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A Dream Deterred: Palestine from Total War to Total Peace

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As the century of Auschwitz, apartheid, and the A-bomb recedes into the past, we might be tempted to agree with Erri de Luca's claim that '[h]umanity will banish the twentieth century, the most infamous and murderous of all, from its history; *we should forget it*' (quoted in Virilio 2000, p. xi, emphasis in the original). In time, perhaps. For now, however, the 'most infamous and murderous century' lives on in the complex dynamics of social memory and in ongoing developments on the ground. Nowhere is this truer than in Israel/Palestine, where the sixtieth anniversary of the state of Israel's creation recently provided a platform for starkly divergent interpretations of this pivotal moment in the long twentieth century. For Israeli Jews, 1948 was surely a kind of beginning, but even more profoundly, it represented the end of a nightmare. For Palestinians, the *Nakba* (catastrophe) remains the point of collective trauma generating a host of subsequent and continuing traumas.

Many Palestinians undoubtedly experience this history as a bitter continuation of the much older story of anti-Semitism that Zionism sought to end for Jews (Massad 2005). Yet the post-1948 history of Palestine also speaks eloquently to the realities of the world that has partially overwritten that story – the world we inhabit today. For six decades, the Palestinian drama has been an undeniably global one. This significance is a function not only of diasporic realities, but also of Palestine's diagnostic relationship to ongoing structures of colonization, militarization, and social acceleration (Collins 2009). Far from being simply shaped by processes of globalization, Palestine has served as a laboratory for many of these processes, a kind of monadic unit that contains clues to a series of global truths in the way that a cell contains the genetic coding of an entire body.

This chapter explores Palestine in the context of the global environment that emerged immediately after World War II. I wish to relocate the *Nakba* and the Palestinian refugee crisis in relation to several global processes that converged during this period: the gradual shift to a system of postcolonial control alongside the continuing successes of settler colonial projects; the rise of *deterrence* as a politico-military logic threatening to eclipse the practice of politics itself; the transition from *total war* to what Paul Virilio calls a project of *total peace*; the construction of an international human rights and humanitarian regime; and the consequent blurring of the line between militarism and humanitarianism. In this light, the *Nakba* prophetically illuminates a larger set of stories whose full significance is only emerging today.

1948 and the triumph of settler colonialism

Along with a wave of decolonization, the postwar years brought a series of victories for settler colonial projects. Consider the year 1948. Ideologically armed with the Truman Doctrine, the United States emerged as a global power and flexed its muscles by leading the Berlin Airlift, an early example of militarized humanitarianism. The list of countries that aided in the effort reads like a who's who of settler colonialism: Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Internally, the US was moving away from the 'retribalization' approach of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act – an approach that relied explicitly on blood quantum requirements to determine the 'allotment' each individual would receive from the state – and toward a 'detrribalization' approach that aimed to move the country's indigenous population into cities (Fixico 1986).

In the same year, the Zionist movement won Israel's independence through the near-destruction of Palestinian society and the defeat of Arab military resistance. By 1949, more than 500 Palestinian villages and numerous urban neighbourhoods were emptied of their inhabitants, and roughly 750,000 people were made refugees (Pappe 2006). It is a measure of the ideological success of Zionism that during the following decades, this act of cataclysmic colonization was typically viewed, to quote Amos Oz (1983, p. 22), as a 'brutal twist of fate, unexpected, undesired, unconsidered by the early [Zionist] pioneers'. More recently, however, the release of previously classified documents and the gradual entry of Palestinian voices into the mainstream scholarly arena have opened up space for a radically different interpretation of 1948. On this view, the conflict that resulted in Israel's creation was a *bona fide*, even paradigmatic case of ethnic cleansing (Pappe 2006).¹