

The Politics of Decolonisation and Bi-Nationalism in Israel/Palestine

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Recent years have seen a revitalisation of decolonisation as a framework of analysis in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This article maps changes in the meanings attached to decolonisation in the Israeli-Palestinian context, paying particular attention to the one-state paradigm. One-state proposals highlight bi-national realities in historic Palestine in order to lay out a decolonising vision grounded in equal civic rights. Many one-state advocates, however, are suspicious of a prescriptive bi-national paradigm that would afford the two national groups equal collective rights, primarily because its recognition of Jewish national self-determination is seen as entrenching, rather than decolonising, colonial relations of power. We argue that a prescriptive bi-nationalism in fact offers rich resources for a decolonising project in Israel/Palestine that seeks to establish a polity based on the principles of justice and equality, come to terms with historical injustice and imagine alternative pasts, presents and futures based on Arab-Jewish relationships.

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In his recent book with Noam Chomsky and Frank Barat, Ilan Pappé (2015, p. 1) observes that ‘we seem to be in the midst of a transition from an old conversation about Palestine to a new one’ which has reframed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of ‘a simple story about colonialism and dispossession’. Decolonisation as a process of ‘undoing’ colonial relations of domination between Palestinians and Israeli Jews has been afforded a compelling and revitalised role in this new conversation. Of course, the concept of decolonisation is not new in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinian struggle for self-determination and against Zionist expansion has long been considered in anti-colonial terms. Likewise, the variety of solutions proposed to ‘solve’ the conflict are embedded in language of decolonisation, even as they attach different conceptual and political meanings to it. What is

striking about this present transition, however, is the re-centring of settler colonialism as the core dynamic shaping the conflict. Whereas the two-state hegemon has seen decolonisation primarily framed in terms of partition and state-building, reducing colonial concerns to the ongoing Israeli settlement project in the West Bank, more recent accounts have taken their lead from earlier critical scholarship (e.g. Sayegh, 1965; Rodinson, 1973; Said, 1979) which considered Zionism in terms of settler colonialism. Accordingly, they seek to articulate a decolonising mandate which includes the Palestinians as a whole constituency and recognises their collective aspirations in the entirety of historic Palestine. In this new conversation, a liberal democratic one-state solution has taken precedence as offering the greatest potentialities for decolonisation in Israel/Palestine – laying down the foundations for a genuine regime change that would affirm Palestinian rights at the same time as re-orient Arab-Jewish relationships around the principles of equality and cohabitation.

This article seeks to bring an additional, albeit under-engaged, element into this newly emerging conversation: bi-nationalism. As an empirical description of the realities on the ground created by Zionist colonisation, bi-nationalism often plays an important role for advocates of a one-state solution, insofar as it designates the seemingly irrevocable territorial, social and political intertwinings of Jews and Palestinians in historic Palestine and highlights the unviability of partition (e.g. Judt, 2003; Remnick, 2014; Benvenisti, 2009; Farsakh, 2017). As a prescriptive political project that would affirm the rights to national self-determination for both Palestinians and Israeli Jews within a shared territory, however, bi-nationalism is far more controversial and typically regarded with a great deal of scepticism, if not suspicion, with regard to its decolonising potential (e.g. Abu-Odeh, 2001; Farsakh, 2011; Tamari, 2000).

Save for a handful of scholars who have explicitly sought to articulate variants of bi-nationalism in decolonial terms (e.g. Raz-Krakotzkin, 2011; Todorova, 2015; Yiftachel, 2016), the idea that Palestinian rights to national self-determination in historic Palestine should be achieved alongside Israeli Jewish rights to the same is widely seen by one-state advocates as an anathema to genuine decolonisation. If nationalism is a process of ‘identity-enforcement’ that is ‘almost always’ implicated in the suppression or denial of other identities as Edward Said (1988: 58) has argued, then not just accommodating but explicitly foregrounding national identities in any future shared polity risks entrenching separation, exclusion and Othering – hardly the stuff of decolonising relationships. Israeli Jewish nationalism, in particular, is

regarded as especially problematic given that it is largely a settler colonial achievement (e.g. Abunimah, 2012; Barghouti, 2009).

In this article, we make two claims. The first is that the civic vision of one-state advocates may be too dismissive of deeply rooted national affiliations for Palestinians and Israeli Jews alike. That Jewish Israeli and Palestinian national identities – like all national identities – are ‘projects of political invention and imagination’ (Tilley, 2015. p. 428) is clear, as are the political risks and dangers of nationalism. Yet, in sidestepping the resonance of national identities or, alternatively, over-estimating the ease with which they may find civic expression, what proponents of a liberal one-state solution ultimately avoid is the difficult question of Jewish Israeli collective rights in historic Palestine. As a decolonising proposal, the liberal one-state vision, in its various modalities, may thus satisfy Palestinian demands for justice but ultimately suffers from a poverty of imagination when it comes to re-imagining the relationship between Arabs and Jews. We argue that bi-nationalism as a prescriptive paradigm is not only better equipped to deal with such questions, but also to develop affective relations of co-belonging. Accordingly, our second claim is that bi-nationalism in fact offers rich resources for imagining an ongoing decolonising project in Israel/Palestine. Specifically, its insistence on equal rights to national self-determination both satisfies Palestinian demands and dismantles the ethno-exclusive vision of Zionism, insofar as it rejects Jewish colonial privileges as well as Zionist claims to exclusive Jewish sovereignty over historic Palestine. Furthermore, its political accommodation of national identities arguably creates a context more conducive to the reckoning with historical injustice and the concordant taking responsibility and offering reparations that decolonisation demands.

The article begins by reflecting on the meanings of decolonisation in settler colonial contexts, suggesting that the emphasis of any potentially postcolonial polity must be placed on decolonising relationships. Amongst others, this entails dismantling settler aspirations to exclusivity as well as establishing equality between natives and settlers. Thereafter, we explore how decolonisation has been imagined in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a particular focus on the one-state paradigm. The last section explores the decolonising potential of prescriptive bi-nationalism, which we define as the egalitarian recognition of two distinct national groups in one political entity. While a bi-national polity of the type we articulate here comes with certain challenges, we maintain that it promises a richer political,

ethical and moral foundation for a postcolonial polity in Israel/Palestine than the partialities of both the two-state and liberal one-state solutions.

