

# [***Opinion: Why so many Americans are misapplying 'settler colonialism' to Gaza***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B47-JJN1-DY7V-G009-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; **Editor's note:** Peter Rutland is [*professor*](https://prutland.faculty.wesleyan.edu/) of government at Wesleyan University and an expert in ***politics***, contemporary nationalism and the economy in Russia. He is a vice president of the [*Association for the Study of Nationalities*](https://nationalities.org/), which promotes scholarship in ethnicity, ethnic conflict and nationalism in Europe and Eurasia. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his own. View [*more opinion*](https://www.cnn.com/opinions) on CNN.

The war between Israel and Hamas has caused turmoil on American college campuses, leading to the resignation of the presidents of [*Harvard*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/02/business/claudine-gay-harvard-president-resigns/index.html) and the [*University of Pennsylvania*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/09/business/upenn-board-of-trustees-meeting-liz-magill/index.html).

It is unfortunate that instead of having a serious debate about the causes of the war, the issue has been co-opted by partisans on the left and the right to pursue their long-standing conflict over identity ***politics*** and cancel culture.

The United States needs a serious and reasoned discussion about how to resolve the conflict in Gaza. The US is a key player: the only one that has any [*leverage*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/us/politics/israel-gaza-war-biden-arm-sales.html) over the government of Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Institutions of higher learning, where students, faculty and staff alike are invested in the mission of academic freedom, should be fertile ground for fostering such robust discourse.

On most American campuses, however, there is no real debate about the war. Instead, we see two parallel sets of conversations, some more civil than others, organized by those who "Stand with Israel" and those seeking "Justice for Palestine."

This bifurcation is understandable, given the trauma experienced by both sides in the conflict and increasingly visible in images and accounts from the region. But it is alarming to see the gulf that separates the two narratives widening among Americans.

While most Americans support Israel, polls show that a majority of [*young Americans*](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/11/16/israel-palestine-quinnipiac-poll-00127726), including many college students, are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. For them, the Holocaust is ancient history, while they see the harrowing deaths of Palestinians in real time on their social media feeds.

Many college students are taught that American society is the product of "[*settler colonialism*](https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230299191)" - a history of conquest and exploitation. In this simplistic framing, the plight of the Palestinians is just one more example of the familiar evils of settler colonialism. For those who see the conflict through this lens, the founding of Israel is treated as the equivalent of the European colonization of the Americas.

The Gaza war is better understood as a conflict between two competing nationalist projects than as a case of settler colonialism. There are a number of inconvenient historical truths that complicate the "settler colonialism" narrative.

It is a conflict in which each side - with good reason - sees itself as an embattled and threatened minority. The Palestinians are vastly outmatched by the powerful Israeli security forces, but Israel lives in the shadow of the Holocaust and is outnumbered 50 to one by its Arab neighbors across the wider region.

The Palestinian side starts the historical clock with the 1917 [*Balfour Declaration*](https://www.amazon.com/Balfour-Declaration-Origins-Arab-Israeli-Conflict/dp/1408809702/ref=sr_1_1?crid=182GA0XKFQAA1&keywords=jonathan+schneer+balfour&qid=1702835017&s=books&sprefix=jonathan+schneer+balfour%2Cstripbooks%2C111&sr=1-1), when the British foreign minister promised the Jews a homeland in Palestine. Or they go back to the founding of Israel in 1948 and the [*nakba*](https://www.amazon.com/Ethnic-Cleansing-Palestine-Ilan-Pappe/dp/1851685553), the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians.

For Jews, history does not begin in 1948, or 1917. Zionism was not a product of the British empire. It was born in Vienna, Vilnius and Lviv. It was a response to the realization that there was no place for Jews, assimilated or not, in the Austrian and Russian empires. The word [*pogrom*](https://www.amazon.com/Pogroms-Anti-Jewish-Violence-Russian-History/dp/0521528518) comes from Russian and entered the English language in the late 19th century with reports of state-sponsored killing of Jews in the Russian empire. The word genocide was [*coined*](https://www.amazon.com/East-West-Street-Genocide-Humanity/dp/0525433724) during World War II by Raphael Lemkin, a Jew from Galicia, wheremore than 100,000 Jews were killed in pogroms in 1921.

