apartheid" to describe the system of racial segregation and differential rights that governs Palestinians.⁴⁶ This divergence highlights how the degree of indigenous survival and resistance directly influences the specific forms of governance and control adopted by settler states. In cases of "incomplete" elimination, the settler state must maintain a more overt and legally codified system of racial hierarchy and control, continually reinforcing the distinction between colonizer and colonized, which differentiates it from settler societies that achieved a more complete demographic shift.

The following table provides a comparative overview of the mechanisms for land dispossession and cultural erasure:

Category	United States	Israel/Palestine
Land Dispossession Mechanisms	Indian Removal Act (1830) ¹⁶ , Indian Appropriations Act (1851) ¹⁶ , Dawes Act (1887) ¹⁶ , Treaties, "Surplus" land sales. ²⁵	The Nakba (1948) (mass displacement) ⁹ , Absentee Property Law (1950) ⁴³ , Jewish National Fund land policies ⁹ , Kibbutzim ⁹ , Ongoing settlement expansion ³⁵ , Home demolitions/land grabs. ⁴¹
Cultural Erasure Mechanisms	Boarding schools ("Kill the Indian...") ¹⁶ , Suppression of languages/religions. ⁴	De-Arabization ⁴⁸ , Co-option of Palestinian culture ⁴⁸ , Changing place names ² , Discriminatory citizenship laws (population control). ⁹

V. Academic Debates and Critiques of the Settler Colonial Framework for Israel

The application of the settler-colonial framework to Israel is a subject of significant academic and political debate.

Arguments Supporting the Application of the Framework to Israel

Proponents, including prominent scholars such as Patrick Wolfe, Edward Said, Ilan Pappé, Noam Chomsky, Rashid Khalidi, and Amal Jamal ⁹, argue that Zionism fundamentally involves processes of elimination and assimilation of Palestinians, directly paralleling other settler colonial contexts such as the US and Australia.⁹ They point to historical evidence, including early Zionist leaders explicitly describing their project as colonial ⁹, the acquisition of land under explicit restrictions preventing non-Jewish ownership ⁹, the mass displacement of Palestinians during the Nakba ⁹, and ongoing policies like the Absentee Property Law and continuous settlement expansion.⁴¹ The framework is seen as highly productive for understanding Israel's land regime, economy, politics, and legal system, and even for predicting certain societal tendencies.⁶ It also helps contextualize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within broader historical narratives of European colonialism, white racism, and global power dynamics.²¹

Arguments Critiquing or Rejecting the Application to Israel

Critics, such as Benny Morris, Yuval Shany, Ilan Troen, and Michael Walzer ⁹, argue that Zionism does not fit traditional colonial frameworks. They view it instead as the "repatriation of an indigenous population" and an "act of self-determination" for the Jewish people.⁹ They contend that Jews are historically indigenous to the Levant, citing archaeological, textual, and genetic evidence.¹¹ They argue that Zionist immigrants largely came voluntarily, fleeing persecution, and did not operate at the behest of an imperial "mother country" nor did they have a home to return to.¹¹ The displacement of Palestinians is often attributed to the 1948 war, which they characterize as a pan-Arab war against the nascent Jewish state, rather than a pre-planned imperial project.¹¹ A key counter-argument is the

non-genocide of the remaining Palestinian population, who constitute 20% of Israel's citizens, which distinguishes Israel from settler-colonial cases like Australia and the US where indigenous populations were largely annihilated.¹¹ Some critics view the

framework as "divisive, hateful, and dangerous," arguing that it denies the legitimacy of existing states and inherently calls for violence or genocide.¹¹ They assert it is an "ideologically driven theory in search of evidence" that uses "nebulous, ideologically motivated, and tendentious language" to support its claims.⁵³

The intense debate surrounding the application of the settler-colonial framework to Israel⁹ reveals that this is not a purely academic exercise but a deeply politicized one. Critics frequently accuse proponents of using the framework to "delegitimize Israel or justify its elimination"⁹, even linking it to justifications for violence.⁵¹ This highlights how academic concepts, when entering public discourse, can become tools in political struggles, shaping perceptions and influencing narratives about legitimacy and justice.

VI. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of settler colonialism in the United States and Israel reveals profound structural parallels, despite their distinct historical contexts and specific mechanisms. Both states exemplify Patrick Wolfe's concept of settler colonialism as an ongoing structure driven by a "logic of elimination," aiming to replace indigenous populations and assert exclusive control over land. This shared objective has manifested through similar ideological justifications, such as "divine mandate" narratives and "empty land" myths, which served to dehumanize indigenous peoples and legitimize violent dispossession. In both cases, the imposition of settler institutions and the systematic erasure of indigenous cultures, through policies like boarding schools in the US and de-Arabization efforts in Israel, represent strategic components of the settler-colonial project.

A critical commonality is the centrality of land acquisition, which inherently necessitates the displacement and often the physical or cultural elimination of native inhabitants. This dynamic creates an enduring conflict where indigenous peoples' deep connection to their ancestral lands is fundamentally at odds with the settler state's desire for exclusive ownership and control. Consequently, violence, both direct and structural, emerges as an inherent and continuous feature of these systems.

A key divergence, however, lies in the demographic outcome of these projects. While the United States and Australia largely achieved a near-total elimination or marginalization of their indigenous populations, Israel's settler-colonial project is characterized by the persistence of a substantial indigenous Palestinian population. This "incompleteness" of elimination necessitates continuous and explicit mechanisms of control, leading to a system of racial segregation and differential rights that has been described as apartheid. This ongoing presence ensures that the colonizer-colonized dynamic remains overt, preventing the full "nativization" of settlers and maintaining the contested nature of the territory.

Despite these differences, indigenous populations in both the US and Israel have demonstrated remarkable resilience through continuous and diverse forms of resistance—armed, political, cultural, and diplomatic. This ongoing resistance fundamentally challenges the settler-colonial project's aims and underscores its dynamic, rather than static, nature. The academic debate surrounding the application of the settler-colonial framework to Israel highlights the politicized nature of historical interpretation in highly contested geopolitical landscapes. Ultimately,

understanding settler colonialism as an enduring structure provides a robust analytical lens for comprehending the historical foundations and ongoing realities of dispossession, resistance, and the complex struggles for self-determination in both the United States and Israel.

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