Theorising Decolonisation

For all its attached redemptive prospects and radical possibilities, it is important to emphasise that the meanings of decolonisation as both a concept and political project are not just broad, but also multifaceted and highly contested. What it means to ‘undo’ colonialism is deeply contextual (Jansen and Osterhammel, 2017). While colonialism can be defined broadly as a relationship of domination in which a people or territory is politically and economically subjugated to a foreign power, actual colonial situations vary quite widely from each other, depending on, amongst others, the particular political systems instituted to maintain control, types of exploitation and expropriation (resources, labour, plantations), relationship between the metropole and colony and patterns of migration they compel (slavery, settlement). Projects of decolonisation accordingly take different forms even if they are united by the common concern of ending or overturning structures of domination instituted by colonialism, which has historically taken place mostly through the withdrawal of colonial powers and achievement of independence for the colonised (Buchanan, 2010). Decolonisation speaks to the aspiration of self-rule and its concomitant critique of colonialism as the ‘systematic denial of freedom’ (Kohn & McBride, 2011, p. 6) and is therefore entangled with a variety of concerns, namely self-determination, justice, equality, freedom and solidarity against colonialism and imperialism. As Todd Shepherd (2006, pp. 3-4) writes, decolonisation is ‘a much wider concept than the mere “winning of Independence” or “transfer of power”... It entails the exploration of dreams, the analysis of struggles, compromises, pledges and achievements, and the rethinking of fundamentals’.

Traditional literature on decolonisation approached it in terms of the historical process that began in the immediate aftermath of World War Two in which countries previously under (typically European) foreign rule transitioned to constitutional independence (Buchanan, 2010). Decolonisation was one of the most significant developments of the twentieth century, radically changing the face of the globe from one in which a small number of empires had dominion over some 80 per cent of the earth’s surface to an international order based on the

principle of self-determination and made up of ostensibly independent states (Hopkins, 2008). Scholars in this tradition have done much to illuminate the wide-reaching structural transformations that accompanied decolonisation, including the emergence of anti-colonial and national liberation struggles at the turn of the century, shifts in world economy that made the maintenance of traditional forms of Empire increasingly difficult, the development of a 'Third World' political project and the institutionalisation of human and civic rights principles that rendered systems based on ideas of racial and ethnic superiority less viable (Hopkins, 2008, p. 216). Yet, the focus on transition has been critiqued for its narrowness insofar as it seems to take for granted the meanings of self-determination and temporally restricts decolonisation to the moment of national liberation. Postcolonial scholars, amongst others, have been at the forefront of this charge, arguing that decolonisation did not produce a postcolonial world *per se*, but rather one that continues to be shaped in significant ways by the legacies of European colonialism (e.g. Spivak, 1999). As Ella Shohat (1992) has argued, there is no way of turning back from the world colonialism set in play nor did colonial modes of domination end with the formal period of decolonisation. From this broadened perspective, decolonisation is the difficult task of tracing the economic, political, social, cultural, relational and linguistic consequences of colonialism and is therefore also an ongoing imaginative project seeking 'a new form of consciousness and way of life' (Pieterse & Parekh, 1995, p. 3) beyond the colonality of modern modes of culture, identity and knowledge more generally.

While the transitional focus of conventional scholarship is quite illuminating in the contexts of Africa and Asia for example, it furthermore excludes a great many decolonisation efforts that have taken place and continue to take place in other regions. This includes countries that remained dependent or only achieved semi-independence as dominions, decolonising projects carried out in territories never formally under colonial rule (the Iranian Revolution, for instance) and – as is particularly important to our discussion here – settler colonies that only partially decolonised, whether by way of loosening ties with the Motherland or achieving independence, but which continue to dominate substantial indigenous populations (Hopkins, 2008). There is a significant lacuna in the decolonisation literature when it comes to settler colonialism, which has increasingly been recognised as a distinct form of colonial practice – and one that is particularly resistant to decolonisation (Veracini, 2007). As the transfer of an exogenous population to a territory they intend to claim as their permanent home, settler

colonialism establishes quite a different structural relationship to 'traditional' forms of colonialism, especially when settler colonial projects succeed in creating a state (Bateman & Pilkington, 2011). Rather than governing native peoples in order to extract resources for economic gain, settler colonisers instead aim to 'seize their land and push them beyond an ever-expanding frontier of settlement' (Elkins & Pederson, 2005, p. 2). For Patrick Wolfe (2006), what distinguishes settler colonialism is thus that it is guided by a logic of elimination as opposed to a logic of exploitation, wherein the eradication of indigenous presence is essential to the success of settler colonial projects.

The primacy of national liberation in the literature makes it especially difficult to imagine, let alone theorise, decolonisation in many settler colonial contexts. Whereas some settler colonial projects like Algeria and Kenya saw decolonisation by way of a mass settler exodus, paving the way for the establishment of independent states, the more successful ones established permanent settler communities (e.g. Northern Ireland) or their own states (e.g. Australia, Canada, the United States) which preclude a simple transition from foreign rule to sovereign status (Veracini, 2007). This is of course not to say that self-determination of the type aspired to by anti-colonial national movements was an easy or even necessarily achievable task. As Kohn and McBride (2011) suggest, in pursuing the dream of self-rule, anti-colonial thinkers had to reckon with the difficulties of articulating alternative political foundations that would make for a genuinely self-determining polity, an enormous task which demands decolonising of minds as much institutions and territory (see Fanon, 1967). Decolonisation must pursue a convincing 'break' between a colonial past and a post-colonial future 'through decisive action in the present'; it must also 'seek to reinterpret the past in such a way that it may help in the present and future struggle for self-rule' (Kohn & McBride, 2011, p. 19). While these pursuits are invariably contingent, partial and commonly symbolic, national liberation struggles very often provide the fodder for a reinterpreted past that is robustly positive and the establishment of an independent state serves as that aspired for 'break'. Settler colonial contexts, especially those where indigenous peoples live as minorities in settler states, make these types of symbolic transitions challenging, as they do the imagining of postcolonial alternatives. If the narrative structure of colonialism is circular (leave, stay, return), making that symbolic break possible, settler colonial narratives are linear insofar as the settler comes to stay and the line continues on unbroken (Veracini, 2007). As Ann Curthoys (1999, p. 288) writes, settler

colonial spaces are simultaneously colonial and postcolonial, colonising and decolonising, which makes decolonisation temporally ambivalent at best.

