

The Making of a Settler Colony: Israel, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Politics of Third World Solidarity

Jelena Vidojević and Ivor Chipkin
New South Institute

Introduction

Much contemporary scholarship and activism about the state of Israel views it as a settler colony, reviled for its colonisation of the Palestinian people, for the denial of their right to self-determination and now, for committing genocide against the people of Gaza. These are key elements of the contemporary popular, political and academic discourse.

This paper draws on a distinction that Rogan (2024) proposes between settler colonialism as a fact, on the one hand, and as a normative conception on the other. In other words, between treating settler colonialism as a historical phenomenon and treating it as a political slur, proposing that

[I]t is important to restore settler colonialism to its original use in making distinctions between different forms of imperialism. Settler colonialism refers to those movements that went beyond the exercise of formal imperial control over the colonised people to promote large-scale immigration designed to shift the demographic balance of the colonised territory. (Rogan, 2024:1)

As a fact, argues Rogan, the Zionist movement sought to change the demographic balance in Palestine and was, therefore, incontestably, a settler colonial movement.

From this perspective, Zionism must be situated in the same context as large-scale Russian and Ottoman settler colonial projects in the mid- to late nineteenth century seeking, respectively, to Christianise and Islamise their empires by driving out and then resettling millions of Russian Muslims and Ottoman Christians. Jewish migration to Palestine happened in the same period and for the same reason that millions of Circassians, Abkhazians, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachays, Ossetians, Avars, Lezgins and other Muslim communities also left Russia as refugees (Hamad-Troyansky, 2024; Marom, 2023). When Rashid Khalidi (2020) defines Zionism as a European colonial movement intending to usurp the Arab population of Palestine, he, like most postcolonial scholars, erases not simply the historical context in Palestine, but also the world-making competition between Moscow and Istanbul (whose unresolved conflicts haunted the twentieth century and make up a good portion of the twenty-first century's wars).

As provocative as it seems at first glance, the distance between settler colonialism as a term that describes a historical process and a term that gives rise to moral judgement allows a question to be interposed. Under what conditions does the former give rise to the latter? That is, when does a historical process become an object of moral or political judgement? At stake in this transition is a methodological claim. Political ideas and formulations do not arise spontaneously from the context, but have a history embedded in political movements animated by personalities. We have a responsibility to excavate such processes, to bring them explicitly to the surface, to describe and account for the world as we believe it exists.

We will further examine political efforts to define Israel as a settler colony in the debates of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM, the Movement) following the 1955 Bandung Conference. The deployment of settler colonialism as both an analytic and normative framework becomes particularly revealing when considered in light of the internationalisation of this concept through the NAM.

During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Arab states within the NAM actively promoted the characterisation of Israel as a settler colonial entity, strategically embedding this interpretation within global political discourse to bolster international support for Palestinian rights. However, despite sustained and systematic efforts by Arab states, the Movement's official stance toward Israel only began to shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s, influenced by both worsening conditions on the ground and Israel's expansionist policies. Yet the NAM never questioned Israel's right to exist or the fundamental nature of the Israeli state, and its recommendations remained consistently anchored within the United Nations (UN) framework.

1. Migrants and Refugees

Khalidi's formulation is that in Palestine, an indigenous Arab population was displaced through a colonial process by Jews from European and Arab countries, made possible by the Great Powers (Khalidi, 2020).

On this formulation, the Zionist movement is understood principally through the lens of European settler colonialism, as a project brokered by imperial powers and inserted into a region already populated by an indigenous Arab population. This framing has enormous political force, and historically it captures key aspects of the Balfour Declaration, British imperial complicity,

and the structures of mandate governance (the system of governance that existed under the British Mandate for Palestine from 1920 to 1948, before the establishment of the State of Israel). As a historical argument, is it well grounded, however? It occludes a critical ideological transformation that took place in the wake of Wilson's Fourteen Points and the rise of self-determination as a new universal idiom.

As several scholars, including Getachew (2019), Manela (2007) and Pedersen (2015), have noted, the language of self-determination radically restructured political imagination across the colonial and semi-colonial world. Movements from Egypt to Korea, and India to West Africa, rearticulated long-standing grievances in this new vocabulary of nationhood and autonomy. Palestine, of course, was no exception. At the same time, there was a fundamental shift in Zionist discourse, especially among Jewish communities already living in the Ottoman Empire.

Originally a diasporic movement of rescue and renewal (what Arendt once called the 'conservative utopia' of Jewish nationalism), by the early 20th century, Zionism increasingly adopted the discourse of national rights. Particularly after the war, Zionist leaders began to frame their claims not simply as a longing for safety or restoration, but as a claim to national self-determination by Jews in Palestine, many of whom were Ottoman subjects or recent arrivals who saw themselves as legitimate participants in the imperial and post-imperial political order.

Hamed-Troyansky's (2024) *Empire of Refugees* reminds us that Jews, like many other communities across the collapsing Russian and Ottoman empires, were not colonial agents, but migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. He focuses on the North Caucasian Muslims (Circassians, Chechens, Dagestanis) who, expelled by Russian colonial policies, were resettled in areas including modern-day Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Palestine. These populations were not marginal; they founded villages, staffed provincial armies, and became politically significant actors in the late Ottoman order.

