



# The praxis of Azmi Bishara: envisioning and building toward the liberation of Palestine

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Accepted: 26 September 2023 / Published online: 10 November 2023  
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## Abstract

Azmi Bishara's new book, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice*, brings together historical, political, and strategic analyses that Bishara developed from the 1990s to the late 2010s. The book provides clear-eyed critiques of the Zionist settler colonial project, its evolution into a system of permanent apartheid, and the long-term challenges facing the Palestine liberation movement. Current debates about Palestine liberation are animated by emancipatory visions of decolonization, principled forms of joint struggle, and a reassertion of Palestinian feminism. Much of this work builds on Bishara's critical analysis and political praxis. His new book will become an important resource as Palestinian political movements and their allies mobilize to abolish the structures of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and empire.

**Keywords** Apartheid · Settler colonialism · Normalization · Liberation · Decolonization

For decades, Azmi Bishara has been at the forefront of Palestinian political praxis, developing transformative analyses and groundbreaking interventions that have fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of struggle. His new book, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice*, brings together historical, political, and strategic analyses that Bishara developed starting in the 1990s and culminating in his critique of Donald Trump's so-called 'Deal of the Century.' The book provides clear-eyed critiques of the Zionist settler colonial project, its evolution into a system of permanent apartheid, and the long-term challenges facing the Palestine liberation movement. It provides an invaluable grounding for Palestinian organizers who are building on these foundations to develop political visions, strategies, and movements for liberation.

An early and vocal critic of the Oslo 'peace process,' Bishara predicted that Oslo would fortify Israeli domination throughout historic Palestine by transforming the

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occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip into a series of disconnected ‘bantustans’ under the full sovereign control of Israel (Usher 1995). As the prospects of Palestinian statehood diminish, the language of ‘apartheid’ has become increasingly important for understanding and resisting Israeli rule. Bishara’s new book argues that this is a productive development and that the apartheid framework provides a powerful tool for movement building. At the same time, Bishara reminds us that Israel’s apartheid system is an extension of the underlying Zionist settler colonial project that created Israel as a Jewish state.

The first part of Bishara’s book lays the foundations of this argument. He demonstrates that the Palestinian question cannot be reduced to the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967, but must instead center the *nakba*—the ongoing catastrophe marked by colonial conquest, forced displacement, and systematic discrimination—that has devastated the Palestinian people since 1948. This argument is absolutely essential, and increasingly important for political praxis. In recent years, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the renewal of settler colonial studies, and the transnational solidarity movement have all centered 1948, not 1967. It is instructive to recall that Bishara helped lay the foundations for all of this work through his articles, speeches, and organizing starting in the mid-1990s. At that time, and for at least another decade, the Oslo process had effectively narrowed the scope of the Palestine question to ending Israel’s military occupation of the 1967 territories. Alongside movements like Al-Awda, Bishara helped transform the Palestine liberation movement by re-centering the *nakba* and the critique of Zionism.

As Bishara points out, Zionist settler colonialism remains an active, aggressive, ongoing project. Importantly, he uses the language of ‘normalization’ to analyze the un-resolved nature of the Zionist project. Unlike the United States or Canada, Bishara argues, Israel has failed to ‘normalize’ its settler colonial project (2022: 6–7). Importantly, he credits Palestinian resistance to Israel’s violent apartheid regime with preventing the ‘naturalization’ of Israeli settler colonialism (2022: 8). There is a discomfiting sense of exceptionalism in this argument, yet the implications for Palestinian liberation are significant.

In recent years, indigenous movements and authors have pointed out that settler colonialism—in the United States, Canada, Australia, and beyond—is not resolved and that indigenous communities have neither disappeared nor surrendered. Not only does the violence of settler expansion continue, but so do struggles for indigenous sovereignty and decolonization (Simpson 2014, 2017; Coulthard 2014; Estes 2019). Over the last 10 years, for example, First Nations and Native Americans have fought pitched battles against settler colonialism and racial capitalism in Turtle Island (North America)—including Idle No More, the Standing Rock Sioux encampment to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Wet’su’weten struggle against Coastal GasLink (Klein 2013; Estes 2019; Estes and Dhillon 2019). The decolonial vision grounding these struggles—Land Back!—aligns with the goals of Palestinian liberation.