Lorenzo Veracini (2007) suggests that there are only two alternatives to settler evacuation for decolonising settler colonial forms and it is dubious whether one of these counts as decolonisation at all: the decolonisation of relationships through ‘the promotion of various processes of Indigenous reconciliation’ or the maintenance of the status quo ‘with the explicit rejection of the possibility of reforming the settler body politic’. Again, what the former might mean is often vague, and historically it is the decolonisation of relationships that is hardest to come by considering the psychological consequences of colonialism for coloniser and colonised alike (Memmi, 1965). Like traditional forms of colonialism, settler colonialism was legitimated by a belief in the colonised’s racial and cultural inferiority. However, the specific settler colonial pursuit of land seizure compels additional stereotypes of native peoples or unique applications of existing colonial ones, wherein their supposed inferiority makes them ill-equipped to develop that land (pre-modern, nomadic, barbaric) or, alternatively, voids any claims to ownership (*terra nullius*). In other words, settler colonialism is as much premised on the denial of indigenous peoples as a political constituency with rights to land as it is their purported inferiority, which is typically enshrined in their status as second-class citizens with all the economic, cultural and social disadvantage this entails (Bateman & Pilkington, 2011, p. 3). Given that settler societies are marked by ‘pervasive inequalities, usually codified in law, between native and settler populations’ which preserve political and economic privileges for the latter (Elkins & Pederson, 2005, p. 4), decolonising relationships demands structural changes that often encounter significant resistance from settler constituencies. Likewise, it requires a reckoning with historical injustice – specifically violence and conflict at the colonial frontier – that is challenging for settler states and populations because it opens questions of settler identity, privileges, legitimacy and reparations and expressly seeks to scrutinise disavowed and long suppressed histories.

Settler colonial decolonisation is thus complicated by a multitude of hurdles, which bring the postcolonial caution of the impossibility of a ‘break’ into stark relief. The relative power discrepancies between settler and native constituencies, the general lack of settler political will to enter into difficult processes of historical introspection and

the constraining of Indigenous claims within the settler state all work against the decisive action in the present that Kohn and McBride (2011) suggest is essential to decolonisation. Indeed, even a commitment to a postcolonial polity as expressed through processes of historical reconciliation often encounters strong resistance when it comes to judicial, constitutional or legislative change genuinely decolonised relationships would demand. Nevertheless, even if it remains difficult to comprehensively imagine the decolonisation of ‘settler societies *vis-à-vis* Indigenous constituencies’ (Veracini, 2007), the central question must be how to construct political foundations which simultaneously acknowledge ‘the practices of racism, violence and subordination’ (Kohn and McBride, 2011, p. 18) that preceded them while also paving the way for a postcolonial future in which natives and settlers are equal parties and share the right to narrate the polity. Equality, freedom and justice may come from legally enshrining Indigenous rights to self-determination or, alternatively, doing away with the categories of ‘settler’ and ‘native’ altogether (Mamdani, 1998). What shape such efforts are likely to take depends, amongst others, on the ‘size and tenacity’ of Indigenous populations as well as the power of the settler constituency (Elkins & Pederson, 2005, p. 3, 6). But we would suggest that the measure to which they may be thought of as decolonising rests on the robustness of the relationship they envision and the space they carve for equal membership in and to a postcolonial polity.

Decolonisation in Israel/Palestine

Israel/Palestine is in many ways an outlier in the historical period of decolonisation mentioned above. Although the British Empire withdrew from Mandate Palestine in 1948, it did not transfer power to a newly independent nation-state but rather left the United Nations (UN) to reckon with competing claims for an independent state from Palestinian Arabs and Jews. Earliest Jewish settlement as part of the Zionist movement to establish a Jewish national home in historic Palestine began in the late 1800s and was strongly influenced by the ideologies and practices of European colonialism (Shafir, 1989; Piterberg, 2008). The Israeli state was established precisely at the moment much of the world began to decolonise, laid out in the 1947 UN Partition Plan and expanding by virtue of the 1948 War, which saw, among other things, the expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians from territory that was to become part of the nascent state (*al Nakba*).¹ The State of Israel expanded once again in the war of 1967,

where its victory saw it exercise de facto sovereignty over the whole of Mandate Palestine and establish settlement projects in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The local Arab Palestinian population has long regarded Zionism as an expansionist settler colonial movement that has sought to expel them from, and replace them on, their land (e.g. Abu-Lughod and Abu-Laban, 1974; Hilal, 1976; Said, 1979). The Palestinian movement has accordingly framed itself as an anti-colonial nationalist movement, which was in turn afforded a central role as a symbol of resistance in the Third World struggle for decolonisation. Fayez Sayegh (1965) argued that Palestinians recognised the settler colonial character of Zionism and began employing the terminology of anti-colonial liberation as early as 1917. This became dominant in Palestinian and Arab political and diplomatic discourse after 1948, especially in the major statements of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its main factions in the 1960s and 1970s.² Decolonisation in this period referred to the liberation of pre-1948 Palestine from the Zionist occupation through putting end to domination, exploitation and dispossession (Sayegh, 1965, p. 49). Liberating and decolonising Palestine was viewed as an integral part of pan-Arabist and socialist ideologies, which sought to establish Arab unity across the Arab World. After the war of 1967 and the decline of pan-Arabism, the Palestinian national movement attached the idea of decolonisation to the establishment of a democratic state in pre-1948 Palestine for Muslims, Christians and Jews (Shaath, 1977). Some political activists on the margins of Israeli society, mainly revolutionary socialists like Matzpen (The Israeli Socialist Organisation), were similarly attached to the idea of decolonisation. They called for the de-Zionisation of the State of Israel through revolutionarily transforming it from a state for the Jews to a socialist state that represents the interests of the masses who live in it.³