Between the 1850s and World War I, around a million North Caucasians left the Russian Empire for the Ottoman Empire, half a million moving between 1863 and 1865 alone. Altogether, between three and five million Russian Muslims settled in Ottoman territories during this period. At the same time, 'discriminatory policies and violence, culminating in pogroms, drove out Jewish communities' (Hamed-Troyansky, 2024: 11). Between 1881 and 1914, around 1,5 million Jews left Russia, the vast majority heading to the United States, but several tens of thousands going to Ottoman Palestine. In other words, Jewish settlement in Palestine formed part of the same

historical process that saw millions of Russian Muslims migrating. It is difficult to reconcile this movement with the idea of a colonial column relying on imperial backing.

What distinguishes Zionism, then, may not be its colonial character per se, but its uptake of a new universalising grammar of nationhood, that allowed even recent arrivals to articulate political legitimacy not through ancestry, but through peoplehood.

Seen in this light, the normative binary between indigenous Palestinians and settler Jews begins to fray. This is not because Palestinians were not indigenous, they clearly were, but because indigeneity itself became reframed in this new world of self-determination, no longer simply about historical depth but also about collective will, sovereignty, and recognition.

To acknowledge this is not to abandon the critique of Zionism as an exclusionary project. It is, rather, to understand how (early) Zionism was shaped by the same global ideological currents that radicalised Palestinian politics, that nationalised it, so to speak. In a strange and perhaps tragic symmetry, both movements entered the post-war world armed with similar claims to self-determination, and found themselves caught in a zero-sum logic of exclusive sovereignty over the same land.

2. The Coming of the Third World

Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel has faced open hostility from neighbouring Arab countries, who viewed it as ‘a form of colonialism that continued the oppression of the Palestinian people’ (Dinkel, 2019) and ‘a foreign colony established thanks to the collusion of imperial powers’ (Erakat, 2019: 65). Fayez A. Sayegh, a prominent Syrian-Palestinian scholar, diplomat, and advocate for the Palestinian cause, writes in the first chapter of his influential 1965 study *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*:

The frenzied ‘Scramble for Africa’ of the 1880s stimulated the beginnings of Zionist colonization in Palestine. As European fortune-hunters, prospective settlers and empire-builders raced for Africa, Zionist settlers and would be state-builders rushed for Palestine (...) By imitating the colonial ventures of the "Gentile nations" among whom Jews lived, the "Jewish nation" could send its own colonists into a piece of Afro-Asian territory, establish a settler-community, and, in due course set up its own state - not, indeed, as an imperial outpost of a metropolitan home-base, but as a home-base in its own right, upon which the "entire Jewish nation" would sooner or later converge

from all over the world. (Sayegh, 1965: 3, emphasis in original.)

Arab leaders argued that Palestinians had been denied their right to self-determination and, beginning in the late 1940s, from the time of Israel's very creation, sought to challenge its legitimacy. They demanded that Palestinian refugees be allowed to return to what had been Mandatory Palestine (the British geopolitical entity that existed between 1920 and 1948) and be given the right to govern themselves. Therefore, unlike most new (postcolonial?) states established after World War II, Israel's very right to exist was contested from the outset.

In the anti-colonial fervour that animated much of the UN General Assembly at the time, Arab states refused to recognise Israel. To delegitimise Israel and rally diplomatic support for Palestinian self-determination, they employed a multi-faceted strategy, especially at major postcolonial gatherings. These forums provided a platform to frame the Palestinian cause as part of the broader anti-colonial struggle, resonating with the aspirations of newly independent states in Africa and Asia.

The emergence of the Third World presented both challenges and opportunities for the opposing sides. For Israel, achieving acceptance, followed by formal recognition and inclusion in international organisations, served as 'an insurance policy for survival' (Laufer, 1972: 616). Diplomatic recognition not only reinforced Israel's legitimacy, but also helped counterbalance the political isolation efforts led by Arab states.

On the other hand, for Arab states, the rise of the Third World was seen as a strategic opportunity to rally the support of newly independent postcolonial nations. By aligning the Palestinian cause with the global struggle against imperialism and colonialism, Arab leaders aimed to build a majority coalition within the UN. This coalition could amplify the Palestinian narrative, increase pressure on Israel, and shift the balance of power in regional and international diplomacy.

Anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism were the initial driving forces behind the collectivist impulses that ultimately led to the convening of the first Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955, as well as the gathering of the NAM in Belgrade in 1961. The Bandung Conference was a defining moment in the history of the Third World. It played a pivotal role in shaping a collective postcolonial identity and fostering solidarity among newly independent nations (Čavoški, 2022). Additionally, the Conference marked the first organised effort to bring the Palestinian issue to the forefront of the Third World's agenda. This early recognition at Bandung laid the groundwork for

future support for Palestine within the NAM and other international forums.

By bringing together twenty-nine Asian and African countries with diverse political, social, and historical backgrounds, the Bandung Conference sought to forge a new form of post-colonial solidarity, one grounded in the shared experiences of various types of colonialism and a collective aspiration for an independent and just future. The Conference was an expression of bi-continental unity and virtually all governments in Asia and Africa, regardless of their ideological orientations (and their policies on the Cold War) were invited. There were only three exceptions: South Africa, Israel and Taiwan.

This unity was intended to challenge the dominance of Western powers and to create a platform for newly independent states to assert their sovereignty and agency on the global stage. The Conference published a Final Communiqué (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955), which became best known for the section calling for ‘friendly cooperation on the basis of ten principles’ (Willets, 2023). The core principles were political self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs and equality between states. Within the broader Cold War context, the Bandung Conference should be recognised as ‘the first large international meeting that, in practice, confirmed the possibility of anti-bloc politics’ (Stubbs, 2023: 12).