Acknowledging the continuation of indigenous struggles for sovereignty challenges Bishara’s description of Palestine as ‘the world’s last remaining unresolved instance of settler colonialism’ (2022:6). Indeed, his argument is reminiscent of Yasser Arafat’s famous claim that ‘We are not Red Indians’ because the world cannot ignore the question of Palestine (Doumani 2007; Simpson 2015). As



Palestinian and indigenous movements deepen their commitment to joint struggle and transnational solidarity, it is important to recognize the limitations of exceptionalism and explore possibilities for renewed connections and visions of global liberation.

Nevertheless, Bishara's analysis of normalization is revealing, and adds to the significance of his broader argument. Despite the continuation of their settler colonial projects, the United States and Canada are widely accepted as 'normal,' 'democratic' countries, even by Bishara himself. Israel aspires to the same recognition. As Bishara explains, this aspiration animates the concerted efforts by Israel and the United States to convince Arab governments to normalize their ties with Israel by signing treaties and establishing official diplomatic relations. Bishara blames the PLO for effectively opening the door for these treaties by agreeing to participate in bilateral negotiations with Israel through the Oslo process. It is in this context that Bishara stresses the strategic importance of resisting normalization and ensuring that Israel's settler-colonial regime is not accepted as a normal, democratic state. Indeed, it is also important to challenge the assumption that the US and Canada are 'normal' and 'democratic' states.

A consistent strength of Bishara political analysis is his emphasis on the indeterminacy of outcomes. As he explains, 'just because Israel is a settler colonial structure and has failed to nativize does not necessarily mean that it will be dismantled. Political outcomes or so-called solutions are not determined solely by the diagnosis of the structure' (2022: 252). He goes on to point out that the failure of the two-state solution does not mean that a one-state solution is inevitable. Palestinians must contend with the fact that Israel has rejected both solutions and committed itself to perpetual warfare and permanent apartheid.

By rejecting all potential solutions with any legitimacy, Israel has chosen to remain behind its walls, surviving by means of coercive deterrence and by taking advantage of intra-Arab disputes, both between regimes and between despotic regimes and their peoples. This might be a permanent solution. Even today, this choice is deeply entrenched among the Israeli public. It relies on the position of strength provided by Israel's unhealthy relationship with the United States, a bilateral relationship without parallel in modern times. Israel thus seems unlikely to accept either a one- or two-state solution any time soon (2022: 263).

Given the existing balance of forces, Bishara argues, no just solution is realistic in the short term. He therefore encourages a long-term strategy that involves resisting normalization, building 'vibrant institutions everywhere,' and developing a democratic vision for liberation (2022: 285). One of the keys, he argues, is to rebuild the institutional foundation for a unified liberation movement. This will require a renewed PLO with a newly elected Palestinian National Council that includes representatives from political factions and civil society organizations inside Palestine and across the diaspora. His analysis of institution building includes reflections on the Palestinian Authority (PA), the refugee camps, and transnational solidarity organizations.



Controversially, Bishara argues against dissolving the PA. To be clear, he consistently explains that the PA operates as a subcontractor for Israel, helping govern the occupied territories and suppressing Palestinian resistance to the occupation. Nevertheless, he predicts that dissolving the PA would lead to civil war and instead advocates for maintaining the PA and transforming it into an institution that can support national liberation. If the PA were part of a genuine liberation movement, he argues, it could provide effective support for Palestinian communities and strengthen grassroots struggles in the occupied territories. He makes a similar case for sustaining the institutional structures that Hamas has built to govern the Gaza Strip. The threat of civil war is very real, and an important reason to be cautious about calls to dismantle the PA. But given the leverage that Israel and the US are able to exert on the PA, and the PA's history of appeasement and security coordination, it is challenging to envision a pathway by which the PA could expand its autonomous power and become an integral part of a national liberation movement.