While it continued to frame its struggle through the language of anti-colonial liberation, the Palestinian national movement underwent a strategic political shift during the 1970s when a statist doctrine concerned with establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip emerged and started receiving large international acceptance (Cobban, 1984; Gresh, 1988; Sayigh, 1997; Farsakh, 2011). This shift gave a new meaning to decolonisation. In Palestinian politics, a statist approach has become hegemonic since the mid-1970s. The Ten Points program of the PLO in 1974, in particular, is widely considered as signifying the beginning of a two-state solution and attaching a narrower meaning to decolonisation, which focused on liberation in the form of statehood, territorial borders and partition (Rouhana, 2014; Bashir,

2014). This gradual shift toward the two-state doctrine was further institutionalised in the Oslo Accords of 1993, which laid out an interim agreement ostensibly intended to fulfil Palestinian aspirations to national self-determination with the larger framework of the ‘peace process’. Insofar as decolonisation has been conceptualised in this shift it is in terms of Israeli withdrawal to pre-occupation 1967 borders (the 1948 Armistice Line) and the concomitant dismantlement of Israeli settlements so as to pave the way for an independent sovereign Palestinian state (Shafir, 1999, pp. 94-95).

As a means for decolonisation and a feasible strategy of liberation (Ibish, 2009), a two-state solution rests on the idea that national self-determination is best expressed territorially in the form of a state, and in many ways aligns with conventional understandings of decolonisation as a moment of transition⁴ from foreign rule and occupation to constitutional independence. From this perspective, the decolonising appeal of a two-state solution is clear. As much as it represents a limiting of Palestinian territorial aspirations, as a compromise it allows for a relatively defined shift to a self-determining polity, where Palestinian national symbols would find state-based expression. However, several scholars have argued that the salience of the colonial paradigm drastically declined post-1993, with mainstream Palestinian political and scholarly discourse largely concerned with state-building and economic development efforts (e.g. Hanieh, 2016; Farsakh, 2016a). The focus on foreign technical and financial support, good governance, reforms and growth in this discourse in many ways diluted the meanings attached to decolonisation, leading some to characterise the Oslo Accords as ‘false decolonisation’ (Tabar and Salamanca, 2015, p. 12), ‘surface level decolonisation’ (Collins, 2011, p. 142) and ‘de-development’ (Roy, 1995, p. 4). The argument herein is that, contrary to decolonisation, Oslo and its associated two states instead maintain colonial structures of domination, inequalities and dispossession while enforcing neoliberal policies and promoting the illusion of post-conflict parity and cooperation. The continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the growing influence of the settler lobby in Israeli politics and the sealing off of the Gaza Strip despite the 2005 settler withdrawal would seem to buttress this conclusion.⁵

While the two-state solution remains hegemonic in mainstream Palestinian, international and liberal Zionist (e.g. Gans, 2008) politics, its failure to materialise the promise of Palestinian national self-determination is by now clear – even some of its most ardent proponents have

now deemed the two-state paradigm a ‘comforting blindfold’ that is ‘no longer a path to a solution than an obstacle in itself’ (Lustick, 2012). In response to these dire conditions, Leila Farsakh (2016a, pp. 66-67) notes that the re-invocation of colonialism as an analytical frame has assisted several Palestinian scholars to articulate alternative liberation and resistance strategies, as well as different notions of economic development (e.g. Rouhana, 2014; Hanieh, 2016). The revival of *settler* colonialism has proven especially helpful in critiques of the two-state solution and the formulation of alternatives (see Busbridge, 2018a). Building on earlier accounts of Zionism as a settler colonial movement (e.g. Rodinson, 1973; Hilal, 1976; Said, 1979; Shafir, 1989), this paradigm has facilitated the drawing of parallels between Israel and the apartheid regime in South Africa as well as a focus on core-periphery relations of exploitation (Davis, 1987; Budeiri, 1982; Samara, 1988; Farsakh, 2005). Common to all the new analyses that re-invoke colonialism is the insistence on viewing *all* segments of the Palestinian people – not just West Bankers and Gazans, but citizens of Israel, Jerusalemites, refugees and diaspora – as parties to the national liberation struggle (Farsakh, 2016a, pp. 66-67). They also undercut the notion of parity embedded in the idea of the peace process (Hanieh, 2016, p. 42) and assert the significance of 1948 and early Jewish settlement in Mandate Palestine for any vision of decolonisation (Tabar and Salamanca, 2015).

The revival of colonial analyses has done much to bring decolonisation explicitly back to the table; for Omar Salamanca *et al.* (2016, p. 4), the settler colonial paradigm necessitates ‘a praxis that brings back decolonisation and liberation as the imperative goal’. At the same time, they represent quite a radical shift in the meanings attached to decolonisation, with the one-state solution, which aims to establish a single secular democratic state for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs on the whole of Mandate Palestine, gaining unprecedented traction as a more just alternative to the two-state model (Faris, 2013; Bisharat, 2010; Tilley, 2015). As we have already noted, the proposal for a single democratic state is not new. However, as Honaida Ghanim (2016) argues, unlike the PLO’s original idea of a single democratic state, which was mostly framed in revolutionary terms as national liberation, the new one-state idea is presented mainly as a civic and political enterprise. Rather than statehood and territorial sovereignty, critical conceptions of decolonisation in Israel/Palestine are increasingly framed by appeals to international law as well as human and civic rights. As Lama Abu-Odeh (2001) suggests, a one-state mandate reconfigures the territorialist vision of decolonisation enshrined in the two-state

strategy, balancing exclusive territorial sovereignty over part of Palestine with equal rights within the whole. Similarly, it transforms the Palestinian struggle from a relatively traditional anti-colonial project for national independence to one framed around the achievement of equal rights within a single, shared political entity (Hanieh, 2016; Barghouti, 2009; Farsakh, 2011). In this sense, decolonisation has largely been detached from its statist connotations, with Palestinian self-determination pursued inside a multi-ethnic state anchored by civil equality.

