

Migration

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For the Alternative Lexicon for Palestine-Israel

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If any country has historically been open to human movements, it is Palestine-Israel. Long before written history, some of the earliest migrations out of Africa passed through the country. Following the Neolithic Revolution, it became a zone of conflict and exchange between centres of agricultural civilization in Egypt and Mesopotamia and developed maritime links to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. The empires which occupied it thanks to its strategic location often exported and imported populations, from the Assyrians' expulsion of the northern kingdom of the Israelites (Ben-Dor Benite, 2009) to the Ottoman implantation of Muslim populations in the 19th century (Abbasi, 2003; Bram, 2003).

Some of these conquests were associated with a growth in the country's religious importance to polities based outside it, whether Christian or Muslim. But while the traumatic and spectacular migrations associated with war and occupation are better documented, there is no reason to think that more pacific movements along routes of commercial and religious exchange were any less consequential in the long term. However they got there, people of greatly diverse origins no doubt found themselves settling down in the country, and it is no surprise that Palestinians are genetically related to Egyptians, Lebanese, Iranians, Cretans, Macedonians, Sardinians, Algerians, Spaniards, French, Italians, Basques, and, of course, Jews (Arnaiz-Villena et al., 2001).

The politicisation of migration

In Palestine, as elsewhere (Torpey, 2009), open borders were largely taken for granted until after World War I, when the British conquerors established an immigration policy favouring Jews from outside the region and discriminating against Arabs from neighbouring countries (Banko, 2017). Zionist discourse framed Jewish immigration in religious terms, appropriating the terminology of ritual pilgrimage or "ascent" (Heb. *'aliyá*) to the Holy Land to refer to the qualitatively new phenomenon of sovereignty-establishing settlement (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2022), at the same time stigmatising Jewish emigration as a dishonourable "descent" (Heb. *yeridá*). Dominant imperial and Zionist imaginaries converged in imaging the land's Arab inhabitants as transitory and rootless, encouraging both the idea of their "transfer" (Confino, 2023) and the legitimation of controls against immigration from neighbouring countries (Banko, 2020).

The idea of transfer was put into practice at a massive scale during the Nakba of 1947-49, which uprooted up to 800,000 Palestinian Arabs (Khalidi, 2006). Celebrated in Zionist theology as a result of miraculous divine intervention (Mor, n.d.), in reality this was a planned expulsion, seen by the Israeli leadership as necessary to the establishment of an ethnonational state (Morris, 2004). Similar messianic inflection was given to the "ingathering of the exiles," that is, the mass immigration of Jews ejected by increasingly ethnonationalist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Middle East in the wake of the world war (Behar, 2007; Zahra, 2016).

This religious discourse of return (Heb. *shvut*) is distinct from that of the Palestinian national movement's demand for return (Ar. *'awda*), which was based in the first decades after the Nakba on the right to self-determination (Khalidi, 1992), and later increasingly on the anti-colonial discourse of indigeneity (Amara and Hawari, 2019). While Zionists (e.g. Gottheil, 2003) have used the “foreign” origins of some Palestinians to deny their claims for many decades, the rise of a Jewish counterclaim to indigeneity also resting on anti-colonial rhetoric is a much more recent phenomenon (Feldman and McGonigle, 2023). At first glance, this rhetoric sits awkwardly with Israel's claims to be a bastion of “Judeo-Christian” civilisation against Islamic barbarism (Greene, 2021). However, similar discourses are also appearing among the nativist far right across the Global North, whose rhetoric of “invasion” and “replacement” similarly flips the script on migrants from the South (naturally including Palestinians and other Arabs). As Nandita Sharma (2020) argues, use of the category of indigeneity to cast immigrants as invaders and imperial formations as protectors of the peace has a long colonial history.

There have been attempts to mythologise Palestinian indigeneity in counterpoint to Zionist primordialism, through identification with the Jebusites and Canaanites ostensibly displaced by the ancient Hebrews (Tamari, 2008, chap. 6). However, the most important ideological shift within Palestinian politics in recent years has been the turn to Islam (Rizvi, 2021), which is more amenable to appropriation of the Jewish (and Christian) heritage than to claiming of kinship with ancient polytheists. As Eli Osheroff (2016) has shown with regard to the extremely polarised religious landscape of Hebron, a more common response to Jewish primordialism among Christian as well as Muslim Palestinians has been to “nationalise” the land's monotheistic heritage by claiming figures such as Abraham and Jesus for the nation (see also Raheb, 2014).

Neither Jewish nor Arab

In a polarised discursive landscape in which many newcomers have been swiftly assimilated into one or the other national grouping (see Kaminer and Ben Dor-Benite, forthcoming), the movements of people who are neither Jewish nor Arab (NJs henceforth) into and out of the country has become well-nigh invisible. Indeed, the period between 1949 and about 1990 was characterised by a steep decline in such movements, as Israel limited the right to settle to those recognised as Jewish by the Orthodox rabbinate and their next of kin (Lustick, 1999). Until the late 1980s, the availability of a cheap, disenfranchised Palestinian labour force in the Occupied Territories made it possible for Israel to avoid importing migrant labour from abroad, as other countries of the global North were increasingly doing (Farsakh, 2005).