The old political order that had taken shape during the colonial era was slowly dissolving, but no new structure had yet emerged to take its place. The Bandung Conference was both the product and focal point of decolonisation and it added to its momentum. Decolonisation was not solely a moment of nation-building in which the anti-colonial demand for self-determination culminated, it was also a project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order, which was moral and inclusive (Getachew, 2019).

At Bandung, the question of Palestine was paradoxically both central and marginal. It was central in that it permeated almost all discussions as a symbol of the broader anti-colonial struggle, yet marginal in the way it was addressed in the Final Communiqué. It was mentioned only briefly and without substantial commitments (Samour, 2017). This paradox reflected the complex dynamics of the Conference, where solidarity with Palestine was evident but constrained by the need to maintain a delicate balance among participating states with differing priorities and geopolitical concerns. Moreover, despite the (initial) prominence of the Palestinian issue, both Palestinian and Israeli representatives were absent from these discussions. Instead, Palestine was represented

indirectly by Egypt and Syria, whose leaders emphasised the Palestinian cause as part of the broader fight against imperialism. Israel, on the other hand, had no representation whatsoever.

Unlike other gatherings of Third World countries that preceded or followed it, the Bandung Conference adopted a strictly state-centric approach, effectively excluding Palestinian representatives from formal participation. However, it is reported that the Mufti of Jerusalem attended the conference as an observer (Samour, 2017). It was not until the NMA's 1976 conference in Colombo that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), by then established as one of the key Palestinian organisations, was able to attend and participate as a full member. As Samour cynically observes, 'At Bandung, Palestine was discussed as a central topic, especially by Egypt, but it was Palestine, not the Palestinians, that was of concern' (Samour, 2017: 601 – 602). This distinction underscored the limitations of early Third World solidarity, where the issue of Palestine was framed more as a geopolitical concern than a struggle for the self-determination of the Palestinian people themselves.

The situation with Israel was markedly different. By the time of the Bandung Conference, Israel was already a sovereign state and a UN member. Its diplomatic efforts to secure an invitation to the Conference were unsuccessful, however. India and Burma supported Israel's participation, Pakistan and Egypt strongly opposed it. Egypt even threatened that the Arab states would boycott the conference if Israel were invited. Ultimately, the 'Colombo group', comprising India, Indonesia, Burma, Pakistan, and Ceylon, which sponsored the Conference, backed down (Ampiah, 2007). Notably, Egypt proved to be highly influential in the preparations for the Conference.

As noted above, although the issue of Palestine was one of the central topics and sparked intense debate, it occupied a relatively marginal position in the Final Communiqué (Samour, 2017). The language used in the Communiqué was notably moderate and conciliatory, emphasising a peaceful settlement of the conflict. While it expressed support for the rights of the Arab people of Palestine, it avoided invoking any of the key concepts, such as colonialism, imperialism, and racialism, that dominated the Conference's heated discussions and would later come to define the framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Final Communiqué of the Bandung Conference, in a section entitled 'Other problems' stated:

In view of the existing tension in the Middle East, caused by the situation in Palestine and of the

danger of that tension to world peace, the Asian-African Conference declared its support of the rights of the Arab people of Palestine and called for the implementation of the United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955: 5)

The position of this statement on Palestine in the Final Communiqué, along with the language used, highlights several important points. At that time, the countries of the Third World, or at least those represented at the Bandung Conference, displayed a strong belief in and commitment to the UN as the most appropriate forum for addressing the Palestinian question. In this regard, they advocated for the implementation of the two most relevant UN resolutions on Palestine: one authorising the partition of Palestine and the other addressing the plight of Palestinian refugees as an exclusively humanitarian concern (Samour, 2017).

The Bandung Conference did not have a direct follow-up meeting, despite multiple attempts by various, mostly Asian, countries to organise one. Competing visions were emerging regarding the leadership and the organisation of postcolonial states. Nonetheless, as Willets (2023) points out, there were some new aspects of global politics that followed the Bandung meeting.

Apart from 'establishing a new form of diplomacy' (Willets, 2023), with new actors, that is, with no direct participation of the 'dominant powers in the international system' (Willets, 2023), the event had successfully initiated meaningful interventions in the UN, which would have far-reaching implications. The UN immediately gained sixteen new members through a package deal that overcame a deadlock between the United States and the Soviet Union regarding how applications should be adjudicated. Additionally, the Afro-Asian Group was formed within the UN, creating a loose voting bloc in the UN General Assembly. These new states took advantage of the General Assembly to put forward their demands. By acting collectively, the Group strengthened its bargaining position.

One year after the Bandung Conference, the so-called Third World Yalta meeting took place on the island of Brijuni in Croatia (then part of Yugoslavia). The leaders of Yugoslavia (Josip Tito), India (Jawaharlal Nehru) and Egypt (Gamal Abdel Nasser)¹ met to discuss 'the fallout of the spheres of influence concept and their vision for a non-aligned force in opposition to Yalta logic' (Prashad, 2008: 95). Tito took the lead in bringing the three leaders together and promoting the links between Yugoslavia and developing countries.

¹ Tito was the leader of the Yugoslav Partisans, who were the only people in occupied Europe who liberated themselves from Nazi rule. He was a communist who was initially loyal to Stalin, but there was a fall out in 1948 when Tito would not accept a subordinate role. Nehru was the first prime minister of India after full independence was achieved in 1947. He saw India as having an independent role in global politics, exercising moral leadership. Nasser had been a leader in the Egyptian army's Free Officers movement, which overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in July 1952, both to end feudalism and to remove the British presence in Egypt. In June 1956, he was elected president as part of a general transfer to civilian rule. Nasser was an Arab nationalist, rather than an Egyptian nationalist and his popularity extended to other Arab countries (Willets, 2023).