One-State Proposals and the National Question

As an alternative decolonising vision, the one-state solution has many advantages compared to the two-state, especially if we accept that the ‘partial decolonisation’ (Shafir, 1999, p. 95) of the latter is increasingly out of reach. Its extension of rights to self-determination ‘to all segments of the Palestinian community inside and outside historic Palestine’ (Abunimah, 2010) addresses both the colonial fragmentation of Palestinians into distinct legal and political entities and sidesteps the territorial challenges presented by Jewish colonisation in the West Bank (Yiftachel, 2016, pp. 1-2). In contrast to a two-state solution, which would affirm Jewish rights to ethno-exclusive statehood and sovereignty, a one-state addresses the discrimination embedded in Israeli state institutions as well as the racist tenets of Zionism. As Ali Abunimah (2010) suggests, a single democratic state necessarily means that Jews must give up their settler colonial privileges and forgo Zionism. Its non-sectarian and civic vision of the state is grounded in the equality of rights for citizens regardless of their identities and affiliations as well as respect for religious and cultural diversity. In acknowledging that the establishment of the Israeli state was disastrous for the Palestinians, it provides scope for possible projects of reparation and reconciliation that deal with historical injustice (Bashir, 2016b). And significantly, its enhanced territorial scope (as opposed to the fragmented territories of Gaza and the West Bank) opens the way for implementing the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees, long considered by the Palestinians to be essential to any decolonising program (Farsakh, 2011). It is this grounding in international law and universal human rights that leads Omar Barghouti (2009) to deem the one-state solution an ‘ethical’ decolonisation.

Yet, we want to ask whether the general disavowal of national dimensions of the conflict in one-state proposals offers a rich enough vision of decolonisation. This is not to say that one-staters do not acknowledge the presence of two national collectivities in Israel/Palestine. Indeed, the concept of *de facto* bi-nationalism as ‘an “actual”, often unplanned, situation that evolves when a territorial unit is cohabited by two collectivities with separate identities’ (Hermann, 2005, p. 382) plays a relatively important role in one-state visions of decolonisation, insofar as it is descriptively employed to denote the partialities and failings of the two-state paradigm. Like other terms used to describe the so-called facts on the ground in contemporary Israel/Palestine, such as ‘one-state reality’ (Benvenisti, 2009), ‘the one-state condition’ (Azoulay and Ophir, 2012) and ‘apartheid’ (Remnick, 2014; Farsakh, 2005; Falk and Tilley, 2017), the notion of a ‘de facto bi-national regime’ (Murray, 2008) points towards the seemingly irrevocable territorial and social intertwinements of Jewish and Palestinian populations as well as the fact of complete Israeli political control from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean sea. These intertwinements – which designate a substantial Palestinian community inside Israel proper, including Palestinian Jerusalemites partially incorporated into the Jewish state with the illegal annexation of East Jerusalem in 1981, as well as a Jewish settler population in the West Bank and East Jerusalem of over 600,000⁶ – are widely taken as evidence that territorial partition into separate Jewish and Palestinian states is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to justly actualise in reality. Highlighting these realities is likewise intended to illustrate an on-the-ground bi-nationalism in which one national group decisively dominates another (see Hermann, 2005, p. 384), making for strident power differentials that cannot be satisfactorily dealt with through a territorially grounded interpretation of self-determination.

However, the idea of *de jure* bi-nationalism – that is, ‘a country in which two and only two national cultures are afforded pride of place, with juridically entrenched rights for control of shares of the state’s resources, positions of authority, symbols, etc.’ (Lustick, 2001) – is widely considered anathema to one-state visions of decolonisation. Although some accounts advocating for a single-state quite obliquely (and inaccurately) refer to themselves as bi-national, these do not ‘involve authentic bi-national cognition and structure’ such as a parity-based or consociational agreements that recognise collective ethno-national rights (see Hermann, 2005, pp. 384-385; also Lijphart, 1969). Instead, they take the form of constitutional

liberalism (Abu-Odeh, 2001) and liberal multiculturalism (Todorova, 2015), amongst others. For many one-state proponents, the shift away from a two-state model necessarily entails a renouncing of the whole nation-state paradigm, which is considered at least partly responsible for the continuation of the conflict. Virginia Tilley (2015, p. 426, 427), for instance, argues that the ‘identity discourse’, which sees the conflict as between a ‘Palestinian people’ and a ‘Jewish people’ both desirous of territorial self-determination within Mandate Palestine, is ‘an acceptance of ethno-nationalism that is unusual at best and arguably aberrant, anachronistic and ruinous in this case’. The idea of partition, she suggests, rests on an out-dated and by now widely rejected notion that ‘an ethnic nation is immutably congruent with its territory’ and ultimately supports an ethno-nationalist vision of statehood (p. 429).

