

## **Decolonization and Cultural Production among Palestinian Citizens of Israel**

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In July 1958, then-seventeen-year-old Mahmoud Darwish and nineteen-year-old Samih al-Qasim participated in an Arabic poetry festival in Acre, where hundreds of residents had gathered in the town square and on surrounding rooftops to listen to them and other local poets recite from their work. For Palestinians living under Israeli military rule (1948–66), poetry festivals offered one of the few—albeit limited—outlets for oppositional political expression. Darwish’s piece, “Martyr,” was dedicated “to every martyr in every battle for freedom,” while al-Qasim’s poem expressed his admiration for the Algerian people in their anticolonial struggle against French rule.<sup>1</sup> These poems were not atypical: decolonization was a major theme in much of the Palestinian poetry produced in Israel during this period, particularly among the generation of poets who grew up as a minoritized community under Israeli rule.

Settler colonialism has achieved scholarly prominence as an analytical lens through which to understand Palestinian–Israeli relations. However, as Rana Barakat notes, its utility for comprehending Palestinian history is quite limited because of its emphasis on the actions of the settlers rather than of those resisting them.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Palestinian citizens of Israel have had to contend with what Shira Robinson calls a “liberal settler state” that incorporates elements of both settler colonial rule and liberal democracy, further complicating the settler colonial paradigm.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that discussions of settler colonialism in the Palestinian context are irrelevant, but rather that more attention needs to be paid to the perspectives and agency of Palestinians themselves. In this essay I show how Palestinian intellectuals and political activists in Israel have long adopted decolonization as both a conceptual tool and a political framework to resist their minoritization and sectarianization within the state and to articulate an alternative vision of pluralism that connected them to communities around the world struggling for freedom. In doing so, I argue that cultural production—especially poetry—is a key source for helping scholars understand how minoritized communities have reimagined pluralist spaces within and beyond the nation-state, especially in cases where oppositional political actions are constrained.

The minoritization of the Palestinians in Israel emerged out of early debates among state officials about how to treat the approximately 160,000 Palestinians who remained within the 1949 Armistice Lines, as well as the tens of thousands of displaced Palestinians who were trying to return to their homes and lands within the newly declared State of Israel. Facing international pressure to repatriate the refugees, yet seeking to minimize the number of non-Jews in the state, state officials developed a series of administrative measures to determine which Palestinians would be allowed to remain and which would not. Yet even after most of the Palestinians remaining in Israel were granted citizenship in 1952, they continued to face a military government that placed restrictions on

their travel, residency, employment, and political expression—restrictions that Jewish Israelis did not face.<sup>4</sup> This type of divided rule was common in colonial contexts, but in theory had no place in a democracy.

Somewhat aware of this contradiction, Israeli officials were keen to show—to themselves and to the rest of the world—that despite this system of divided rule, Israel was a liberal democratic state. To that end, they cultivated a colonial discourse in which the state was presented as a beacon of pluralism that sought to uplift and modernize the traditionally structured “Arab minority” comprised of Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Bedouin.<sup>5</sup> By subdividing the Palestinian citizens of Israel into essentialized ethno-religious groups and denying their connections to the Palestinian people as a whole, this colonial pluralism was aimed at isolating them from the Palestinian national body and obscuring the colonial conditions under which they lived.

In my recent book, I show how Palestinian intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s developed a political vocabulary of decolonization in order to challenge their minoritized and sectarianized status within the state and to posit an alternative vision of pluralism rooted in Arab cultural pride and an anti-imperialist political vision.<sup>6</sup> By insisting that their struggle for full equality within the state was intimately linked to struggles of colonized and semi-colonized peoples in the Arab world and beyond, they drew on earlier transnational frameworks of decolonization that went beyond the confines of national liberation to envision a cosmopolitan world of universal justice and equality.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, they developed a decolonizing pluralist discourse that integrated the Palestinians in Israel into a global political imaginary in which everyone would live together with freedom and dignity.

