**THE FRAMING OF THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE BY THE EARLY PALESTINIAN PRESS: ZIONIST SETTLER-COLONIALISM AND THE NEWSPAPER *FILASTIN*, 1912-1922**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article uses a new conceptual approach to the question of Palestine, namely the settler-colonialism paradigm. This paradigm enabled scholars to develop the depiction of Zionism as a settler-colonialist project. However new approaches which have focused on Zionism as a settler-colonialist movement have, in fact, neglected indigenous Palestinian perspectives. The article advocates further refinement to the discourse of anti-colonialism by revisiting early Palestinian perceptions of Zionism. The article also shows that in the early stages of Zionism the movement was clearly depicted as a settler-colonialist project by Palestinian journalists and press commentators of the newspaper *Filastin*. However the existential implications of such an analysis were ignored by the Palestinian political elite, an oversight which also contributed to the 1948 Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe).

**Introduction:**

**The Paradigm of Settler-Colonialism**

The scholarly discussion on the origins of the Palestinian national movement has travelled a substantial distance since the topic was first debated as a political issue after the events of 1948. The most important leap forward, in scholarly terms, was in the 1990s. Until then the discussion was about the authenticity of the Palestinian national identity and when this was not doubted any more, the focus shifted to questions about the uniqueness of the Palestinian case study and in particular its relationship with the Zionist movement during the formative years of its emergence or birth.

The consensual position emerging was that one could trace the movement’s origins to a pre-Zionist period and yet acknowledge the impact Zionism had on it when it matured into a more solid collective identity of the people who lived in Mandatory Palestine. Zionism was only one, important as it was, factor shaping that identity. A fine example of such a historical inquiry is Rashid Kahlidi’s *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (Khalidi 1997). Khalidi analyses comprehensively the various constituents that formed the national consciousness among Palestinians; stressing that not all of them were related to Zionism. Like Muhammad Muslih (1988) before him, Khalidi depicts Zionism as a catalyst that instigated Palestinian nationalism but never contributed to its creation (a point also made recently by Manuel Hassasian in a very thoughtful article on the topic) (Hassassian2001-02: 50-60).James L. Gelvin, on the other, hand attributes a far more decisive role to the Zionist movement but hastened to explain that this did not delegitimise Palestinian national demands and more importantly, affected only one layer in a community that adhered to a multitude of overlapping identities (as the rest of the Arab peoples did at the same time) (Gelvin 2005).

Recent works by Beshara Doumani and Gordon A. Welty, to mention but two authors, looked at Palestinian nationalism as an essential identity formed by the local elite in response to economic and political realities in an ever changing Ottoman empire – which included domestic reforms as well external interventions by European capitalism, colonialism and Zionism (Welty1995:15-35). Others, yet, pointed to proto-national Palestinian action and discourse either in the 1830s, as Kimmerling and Migdal did, or in an even more distant past, as Haim Gerber suggested (Gerber 1998: 563-572).

This search for the uniqueness of the movement was recently endowed with a new paradigm developed out of older conceptual attempts to understand situations such as Palestine on the eve of the First World War. The new paradigm is settler colonialism: a perspective that has already warranted two academic journals and inspired very original and thought provoking new historiographical takes on the realty in Israel and Palestine at that crucial juncture. Settler colonialism depicts the Zionist movement as a project that had all the characteristics of a colonialist enterprise, initiated by people coming from Europe and settling in the rest of the world, but who developed their own, and new, national identity within the colony or the colonised area (as happened in Australia, the USA and elsewhere).David Fieldhouse called it the project of colonisation as distinct from the project of colonialism in an early presentation of this paradigm (Fieldhouse 1981).

When it developed into a working paradigm settler colonialism was described as a global and transnational phenomenon, and as much a thing of the past as a thing of the present. There is no such thing as neo-settler colonialism or post-settler colonialism because settler colonialism is a resilient formation that rarely ends. Not all migrants are settlers; as Patrick Wolfe has noted, settlers come to stay. They are founders of political orders who carry with them a distinct sovereign capacity. And settler colonialism is not colonialism: settlers want Indigenous people to vanish (but can make use of their labour before they are made to disappear). Sometimes settler colonial forms operate within colonial ones, sometimes they subvert them, and sometimes they replace them. But even if colonialism and settler colonialism interpenetrate and overlap, they remain separate as they co-define each other.

Patrick Wolfe, Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (Wolfe 1980; Cavanagh 2013; Veracini 2010) conceptualised further this model based on the distinction made by David Fieldhouse between colonisation and colonialism, the former being the successful reproduction of European society in a colonial context, rather that extending the influence of the metropolis empire as in the case of colonialism. Depictions of Zionist ethnic cleansing and genocide, Zionist narrativesof transfer and of settler-indigenisation, as well as Zionist conceptsof displacement and racialisation, have all been put forward. Gabriel Piterbergadded the cultural dimension to the phenomenon by exploring the hegemonic narratives of settler colonialism and pointed to three major factors informing them: exceptionality of each settler nation, the exclusiveness of settlers’ subjectivity, the rejection of recognising the presence of the colonised people along with the subsequent colonisation of the settler societies.He found Zionism a case study that harbours all these characteristics (Piterberg 2008). Although Piterberg points to the results of the project as determining the phenomenon, and less the intentions, the subject of this article assumed the result from a clear analysis of the intentions.Piterberg further concludes that the presence of the Palestinian Arabs on the land destined for colonisation was ‘the single most significant factor that determined the shape taken by the settlers’ nation’ (Piterberg 2008: 62).

These general and particular features of settler colonialism are examined in this article. I argue here that one particular Palestinian voice, the journalists and editors of the newspaper *Filastin*, viewed Zionism around the First World War very much as these scholars depicted it more than a century later. These journalists shared the analysis of the present-day scholars. One of the reasons was that this particular voice, like others in Palestinian politics after the 1948 War, focused on constructing a national identity and deserted what I describe here as the angst that dictated focusing on survival, leaving the luxury of engaging with modern collective identities for a later stage. The particular circumstances of the settler colonialist project did not allow this luxury and sequence to the native population.