Key to Tilley’s argument is how the acceptance of an ethno-nationalist paradigm in Israel/Palestine has tacitly supported Zionist ethno-exclusivism and its disastrous results for the rights, security and well-being of Palestinian civilians (p. 435). A similar concern drives other one-state accounts, but especially those explicitly concerned with decolonisation. Particularly with the framing of Israeli Jews (and not just those in the Occupied Territories) as a settler collective as per the settler colonial paradigm, the idea that the latter should achieve self-determination on land they have forcibly occupied is considered tantamount to entrenching colonial presence and legitimising colonialism. Barghouti (2009, p. 578), for instance, maintains that any acknowledgement of Jewish national rights in historic Palestine ‘cannot but infringe upon the basic rights of the land’s indigenous Palestinian population and perpetuate a system of racial discrimination that ought to be opposed categorically’. The extra-territoriality of the idea of the ‘Jewish nation’, which affords all Jews in the world the right of Israeli citizenship (Barghouti, 2009, p. 580), adds an extra dimension here, insofar as recognising Jewish national rights would seem to affirm the Jewish Law of Return and thus facilitate ongoing colonisation (also Abunimah, 2010; Todorova, 2015). While many one-state advocates are not adverse to some form of collective rights for Israeli Jews (e.g. Rouhana, 2013), these are on particular provisos – namely, that they are restricted to the cultural, linguistic, social and religious domains and ‘do not infringe upon the inalienable rights of the indigenous Palestinians’ (Barghouti, 2009, p. 580). For Ali Abunimah (2010, p. 5), Jewish Israeli collective rights would be granted on the legitimacy of presence but not as a national group; in other words, Israeli Jews would be entitled to participate in self-determination but

only as legitimate individual residents (Abunimah, 2014; also Wolfe, 2013).

If one-state advocates are broadly in agreement on Israeli Jewish nationalism, responses to Palestinian nationalism are more mixed. Of course, the proposal for a single democratic state requires that Palestinians give up on their aspirations to statehood and the remarkable global recognition they have achieved thus far as a nation deserving territorial-based self-determination, something which has fostered a split between a 'new guard' concerned with civic and human rights and an old guard committed to more conventional nationalist-based struggle (Tamari, 2001). This is in part a recognition that the pursuit of the old nationalist model has not been effective (Abu-Odeh, 2001) and in part an acknowledgement of the ethnic connotations of Palestinian nationalism as laid out in the PLO Charter, which rejects any national identity in Mandate Palestine apart from 'Palestinian Arab' (Tilley, 2015, p. 436). At the same time, Palestinian nationalism is widely considered more amenable to more inclusive expression, due to its civil historical roots, the fact that a united state was the main demand of the Palestinian struggle for much of the twentieth century and that the Palestinians have less to lose and more to gain by endorsing a non-ethnic state (see Tilley, 2015). Those working from a settler colonial perspective further raise the question of the comparability of the two nationalisms. Barghouti (2009), for instance, draws on the anti-colonial underpinnings of the principle of self-determination as a means for 'peoples under colonial or alien domination or foreign occupation' to realise their national rights to challenge its applicability to settler collectives like Israeli Jews. As an Indigenous people, the Palestinians have inalienable rights to self-determination which are not 'equivalent, or even morally symmetric' to the acquired rights of Israeli Jews. For Abunimah (2010), while the Palestinian national struggle must re-orient itself around the principle of equality in order to agitate for a single state, this does not mean that it need give up on the aspiration of self-determination as a people.

Bi-nationalism and Decolonisation

From this perspective, one-state proposals can be thought of as more concerned with defending Palestinian rights than imagining a robust and viable postcolonial or decolonised polity. While the predominant one-state imaginary does not exclude Israeli Jews *per se*, it only includes them to the extent that they constitute a neutral and repentant entity (Farsakh, 2011,

p. 70). As much as it is not the responsibility of the colonised to liberate the colonisers (see Zreik, 2016), this nonetheless ‘demonstrates a puzzling lack of interest in accommodating Jewish Israeli interests and perspectives’ (Ibish, 2009). In this regard, the disavowal of the national question for Israeli Jews means that the one-state vision of decolonisation is more territorial than often supposed: settlers may not be forced to evacuate, but would cease to exist as a political collective in historic Palestine. What it might mean to decolonise Jewish-Arab *relationships* is thus sidelined beyond the idea that Israeli Jews must give up on their settler colonial privileges, which is fair but ultimately incomplete. What type of Arab-Jewish relationships might make up a postcolonial Palestine and how might decolonisation foster them? As Nadim Rouhana (2017, p. 42) writes, ‘[l]iberation and decolonization for Palestinians as the colonized must include liberation and decolonization of the Israelis: the colonizing?; a liberal one-state only tells part of the story.

Our contention is that egalitarian bi-nationalism, as a paradigm which recognises and promotes the existence of two national groups with equal rights to self-determination, offers far more fertile ground for envisioning decolonisation in Israel/Palestine. Egalitarian bi-nationalists and liberal one-staters agree that partition and segregation are infeasible and normatively undesirable (e.g. Benvenisti, 2009; Said, 1999). However, we argue that the former’s willingness to reckon with the national question is better able to account for the socio-political significance of national attachment. It is also better poised to turn this into a positive resource with which to found a polity grounded in the principles of equality and justice, negate the oppressive and dehumanising aspects of colonialism and establish relationships of parity and mutual recognition between Palestinians and Jews. We view bi-nationalism as a multilayered and complex relational construct. It does recognise difference and Othering but seeks to view it as productively disruptive. In other words, it transforms ‘otherness’ from a problem to be disposed of into a moral and emotional challenge (e.g. Bashir and Goldberg, 2014).

As an alternative political arrangement, *de jure* bi-nationalism is not a new proposition in Palestine/Israel (Hermann, 2005; Farsakh, 2016b; Bashir, 2016a). During the British Mandate in Palestine, marginal non-statist Zionist groups such as Brit Shalom (‘Covenant of Peace’) and Ihud (‘Union’) opposed partition and called for the creation of a bi-national state in which the two national groups enjoy equal rights and representation in a democratically elected

council regardless of their relative size. The aim of these Jewish Zionist advocates of pre-1948 bi-nationalism was to protect and strengthen the Jewish minority through granting it national rights and representation equal to the Arab majority, and was likewise rejected by the Palestinians as settler colonial. While the popularity of bi-nationalism dramatically declined after 1948, the very different material conditions associated with the consolidation of the Israeli state, the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory have compelled a tiny amount of Israeli civil society organisations (e.g. Halper and Ephstain, 2012) and a handful of scholars to re-examine bi-national solutions, albeit in the context of decolonisation and Palestinian rights (e.g. Raz-Krakotzkin, 2011; Todorova, 2015; Yiftachel, 2016; Ghanem, 2009).

