

Liberal Zionism: A Pillar of Israel's Settler Colonial Project

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Excerpts

Despite the Israeli regime's increasingly right-wing policies, liberal Zionism still plays a dominant role in Zionist ideology. It fulfills the specific and critical function of providing the Zionist project with the veneer of enlightened, Western civilization and democratic, progressive politics. As a result, the Israeli regime is rarely described in mainstream Western circles for what it is: a settler-colonial state that practices apartheid. ...

Contemporary liberal Zionism emerges from Labor Zionism—the so-called left-wing, socialist arm of the Zionist movement that emerged over a century ago and played an instrumental role in the formation of the Zionist state. Since the state's establishment, liberal Zionism has appeared in the policies of successive left-wing governments and in the missions of non-governmental organizations, lobby groups, political parties, and scholarly networks and institutions that promote Israel as a liberal Jewish state. Liberal Zionism enjoyed ideological hegemony for many decades following 1948. As liberal Zionist Yehuda Kurtzer writes in reference to early Zionists: “The triumphant Zionists understood what they were doing as building a liberal political movement. Liberalism was baked into the political Zionism that ultimately led to the building of the state.” ...

Liberal Zionism is hostile to Palestinian decolonial critiques of 1948 and often paints them as antisemitic in order to marginalize and censor them. The erasure of the Palestinian critique through the notion of “the new antisemitism” dates back to at least the early 1970s, when the Israeli foreign minister for the Labor government, Abba Eban, began pushing the narrative that anti-Zionism is antisemitism. Furthermore, liberal Zionists use these foundational beliefs to critique the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza, while carefully avoiding drawing attention to 1948.

Since liberal Zionists purportedly support a two-state solution along 1967 borders, they should theoretically no longer be interested in expansion; indeed, they view the occupation as dangerous for the Jewish state project. This is sometimes expressed through a critique of apartheid policies and practices (without using the term apartheid) that expand the Israeli state by unleashing totalitarian power over the Palestinians.

Still, this support for a two-state solution must be understood to be based on their ultimate fear of a one-state solution in which “unofficial” Israeli sovereignty over Palestinians will transform into “official” Israeli sovereignty over the whole of colonized Palestine, leaving Israel with a significant Palestinian population that threatens Israel’s status as a Jewish state. Since liberal Zionism cannot reconcile the Zionist dream of an ethnocratic Jewish state with true democracy, a one-state reality will expose this foundational fallacy. In this way, settler-colonial and apartheid policies are embedded in the liberal Zionist ideology that refuses to face the facts of what Zionism is and always has been.