The settler-colonialism paradigm focuses on those who colonised, invaded and settled. The victims are the same whether they are the genocided indigenous population of the Americas or the colonised natives of South Africa and Palestine. As their fate proves they were not fighting only against classical colonial exploitation but against their physical or conceptual elimination as a nation in their own right. The paradigm focuses less on the native’s perception of the settlers or the motives for the settlement and much more on the methodology used to eliminate the native and the consequences of this act of elimination. For obvious reasons, when it comes to the indigenous populations of the Americans and Australia, it may be more difficult to assess how the natives viewed settler colonialism– although it is clear how they reacted to it. Palestine, if indeed one accepts even in part the applicability of the paradigm to this case study, offered a very articulate, documented and written response to ‘their’ settler colonialism. This local view is described in this article not as regular feature of national discourse or even liberation, like the works we have mentioned and others, but as an existential angst, warranted by the very nature of settler colonialism. It was angst voiced in a very definitive period, just before and during the First World War and has impacted on the Palestinian very existence ever since, and in particular when the angst proved to be validated by the events of the 1948 war in Palestine.

I describe in this article how a certain Palestinian voice, in the formative years of Palestinian nationalism, viewed the settler colonial features of the Zionist project. It is a view absent from most of the settler-colonial paradigm engagement with the topic, as the focus there, for obvious reasons, is on validating the applicability of the paradigm to the Zionist case study. When examined from this perspective, these voices from the past show that long before the paradigm was articulated in the West, it was, intuitively and inductively, understood by a certain group of Palestinians. They analysed Zionism as a settler colonial movement, without of course using the term, but by attributing to the movement the very essential characteristics the paradigm recognises in such historical situations.

This view in the past is very different from the way we attempt as scholars to articulate it in the present. The examination of Zionism in the scholarly world is deductive – it carved out from within a general theory or concept – and move between analysis as nationalism or colonialism. This is a highly important intellectual search which will undoubtedly continue. What I suggest in this article is to present the Zionist project from the perspective of the Palestinians in the formative period in which they became, as the scholarly consensus would have it, a national movement. Their perception does not only add another input to the debate of what Zionism was and is, but also allows us to understand what was unique in this particular case study of the more general phenomenon of Nationalism. The Zionist project, I assert here, was appraised with an existential angst, because it was a colonisation by people who had intended to stay and dispossess – nationalism was not enough for this – a realisation that lends credibility to the settler colonial paradigmatic analysis of Zionism.

What was articulated in the newspaper was an angst against a potential existential danger, at a time when the settlers were weak and a tiny minority in the land. Maybe this gap between the menace attributed to Zionism by these Palestinians on the one hand and the settlers’ feeble presence at the time, on the other, explains why the angst subsided after the war. The new reality after the First World War, of a British Palestine, transformed the nature and discourse of the Palestinian national movement. It adopted the discourse of liberation (from British rule) and its elite focused on constructing a new collective culture and identity. Such an agenda in the period 1882-1948 may have been a luxury the Palestinians could ill afford and maybe a more concentrated focus on the angst would have changed the course of history.

The particular voice I have chosen, the newspaper *Filastin*, gives the impression that Palestinian existential angst about Zionism, dominating the newspaper’s articles even before the First World War, gives a clear idea about a burgeoning nationalist movement in Palestine seeking to engage with fundamental Palestinian national questions. The Palestinians ever since the early days of the newspaper *Filastin*would continue to move uneasily between the luxuries they did not possess to formulate strategies and ponder about collective identities and visions on the one hand, and the perceived, and possibly real, sense of existential danger, they were constantly faced with, on the other. It seems that long before the Nakba, Zionism, even as a feeble movement and with no power or capacity to be an existential danger, triggered an angst about the potential danger it held in its power.

*Filastin*’s analysis was spot on, if judged from the perspective of 1948. The newspaper even had some initial ideas of how to confront the danger, but these ideas were ignored by the political elite and the newspaper itself became more partisan and was dragged into internal political bickering and divisions and was not listened to as a consensual voice. But its pre-First World War analyses of Zionism as a settlers’ movement with plans that could lead to the destruction of the local population proves two points obscured so far in the rich historiographical literature on Zionism and Palestine. The first is that a large number of Palestinians did not ignore Zionism before 1918, were fully aware of its inner thinking and discussion about the native population and consequently were genuinely worried about an imminent catastrophe. The second is that if one revisits what the settlers wrote and said about the Palestinians, one can see that the former were aware of the latter’s existence as an obstacle that had to be removed and were cognizant of the particularly troublesome role, intellectuals, of the sort that owned *Filastin* and wrote in it, could play in thwarting the Zionist project. The paradigms of the past are not that different from the new ones suggested today.

The source I have chosen, the newspaper *Filastin*, has already been a subject for a textual analysis as a national tract (Bracy 2010).As mentioned, I do not wish to challenge or repeat this. I am looking at it as a venue in which at early stage survival rather than nationalism was discussed. The newspaper was shut down for several months in 1920 and 1921 but re-appeared regularly from 1922 onwards and then it seems the national discourse took over and the angst subsided. Nationalism had the ability to empower the native society and assert its collective identity; but alas it did not save the people from their 1948 fate. The people who articulated what I call here existential angst, and repressed it later on, were key factors in Palestinian politics in the Mandatory period and as much as the newspaper reflected their opinions, it also shaped those of others in all walks in life in Palestinian society (the newspaper was distributed free to villages in the Jaffa district with more than 100 inhabitants and others were aware of its content, even if they were illiterate, through the public reading of the newspaper in the village centre) (Khalidi 1997: 57).

**Zionism and the Early Palestinian Press**

The early Palestinian newspapers, appearing in the wake of the Young Turk revolution contributed immensely to the consolidation of Palestinian national identity in the late Ottoman period and during the British Mandate years. They created, as indeed Benedict Anderson and other theorists of nationalism suggested a modern press would, a sense of a joint community – integrating the various parts of the country even before the British made it one recognisable geo-political unit by merging the three Ottoman sub-districts of Palestine of the nineteenth century (Anderson 2006).