Bi-nationalism diverges most from the liberal one-state paradigm in its assessment of national identity, as we have mentioned. Whereas one-staters are more likely to regard nationalism as an oppressive, violent and volatile force that significantly increases the possibility of conflict, bi-nationalists adopt a more nuanced perspective wherein nationalism may be both conservative *and* progressive depending on context. Likewise, if one-staters believe that ‘nations’, as relatively recent historical inventions, are malleable and open to significant rearticulation, bi-nationalists are more inclined to point to the enduring nature of certain national markers (e.g. language, religion) as well as the highly affective dimension of national identity, a divergence that in some ways replicates the split between ‘modernists’ and ‘primordialists’ in nationalism scholarship (Busbridge, 2018b). This naturally has consequences for how resolution is imagined. As Woods, Schertzer and Kaufman (2013, p. 6) suggest, a more malleable view of nations as social constructs might see one favour approaches that foster interethnic cooperation whereas a more enduring view might translate to structural approaches like consociationalism that seek to protect ethno-national boundaries. While a context of ethno-national conflict like the Israeli-Palestinian might make the former a more appealing moral and ethical vision, it also arguably makes it harder to achieve – conflicting groups are rarely willing to give up on hard-fought elements of their identity, the boundaries of which are in turn typically starkly demarcated (see Woods et al., 2013). The argument that Palestinian identity and nationalism has the cultural and political resources to be inclusive and rights-based rather than ethnically and religiously based (Abunimah 2014, p. 233; Rouhana 2013, p. 26), for example, appears to presume a path of integration for Israeli Jews that is

hardly accessible after decades of conflict and antagonism. Certainly, while there were territorially inclusive versions of Palestinian nationalism willing to accommodate Jews⁷ in mainstream Palestinian politics until the late 1960s and early 1970s,⁸ for the past four decades the majority of Palestinian politics and its Islamist, national and leftist/secular strands have subscribed to ethicised forms of Palestinian Arab nationalism.

Liberal one-staters quite rightfully point to the ethno-exclusionary nature of Jewish Israeli national identity but seem to overestimate the scope to dismantle it. The transnational and diasporic character of Zionism as a Jewish national movement, of course, complicates matters and there is an urgent need to disentangle Jewish and Israeli identities (see Butler, 2012). At the same time, it is important to demonstrate sensitivity to the experiences and specificities of modern Jewish life, mainly European anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. These are constitutive experiences that continue to inform Jewish and Israeli Jewish politics, not least of which is the significance of collective institutional safeguards and protections (Yiftachel, 2016). Certainly, many Jewish Israelis have argued that there has been little attempt by one-state advocates to allay fears that such a proposal would be tantamount to ‘demographic suicide’, with Jews incorporated into a shared state set to become a minority (e.g. Fein, 2001; Karsh, 2001). Conversely, the claim that its diasporic elements mean that there is no Israeli Jewish national identity as such (e.g. Barghouti, 2009) would seem to gloss over the socio-political reality that, after more than seven decades of Israeli Jewish existence, an Israeli Jewish national identity has been established that is distinct from a diasporic Jewish identity. While Zionism was a source of controversy among important segments of European Jewry before 1948, and continues to face several challenges from Jewish groups, it is very hard to deny the existence, development, and consolidation of an Israeli Jewish national identity that is intimately tied to Israel/Palestine (Farsakh, 2017, p. 390; Ibish, 2009). This Israeli Jewish national identity, notwithstanding its internal diversities, tensions and splits, does not only enjoy the recognition and endorsement of the overwhelming majority of Jews, but is also recognised by large parts of the world.

In acknowledging these socio-political realities, bi-nationalism is less willing to assume that they may find easy civic or cultural expression (e.g. Abu-Odeh, 2001; Todorova, 2015), which is a depoliticising move given that political theorists like Avner De-Shalit (1996, pp. 910-911) have compellingly argued that national self-determination is a political and not a cultural claim.

It neither abandons the Palestinian right to self-determination, which remains central to the Palestinian national movement and has been confirmed by the International Court of Justice (Tilley, 2015, p. 439), nor does it discount the powerful reasons to recognise and accommodate Israeli Jewish national self-determination as an acquired right, even if this may be opposed on the principled grounds of anti-colonialism (Bashir, 2016a). Most significantly from the perspective of decolonisation, in aligning these two rights alongside each other bi-nationalism lays out a stronger, political vision oriented towards institutional arrangements and positive efforts of acting rather than the negative efforts of refraining from harming a group, its members and their culture as per many civic visions. This parity is not the false parity of the conflict resolution paradigm (Rouhana, 2017), but rather a *postcolonial* parity where Jewish Israelis are required to give up their settler colonial privileges, aspirations to exclusive sovereignty over historic Palestine (e.g. Jewish state) and acknowledge the Palestinians as a political constituency with equal rights to the land. It refuses racism and subordination. And as an institutional framework, it places equality, mutual recognition and shared belonging at the heart of the political foundation. It does not seek to re-engineer Jewish Israeli and Palestinian identities along civic and cultural lines—an outstandingly demanding, if not paternalistic, task—but rather restructure the relationship between the two.

