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CONTROVERSY

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# Colonialism or Something Else?

## *A Reply to Ira Sharkansky's Comment*



RAFAEL REUVENY

Ira Sharkansky's criticism of my article is emotional and sometimes inflammatory, but it is also unconvincing. *Colonialism*, he writes, "is one of the ugliest words available to judge a country's history, and therefore it tilts the analysis heavily toward Israel's fault," suggesting that I seek to blame Israel (he does not specify for what, but presumably he means for perpetuating the conflict). Contrary to what he suggests, my approach is neither polemical nor judgmental. Colonialism is an empirical phenomenon whose attributes have applied to Israeli-Palestinian relations since 1967. I evaluate the conflict in a historical perspective because this approach provides insight into its determinants and suggests how it may ultimately be resolved.

Sharkansky compares my essay to former U.S. president Jimmy Carter's use of the term *apartheid* to describe Israeli-Palestinian relations, which, he says, "makes clear how [Carter] is judging the country." This criticism is empty because I do not assign guilt, but perform an empirically based analysis. In contrast, Sharkansky blames the Palestinians "for years of failure [to resolve the conflict]." He claims the West is "nervous about Islam" and is "perhaps more inclined to understand Israel." It seems

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as if he seeks to ensure continued U.S. support of Israel. Rather than promote an ideologically based position that supports one side, I seek to understand the conflict objectively.

“[T]he ascendance of an aggressive form of Islam,” Sharkansky writes, “make[s] it difficult, if not impossible, for Palestinians to accept anything Israel is likely to offer.” This statement begs the question, What is Israel actually offering that the Palestinians reject? Perhaps the ongoing settlement expansion since 1967, numerous Israeli checkpoints, blockades of Palestinian areas, curfews, and demolition of Palestinian houses? Perhaps the ongoing confiscation of more than 50 percent of the land on the West Bank, much smaller Palestinian water allocations per capita than those given to Jewish settlers, roads closed to Palestinian traffic, or the separation barrier that Israel builds around but inside the West Bank, which the International Court of Justice in the Hague has ruled illegal? Other colonial rulers who faced revolts have taken similar actions.

As Sharkansky notes, some Palestinians reject Israel, claiming Greater Palestine in the name of Allah, but he fails to note that some Israelis reject a Palestinian state, claiming Greater Israel in the name of Jehovah. More important, a point Sharkansky also ignores, both phenomena are not unique. Some colonialists and rebels in other conflicts acted in the names of their gods.

Next, Sharkansky argues that Israel is not the last colonialist: Tahiti is a colony of France, Gibraltar is a colony of Britain, Chechnya is a colony of Russia, and Israel is a colony of the United States. However, his examples are not relevant for our case. Gibraltar and Tahiti are overseas territories whose people are citizens of the home country and are pleased with their status. In contrast, Israel denies citizenship to the Palestinians. Russia annexed Chechnya in the mid-nineteenth century. Arguing that Chechnya is a colony is like arguing that California, which the United States acquired in 1848, is a colony. Finally, Israel is a sovereign country, not a U.S. colony. Sharkansky does not elaborate on his assertion, but further discussion of this point is beneficial.

Sharkansky seems to imply that Israel placed settlers on the West Bank and (until 2005) on the Gaza Strip at the behest of the United States. However, empirical analysis paints a different picture. In 1967, facing threats by Arab states, Israel fought brilliantly and unexpectedly won vast lands. Israeli colonialism, like other examples listed in my article, was only creeping after 1967, but by 1977 was moving along with full force. The country refused to let go of lands lying beyond what most of its people had considered its borders before 1967. When Carter took office in 1977, there were about thirty-three thousand Jewish settlers on the West Bank; today, there are about five hundred thousand. Like almost all colonial rulers, Israel has not annexed the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but rather has treated them as separate administrative units, which the native people have rejected. The U.S. government has condemned the settlements, which have been a liability to the United States, but it has continued to give aid to Israel because it has deemed the connection to Israel beneficial overall. The

U.S. approach to Israel resembles its approach to other colonial rulers after 1945, including France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. However, like these colonial rulers, Israel chose colonialism; the United States did not force the decision on Israel.