The founding of Israel should also be seen in the context of state-building and ethnic cleansing throughout the region. Alongside the Palestinians expelled from Israel, there were [*900,000 Jews*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/many-israelis-are-refugees-from-arab-lands-middle-east-history-9cf540f6) driven from their homes in Arab lands in the mid-20th century. As recently as 1991, 14,000 Ethiopian Jews, fleeing famine, were [*evacuated*](https://www.amazon.com/Operation-Solomon-Daring-Rescue-Ethiopian/dp/019530716X/ref=sr_1_1) to Israel. Egypt and Jordan occupied Gaza and the West Bank, respectively, [*from 1948 to 1967*](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war) and were indifferent to Palestinians' rights.

Another problem with the settler colonialism narrative is that it treats each side as a monolithic actor, playing the role of colonizer and victim, respectively. In reality there is a diversity of ideas and interests in both the Israeli and Palestinian camps.

The tragedy of the past 30 years is that moderates on both sides, interested in making a genuine peace, have been repeatedly [*outflanked*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt3PpqaLfxo&ab_channel=FRONTLINEPBS%7COfficial) by radicals screaming that compromise means betrayal. This process of "[*ethnic outbidding*](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/ethnic-parties-and-democratic-stability/1D5DDC5687496C4157C3B2CDAEC88B2A)" can be seen in many conflicts, from Bosnia to Northern Ireland.

For years, Netanyahu has obstructed efforts to forge a compromise peace with the Palestinians. He actually [*helped Hamas*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/17/opinions/israel-approach-palestinian-authority-west-bank-ibish/index.html) after the group came to power in Gaza, because that meant the Palestinians were divided and unable to make peace with Israel. However, Israel [*cannot*](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/mepo.12703) achieve security through military means alone.

Hamas started the war on October 7 to undermine Israel's image in the world and deter other Arab states such as Saudi Arabia from following the example of the 2020 [*Abraham Accords*](https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/), in which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan made peace with Israel. The pro-Palestinian left on American campuses seems to oppose Israel making peace with its neighbors on the grounds that it is not connected to the creation of a Palestinian state. I was shocked to hear a Palestinian professor argue in a Zoom lecture that the more civilians that are martyred by Israel, the closer they will be to liberation.

The Hamas strategy seems to be working, with mounting global condemnation of Israel's assault on Gaza and a [*surge in support*](https://www.npr.org/2023/12/21/1217758546/hamas-support-palestinians-west-bank) for Hamas among Palestinians.

Hamas gets support from Iran, Turkey and Qatar. But the moderate Arab countries fear Hamas more than they fear Israel. That's why the Arab League was unable to come up with a joint statement at its October 21 [*meeting*](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/cairo-peace-summit-grapples-with-gaza-war-risks-region-rise-2023-10-21/) in Cairo.

None of this is to excuse the mass killing of civilians in Gaza or the occupation regime in the [*West Bank*](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/12/21/a-bitter-season-in-the-west-bank-david-shulman/) - a literal case of settler colonialism. But peace will only be possible if we recognize that there are legitimate grievances on both sides. It is not a struggle between right and wrong, between good and evil, though partisans often frame it in those terms.

The United States has a vital role to play. It is the only actor with the ability to force Netanyahu to de-escalate, as it has done [*repeatedly*](https://time.com/6549715/history-israel-hamas-war-end/) in [*past wars*](https://time.com/6549715/history-israel-hamas-war-end/) fought by Israel. At the same time, it is working with its Arab allies to come up with a solution that enables Israelis and Palestinians to coexist in peace.

Students and faculty on American universities should be working together to help forge a solution, and not using the conflict to open a new front in the culture wars and to score points against their political opponents in the US.

Opinion by Peter Rutland

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