At the same time, Bishara highlights the urgency of reintegrating Palestinian refugee camps into the struggle for liberation. As Bishara explains, the camps 'formed the epicenter of the militant struggle' (2022: 137) until the PLO effectively abandoned the diaspora after Oslo. Nevertheless, he points out, Palestinian refugees continue demanding the right of return and seeking opportunities to participate in the struggle. Moreover, the camps in the occupied territories remain vital centers of resistance. 'It is impossible to sustain the demand for the right of return,' Bishara argues, 'unless the refugees are allowed to play an active role in the national movement' (2022: 141). And without the refugees, the Palestinian cause is reduced to merely a 'border dispute.' Rebuilding the links between the refugee camps of the diaspora and those in the occupied territories and establishing institutions to support the struggle for return are keys to the future of the liberation movement.

While uplifting the work of young Palestinians who have built grassroots solidarity movements around the world, Bishara argues that their impact will remain limited until they are connected to a coordinated liberation movement. 'It is critical for these fragmented initiatives to unite under a common framework if they are to gain greater political leverage' (2022: 284). What is not clear, however, is the role that Bishara sees for transnational organizations in the development of that common framework. As I discuss below, the Palestinian Youth Movement, the Palestinian Feminist Collective, and other grassroots organizations have developed sophisticated analyses and embraced joint struggle and intersectionality as foundations for Palestine liberation. Their work builds on analyses that Bishara helped establish. But their visions of liberation are more expansive and add important new dimensions to the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice.

Bishara powerfully argues that the liberation movement must develop a 'democratic vision' for the future. He advocates for a bi-national state based on mutual recognition, full legal equality, and coexistence of two national communities: Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis. To achieve this goal, Bishara contends, the long-term strategy must ultimately transform Jewish Israeli public opinion towards coexistence. He argues that equal citizenship is 'the key to coexistence in one state without Zionist hegemony, and it also offers an alternative to the Jewish population, who will need to be convinced that there is no need for an exclusivist Jewish state' (2022: 253).



This argument builds on a political strategy that Bishara helped develop among 1948 Palestinians in the early years of the twenty-first century: insisting that Israel become a ‘state for all its citizens.’ This demand grounded the platform of Bishara’s political party—the National Democratic Alliance (Balad)—and was later incorporated into the ‘Future Visions Documents’ (Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khoury 2014). Within this strategy, the argument that Israel should become a ‘state for all its citizens’ played a dual role. First, it provided a democratic vision for the future. Second, the movement understood this demand as a political wedge that could expose the contradictory claim that Israel was ‘Jewish and democratic.’ Using this demand to deepen the contradictions of Zionism and resist the normalization of Israel as a ‘democratic’ state has laid bare the fundamentally racist nature of the Israeli state. Indeed, Zionist politicians responded to calls for equal citizenship by adopting the so-called ‘Nation State Law’ insisting that Israel will always remain a Jewish state.

As Palestinians explore long-term strategies and visions for the future, Bishara’s book and his arguments for a bi-national state will provide important guideposts. But these discussions are proceeding quickly, and the latest visions have moved beyond ideas that Bishara expresses in the book. This could be due to the time lag involved in publishing a book, or it could be a sign that young Palestinians are moving forward more quickly than Bishara.

Most importantly, some Palestinians are questioning the limits of a rights-based framework that emphasizes legal equality and citizenship. Bishara mentions the One Democratic State Campaign (ODSC), which calls for full legal equality and the right of return for all Palestinian refugees. Yet the ODSC platform goes beyond formal equality by calling for redistributive economic policies to address racialized class inequality and restitution for Palestinian refugees whose land was stolen.<sup>1</sup> Bishara does not discuss these issues, including the fundamentally important question of land redistribution, which are key to addressing social and economic inequality in a post-apartheid future.