Sharkansky charges that I discuss the deterioration of Israeli unity over the decolonization, but ignore the deterioration of Palestinian unity. “Current internal Palestinian disputes,” he writes, “may have reached the status of civil war only after [Reuveny] submitted his manuscript, but nonetheless they amount to an important limitation of his analysis.” This charge is wrong (see pages 338–40 of my article). Sharkansky implies the intra-Palestinian dispute demonstrates that our case is not one of colonialism, but he may not realize that his point further strengthens my thesis. Many colonized societies, including French Algeria, Portuguese Angola, British America, and Dutch Indonesia, exhibited internal fighting. Colonialism and the wars it entailed were traumatic for both the colonizer and the colonized. Our case is no different.

Sharkansky charges that I do not give a time line for my prediction of decolonization. I accept this charge and admit that, like him, I do not know the future. Should the United States remove its aid, decolonization may occur quickly. If the aid continues, the time line may lengthen. After 1945, the U.S. government supported several colonial rulers (for example, France and the Netherlands). It eventually froze its aid until they left their colonies, in effect causing decolonization. Similarly, the U.S. government may conclude that the costs of Israeli colonialism outweigh the benefits of keeping Israel content and thus force it to decolonize. That said, it is not relevant to my thesis to suggest when this change will occur.

Sharkansky suggests that I am certain Israel will decolonize. This suggestion is misleading; as I write in the article, only the future will tell. He argues that I fail to consider other possibilities for the future, in addition to decolonization. This claim also is not true; as I elaborate in the article, historical colonial situations have ended in several ways, of which decolonization was but one. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to evaluate Sharkansky’s proposed long-term scenarios.

*The Gaza Strip becomes a failed state.* This situation cannot be a stable long-term outcome. The failed state would likely attack Israel, which would probably reject a failed-state Gaza as an end game.

*Fatah has some control in cities and villages on the West Bank under Israeli oversight.* Such indefinitely continued colonialism is unlikely. Unlike Native Americans or Australian Aborigines, the Palestinians have not been demographically exterminated and probably never will be. The U.S. and Australian outcome—a binational, colonized-colonizer state in which native peoples are citizens—is unlikely. Israel rejects this possibility and probably will continue to do so indefinitely. The Palestinians will continue to fight for independence, as other colonized peoples have done.

*Israel acts forcefully against Palestinians.* All military campaigns eventually end, so this situation also cannot be a long-term outcome. In any event, this outcome does

not contradict my model. Historical colonizers sometimes launched massive attacks in response to colonial revolts, only to find themselves facing similar revolts later.

*Hamas gains control in the West Bank and attacks Israel, causing Israeli retaliation and Palestinian refugee flight to Jordan.* Some colonial revolts have generated refugee flows. Would the Israeli psyche accept this outcome after what happened during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948? Would the international psyche accept it? I think not. A much smaller military action by Israel in the Gaza Strip in March 2008, which resulted in more than 130 Palestinian casualties in a few days, led to Israeli public protests, international outcry, and U.S. pressure to stop the action. Israel complied.

*Jordan reabsorbs the Palestinian areas of the West Bank, and Egypt reabsorbs the Gaza Strip.* As Sharkansky himself notes, this outcome is unlikely. In any case, it cannot persist in the long term. After years of Israeli colonialism, the Palestinian areas have taken the form of many enclaves surrounded by Israeli-controlled lands. Changing the name of these enclaves' overseer will not resolve the Palestinian problem, and the conflict will likely continue.