I also show how these intellectuals sought to expand the spatial horizons of their community and envision themselves as part of the worldwide struggle for decolonization. Despite the considerable constraints placed on them by the Israeli military censors, political activists and commentators published opinion and analysis pieces in the local press that celebrated anticolonial movements taking place in the Arab world and beyond. Like the Assyrians in Iraq whom Alda Benjamen discusses in this roundtable, younger and increasingly urbanized Palestinian citizens were drawn to leftist and secular political and cultural spaces, in part to counter the sectarian identities being ascribed to them by the state. As a result, press outlets sponsored by the Communist Party of Israel, with their clear anti-imperialist vocabularies, eventually became the most popular among the Palestinian intelligentsia in Israel. They were briefly challenged by Arab nationalist rivals who utilized their own local press outlets to assert a pro-Nasser *qawmī* (pan-Arab nationalist) vision of decolonization before being shut down by the Israeli authorities. Despite the sometimes-bitter debates between them, the communists and Arab nationalists both asserted a decolonizing pluralist discourse that rejected attempts to sectarianize their identities and instead asserted a shared Palestinian and Arab identity that was engaged in a transnational struggle for freedom.

While press debates helped Palestinian intellectuals think through the contours of this discourse, poetry became a key means by which they transmitted their vision to the larger community. In a sign of how salient poetry was to these discussions, both the communist and pan-Arab nationalist press outlets devoted considerable space to publishing poems by local writers that celebrated the revolutionary victories of the day. Composing and publishing such poems were themselves acts of resistance given the Israeli state’s censorship as well as its active sponsorship of apolitical, romantic poetry.<sup>8</sup>

With large-scale protests constrained by the military regime, local poetry festivals emerged as an especially popular site in which Palestinians in Israel spread these decolonizing pluralist discourses. Poems, like those declaimed by Darwish and al-Qasim celebrating revolutionary victories in Algeria, Iraq, and beyond, helped develop “geographies of liberation”<sup>9</sup> that connected Palestinians in Israel to other peoples around the world who were struggling for freedom against colonial and imperial rule. By using direct language and evocative images to reimagine Palestinians citizens of Israel as part of a pluralist community of colonized peoples seeking transnational liberation, these poets rejected Israeli discourses that sought to cast them in ethno-religious terms as being solely oriented toward the nation-state. The liberatory potential of these festivals was not lost on the Israeli military government, which frequently tried to limit the number of people who could attend and subjected Darwish, al-Qasim, and other decolonizing poets to various forms of restriction.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, Palestinian intellectuals in Israel have long recognized that decolonization, broadly defined, is a useful conceptual tool and political framework to help them contest their minoritized and sectarianized status within the state and to push back against Israel’s selective deployment of pluralism in ways that perpetuate their marginalization. During the heyday of global anticolonialism, Palestinian political activists and cultural producers pushed for a wider pluralistic vision that called for marginalized peoples around the world—including themselves—to live with dignity as equals. Today, as Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line continue to confront settler colonialism in its many forms, identifying this historical lineage can help scholars center Palestinians’ agency more squarely in their analyses. Recognizing this historical context also helps us to see how a more robust engagement with cultural productions as a historical source can shed important light on discussions of minoritization and pluralism in the Israeli-Palestinian context and beyond.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Khass, “Mu’tamar Watani bi-Lughat al-Sh‘ir,” *al-Jadid* 5, no 7 (July 1958): 48–52.

<sup>2</sup>Rana Barakat, “Writing/Righting Palestine Studies: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty and Resisting the Ghost(s) of History,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 8 (2018): 349–63.

<sup>3</sup>Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel’s Liberal Settler State* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* See also Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967*, trans. Haim Watzman (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010); and Gil Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Maha Nassar, *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup>Nassar, *Brothers Apart*, chap. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>Nassar, *Brothers Apart*, 86–90, 127–130.