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*From Colonialism to Neocolonialism: Palestine as a Case Study in The Legacy of Orientalism in Modern Geopolitics*

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### **Abstract**

*One of the most persistent geopolitical problems of the contemporary age is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has been characterized by decades of political unrest, bloodshed, and failed diplomatic attempts to find a solution. The legacy of Orientalism, a school of thought that portrays the East as inferior, illogical, and needing Western control or intervention, provides a crucial lens through which this conflict might be interpreted. The neocolonial structures that result from Orientalist discourse serve to sustain the colonial forces that have defined the Palestinian fight for statehood. This article looks at how Orientalism still affects the world views Palestine, especially in terms of how it affects media representations, Western policy, and how Palestinians are treated as permanent "others" within a framework that supports Israeli hegemony. Israel's continuous occupation of Palestinian territory is a type of neocolonialism that is supported by Western assistance and Orientalist rhetoric. This study uses a qualitative research methodology to examine the impact of Orientalism on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by combining discourse, content, and historical analysis. With special reference to Israeli occupation and Western assistance, historical research traces the origins of Orientalism in colonial-era policies and investigates its evolution into neocolonial practices. Content analysis looks for Orientalist motifs that depict Palestinians as violent or incapable of self-governance in political speeches, media reports, and policy documents. debate analysis is used to examine how Orientalist narratives continue to shape opinions about Palestine and provide justification for neocolonialism in intellectual debate. A thorough grasp of how Orientalism upholds geopolitical injustices in the Palestinian context is made possible by this multi-method approach.*

**Keywords:** Colonial, Orientalism, neocolonialism, Palestinians, legacy, Western.

## **Introduction**

The history of Palestine is deeply intertwined with colonialism, and in the contemporary era, it has become a site of neocolonial control. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Israeli Palestinian conflict have often been analyzed in the context of nationalism, human rights, and international law. However, less attention has been given to how Orientalist ideologies have shaped the discourse surrounding Palestine, particularly in Western political thought. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a detailed analysis of how Orientalism, as outlined by Edward Said, informs the ongoing neocolonial structures affecting Palestine today.

## **Theoretical Framework: Orientalism and Neocolonialism**

### **Orientalism**

In Orientalism, Edward Said argues that the West has historically constructed the East as an exotic, backward, and inferior "Other." This process, which he terms "Orientalism," provided ideological justification for European colonial expansion and the subjugation of non-Western peoples. Orientalism is not merely an intellectual or cultural phenomenon but a tool of domination, deeply embedded in power relations. The "Oriental" was created as a category against which the West could define itself as superior, rational, and modern.<sup>1</sup>

### **Orientalism and Israeli Hegemony**

The Orientalist lens is not just an intellectual exercise but actively supports the hegemonic framework through which Israel can maintain control over Palestinian territories and people. By positioning Israel as part of the "West" and Palestine as part of the "backward East," global powers, particularly in the West, provide moral, military, and economic support to Israeli policies that uphold occupation and settlement expansion.<sup>2</sup> This Orientalist framework allows Israeli policies whether military occupation, settlement building, or the blockade of Gaza to be framed not as colonial domination but as necessary for the defense of Western civilization against a dangerous and irrational other. It also allows for the international community, particularly in the West, to turn a blind eye to the asymmetry of power and the structural violence inherent in the occupation.<sup>3</sup>

### **Neocolonialism: Continuity of Control**

Neocolonialism, a term popularized by thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, refers to the indirect, often subtle mechanisms of control that former colonial powers and other dominant nations exert over previously colonized states<sup>4</sup>. While formal colonial rule may have ended, the legacy of domination persists through economic dependency, political influence, and cultural hegemony. These forms of control are not enforced by direct occupation but rather through international institutions, media narratives, and global economic systems that continue to disadvantage developing nations. In many cases, the sovereign independence of postcolonial states is undermined by unequal power dynamics that leave them reliant on foreign aid, indebted to global financial institutions, or

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<sup>1</sup> W. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> N. Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (California: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> B. Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, society, and the Military* (California: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> P. K. B. Frimpong, *Nkrumahism and Neo-Nkrumahism* (Louisville; University of Louisville, 2012).