Each of them asserted a distinct role for their country and refused to engage in Cold War politics. Collectively they sought to challenge the influence of the so-called big powers over their countries and proclaimed their 'active neutrality', 'non-alignment' or 'positive neutrality' in the Cold War (Willets, 2023: 65). In other words, their non-engagement in Cold War politics represented a rejection of the political posturing of both blocs.

The fifteenth session of the UN General Assembly, which began on 20 September 1960 in New York, was marked by extensive and coordinated lobbying by a group of countries referred to variously as 'neutral', 'non-engaged', and 'non-bloc', who sought to formulate a resolution aimed at reducing Cold War tensions (Stubbs, 2023: 9). A pivotal meeting held at the Yugoslav mission in New York, attended by Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, Indonesian President Ahmed Sukarno, Egyptian President Nasser, Indian Prime Minister Nehru, and Yugoslav leader Tito, served as a critical moment where non-aligned, anti-bloc politics began to take shape (Stubbs, 2023). As we will see, a vision was emerging for a new coalition of post-colonial states committed to playing an active role in global affairs, later to become known as the NAM.

The Movement, as well as the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference, originated from the common desire of many newly independent and non-bloc countries to survive politically and to develop economically in a complex international environment, but also to launch collective actions between small countries (Čavoški, 2022). Egypt, together with Yugoslavia and India, played a fundamental role in shaping the foundations of global non-alignment. More immediately, an agenda was forming for the Belgrade Conference, scheduled to be held in the early 1960s. The decision to convene the first non-aligned summit was made by Tito and Nasser. Tito formulated the idea of a radical grouping based on a common ideological approach and a firm rejection of bi-continentalism, while Nasser used the prestige that he enjoyed after confronting the Western bloc in the 1956 Suez crisis to give the initiative further standing (Willets, 2023).

The Belgrade Conference marked a shift from passive neutrality to what became known as a positive neutrality. For the first generation of postcolonial governments, who made non-aligned foreign policy a core aspect of their postcolonial identity, this positive neutrality represented an insistence on their rights to have a voice in major global issues, rather than standing passively aside (Stubbs, 2023; Willets, 2023).

Additionally, the Belgrade Conference, in ideological terms, was more sophisticated than the

Bandung gathering. It was defined by a form of radical nationalism that asserted the independence of third-world states from the two Cold War blocs, while also rejecting the conservative nationalism of certain newly independent state leaders. However, although the NAM sought to transcend the Cold War, its first decade was deeply shaped by the superpower rivalry, as well as the historical dynamics and character of North–South relations. Furthermore, the great variety of individual national interests as well as the onset of Soviet-American détente in the early 1970s, weakened the internal cohesion of the movement.

Within this new alliance, Egypt and other Arab states continued to pursue their goals regarding the conflict in the Middle East. In response to the rapidly evolving situation on the ground and, to some extent, due to sustained lobbying by Arab states, Third World countries revisited and significantly, if not radically, redefined their positions on the question of Palestine.

3. The Cold War

While the Arab-Israeli conflict was not inherently a Cold War confrontation, there were moments, particularly during the wars of 1967 and 1973, when it seemed that Cold War dynamics in the Middle East had, in effect, hijacked the broader bipolar world order for their own purposes. In other words, the superpowers focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict not because it was central to the Cold War, but because it acquired symbolic significance for both blocs. Although not all regional conflicts were directly tied to global ideological divides (or the emergence of competing world visions), many political leaders deliberately framed them in such terms, both to mobilise domestic support and to build strategic alliances against regional adversaries (Westad, 2017).

For both the Soviets and the Americans, the Middle East was a geopolitical maelstrom, one that threatened to drag them deeper into its vortex, driven by forces that affected their interests but over which they struggled to gain control. In this volatile and rapidly evolving context, the United States saw securing oil supplies and maintaining a Western strategic presence in the region as critical imperatives. The Soviet Union, for its part, sought to encourage radical nationalist movements to break free from capitalist influence and align with Moscow. On both sides, the region became a combustible mix of ambitions and anxieties, intertwining the Middle East's volatile politics with the larger Cold War struggle (Westad, 2017).

During the Suez Crisis of 1956, both Washington and Moscow had supported Cairo. The Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbours in June 1967, however, marked a critical juncture that

transformed the Arab-Israeli conflict into a fully-fledged superpower clash of global importance (Lüthi, 2020; Westad, 2017). The roots of the war lay at the intersection of several major developments: the Arab world's renewed focus on the Palestinian cause, the intensifying Cold War dynamics in the region (Westad, 2017), and also Israel's expansionist ambitions. Though the war lasted only a few days, it fundamentally reshaped the balance of power in the Middle East.