Next to the first Jerusalemite newspaper, *al-Quds,* two Greek Orthodox newspapers stood out among the thirty six newspapers that appeared between 1908 and 1914: the Haifa- based *al-Karmil* and the Jaffa-based *Filastin*. In their earlier issues, Zionism did not occupy a central part in what, in hindsight, can be called their national agenda (Marwah 1974: 216).The negligence of the local governors, education, the plight of the *falah* (peasant),the state of local agriculture in general, and issues of personal security were far more important in the eyes of the journalists and were not, to begin with, associated with the Zionist project (Yehoushua 1969: 218).

The angst about Zionism from around 1882 to 1908 was voiced elsewhere, but the same perception would be articulated later in *Filastin* and other newspapers. In the last days of the Ottoman Empire, it was the Ottoman parliament that became the main venue for voicing the early Palestinians concerns about the potentially disastrous impact Zionism could have on their lives and futures. In this respect, the representative Shukri al-Asali should be mentioned as a pioneering figure on that particular stage (Khalidi 1982: 223-224). Next to him, Salman al-Taji al-Farouqi, a leading member in the Patriotic Ottoman party, articulated early on the need to find legal ways, through legislation and alerting the media, to stop Zionist immigration to, and land purchase in, Palestine. In 1891, a group of Jerusalem Arab notables petitioned the government in Istanbul to halt Jewish immigration: ‘The Jews are taking all the lands out of the hands of the Muslims, taking all the commerce into their hands and bringing arms into the country’ (Mandel 1976: 44). In similar vein, Yusuf Diya Pasha al-Khalidi wrote to the Chief Rabbi of France appealing to him to halt Jewish colonisation, predicting it would lead to a violent conflict: ‘There were still uninhabited countries where one could settle millions of poor Jews…But in the name of God let Palestine be left in peace’ (Dowty 2008: 63).

A famous early reference to such bleak scenarios appeared in Najib Azouri’s *Reveil de la Nation Arab* published in 1905, warning that the Zionist movement wished to establish a state (he thought it would stretch over a larger part of the Eastern Mediterranean) (Mandel 1976).The potential of its being a catastrophic force was also recognised by a group of Palestinian intellectuals who distributed a leaflet in May 1911, signed by ‘the Ottoman National Party’ (*al-Hizb al-Watani al-Uthmanni)*, which described Zionism as the ‘awful wave which beats our shores: it is the source of deceitful acts which we experience like a downpour and which are to be feared more than going alone at the dead of night’ and more acutely: ‘it is also an omen of our future exile from our homeland and of our departure from our homes and property’. Zionism as a Tsunami that would dispossess the Palestinians was not sheer poetry, or Oriental fantasy – it was accurate 1911 prediction of what settler colonialism could achieve in a relatively short historical period (Kayali 1978:26).

The readiness of *al-Karmil* and *Filastin* to take on the call – as mentioned not necessarily in a central place to begin with - alerted indeed the educated urban elite in Palestine. The media was the main vehicle through which that particular group in society apprehended and reacted to the Zionist presence in Palestine. The story was very different in rural Palestine. Most of the people living there knew more about early Zionism from practical experience rather than from media information; in this respect Zionism was more acute as an existential threat to them, although just a small number of the one thousand Palestinian villages had Zionist neighbours – for many alas, the real danger revealed itself only in 1948 when it was too late.

Leafing through newspapers in their early years one can see how the argumentation against Zionism was slowly built and articulated. From very early on Zionism was presented as an existential danger – economically, socially and politically. Zionism was defined as an expansionist movement wishing to take over the country. Even the possibility of the eventual creation of a Jewish state instead of the Arab-Ottoman provinces was predicted (Yehoshua 1969: 218-222).This prediction was not based on conspiracy theories of an omnipotent Jewish movement or any other such anti-Semitic paranoia. It was a realisation of the zeal and capacity of the settlers. Throughout the criticism you can trace admiration for the tenacity of the project and at times even a call to emulate Zionism technologically, scientifically and organisationally.[[1]](#footnote-2)So in hindsight early Zionism was read for what it would become. The ability to grasp its threatening essence was helped by the distinction made between the veteran Jewish community and the newcomers who were regarded as aliens. The old community, Hayishuv Hayashan, had strong social and economic ties to the rest of the Palestinian society. It was reported also that this old community too did not view favourably the newcomers; of course this changed after the First World War.

Zionism became a central issue when Britain occupied Palestine and established a League of Nations’ Mandate there. Early suspicions of the pro-Zionist bias of the new rulers arose when the Zionist committee of delegates (*Va’ad Hazirim*) was invited by Britain in April 1918 to survey the country and examine the, still secret then, pledge by the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, to create a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. The committee transformed the Jews in Palestine from religious millet into a political movement with a representative body, claiming the right to own Palestine.

The urban Palestinian elite were not idle or passive and reacted by establishing their own representative bodies, the largest of which was the Christian-Muslim association of Jerusalem. From the first conference in Jerusalem in 1919 which convened all these new associations on annual basis, it was clear that Palestinian political protest was against the Zionist project and not the British Mandate as such. In the first years of the Mandate, many of these outfits were associated with the short lived Hashemite government in Damascus (1918-1920) and the newspapers reflected this shade of the local national identity; although whether one supported Palestine as part of a Greater Syria or not – the rejection of the Zionist project was the same. In many ways, the end of the Greater Syria option with the expulsion of Faisal from Damascus allowed activists and journalists alike to focus even more on the Zionist danger – as became quite evident in the third national conference in Haifa in 1920 (Zuaytar 1979: 38-41).Five successive conferences later revealed that this mode of politics could not transform the British pro-Zionist policy on the ground. But, nonetheless, the leadership of the movement still made an effort not to enter into a direct clash with the British rulers of the country. The local press reflected the doubts about the wisdom of this policy as it exposed alas also the internal divisions and divided loyalties of an urban Arab Ottoman elite. The newspapers and the elite alike were not connected enough to the growing plight of the Palestinians in the rural areas; where indeed the first signs of the destruction dreaded before the First World War began to materialise. Zionist Land purchase and British support for Jewish economic separatism and predominance began to impoverish and ruin the Palestinian countryside. The lack of success and the increase in the Zionist presence and power aggravated existing lines of divisions in the society between Christians and Muslims, notable families such as the Husaynis and the Nashashibis and between the city and the countryside. The press sometimes represented these sectarian and fragmented loyalties, but on the issue of Zionism more often than not, tried, unsuccessfully, to promote a unified position. By 1919, the politicians of the national movement hoped they had the power to eliminate Zionism with words, and less with deeds, before it eliminated them: ‘We will push the Zionists into the sea or they will push us into the desert’, declared the Christian-Muslim society of Jaffa (Morris 1999: 91).

