

Rashid Khalidi's Palestine Myths: Part II



by Andrew E. Harrod

“There’s an Israeli people now” and “Palestinians have to figure out how we’re going to live with them,” stated Columbia University Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies [Rashid Khalidi](#) during a December 14 *Jadaliyya* [webinar](#). True to form, this former Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) propagandist made more than his fair share of usual questionable and skewed statements, even if his presentation contained a few valuable insights.

Khalidi addressed *Jadaliyya*’s “Gaza in Context: Collaborative Teach-In Series” in an episode on “Colonial Narratives (Part 2).” [Bassam Haddad](#), director of George Mason University’s Middle East and Islamic Studies Program, moderated for

Jadaliyya.

Although Khalidi described Zionism, the movement to reestablish a Jewish national home in Israel, as “settler-colonial,” a denunciation ubiquitous throughout Middle East studies, he nonetheless conceded Zionism’s nationalist character. “The Zionist project was a settler-colonial project,” but also a “national project and, in that respect, it was different from every other settler-colonial project that I know of,” he stated. “Most settler colonial projects are extensions of the population of the mother country,” like the French settling in Algeria. But Zionists “had their own national objective” in “a separate movement before they entered into a transactional relationship” to settle the Holy Land under the post-World War I League of Nations mandate given to an imperial Great Britain.

Khalidi’s analysis of nation-state developments in the Middle East undercut the claims often advanced by him and others that a [relatively modern](#) Palestinian nationalism represents an indigenous group. “The nation states that we see in this part of the world are entirely recent. They’re the creations of the rise of nationalism and imperialist partitions,” he said, for “most Palestinians didn’t think of living in a Palestinian state in 1800 or 1850.” People in the region “thought in pre-national terms in the eighteenth century or the early nineteenth century” like “religion,” “family,” “belonging to the Ottoman Empire,” “local patriotism,” or the “cities and towns and villages they lived in,” he added.

As an example of nascent Palestinian national consciousness, Khalidi noted the 1911 establishment in Ottoman-ruled Jaffa of the [Filastin](#) (Palestine) Arabic newspaper. Yet scholars have described its Christian Arab founder as a “staunch secularist and an Ottoman patriot.” He would have had considerable discomfort with the later [dominant Islamist, jihadist trends](#) in the Arab community in the British mandate, which have continued to the [present](#) under brutal groups like Hamas.

This historically deficient national consciousness among various Arab communities in what became the Palestine Mandate significantly weakens Khalidi's demand for any unification of this territory in a state. There has been no "Israeli acceptance of the right of the Palestinian people to full self-determination to independence and to statehood in a viable, contiguous, sovereign independent Palestinian state," he bemoaned. Yet increasingly observers, including former National Security Adviser John Bolton, [note](#) that Arabs in Gaza and in the West Bank have [little commonality](#) either past and present, and therefore should become [independent polities](#) in the future.

Rather than solidifying a stable state, the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) under the Oslo peace accords process begun in 1993 has been a [disaster](#), creating a corrupt regime that only incites jihadist terrorism against Israel. Even [observers](#) sympathetic to the Palestinian cause have noted that the Palestinian national movement represented by the PA is degenerating into a dead end, as the dictatorial PA president Mahmoud Abbas has no practical successor. Khalidi should therefore not wonder that Israel has always offered Palestinians "less than a state" [in the words](#) of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a month before this [cautious peacemaker's](#) 1995 assassination. He soberly demanded Israeli "security control of the Jordan River Valley," Khalidi recalled, such that "Israel is the sole sovereign, and the Palestinians live on sufferance under Israeli military control."

This dangerous nature of Arab opposition to Zionism affirms the [words](#) (as misquoted by Khalidi) of the legendary Israeli diplomat [Abba Eban](#) that "Palestinians have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity" for peace. Yet, despite the Palestinian cause embodying [incessant jihadist rejection](#) throughout history of the Jewish state's right to exist, Khalidi proclaimed Eban's famous aphorism "one of the great

lies of the twentieth and twenty-first century.” “In fact, the ones who have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity are the Israelis,” he said, despite [repeated Arab refusals](#) of Zionist territorial compromise going back to 1937. “This could have been settled conceivably at some stage by the Israelis accepting the idea that the Palestinians are a people with sovereign rights in their own homeland and figuring out some way to share it.”

Amidst Khalidi’s fictions, one concrete fact emerged that offered some hope that Israel might eventually finding peace with its neighbors. “The idea that Zionism has created a weak and fragile entity that at a single blow will shatter, I think, should probably have been put to bed by now,” he said, adding that Israeli Jews “can go away or will go away in my view is a fantasy.” Just as the “indigenous South African population has had to figure out how to live with the former dominant colonial-settler population” of whites after apartheid, Palestinians “in a decolonial context” will have to live with Israelis “on the basis of equality.”

Khalidi’s myth-making must cannot be taken seriously, as any objective observer can see that Israel has successfully built a strong Jewish nation, while its Palestinian Arab enemies have developed little beyond the infrastructure and soul-killing psychoses for futile conflict with Israel. Palestinians will live in equality with Israel only when they are ready to accept practical arrangements for demilitarized Palestinians to pursue peaceful lives alongside a strong Israel able to defend itself in a hostile region.

If they are to achieve that, they will need to ignore academic ideologues like Khalidi, whose distortions of the region’s history and needs serve only to thwart a much-needed reckoning with truth.

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