Soviet military support for Egypt was seen as a way of building influence in the region. Nasser realised that Egypt needed the support of the Soviet Union, as the NAM could offer only platitudes. In Moscow, the theory of the national democratic revolution was enjoying a renewed prestige, which saw in Third World nationalist struggles a potent weapon against imperialism, that is, US political strength (Hudson, 1986). For Egypt, closer alignment with the Soviet bloc was an opportunity to exercise greater independence from the West. The Arab defeat in 1967 was a significant geopolitical setback for the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Israel emerged as the undisputed military victor, solidifying its position as a dominant regional power and establishing itself as the United States' most strategic ally (Erakat, 2019). Initially, both Soviet and American perspectives on Israel sought to simplify complex local realities into a shallow Cold War framework. Until the 1956 Suez Crisis, the Soviets still harboured some hope that the Zionist state could align with Moscow's position in international affairs, potentially allowing them to mediate a settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Bolshevism and Zionism had developed side by side in Russia and Eastern Europe as socialist rivals and at times outright adversaries. However, up until 1948, British imperial policies, rather than the Arabs or the Soviets, had been Zionism's most formidable obstacle.

Under Ben-Gurion, the Israeli labour government's decision to align with the British and French during the Suez Crisis came as a shock to Moscow. For Israel's leadership, confronting its Arab neighbours was a matter of survival, and securing Western support was essential to sustaining this confrontation. Meanwhile, Soviet agreements with Egypt in the aftermath of the 1956 war only reinforced Israel's suspicions. This development pushed Zionist leaders to move closer to the Americans, solidifying Israel's eventual strategic alignment with the United States (Westad, 2017). This war additionally exacerbated the Palestinian tragedy, creating a new wave of refugees, this time from the West Bank and Gaza, who resettled in neighbouring Arab states. In Jordan and Lebanon, Palestinian refugees became a key demographic and political force. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was established in 1964, with the help of Nasser, as a way to control the rising influence of Palestinian-led groups in exile. The early PLO deliberately excluded those groups, including the Arab National Movement (established in 1951 in Beirut) and Fatah (established in 1958 in Kuwait).

The defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 came as a wake-up call to Palestinian popular and organised forces and made evident that Arab armies alone would not liberate Palestine. The war catalysed a process resulting in the ascendance of Palestinian-led groups and their takeover of the PLO in 1969 (Erakat, 2019). This increasingly shaped the political landscape, with the PLO emerging as a central actor in the struggle for Palestinian self-determination.

The NAM, through its regular meetings and its growing influence within developing countries, provided a platform where a novel discursive articulation took place. Under the influence of Egypt, the NAM became an important forum for keeping the Palestinian issue on the international, political agenda. At the same time, Egypt's alignment with the Soviet Union meant that Palestinian self-determination became an issue increasingly framed as an anti-imperial cause. This is how it was increasingly articulated in multilateral forums, most notably the UN, with its unparalleled representative scope. Additionally, the NAM worked successfully on elevating the international standing of the PLO, while promoting the international isolation of Israel. Since its founding in 1945, few other geopolitical issues have occupied as much time within the UN system as the question of Palestine.

At its Conferences (also called Summits or Summit Conferences), and other meetings (which were often convened in the wake of critical political developments in the Middle East), the Movement had the opportunity to articulate its position on the Palestinian conflict, assess recent developments, propose appropriate responses, and offer guidance on how the international community should react. These gatherings played a crucial role in shaping the normative conceptions applied both to the parties involved and the conflict itself. What was once primarily seen as a humanitarian issue, focused on the plight of refugees, gradually evolved into a legal and political matter centred on national rights and statehood. This shift aligned with one of the core principles of the NAM: the right to self-determination. The transformation reflected the broader anti-colonial and anti-imperialist discourse that increasingly shaped the Movement's approach to international conflicts.

3.1 From Lusaka to Algiers

The shift only began to take place in the early 1970s, however. In this regard, the 1970 Lusaka and 1973 Algiers Conferences of the NAM were decisive. The majority of non-bloc and developing

countries succeeded in speaking with one voice, clearly defining not only the final national form of this organisation, but also charting its future strategy. It also promoted the general adherence to a more proactive policy in respect of the blocs and the developed world in general.

This new action concept was supplemented by the idea of launching a collective endeavour in this respect, thus boosting the NAM's active component, both in its political and economic spheres. These ideas were largely presented in the Political Declaration and the Declaration on National Liberation issued by these Conferences, as well as in some specific regional resolutions, where support for national liberation movements and condemnation of different colonial or racist regimes was even more harshly reiterated than before, especially with respect to Israel and South Africa (Čavoški, 2022).

Until 1973, for example, Israel was an important partner for Sub-Saharan countries, the vast majority of them members of the NAM, especially as beneficiaries of developmental aid. Between March and May 1972, only six African countries severed relations with Israel, but in October and November 1973, twenty-one African states broke off ties. This African break occurred against the background of the Yom Kippur war (which lasted from 6 to 25 October 1973) and it marked the beginning of a sharp deterioration in Israel's international position (Levey, 2008).²

Levey argues that Israel had little influence over the circumstances that brought about the 'rupture' (Levey, 2008: 205). The large number of files on Africa in the Israeli archives, as noted by Levey (2008), reflects the importance that Israel attached to the continent. Apart from strategic pragmatism³, it seemed that there was a genuine desire to play a positive role in anticolonial struggles, as well as the nation-building process of the young postcolonial states. Moreover, during the first years of its diplomatic activity on the continent, Israel emphasised its non-alignment in the Cold War, and its commitment to providing developmental (rather than military) aid,⁴ offering technical cooperation and training programmes. Israel portrayed itself as a postcolonial state, and Zionism as a national liberation movement. Additionally, Israel positioned itself as a potential developmental model, a young country that made a desert bloom, forging capable state institutions, and succeeding, in a short period of time, in creating a sense of national unity among

² One week after the war began, Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal from the Sinai Peninsula onto what is unequivocally African soil, and the Arab members of OPEC decided to raise the prices of oil and place an oil embargo on states supportive of Israel. Both events increased the pressure on African states to distance themselves from Israel, if not out of solidarity with Egypt, then out of fear for their own economies. The reward from the Arab world came in the form of various commitments for financial aid and the establishment of the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, with headquarters in Khartoum (Gidron, 2020).