From a decolonial perspective, Lana Tatour (2019) has challenged the use of ‘citizenship’ as a framework for liberation. She explains that Israel has always used citizenship as a tool of control, providing conditional citizenship to 1948 Palestinians in order to appear democratic while institutionalizing a colonial hierarchy based on the dispossession of the Palestinian people. Citizenship alone, she insists, does not constitute liberation. That will require more expansive visions that include transformative justice, land redistribution, and dismantling the political, social, and economic institutions that uphold Israeli settler colonialism.

In a similar vein, the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) has incorporated a critique of racial capitalism into its vision of decolonization. In 2019, PYM organized a study delegation to South Africa to consider the apartheid analogy and the limits of change in South Africa after 1994. As Loubna Qutami (2020) recounts:

The most profound lesson drawn from the South African context ... is that ... Palestinians must also grapple with racial capitalism and that if solutions do

<sup>1</sup> <https://onestatecampaign.org/all/en-manifesto/>.



not allow for a complete redistribution of land, wealth and power there will be no true Palestinian liberation....Delegates concluded that true change cannot be achieved through a negotiated settlement with a colonial force and that it will only be achieved through a comprehensive process of decolonization... that will also hold colonial violence to account.

Another move beyond the focus on legal equality is the insistence that Palestine is a feminist issue. Building on political visions articulated by INCITE!, the Palestinian Feminist Collective insists that gendered and sexual violence are central to the struggle for Palestinian liberation. The PFC's founding document outlines a 'truly intersectional and decolonial feminist vision for the United States, Palestine, and our world' based on 're-imagining and re-creating a world free from systems of gendered, racial and economic exploitation.'<sup>2</sup> Expanding on this vision, Nadine Naber and Clarissa Rojas (2021) call for 'anti-imperialist abolition feminism' that attends to the connections between gender-based violence, police violence, settler colonialism, and imperialist warfare. They argue that:

...if we want to abolish prisons, we are going to have to dismantle systems that cage and punish while also dismantling the structure of the U.S. nation-state and its local and global extractivist and expansionist systems of genocide and war, ethnic cleansing, displacement and dispossession.....When we defund the military, ICE and the police, we must also defund U.S. support for authoritarian dictators, puppet regimes and Israeli settler-colonialism.

Finally, we can see the shift from rights-based to justice-based frameworks in the resurgence of revolutionary solidarity and joint-struggle between Black, indigenous, and Palestine liberation movements. Building on long histories of shared struggle, the 2014 Ferguson uprising and the 2016 Standing Rock water protector encampment became key moments in the revival of joint struggle frameworks (Bailey 2015; Naber 2017; Tabar and Desai 2017; Dhillon 2019; Abuznaid et al 2019; Erakat and Hill 2019). Through joint solidarity statements, reciprocal delegations, political gatherings, collective actions, and other forms of mutual support, Black, Native American, and Palestinian organizers are building joint struggles against state violence, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism. These conjoined struggles are grounded in a recognition that Palestinians, Black Americans, and Native Americans confront similar yet distinct forms of racial, colonial, and capitalist domination that are connected through a global network of imperial power.

Emancipatory visions of decolonization, principled forms of joint struggle, and a reassertion of Palestinian feminism are animating current debates about long-term strategies for Palestinian liberation. Much of this work builds on Bishara's critique of Zionism, his insistence on the centrality of the *nakba* to the Palestinian struggle, and his effort to articulate a democratic vision for the future. Bishara's new book contains a powerful archive of his arguments. It will become an important resource as Palestinian political movements and their allies mobilize to abolish the structures of settler

<sup>2</sup> <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/pledge-declaring-palestine-is-a-feminist-issue>.



colonialism, racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and empire. These movements provide the clearest direction and most inspiring visions for the future.

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