The number of newspapers increased during the Mandatory period and some of them appeared, more frequently. The press became much more important in the political scene, either as an organ of a particular party or faction or as an actor calling for the overcoming of the internal rifts. Zionism was now not only analysed; the newspapers also suggested strategies and actions to be taken in the face of its growing presence and deemed menace. The newspapers called for the abolition of the Balfour Declaration and a stop to Jewish immigration and colonisation. It demanded an end to selling land to the Zionist movement and called for the solution of the Palestine ‘problem’ by appointing a national independent government. Although hardly described so by mainstream historiography it was an anti-colonialist press *par excellence*.

Next to the general discussion of Zionism, each drama or development on the ground was reported and analysed. The term Anglo-Zionist imperialism became associated with most of these developments (Najjar 1980: 18). The Zionist project was described as far more imminent danger than it was in the Ottoman period: a danger to the Arab character and the very existence of the people living there. A perception that begs another question: why was the prognosis offered by what Bracy so aptly calls ‘the Printing Class’ not followed by the political classes? Until the revolt of 1936, the press seemed to be more vociferous and active than the politicians and indeed was deemed by the CID, the secret police of the Mandate, to be more dangerous was monitored more tightly and censored more severely than the politicians of the day (Najjar1980: 82).

In hindsight, we realise today that the newspapers did not succeed in preparing the population for what lay ahead in 1948; and maybe even more professional or influential newspapers would not have done better, given the very extraordinary circumstances that allowed the Zionist movement to dispossess by force the Palestinians while the rest of the world remained silent.

Within this trajectory, moving from minimal interest in Zionism to transformation into a growing alarm at the danger posed by Zionism, ending with a futile call for action, *Filastin* stands out, in accelerating through the process as if acting upon all three stages at a very early moment in Palestine’s modern history – around the First World War. Given the newspaper’s importance among the elite and in national history, its own particular periodisation of awareness and reaction sheds light on the role Zionism played in the Palestinian national psyche and consciousness in the formative years of the conflict (Kahalid 1997: 26).

**The Evolution of *Filastin’s* Attitude to Zionism**

*Filastin* was not immediately recruited to the struggle against Zionism but once it was, circa 1912, it never stopped. In the early issues, Zionism appeared on the second and third pages and quite a lot of the material was written by readers. But already one could see the distinction made between the stance towards Judaism (positive and empathetic) and Zionism (critical and later antagonistic).There is even a willingness to give Zionism a voice to try and allay some of the fears the movement had aroused among the local population. *The Hacham Bashi* (chief rabbi of a sort) of Salonika was interviewed and conveyed a message from the founding father of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, a message of reassurance: the Zionist movement had no ambition to create a ‘Jewish kingdom’(*Filastin*, 12 August 1912).A more ominous interview with Max Nordau, the second in command in the Zionist movement, was published few issues later. Nordau declared that the movement’s desire was to bring as many Jews to Palestine as possible (*Filastin*, 26 August 1911). The two interviews were published without comment. They appeared in a special column, *Bada’i Ghayrurha* (the commodities of the others) in which Zionists were allowed to present the movement in their own words.

In its early wish to understand and to give credit to the movement’s claim of benevolence, the newspaper also reported the potential economic benefit that could emerge if indeed Zionism did not wish to colonise and take over. The newspaper reported quite positively on the settlement of Jews on non-cultivated land (singling out the settlement in ‘AynQara) (*Filastin*, 5 June 1911). For a while, the newspaper went as far as asking Zionism’s most severe critics and opponents, such as al-Asali, to tone down their objections. At that stage, the newspaper was quite loyal to the Ottoman government, and therefore, part of its willingness not to confront Zionism too much had to do with its wish to follow the general line of the Young Turks. But this changed after a short while when the Zionist strategy was better understood and comprehended (*Filastin*, 2 August 1911).

It is around the summer of 1913 that the admiration for Zionist capabilities was substituted with a realisation that all these positive features of the project had the potential, and the intent, to be used against the local Palestinian population. Indeed if one thinks about the difference between the early Zionists (as they were called in Zionist jargon, the First ‘*Aliya* – the first wave of Zionist migration to Palestine) and the Zionist new comers in the days of the newspaper’s appearance (the Second ‘*Aliya*) one can vindicate the transformation in the newspaper’s views. The early settlers were classical colonialists who came with the double notion of exploitation and modernisation. The second wave, which became the core group from which the leadership of modern Israel emerged, came as potential dispossessors: wishing to have as much of the land as possible with as few Palestinians in it as possible.[[2]](#footnote-3)

One visitor, Ahad Ha’am (Asher Tzvi Ginsberg), noted as early as 1891 that the Palestinians would sooner rather than later understand the danger Zionism constituted to their very existence. In ‘Truth from the Land of Israel’ he wrote: ‘the Jews abroad tend to consider all the Arabs as desert savages…but this is a serious mistake’ in his view:

The Arabs, and especially those in the cities, understand our deeds and our desires in Eretz Israel, but they keep quiet and pretend not to understand, since they do not see our activities as a threat to their future…However, if the time comes when the life of our people in Eretz Israel develops to the point of encroaching upon the native population, they will not easily yield their place. (Ahad Ha’am 2003: 14-15)

The diaries and memoirs of these Jewish settlers are a testimony that the existential angst of the Palestinians writing in the local press was not ill founded. In the days the early references in *Filastin* and other newspapers were made, the main objective of the Zionist activists of the Second ‘*Aliya* was to substitute the Palestinian labourers working in the more veteran Jewish plantations and colonies. David Ben-Gurion, then only a leading activist, before becoming the ultimate leader of the community, described the Palestinian workers and farmers as *Beit Mihush* (an infested hotbed of pain). He also conjured, within this medical metaphor, of Jewish Labour as a panacea. In his and other settlers’ letters, ‘Hebrew’ workers appeared as the healthy blood that would immunise the nation from rottenness and death (Ben-Gurion 1945: 15).