³ Across the continent, Israeli initiatives sought to consolidate political alliances and curb Arab influence, a strategy that became known as the 'periphery doctrine'.

⁴ Israel's presence in some African countries was as prominent as that of leading Western powers. One third of its foreign ministry's budget was committed to supporting a far-reaching programme of cooperation with developing countries (Laufer, 1972). The growth of Israeli presence on the continent during the years of African independence was extraordinary. By 1963, Israel had twenty-two embassies in Africa, and by the late 1960s, it had established ties with thirty-three countries (Gidron, 2020).

its diverse (and heavily traumatised) population. All this spoke directly to African visions and aspirations of modernity (Gidron, 2020). Many African countries, including Ethiopia, apartheid South Africa, post-independence Uganda and Sudan, Zaire (later Democratic Republic of Congo) and Rwanda sought Israel's support.

What produced this change was rising peer pressure⁵ from an increasingly hostile international environment⁶, spearheaded by Arab states who leveraged the threat of an oil embargo on states sympathetic to Israel to secure compliance with their position. Previously, African governments had found Israeli policies problematic, but unlike Arab states, they had neither objected to the nature of the Israeli regime, nor questioned its right to exist. 'African states blamed Israel for what it had done, but not for what it was' (Levey, 2008: 224). Thus, even after the rupture in the relationship, a number of African leaders, as well as Yugoslavia, approached Israeli representatives with conciliatory messages⁷.

At the Lusaka Conference in 1970, the NAM began consolidating itself from a loose network of countries into a fully-fledged international organisation with a clearly defined set of principles and ideas, and a concrete programme (Čavoški, 2022). It also marked the emergence from paralysis for the non-aligned group, who had faced serious challenges at the end of 1960s - Arab defeat in the 1967 war and the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia in August 1968⁸ being among the most complex ones. At the Lusaka Conference, the first comprehensive resolution on the Middle East was adopted, condemning Israel for the occupation of Arab territories. It emphasised that recognition of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people was a necessary precondition for achieving peace in the region. However, it is important to stress that the resolution did not question Israel's right to exist.

A number of countries, primarily Arab ones, advocated for initiating procedures within the UN to impose sanctions on Israel should it continue to boycott UN resolutions. This demand, in a

⁵ Several African states had at the May 1973 Organisation of African Unity assembly objected to an extreme approach to the Middle East dispute. However, the desire for decision by consensus prevailed.

⁶ After the beginning of the Yom Kippur war in early October 1973, the Algerian president, as chairman of the NAM, sent letters to all members of the Movement describing the Arab states' attack on Israel as a legitimate struggle against foreign domination and imperialism, and calling on all non-aligned governments to support it diplomatically at the UN (Dinkel, 2019).

⁷ After Israel and Egypt signed a peace agreement in 1979, Israel's urgency for guaranteeing African support declined, and the Israel-Egypt conflict in Africa was slowly replaced with the much militarised Israeli-Palestinian one (heavily intertwined with Cold War dynamics). The PLO, benefiting from the new momentum of Afro-Arab solidarity, slowly began to expand its diplomatic efforts on the continent, opening missions in countries that had severed relations with Israel. After Israel began to negotiate with the Palestinians and following the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement in the 1990s, Africa lost much of its strategic importance from the Israeli perspective. However, following the total collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the early 2000s, and as Israel's international isolation grew again, it slowly began to return to the continent (Gidron, 2020).

⁸ In 1968, Warsaw Pact forces, led by the Soviet Union, invaded Czechoslovakia to quell the Prague Spring, a period of liberalisation and reform, ending the reforms and solidifying communist rule.

somewhat softened, generalised form, was included in the final documents of the Lusaka Conference. Additionally, representatives of the PLO were present for the first time at the Lusaka Conference, with the status of guests.

In 1973, these developments came to a head. At the NAM Conference in Algiers in September 1973, the PLO became an observer with the right to participate in the Conference's deliberations and the PLO delegate was amongst 14 representatives of the different national liberation movements recognised by the NAM. The Conference also acknowledged the PLO as the 'legitimate representative of the Palestinian people' (Dinkel, 2019). Two years later, at the NAM meeting of foreign ministries in Lima, Peru, the PLO was given the status of a full participant, a status that was confirmed at the fifth NAM Conference in Colombo in 1976. In February 1974, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, comprising fifty-seven states, had similarly recognised the PLO. The Organisation of African Unity followed suit.

The 1973 Algiers Conference adopted the strongest anti-Israel resolution in the history of the NAM, referring to Israeli policy towards Palestinians as colonial rule and a form of apartheid. The Palestinian struggle was made a global symbol of the anti-imperialist struggle (Dinkel, 2019). This resolution also marked the beginning of close cooperation between African states opposed to South Africa and Arab states opposed to Israel, both within and outside the UN (Dinkel, 2019). In this way, the Algiers meeting functioned as a dress rehearsal for the UN General Assembly special session and with the additional help of the Eastern bloc countries, the Movement successfully brought its criticism of Israel before the UN.