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manipulated by geopolitical interests. Neocolonialism, therefore, represents the continuity of colonial domination, reshaped to fit the modern world order.<sup>5</sup>

This paper explores the enduring effects of neocolonialism, using Palestine as a case study to illustrate how economic, political, and cultural domination persists in regions long freed from formal colonial rule. It will examine how neocolonialism operates today and how it sustains the global imbalance of power, particularly about Western dominance and the enduring effects of Orientalism on formerly colonized societies.

### **Palestine: A Case Study in Colonialism and Neocolonialism**

#### **Colonial Legacy**

The colonial history of many nations, including Palestine, laid the groundwork for the neocolonial dynamics seen today. Colonialism was not merely a system of territorial conquest and governance but also a profound exercise in economic exploitation, cultural domination, and political control. In Palestine, British colonial rule under the Mandate system from 1920 to 1948 set the stage for many of the geopolitical struggles that continue to define the region<sup>6</sup>. British imperial policy, driven by both strategic interests and Orientalist ideologies, shaped the future of Palestine by fostering divisions, dispossessing the local population, and prioritizing external interests over indigenous governance.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was a pivotal moment in colonial history. By committing to the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, Britain facilitated the Zionist settler-colonial project while marginalizing the political rights of the native Arab population<sup>7</sup>. This colonial policy reflected the Orientalist view of Palestinians as incapable of self-governance and in need of external administration and oversight. The subsequent period of British rule entrenched these dynamics, with colonial administrators managing the land and resources to benefit European settlers and imperial interests<sup>8</sup>. As British colonial power withdrew in 1948, the vacuum left behind gave rise to the establishment of Israel and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians an event known as the Nakba (catastrophe)<sup>9</sup>. This moment marked the formal end of British colonialism but initiated a new phase of settler-colonialism and the beginning of a broader neocolonial system, wherein Western powers, especially the United States and the United Nations, became deeply involved in maintaining the political and economic status quo.

The colonial legacy of Palestine is crucial for understanding the structures of neocolonialism today. The region's current political, economic, and social struggles are deeply intertwined with the remnants of British colonial policies, which institutionalized divisions, fostered economic dependency, and established the framework for ongoing foreign control. The colonial experience of Palestine thus laid the foundation for the continued neocolonial domination that persists through both Israeli occupation and international governance.

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<sup>5</sup> N. Rao, "Neocolonialism" or "Globalization: Postcolonial Theory and the Demands of Political Economy" in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 1 no. 2 (2000): 165-184.

<sup>6</sup> R. El-Eini, *Mandated landscape: British Imperial Rule in Palestine 1929-1948*. (New York: Routledge, 2004),

<sup>7</sup> D. Gold, "The Historical Significance of the Balfour Declaration," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 28 no 1/2 (2017); 8-13.

<sup>8</sup> S. Huneidi, *The Hidden History of the Balfour Declaration* (New York: OR Books, 2019),

<sup>9</sup> A. H. Sa'di, L. Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2007).

## **Neocolonial Mechanisms Post-1948**

Since the creation of Israel in 1948, Palestine has remained subject to various forms of neocolonial control. This neocolonialism manifests through several mechanisms, including economic dependency on international aid, military occupation, and international diplomatic arrangements that systematically disadvantage Palestinian sovereignty. The Oslo Accords (1993) and subsequent peace processes, which promised to deliver Palestinian self-determination, have been criticized for perpetuating Palestinian dependence on Israel and international donors, effectively maintaining a neocolonial relationship.