*Jordan will become Palestine, leading to a war with Israel.* Even if the Palestinians in Jordan take over the country, the colonial situation on the West Bank will continue. In the past, as some colonial people gained freedom, others became more emboldened to call for it. Observing the Palestinians' success in Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, Palestinians probably would reject indefinite Israeli control. Thus, this outcome also cannot be stable in the long run.

At the end of his critique, Sharkansky claims that my essay appears academic, but is driven by anti-Israeli ideology. He calls this aspect "disturbing, both for an Israeli citizen and for the quality of what passes as political science." He goes on to compare my work to the "doubtful quality" of the recent book by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, who have been vilified as anti-Semitic because they argue that the Israeli lobby in the United States has influenced policy.

Emotional and inflammatory attacks are always easier to launch than a head-on confrontation with empirical evidence. This ease is further demonstrated when Sharkansky tries to support his position by lauding Israel's economy, democracy, and universities. He asserts that Israeli Arabs score closer to Jews in income, longevity, and health than African Americans do in comparison with white Americans. He claims that Israeli leaders muddle through unpleasant alternatives, guided by humanitarianism in dealing with the Palestinians, and that they restrain their use of military power against Palestinians who attack Israeli civilians. The term *colonialism*, he argues, obscures the Israeli attempts to separate from the Palestinians.

Whether Sharkansky's assertions about African Americans are correct is irrelevant. His lumping of Palestinians and Israeli Arab citizens suggests that he holds a belief similar to that held by former Israeli prime ministers Golda Meir and Menachem Begin: there is no such thing as a Palestinian people; they are simply Arabs. Whether the Palestinians are classified as Arabs, however, does not change the colonial reality in the West Bank and (until 2005) the Gaza Strip.

Further, Sharkansky's claim that Israeli leaders restrain their use of military power against Palestinians who attack civilians is not supported empirically. From the start of the second Palestinian revolt on September 29, 2000, to March 31, 2008, Israelis killed 4,719 Palestinians, of whom 4,608 were killed by security forces, 2,168 did not take part in the hostilities, and 865 may not have taken part in the hostilities. Palestinians killed 1,044 Israelis, of whom 715 were civilians (B'Tselem 2008). These statistics hardly suggest Israeli restraint.

Ultimately, Sharkansky's statements about Israel's wonders do not negate my thesis. Colonial rulers such as the United States, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and France had many of the qualities Sharkansky attributes to Israel. They were wealthy, had great universities, and pursued democracy and humanism at home. They even pursued aspects of these norms in their colonies—that is, as long as the colonized people did not seek independence. Facing revolts, however, these colonial rulers and others unleashed their military might to subdue the colonized people, ignoring their demands for political self-determination. Then, in the midst of these wars, they found themselves facing unpleasant alternatives. Staying entailed an endless war in which they would inevitably cross moral and legal lines considered unacceptable at home (for example, torture and collective punishments). Leaving risked at least some chaos at home as settlers and their supporters rejected decolonization. Partial withdrawal meant continued war. Israel exhibits these historical attributes, including its attempts to separate partially from the Palestinians, which Sharkansky lauds.

Through a deconstruction of Sharkansky's emotional and sometimes inflammatory critique, it is apparent that Israel is in fact a colonialist state. The question remains, Will it ever decolonize? As I argue in my article, we can use history as our laboratory. History suggests that the answer is: Yes, sooner or later, Israel's benefactor, the United States, will probably decide to back its words with determined actions. Once the U.S. government removes its support until Israel decolonizes, the Last Colonialist will deposit its title in a final resting place in the annals of history.

## Reference

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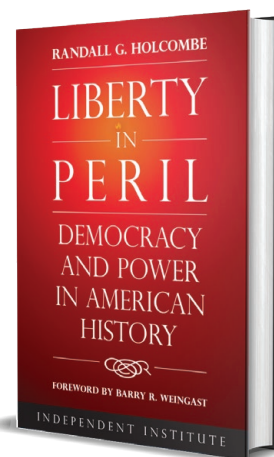
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