The more invisible existential threat was in the discourse about the land itself as it appeared in the writings of the Second ‘*Aliya’*s settlers. Palestine on the day of their arrival was a *Nechar* – a foreign land or even worse, *Yam Nechar*, a sea of foreignness and alienation. This sea, wrote the settlers, covered the coveted homeland. *Nechar* had another synonym *Shemama*, wilderness. Wherever there were Palestinians, there was a sense of bareness that caused some settlers to rethink the whole venture and contemplate a return from, as one of them put it, ‘a land of nothingness’. The empty land was full of strangers: ‘people who *were stranger* to us than the Russian or Polish peasant’ and he added, ‘We have nothing in common with the majority of the people living here’ (Belinso 1945: 48).

Those who were insistent on staying, hoped that eventually the land would be taken away from the strangers. This much was understood by the Palestinian journalists. The Zionist discourse of the day was probably less familiar. The presence of Palestinians in Jewish colonies or near them was referred to as *kalon* (in Hebrew, shame) that had to be redeemed in a way that could only have meant the expulsion of the Palestinians from the labour market.

These entries in the diaries and letters were not read by the Palestinian journalists but there was a growing sense that the Second ‘*Aliya*, as Ahad Ha’am put it, constituted a menace. Thus we can read in the newspaper in July 1912a fair description of the potential power of the Zionist movement to settle, organise and buy land and their solidarity and determination. But this time the tone was worried not appreciative (*Filastin*, 19 July 1913).When this line was adopted, *Filastin* developed a much more profound understanding of the Zionist project than the one appearing for instance in the Egyptian newspapers that followed Zionism from even earlier on. The Egyptian press blamed Europe for dropping their ‘wretched poor’ on the doorsteps of the Arabs. *Filastin* realised that these ‘wretched’ people could not have been that impoverished if they could pay the kind of money the Zionist movement was willing to pay for land. Nor could they invest the sums of money they did in new technologies and machineries (*Filastin*, 19 July 1913).

Two years later the newspaper editors felt gratified at a change in the Egyptian press which they attributed, probably rightly so, to their own insistence of a different pan-Arab perspective on the eve of the First World War. On 2 April 1914, *Filastin* published an article on ‘The Zionist Danger and the Arab Press’ where it praised also the press in Beirut and Damascus (it mentioned *al-Hilal*’s perceptive analysis that the isolationist policy of the Zionist settlement was an ominous indicator for its plans for making the rest of the country an enclave Jewish entity). It also acknowledged the pioneering role played by its rival publication, *al-Karmil* from Haifa.

But while the realisation of the more sinister planning and ambition behind Zionism would appear in the second year of the newspaper’s life; already in the first year, as mentioned, readers were allowed to voice strong doubts about Zionism. In June 1911, a letter signed by ‘a teacher from Gaza’ very perceptively explained that Zionism would serve British imperial plans to drive a wedge between Syria and Egypt and berated the Ottoman government for its indifference and negligence of the Zionist problem. He had no doubt that the Zionist movement wished to build a Jewish kingdom, and would exploit the government’s indifference to the full and he was the first, on the pages of *Filastin*, to call on Palestinians not to sell land and to feel no pity for these Jews and called for their expulsion (*Filastin*, 12 July 1911).This prompted the newspaper to think more seriously about the issue and the first article analysing thoroughly the economic impact of the Jewish colonisation appeared. It pointed to the rise of prices of basic commodities and counted the Jewish immigration as one of the factors causing this (including a very perceptive observation of the economic enclaves built by the Zionists and their impact on the local market).It predicted the Zionist takeover of the local market and monopolising of several commodities, fixing high prices for them.

A year later an even more profound analysis of the economic implications appeared in the newspaper. It asserted that the Zionist movement aimed at taking over the Palestinians’ sources of living, especially cultivated or cultivatable land through its project of land purchase. The newspaper was the most vociferous publication in the opposition from the very onset of sale of lands to the Jews and boasted at times of the ability to sabotage such transactions from taking place (*Filastin*, 22 February 1913).

But these were not hate articles – they criticised the Zionist tendency to isolate and live in gated communities because it indicated a wish to care for the settlers and not for the country. When the early analyses on the economy appeared, the newspaper published an angry Zionist response condemning the article as anti-Semitic. It did not stop there; the newspaper defended its position and claimed it refused to accept Judaism as a national identity but respected it as a religion (and differentiated between *Israeliyun*, Israelis, ironically as a religious sect and Zionism as a colonialist project) (Filastin, 5 June). Had not the local *qaimaqam* in Jaffa interfered, this ping pong would have continued (*Ha-Herut*, 30 June 1911).Perceptive readers will note that these analyses found their way, many years later, into the modern historiographical critique on Zionism by Palestinian and post-Zionist scholars.

*Filastin* warned the Ottoman Empire that Zionism aimed at ceding Palestine from the Empire – argued out of conviction or an attempt to persuade the Ottomans to take action or both (*Filastin*, 25 February 1913) Indeed, as mentioned, from July 1913, the language of the newspaper about Zionism changed from end to end. The danger of Zionism became in the summer of 1913 the main focus of the newspaper: the tone was alarmist, but very analytical in its approach. In August 1913 *Filastin* informed its readers that it had to increase the number of its pages in order to publish the increasing number of petitions and protests against Zionist encroachment. But even this was on enough. In April 1914, it decided to publish a supplement devoted almost entirely to Zionism: ‘owing to the great deal of material on the Zionist Movement’ (*Filastin*, 1 April 1914).

The editors wrote now clearly that the Zionist aim was to take over the land, and mentioned in this respect to Max Nordau quote: ‘We the Zionists have no political objectives outside of Palestine’ in the interview he gave the newspaper. In between the lines, explained the editor, there was a wish to take over the land and limit its inhabitants’ access to it, while subjecting them to the political rule of Zionism (*Filastin*, 19 July 1913).In July 1913, the newspaper published the bluntest attack on the Ottoman *mutasarrifs* (local governors) in Palestine for allowing the Zionist movement to build their own legal, educational, postal and press infrastructures; warning the Empire that the overall desire of this movement was to cede Palestine from the empire all in all (*Filastin*, 25 January, l913).