## **The Role of International Institutions**

International institutions like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have played critical roles in shaping the neocolonial landscape of Palestine. While these institutions often present themselves as neutral arbiters, their policies frequently align with Western interests, reinforcing the economic and political dependence of the Palestinian Authority. For example, economic aid to Palestine is typically conditional, requiring compliance with neoliberal economic policies that have often exacerbated local poverty and unemployment, entrenching economic dependency. Western foreign policy, particularly that of the United States and Europe, is also heavily influenced by Orientalist assumptions<sup>10</sup>. Since the early 20th century, the West has viewed the Middle East through a lens that sees the region as inherently unstable, backward, and in need of external control. These perceptions have directly influenced how Western governments engage with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, often to the detriment of Palestinian aspirations for self-determination. The U.S., for example, has long supported Israel, framing this support as part of a broader struggle to protect Western values and interests in a region perceived as dangerous and volatile. Palestinian demands for self-determination are frequently ignored or marginalized in U.S. policy debates, as they are often cast as unreasonable or dangerous<sup>11</sup>. This Orientalist view paints Israel as a beacon of democracy and modernity in a sea of chaos, reinforcing a civilizational binary that underpins many Western policies.

Moreover, the discourse of the "War on Terror" has deepened this Orientalist view by linking Palestinian resistance with global jihadist movements, further cementing their portrayal as a security threat. This has allowed Western powers to justify their continued support for Israel's military dominance, particularly in the context of counterterrorism. Palestinians are thus treated not as a people fighting for liberation from occupation, but as part of a broader, irrational, and dangerous Islamic menace.

## **Orientalism in Geopolitical Discourse**

### **Western Media and the Orientalist Lens**

Western media plays a central role in perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes about Palestinians, often portraying them as irrational, violent, and regressive. These depictions align with historical Orientalist views that cast the "Orient" as barbaric and incapable of self-governance. The media narrative surrounding Palestine frequently centers on the idea of "terrorism" or "radical Islam" as the driving

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<sup>10</sup> M. V. Nayak, C. Malone, "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 11 no. 2 (2009): 253-276.

<sup>11</sup> A. J. Rotter, "Saidism without Said: Orientalism and US Diplomatic History," *The American Historical Review*, 105 no. 4 (2000), 1205-1217.

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force behind Palestinian resistance, reducing complex political struggles to questions of religious extremism. For example, during violent escalations between Israel and Palestine, media outlets tend to frame Israeli military actions as defensive, using language such as "retaliation" or "self-defence," while Palestinian actions are often labelled as "aggression" or "terrorism."<sup>12</sup> This dichotomy creates a moral hierarchy that implicitly justifies Israeli policies of occupation, military incursions, and settlement expansion. Palestinian voices are frequently underrepresented, and when they are included, their narratives are framed within a narrow set of tropes, denying them the legitimacy and complexity afforded to their Israeli counterparts<sup>13</sup>.

This Orientalist framing serves to dehumanize Palestinians, presenting them as the perpetual "other" whose violence is irrational and whose culture is backward. As a result, the root causes of the conflict, such as the ongoing Israeli occupation, the displacement of Palestinian people, and the broader colonial legacy, are obscured or downplayed.

### **U.S. Foreign Policy and Orientalism**

The United States' role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also deeply informed by Orientalist ideologies. U.S. foreign policy has consistently supported Israel, often at the expense of Palestinian self-determination. This support is justified through a combination of strategic interests and Orientalist views of Palestinians as inherently unstable and prone to extremism. The "War on Terror"<sup>14</sup> further entrenched these perceptions, framing Palestinian liberation struggles as part of a broader threat posed by radical Islam, rather than as a legitimate anti-colonial movement.

### **Palestinians as Permanent "Others" in Global Discourse**

The legacy of Orientalism has entrenched Palestinians as perpetual "others" within the global framework, denying them full political and cultural recognition. This Orientalist construct renders Palestinians invisible in many international debates, where their plight is often reduced to humanitarian aid discussions rather than framed as a struggle for decolonization and justice. In this context, Palestinians are denied political agency and are instead depicted as victims in need of Western intervention, or, alternately, as threats to Western interests<sup>15</sup>. This duality serves to marginalize their voices in global governance structures, where solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are often imposed from above without genuine Palestinian participation or recognition of their right to resist occupation.