4. From the NAM to the United Nations

Decisions made within the NAM, due to the joint actions and growing cohesion of the bloc and especially the influence of the Afro-Arab group within it, had implications for the internal decision-making processes of the UN. Therefore, the passage of Resolution 3210 (United Nations, 1974), extending an invitation to the PLO to participate in the General Assembly debate on the question of Palestine, signalled a remarkable precedent and demonstrated the potential of the Third World as a united voting bloc and thus a source of international lawmaking (Erakat, 2019). At the 29th UN General Assembly, the PLO delegation was accorded observer status, much to the open chagrin of the West, with Yasser Arafat giving his first speech in front of an audience of nearly every member state. This was perceived as a victory for the Palestinian cause and for the global anti-colonial movement in general, since this international platform had been historically reserved

for member states, as a matter of privilege and right (Erakat, 2019). The US, however, continued to oppose the PLO's participation, shutting down the diplomatic possibility of negotiating a two-state solution.

Arafat's appearance before the UN was subsequently interpreted in a contradictory manner. On the one hand his UN debut was said to fulfil the struggle of Palestinians for formal recognition as a people with a right to self-determination. On the other hand, the PLO's participation in the UN system, was construed as an endorsement of a hierarchical and state-centric global order. Moreover, by articulating its demands for statehood in the framework of international law and pursuing this goal at the UN, the PLO drew upon the same legal and institutional principles that legitimised Israel's establishment, naturalised its existence and protected its territorial and political sovereignty⁹ (Erakat, 2019).

Around this time, the PLO was also making a different kind of diplomatic bid, one that aimed to legitimate its use of armed force. Until the early 1970s, only states could legally participate in war. However, in the aftermath of World War II, the primary forms of conflict were non-conventional wars (liberation, anticolonial struggles). In November 1973, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 3070 that reaffirmed 'the legitimacy of the peoples' struggle for liberation from colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation by all available means, including armed struggle' (UN General Assembly, 1973a: 78).

Simultaneously, the PLO sought to isolate and exclude Israel from UN agencies and other international organisations. Drawing inspiration from South Africa's suspension from the UN¹⁰, the PLO pursued a similar action against Israel. However, this initiative failed to gain support from the PLO's key allies, particularly within the region, as Egypt had already entered its first interim peace agreement with Israel. The problem, according to Anis Fawzi Kassem, a legal scholar and later advisor to the PLO, was that, 'no one could answer the question of how the PLO should transfer its legal achievements into diplomatic victories'(Erakat, 2019: 124). Having failed to garner the necessary support to have Israel expelled from the UN, the non-aligned bloc strove to delegitimise Israel's constitutive ideology and expel it by other means.

In August 1975, during the Fifth Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Non-Aligned Countries held in Lima, Peru, a resolution was adopted condemning Zionism as a threat to world

⁹ This new reality additionally divided the PLO itself, into a pragmatic camp, who saw the establishment of a Palestinian state as an interim or even final step to full liberation, and a rejection front, that insisted upon revolution in order to upend Zionist settler sovereignty.

¹⁰ In November 1974, under Abdulaziz Bouteflika's leadership, the UN General Assembly suspended South Africa as a member state. In this way, it established a precedent that the General Assembly could suspend a member state through a UN General Assembly presidential ruling, without a recommendation from the Security Council.

peace and calling on all countries to boycott Israel. This marked the first official use of the term Zionism as a political label within the Movement.

Subsequently, during the 1975 UN General Assembly, Cuba, South Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Syria jointly introduced an amendment to Resolution 3057 (which had been adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 1973), which called for a Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (UN General Assembly, 1973b). The new wording sought to mention Zionism alongside apartheid, racism, colonialism, and racial discrimination. Although this specific change was not adopted, a diplomatic victory was achieved when, on the 10th of November 1975, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 3379, declaring that 'Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination' (UN General Assembly, 1975: 84).

The resolution quickly became highly controversial, largely due to US opposition to it, and, more importantly, marked a fundamental reframing of the Arab-Israeli conflict. By declaring Zionism a form of racism, the Resolution shifted the conflict's framework from a peace-making imperative, focused on reconciling Israel's existence with Palestinian national selfdetermination, to an anti-colonial struggle focused on Israel as an aggressive, white, racist and imperial power. This reconfiguration aligned the Palestinian cause more explicitly with global anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements, further embedding it within the broader discourse of racial and colonial injustice. Western states saw this move as unnecessarily divisive, while a number of African countries expressed a reasonable concern that this intervention would undermine global support for the *Decade against Racism*.

By the late 1970s the Cold War in the Middle East had fashioned a region with hard, almost intractable problems. The area was divided into US and Soviet allies, much as in other parts of the world. Both powers supported regimes that did not serve their own population well. Neither power had a real interest in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict, except to the degree that the negotiations helped their own position versus the other superpower. The US refused to speak to Palestinian leaders, whom they considered terrorists. The Soviets claimed to support the Palestinian cause, but only to the extent they could control the Palestinian organisations. US interests in securing Middle East oil supplies made it tolerant of dictatorships in Iran and Saudi Arabia. It was an explosive mix which made sure that the region would stay highly volatile up until the end of the Cold War and beyond (Westad, 2017).

As for the NAM, it began to face an internal crisis in the 1980s, failing to generate the restructuring of the international order it sought, while becoming increasingly entangled in internal conflicts (Čavoški, 2022). One of the Movement's lasting effects, however, was political and ideological: framing Israel as a racist, settler colonial state and establishing the basis for judging it politically going forward.