But in hindsight the most revealing and troubling content from that year, 1913, was the newspaper’s realisation that the Palestinian population faced almost an impossible mission should it decide to confront head on the Zionist project. How could they think so when the Zionists were only ten per cent of the population? The newspaper analysed soberly the difference between settlers who believed that their need to colonise was existential and a local population that believed that life was not going to change for them as it had not changed in past millennia. This is a close as one can get to a 1913 application of the settler colonialist paradigm as it was articulated by Palestinian intellectuals. Other features of settler colonialism were also not ignored. Economic monopoly, the Hebrewisationof the landscape and the Judaisation of the legal system where all attributed to the Zionist movement. Economic monopoly would lead to political takeover, warned the newspaper. Jaffa was brought in an example of the Zionist incremental takeover of the local market and economy and the newspaper noted that only a few traders could withstand the competition – those who traded with coal, petrol and oil (*Filastin*, 27 November 1913).

Jaffa occupied this image of a battlefield both because the only pure settlers’ town, Tel Aviv, was growing next to it, but also it became the centre for intellectual and political Palestinian activity. David Ben-Gurion in particular hated the educated urbanites of Jaffa, but said little about it. His colleague, Nathan Shifris, spoke in his name when he wrote one should lament the existence of so many educated nationalists and ‘impertinent and too assertive’ Arabs in Jaffa (Shifris 1954: 191). Yisrael Kadishman, another Second ‘*Aliya* colleague, concluded that ‘our wits’ and not only power would be needed to combat these ‘[Jaffa] Arabs’ (Kadishman 1945: 293).

Indifference and lack of initiative, warned the newspaper, would lead to a linguistic disaster whence Hebrew would replace Arabic as the hegemonic language. The focus on the language as an indicator of worse things to come was clearly articulated in an article on 28 August 1912 when it was stated that such an imposition of the settlers’ language was part of an attempt to construct an independent and ‘powerful’ educational system that would inevitably lead to catastrophic consequences for the local population unless they woke up (*Filastin*, 28 August 1912).This was a very sober analysis and prophetic in many ways: the Hebrew judicial system that had just appeared, the internal autonomous organisation of the early Zionist bodies and the renaissance of the Hebrew language did not escape the perceptive eyes of the Palestinian journalists. Several articles appeared about the Jewish communal courts in Tel-Aviv and other settlements throughout 1913. These Zionist institutions were the basis for ‘a state within a state’, declared *Filastin* (*Filastin*, 19 July 1913).All in all, *Filastin* seemed to have very little doubt that the principal objective, and possible outcome, of the Zionist movement was to build a Jewish state in Palestine.

***Filastin’s* Prognosis: Early Calls for Action, 1913-1919**

The way forward, the editors of the newspaper felt in the summer of 1913, was to maintain Palestine’s Arab Ottoman identity (*Filastin*, 12 April 1913).The newspaper wrote more explicitly about the link between ‘the bliss of independence’ and the danger of not achieving it in the face of the finance, science, zeal and concluded, then in that only action to stop it from growing and expanding could save ‘the beloved nation’ of Palestine (*Filastin*, 29 June 1913).

The best method, the newspaper suggested, was to stop selling land to the Zionist settlers. The worst seller according to the newspaper was the Ottoman government itself: allowing the Zionist buyers to take over *miri* land,[[3]](#footnote-4) in an open tender in which no local could compete. In this 1913 campaign the newspaper joined forces with *al-Karmil*. The newspaper singled out, and rightly so in hindsight, the land as the main source of power for the future of Palestine (*Filastin*, 12 July 1913). The newspaper targeted Ottoman officials who were easily bribed by the Zionist movement and who facilitated the purchase of land and tried, in vain, to organise a campaign of telegrams and public petitions to Istanbul (*Filastin*, 2 November 1913).

And again, if one you leafs through the newspaper one can only be profoundly affected by the foresight of the analysis and the weakness of the prognosis. The newspaper’s suggestions for action on how to confront the land takeover were never considered seriously by the local elite. *Filastin*, already in July 1913, offered to establish a national financial society that would purchase, with the money of Palestine’s richest families, any land offered by the government in a public tender. This should be accompanied by a national committee that would raise people’s consciousness and awareness about the dangers looming in the future (it demanded that journalists take a leading role in this campaign, and in the process condemned those who did not play their share). It also called upon the Ottoman government to accelerate and expand the reforms in Palestine’s agriculture, education, transport and trade so as to make the local community more resistant to the Zionist movement (*Filastin*, 30 July 1913).

The newspaper was furious with those notables who were unwilling to see the danger and chip in to the overall effort to confront it. ‘Those rich and influential people who were blinded by self-interest; they do not see the encircling Zionist danger, and preferred to have a golden present at the expense of a dark future for their sons’(*Filastin*, 26 March 1913). Worse were those, in the eyes of the newspaper, who out of naiveté and misunderstanding of the danger Zionism constituted, even suggested alliance with the Zionists against the Turks. One of them was Sheikh Ahmad Tabbar, a leading figure in the June 1913 pan-Arab congress: ‘For he did not mention what dangers were connected with the immigration of the Zionists into the country and what problems for the future are being brought by the Government's attitude on this issue’ (*Filastin*, 9 July 1913).