Within Israel itself, the "othering" of Palestinians is institutionalized through policies that treat Palestinians both within Israel's borders and in the Occupied Territories as second-class citizens or stateless people. The Israeli state is often framed as an oasis of civilization, democracy, and modernity amidst a "barbaric" Palestinian population, reinforcing the civilizational discourse that justifies

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<sup>12</sup> N. Cristante, "How About Reconstructing Orientalism?: A Summary and Overview of Edward Said's Saturated Criticism," *Istanbul Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 54 (2016): 103-127.

<sup>13</sup> Kaiwar, V. (2014). 6 The Postcolonial Orient. In *The Postcolonial Orient* (pp. 301-375). Brill.

<sup>14</sup> M. V. Nayak, C. Malone, "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony," *International Studies Review*, 11 no. 2 (2009): 253-276.

<sup>15</sup> V. Mason, "The liminality of Palestinian Refugees: Betwixt and between Global Politics and International Law," *Journal of Sociology*, 56 no. 1 (2020): 84-99.

unequal treatment.<sup>16</sup> The policies of surveillance, restriction of movement, and systematic marginalization of Palestinians within both Israeli and international contexts reflect the continuing impact of Orientalist thinking.

### **The Impacts of Neocolonialism on Palestinian Society**

**Economic Impacts** Neocolonial economic policies have had devastating effects on Palestinian society. The reliance on foreign aid, combined with restrictions on trade and movement imposed by Israeli military occupation, has created a situation of perpetual economic dependency. This has weakened Palestinian industries and agriculture, leading to high unemployment rates and a lack of economic sovereignty.

**Social and Cultural Impacts** The neocolonial framework also affects Palestinian social and cultural life<sup>17</sup>. The erasure of Palestinian history, culture, and identity through Orientalist narratives contributes to a form of cultural imperialism. Palestinian narratives are marginalized in global media, and the Palestinian people are often denied agency in shaping their representations.

### **Conclusion**

The case of Palestine exemplifies the transition from colonialism to neocolonialism, revealing the persistence of Orientalist ideologies in modern geopolitics. While formal colonial structures may no longer exist, the mechanisms of neocolonial control economic dependency, political manipulation, and cultural domination continue to oppress the Palestinian people. These dynamics are not unique to Palestine but are part of a broader pattern in which formerly colonized nations remain subject to the power structures created during the colonial period.

Understanding the legacy of Orientalism is essential for recognizing how neocolonialism operates in the contemporary world. By exposing these connections, this article highlights the need for a more just and equitable international order, one that truly respects the sovereignty and dignity of all peoples. Orientalism continues to shape the way the world views Palestine, from the media's distorted representations to Western policies that undermine Palestinian sovereignty. By casting Palestinians as the irrational "other" and Israel as a modern outpost of Western civilization, Orientalist ideologies provide the foundation for ongoing geopolitical arrangements that entrench Israeli hegemony. The denial of Palestinian agency, culture, and political rights is not only a continuation of colonial attitudes but also a key pillar in the neocolonial framework that sustains the current geopolitical status quo. Breaking free from these Orientalist paradigms is essential if there is to be any meaningful progress toward justice, self-determination, and peace in Palestine. This requires a reevaluation of how Palestine is framed in global discourse, moving beyond simplistic and dehumanizing narratives toward a more nuanced and just understanding of Palestinian history and aspirations.

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<sup>16</sup> E. Reidy, *Between a City Divided and an Oasis of Peace: Narratives of Identity and Belonging in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> A. E. H. Basheer, "Globalization or Colonization: Post-colonial Civic Education in Palestine, Jordan, and the US," *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, 2 no. 5 (2015): 45-56.