Conclusion

This paper has distinguished between settler colonialism as a historical phenomenon and settler colonialism as a term of political and moral judgement. It has argued that the normative framing of Israel as a settler colonial state emerged very early, not merely from the facts of Zionist migration, but from a deliberate political project, driven most notably by Egypt. We have shown how Cold War alliances, Afro-Arab solidarities, and the strategic deployment of anticolonial rhetoric contributed to the framing of Zionism alongside apartheid and Western imperialism, an association that was subsequently institutionalised through international diplomacy and law, largely in response to evolving (deteriorating) conditions on the ground. This process reshaped Israel's political identity in the global arena and recast the Palestinian struggle as a paradigmatic case of anti-colonial resistance.

The case of Israel's evolving international status, therefore, cannot be understood separately from the decisive interventions of the NAM. Far from being merely a backdrop to Cold War diplomacy, the NAM emerged as a pivotal site where the meaning of Zionism, Palestinian nationalism, and the language of anti-colonialism were negotiated on a global stage. Initially marginal in NAM deliberations, the Palestinian question was elevated through sustained AfroArab solidarity, culminating in the Movement's recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the adoption of increasingly forceful resolutions that equated Zionism with colonialism and apartheid.

This trajectory reveals not only the strategic power of postcolonial diplomacy, but also the historical malleability of political categories. Zionism, once positioned by its advocates as a national liberation movement, was reinterpreted through the NAM as a settler colonial project, an ideological shift that had real institutional consequences at the UN and beyond. By mobilising the rhetoric of racial justice and Third World solidarity, NAM member states transformed the Palestinian cause into a paradigm of global antiimperialism. At the same time, the NAM's

state-centric structure and its Cold War entanglements constrained its ability to respond to Palestinian political agency in all its diversity.

The historiographical implication is clear: the classification of Israel as a settler colonial state from the beginning is not only a claim about historical facts, but also the product of a specific international political project. It also obscures the transformation of the character of the Israeli state. If Israel was always, from the outset, a settler colony, it is not necessary to explain how it became one in the 1970s. Yet, this is surely the task that is at hand today, both for historiographical and political reasons. If settler colonialism is not inherent to Zionism and to the character of Israel as a state, then an anti- or postZionist politics does not necessarily require the end of Israel *per se*.

References

- Ampiah, K. (2007). *The Political and Moral Imperatives of the Bandung Conference of 1955: the Reactions of the US, UK and Japan*. Leiden: Brill.
- Čavoški, J. (2022). *Non-Aligned Movement Summits: A History*. [e-book] London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Dinkel, J. (2018). *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*. Leiden: Brill.
- Erakat, N. (2019). *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Getachew, A. (2019). *Worldmaking after Empire: the Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gidron, Y. (2020). *Israel in Africa: Security, Migration, Interstate Politics*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hamed-Troyansky, V. (2024). *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hudson, P. (1986). The Freedom Charter and the theory of national democratic revolution. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 1:6–38. Available from: <https://d.lib.msu.edu/tran/3> [Accessed: 27 Mar 2025].
- Khalidi, R. (2020). *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Laufer, L. (1972). Israel and the Third World. *Political Science Quarterly*, 87(4): 615-630.
- Levey, Z. (2008). Israel's exit from Africa: the road to diplomatic isolation. *British Journal of*

Middle Eastern Studies, 35(2): 205-226.

Lüthi, L. (2020). *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manela, E. (2007). *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marom, R. (2023). Hadera: transnational migrations from Eastern Europe to Ottoman Palestine and the glocal origins of the Zionist-Arab conflict. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 60(2): 250–270.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia. (1955). *Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference*. Available from https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/final_communique_of_the_asian_african_conference_of_bandung_24_april_1955-en-676237bd-72f7-471f-949a-88b6ae513585.html [Accessed 27 Mar 2025].

Pedersen, S. (2015). *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Prashad, V. (2008). *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. New York: New Press.

Rogan, E. (2024). Memo on: Revisiting the past: apartheid and settler colonialism. In: *Narrative Conditions Towards Peace in the Middle East conference, Johannesburg, South Africa*, 18–20 September 2024. Available at: <https://africanglobaldialogue.org/eugene-rogan/> [Accessed: 20 March 2025].

Samour, N. (2017). Palestine at Bandung: The longwinded start of a reimagined international law. In: Eslava L., Fakhri M. and Nesiah V. (eds.) *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 595-615.

Sayegh, F.A. (1965). Zionist Colonialism in Palestine, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2:1, 206-225, Available from <https://archive.org/details/zionistcolonialism/mode/2up> [Accessed 27 Mar 2025]

Stubbs, P. (ed.) (2023). *Socialist Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned Movement: Social, Cultural, Political and Economic Imaginaries*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

United Nations General Assembly. (1973a). *Resolution 3057 (XXVIII). Programme for the Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination*. Available from: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/191433/files/A_RES_3057%28XXVIII%29-EN.pdf [Accessed 27 Mar 2025]

United Nations General Assembly. (1973b). *Resolution 3070 (XXVIII). Importance of the universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination and of the speedy granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples*. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/191219?ln=en&v=pdf> [Accessed 27 Mar 2025].

United Nations General Assembly. (1975). Resolution 3379 (XXX): *Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination*. Available from: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert181963/> [Accessed] 27 Mar 2025

Westad, O. A. (2017). *The Cold War: A World History*. New York: Basic Books.

Willetts, P. (2023). The foundations of the Non-Aligned Movement: The trouble with history is that it is all in the past. In: Stubbs, P. (ed.) *Socialist Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned Movement: Social, Cultural, Political and Economic Imaginaries*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 59-84.