A year later, a rebuke was also directed against businessmen who had extensive dealings with the Zionist movement, although it understood the difficulties that these businessmen encountered. On 11 April 1914 it reported that Palestinian merchants who signed a telegram calling for a boycott Zionist business were subjected to strong pressure from the Anglo-Palestine Bank and therefore had to withdraw their signatures. Only one brave merchant, who was not named, refused and suffered considerable lose. The newspaper compared this to the Zionist boycott of Muslim and Christian goods that went unpunished or noticed. Sobriety also meant that the past distinction between Ottoman Jews and Zionists was not relevant anymore by 1913:

Ten years ago the Jews were living as Ottoman brothers loved by all the Ottoman races. Living in the same quarters, their children are going to the same schools. The Zionists put an end to all that and prevented any intermingling with the indigenous population. They boycotted the Arabic language and the Arab merchants, and declared their intention of taking over the country from its inhabitants… (*Filastin*, 4 April 1913)

But it should be realised that this was a process and therefore one can still notice ambivalence even in 1913, not so much in what the newspaper wrote but in how it conducted its business relationship with the Zionist movement. It took ads from Jews and rented a building belonging to a Zionist agency. But if there were times when business considerations mitigated the national commitment, they were over by 1914.And this led to constant and futile Zionist attempts to bribe the editors and pressure them to moderate the newspaper’s antagonism towards the movement. The Zionist activists sued the newspaper once in the Ottoman court to no avail (Kisch 1939: 39. 55), but did succeed in convincing the American consul to bring about its closure for a short while in April 1914 (allegedly for sowing dissent amongst the peoples of the Empire) (*Filastin*, 11 March 1967). The Zionist leaders particularly infuriated by a circular issued by *Filastin* to its readers and subscribers which attacked the government for regarding Zionism as a race and not a political movement. The circular quoted one ‘doctor Urbach’ of the Zionist Movement as saying in Haifa that Zionism should rise against the Arabs, divide them and evict them, thus serving Ottoman interests. The British vice-consul in Jaffa as well as the Consul in Jerusalem testified that the circular ‘faithfully mirrors the growing resentment among the Arabs against the Jewish invasion’ (Kayyali 1978: 38). Furthermore, *Filastin* warned the authorities that Zionism was no longer a ghost but a tangible menace. The central government could suppress *Filastin*, but there were other patriotic newspapers to ‘carry the torch’, and there was the youth of Palestine, ‘boiling with anxiety over the threatened future’ (Kayali 1978: 38).

Its constant commitment to the struggle against Zionism is important because it became and developed into being the most popular and prestigious Mandatory newspaper (and maybe it maintained that status because of this constant commitment). But it was not only against something. It also stood for something or rather someone: the ‘*Filastinyun*’ or ‘*Abna Filastin*’ was how the people of Palestine were addressed by the newspaper. They were the people who lived in different Ottoman districts but were part of the same nation for the newspaper. By such it was not only an anti-colonialist organ but also a national one.

A moment before the new powerful rulers of the Middle East, the European colonial empires, took over, the Americans made an abortive attempt to inject their own ideas of liberation and self-determination into the post-Ottoman fray. The King-Crane Commission, representing President Woodrow Wilson shared *Filastin*’s analysis of the potential danger Zionism constituted for the people of Palestine: ‘the commission began their study of Zionism with minds predisposed in its favour…’, however:

…the fact came out repeatedly in the Commission’s conferences with Jewish representatives that the Zionists looked forward to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, by various forms of purchase.[[4]](#footnote-5)

**The Newspaper Battles during the British Mandatory Period**

The newspaper’s pre-war analyses and prognosis of Zionism continued to be articulated forcefully and in the short periods of its closure were represented in other venues, most notably in a new newspaper *Surriya Janubbiyy* (Khalidi 1997: 168).Among those who reflected this view was Hajj Amin al-Husayni. A moment before he became the Mufti of al-Quds/Jerusalem, he wrote an article, without referring directly to Zionism or the Palestinian community, which repeated the local Palestinian anxiety about Zionist intentions to dispossess the inhabitants of the land. He noted the impulse behind such a move – in a very similar way in which modern day scholars would explain the origins of White settler colonialism in other places – these were, he explained uprooted people who were determined to ‘build their house on the ruin of yours’ (Khalidi 1997: 168). The article alerted the readers to the potency of despair that could sweep the Palestinians out of their homeland. When it was republished, the newspaper, the owners and editors, Yusuf and ‘Isa Dawud al-‘Isa, advocated a low level cooperation with the Mandatory authorities due to their support for the Zionist project. The reason given was that the British empowered the colonisation efforts of the Zionist movement and as in 1913 so in 1922, the newspaper alerted its readers again and again to the fact that Zionism’s main objective was to dispossess the people of Palestine (*Ha-Herut*, 16 December 1912).

But Britain could not be ignored for long. High politics in Palestine meant British politics and a major newspaper like *Filastin* had to report and analyse high politics. Early on, op-eds displayed some trust in Britain’s commitment to the safety of the local population this was soon substituted by growing disappointment; early calls for collaboration with the Mandatory authorities were replaced by explicit calls for actual resistance (a trajectory many Palestinian politicians and intellectuals went through in the 1920s).It took time before Albion was considered perfidious, but when the time came, the Mandate lost any of its remaining prestige and goodwill and was fought with the same vehemence and determination as the Zionist movement. But this is a well-trodden path. I am concerned here more with the newspaper’s evolution as a serious venue for discussing Zionism and its potential impact on the native population; not surprisingly it did not end in the Mandatory period – nor would it end in the next decades and still continues today.

None of the social, economic and above all political processes triggered by the arrival of the British in Palestine led the paper to divert from its analysis of Zionism as an existential danger for the Palestinians. All the fears associated with that movement’s intentions were vindicated. The paper published tracts from Vladimir Jabotinsky’s works to indicate how far the Zionist expansionist ambition went. Some of the paper’s more cool headed analysis was lost in the 1920s and it published part of the anti-Semitic tract, the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’.[[5]](#footnote-6) But this was a temporary lapse into conspiracy theories: on the whole the rule was a very sober and thorough analysis of the Zionist ideology, plans and strategy.

It was the Zionists’ own wish to be an alien element not only in the land but in the region that caught the attention of the newspaper in the Mandatory years (*Filastin*, 4 March 1922). The attempt to build a European enclave in the land was not new – other European colonisers had done it in the past. But the newspaper realised that this attempt to Europeanise the land was associated directly with the wish to destroy the Palestinians (*Filastin*, 4 March 1922). This is why the language became far more moral and philosophical than it had been in the early years. This was a struggle between justice and injustice, between the owner of the land and the invading robber and between good and evil (*Filastin*, 8 February 1922).