While it may seem counter-intuitive, bi-nationalism may also offer far more fertile ground on which to imagine a common political identity. Liberal one-state advocates often forget that any new shared polity requires the development and fostering of some sort of identity that ties it together (Lustick, 2001). As much as liberal one-staters tend to emphasise a commitment to civic equality and justice as the glue that would hold together a state home to both Jews and Palestinians, this is a particularly thin sense of shared identity for a decisively polarised context. It also a relatively negative one insofar as it does not afford a robust sense of distinctiveness and tends towards a majoritarianism of benign neglect. For others, the ultimate goal of a democratic one-state would be the ‘de-dichotomisation’ (Barghouti, 2009) or ‘hybridisation’ (Butler, 2012) of individual identities so as to break down the relation of oppressor/oppressed (settler/native) presumed expressed by Jewish Israeli and Palestinian identities. Again, this would seem to be a demanding task, further complicated by an insistence on defining postcolonial society, politics, and justice in relation to (Palestinian) indigeneity (e.g. Barghouti, 2009; Abunimah, 2014; Rouhana, 2014). In seeking to go beyond this polarity of

‘settler’/‘native’ in Palestine (e.g. Zreik 2106), bi-nationalism is better positioned to produce an imaginative geography of two peoples and thereby allow for the narration of Palestinian and Jewish experiences in the Middle East alongside each other: *al Nakba* and the Holocaust (Bashir and Goldberg, 2014), for example, or the complex interactions and exchanges that long existed between Jewish, Islamic and Christian cultures in the Levantine (Bashir, 2015). This not only gives scope for the reinterpretation of the past so as to locate positive resources with which to fashion a future postcolonial polity. It also opens a path to legitimacy for Israeli Jews, who may be able to integrate into the region in exchange for giving up on their colonial privileges (see also Abunimah, 2009).

In seeking to transform the relationship between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish identities but not to do away with them, bi-nationalism promises a richer temporality than the faux neutrality of the one-state solution. Simply touting institutional ‘solutions’ is not enough because decolonisation demands the development of a temporal imaginary that (re)constructs the past as a means both to reckon with colonial injustice and articulate a collective future based on anti-colonial principles. In placing Arab-Jewish relationships at the foundation of the postcolonial polity, bi-nationalism presents a vision of an egalitarian future ‘broken’ away from a colonial past but also has a backward-looking dimension that is more compelling in coming to terms with the past, specifically historical injustices and their persisting consequences and right of return of Palestinian refugees. The importance of reckoning with historical injustice is indeed one of the main critiques of the two-state paradigm leveraged by liberal one-staters, who argue that its focus on 1967 precludes engagement with 1948 and the establishment of the Israeli state (Khoury, 2016). However, in aspiring to civic equality produced or conditioned by postcolonial hybridity, liberal one-state proposals miss an important opportunity to seriously engage Arab-Jewish relationships. They are also arguably not conducive to the types of conditions that would allow a genuine process of historical reconciliation to take place; after all, oppressing parties are typically fearful of vengeance and given long-held Jewish Israeli existential angst, it follows that institutional and legal collective safeguards would be necessary for the community to engage in the sincere interrogation of history that postcolonial justice demands (Bashir, 2016a). If an emphasis on formal equality and parity of representation risks maintaining some form of tacit colonial privileges (Barghouti, 2009) or encouraging amnesic politics of neutralising history (Bashir, 2016b), bi-nationalism promises more fertile ground

for the reckoning with *al Nakba* and its imperatives of collective responsibility, apologies and reparations, requirements that are very critical for any successful reconciliation process.

Conclusion

This article has sought to trace shifts in the meanings attached to decolonisation in the context of Israel/Palestine, with the aim of bringing prescriptive bi-nationalism into the debate which remains for the most part caught between the one-state and two-state solutions. As a decolonising alternative, bi-nationalism offers many things that a liberal one-state does not, not least of which, according to Hussein Ibish (2009), is its willingness to offer collective safeguards beyond equality and non-discrimination to protect the interests of Israeli Jews while still advancing Palestinian rights. One of the challenges of any vision of decolonisation is the need to mobilise as wide a constituency committed to it as possible – including, importantly, elites – and the willingness of bi-nationalism to reckon with the Jewish question in Palestine places it in a potentially stronger position to convince Jewish Israelis to enter into a more just political arrangement. At the same time, we are aware of the numerous challenges that may face the implementation of a bi-national model in Palestine/Israel, not least of which include the present lack of political support, constraining the ethno-exclusive aspects of both nationalisms, avoiding Balkanisation and the socio-economic discrepancies between the two populations. Given that differences in socioeconomic status tend to aggravate colonial interethnic tensions (Coakley, 2009, p. 466), the stark inequalities that currently exist between Jews and Palestinians may very well make bi-nationalism a lopsided pursuit and would demand difficult redistribution measures.

Nevertheless, we believe that prescriptive bi-nationalism offers important ethical and normative resources that are well poised to assist in the shift from colonialism, separation and segregation to postcolonialism, cohabitation, integration, and reconciliation in Palestine/Israel. The vision of decolonisation into which we have sought to insert bi-nationalism is a wider project than simply an institutional solution. In its commitment to build a future postcolonial polity and a decolonial political consciousness centred on justice and equality between Jews and Palestinians, bi-nationalism is as much an attempt to influence underlying realities as it is to reflect them (see Coakley, 2009, p. 464). In a context where there

is no shortage of proposals seeking to ‘solve’ the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a variety of institutional arrangements, there is a striking dearth of scholarship seeking to articulate ethical and political principles that may guide the establishment of a new regime and polity. While bi-nationalism as we have presented here is no doubt in need of further sharpening and development if it is to become a serious political alternative, as well as sound empirical work on how and why national attachments continue to matter to Palestinians and Israeli Jews, initiating the conversation is a good start.

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¹ This historical period is often the center of controversies among historians and scholars of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

² See the PLO's Palestine National Charter of 1964, especially articles 19 and 22, and the Palestine National Charter of 1968, especially article 22.

³ 'The Palestine Problem and the Israeli-Arab Dispute', Statement by Matzpen, May 18th 1967: <http://98.130.214.177/index.asp?u=120&p=doc1> (accessed: 14.4.16).

⁴ Albeit a long one in the case of the Oslo Accords.

⁵ See B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in Occupied Territories, <http://www.btselem.org/>

⁶ This is the estimated number of settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem according to data provided by Israel's Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and by the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies in 2016. B'tselem and other organizations use these sources to determine the estimated numbers of settlers.

⁷ Namely those who were legal residents of Palestine before the arrival of European Jewish settlers.

⁸ See 'Toward a democratic state in Palestine', Palestine National Movement, Fateh, 2nd World Conference on Palestine, Amman, September 2-6, 1970. <http://www.palestinianconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/DemocraticStatePal-Fateh-1970.pdf> (accessed: 14.4.16).