The immediate goal was to try and limit the immigration. For the first time, the newspaper paid attention to the misery of some of the immigrants themselves and told its readers that quite a few of them were allured by false descriptions to the land (a point that would only be made by post-Zionist scholars seventy years later) (*Filastin*, 26 March 1926 and 2 July 1926).But more often than not, the newspaper did not have the time for such a minute analysis and it usually referred to the settlers as a group motivated by an ideology that could only harm the local population (*Filastin*, 19 September 1921 and 2 May 1922).

It was once more the attempt to stop land sales that was spread all over the pages of the newspaper. The pre-1918 idea of a national body that would buy Ottoman land was replaced by the actual establishment of a private company that tried to help the rural population by buying land before it was sold to the Zionist setters. But the newspaper did not have the Zionist economic resources nor did the absentee landlords, like the Sursuqs of Beirut, wish to transact with them. The newspaper attacked vehemently the Sursuqs and the Amir Said al-Jazairi, and their local agents, for their role in expanding Zionist land purchase(*Filastin*, 5 September 1924; 3 November 1924; 7 December 1924; 31 January 1925 and 10 March 1925).

As before the economic aspect was closely inspected by the newspaper. As it warned, the Zionist movement did not only purchase land but also won most of the industrial and mineral Mandatory concessions. In this respect, the newspaper took a special interest in the British grant of the electricity concession to the Zionist leader, Pinchas Rutenberg. The newspaper called upon its readers to boycott its services, with no success. The takeover of natural resources, such as water, and the occupation of pathways and roads were also desperately reported. But the pace of the takeover was faster than the ability of the community to respond. The newspaper, however, was less clear when it came to choosing suitable leaders for the national movement. At first it supported the Muslim-Christian associations and the executive committee of the Arab congresses which were loyal to the Husaynis. In 1927, it shifted its support to the opposition led by the Nashashibis. But it subsequently vacillated several times more.

But the opposition to Zionism was not affected by these oscillations in party loyalties. The view was directed towards the outside world, not in the direction of domestic politics. In 1929 it was decided to publish an English version of the newspaper, distributed freely among British parliamentarians and public figures. This publication lasted for three years but it failed to make an impact on Western public opinion. The Arabic version, however, survived and became far more significant. Its accessibility and readable prose reached many people and it became the most read newspaper among the people of Palestine. When it was closed for a short period in 1921, it was inundated by support from people in all walks of life. As the photographic history of Palestine testifies, quite often people sat in coffee houses around one person who could read and they listened attentively to the newspaper being read aloud to them (Graham-Brown 1980: 166).

Throughout the 1920s the line of the newspaper seemed to be still hopeful; hopeful in the sense that the Zionist movement might still prove to be a failure. Here and there were articles that stated that the dire conditions in which many of the settlers lived would convince them to return to their homelands. This kind of reporting exposed an ambivalence which would characterise not only the Palestinian but also other political systems in the Arab world in their attitude to Zionism; at least until 1967. The Zionist movement was presented simultaneously as weak and immensely powerful. In the early 1920s a possible assumption was still: as the newspaper stated, that it was a strong rival but could be overcome [leave note as it is]. It was also argued that since the land was solidly Arab it could not be easily transformed (some of this hope was vindicated throughout the years) (*Filastin*, 6 August 1921; 23 June 1922 and 14 July 1922).

Some of the arguments made in the 1920s as a proof of the ability of the Palestinians to survive became arguments in the attempt to persuade the world of the Palestinian natural right to Palestine: the continuity of Arab and Muslim presence, the demographic and indigenous majority and the overall Christian and Muslim affiliation of the majority of the inhabitants (*Filastin*, 17 September 1921; 22 October 1921; 16 February 1922; 28 April 1922 and 21 May 1922).

The argument for future diplomatic battles had already begun to be shaped in the newspaper. The religious affiliation of Jews to the land was not questioned, but the validity of any claim after 2000 years of alleged exile was strongly refuted. Judaism, stated the newspaper very clearly, was a religion not a nation. Furthermore, although the newspaper did not have any socialist, let alone Marxist inclination, it also pointed to the Zionist project as a capitalist one (*Filastin*, 23 March 1913). Zionism became, in the Mandatory period, unlike the late Ottoman period, the main concern of the newspaper. And similarly to the pre-First World War period, the Zionist movement attempted to convince the Mandatory authorities to close down the newspaper, but all these attempts failed.

Like the rest of the political scene in Palestine, the newspaper sank into the more petty side of internal Palestinian politics in the 1930s, apart from the brief moment of unity at the very beginning of the revolt in 1937.The relative economic prosperity after the Second World War made the newspaper reflect the more mundane life in Mandatory Palestine described quite picturesquely by Tom Segev in his book *One Palestine Complete* (2001). Although the newspaper was following international, regional and local, events very closely, like every other section of the political and cultural elite, there was no hint that the pending catastrophe of 1948 was sensed, felt or anticipated. The acute, prophetic and sober predictions before and during the First World War generated neither political unity nor genuine pan-Arab solidarity (the Arab League usurped the Palestine cause from local politics to the detriment of the local population).

Palestine suffered a serious loss with the brutal British retaliation to the revolt of 1936 to 1939. It lost its military capacity to defend itself and some of its best political leaders. Without such components, and with the world standing behind Zionism in the wake of the Holocaust, perceptive, patriotic journalists could not do much, even if they had been able to predict the terrible events of 1948. And yet they laid the foundation for future Palestinian journalism which became an even more crucial element when the national movement was resurrected in the 1950s and continued the struggle for liberation and justice.

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1. See *al-Karmil*, 7, 28 January 1913 and 12 February 1913, quoted by Qasimiyya(1973: 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For a slightly different, but not totally dissimilar, distinction, see Lockman (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. A form of **land** ownership in the **Ottoman** period (others included *mulk*, waqf, musha, *jiftlik*, mahlul, matruka, mawat ). *Miri* was agricultural land that was leased from the government on condition of cultivation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. ‘King-Crane Report on the Near East’ (New York 1922), recommendation on Syria-Palestine and Iraq, 29 August 1919). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Filastin*, 3 January 1921; 29 June 1921; 3 September 1921; 8 October 1921 and 22 October 1921. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)