This changed following the First Intifada, in which Palestinians leveraged Israeli employers' dependence on their labour in their struggle for independence (Bishara,

1989). The state moved to neutralise this dependence through the importation of a migrant labour force to fill the ranks of low-wage industries, including sectors that had traditionally employed Palestinians such as agriculture and construction, as well as the new sector of semi-privatized eldercare (Farsakh, 2002; Kemp and Rajiman, 2014). A “migration industry” of intermediaries rapidly grew up, eating into migrants’ earnings with legal and illegal fees and capturing state apparatuses (Kurlander, 2022). Thus, the number of documented NJNAs in the country, near zero at the end of the 1980s, shot up to 80,000 by 2000 (Rosenhek, 2000, p. 50), and remained high through the next two decades, as levels of Palestinian employment fluctuated. Despite the death and abduction of dozens of migrants in the Hamas attack of October 2023 (Kaminer, 2024a), the almost-hermetic exclusion of Palestinian workers from the Israeli economy as part of the genocidal war launched in the wake of the attack, as well as the ongoing mobilization of tens of thousands of Israelis as reservists, has led the government to authorise an influx of new migrants. By 2025, documented NJNAs in the country numbered over 150,000, with plans in place to double the number in the near future (Niezna and Kurlander, 2026, p. 8).

In addition to this deliberately imported migrant workforce, in the 1990s and 2000s populations of asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants also appeared in the country, the former mostly from the Horn of Africa (primarily Eritrea, Darfur and South Sudan) and the latter from countries all over the global South (Willen, 2007). Under the right-wing governments of the 2000s, undocumented people were aggressively persecuted (Kalir, 2015) and a huge fence was erected along the border with Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula to prevent further entries (Ben-Ze’ev and Gazit, 2022). As a result, the number of asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants, officially labelled “infiltrators,” dropped from between fifty and one hundred thousand in 2000 to around 18,000 in 2025 (CBS, 2025, p. 3; Rosenhek, 2000, p. 50).

In the current conjuncture, NJNAs appear as peons in the hands of Israeli capital and the state, an easily exploitable labour force available to neutralise the leverage of Palestinian workers (Kaminer, 2024b) and increasingly to serve as backup for Israelis called up for the reserves. However, as the global eco-social crisis continues, it is almost certain that growing numbers of people will push out of Africa and that some of them will make it over the land bridge of the Sinai, fence or no fence. Moreover, growing dependence on migrant labour carries political risks of its own for the colonial project. As their numbers grow, NJNAs might not remain politically quiescent; indeed, anyone who desires justice should hope that they do not. The emergence of a large and quiescent class of disenfranchised migrant workers bodes badly not only for the migrants themselves but for Palestinian national aspirations as well as the prospects of Israeli workers – including Palestinian citizens of Israel, an overwhelmingly proletarian

group (Gozansky, 2014). But this does not have to be the case: organised and militant NJNA workers could be a powerful ally to the movement for decolonisation and justice.

For this to happen, however, that movement would have to recalibrate its attitudes and priorities. Unfortunately, at present the invisibility of NJNAs in hegemonic political imaginaries is mirrored by the most prominent initiatives working towards the establishment of two states (Geneva Initiative, n.d.), one state (One Democratic State Campaign, n.d.), or a confederation (A Land for All, n.d.), which make no mention of their existence, not to mention their rights under any future settlement.¹ Indeed, the binational imaginary which is sometimes touted as an alternative to settler colonialism and apartheid seems so far to hold no place for those who belong to neither of the relevant “nations.” In this sense, the binationalist imagination repeats and entrenches the essentialism introduced into the country by Zionism. Against the background of the religiously inflected ethnonationalism embodied in the “Abrahamic” ideology common to Israeli, Gulf and US elites (Kaminer, 2024c), it becomes necessary to explicitly reject a future in which Jewish and Arab ruling classes band together to “binationally” exploit disenfranchised NJNAs as well as Palestinians and poor Jews.

The State of Hagar

Things do not have to be this way. Elsewhere in the global North, solidarity movements are pushing back on the presumption – often adopted by centre-left politicians in self-defeating attempts to appease the far right – that the state must at all costs defend its prerogative to police borders and restrict the entry of non-citizens (Bradley and Noronha, 2022). As activists and scholars advocating for open borders point out, the bifurcation of working classes into enfranchised and disenfranchised fragments is not in the long-term interest of any of these fragments, but only in that of the ruling class. With few exceptions, the case for open borders has been made in secular terms, rendering it difficult to reconcile with the ideological perspectives common among both Palestinians and Israelis. In what follows, I sketch out an approach to migration appropriate to a decolonised state that seeks justice and equality on the basis of the Islamic and Jewish traditions. This is not to deny that some Israelis and Palestinians, as well as many NJNAs, are of other faiths or none, nor that other traditions, including secular ones, can make contributions to a future vision of open borders.

Thus, in the Hebrew Bible the commandment to “love the stranger” (Deut. 10:19) is serially repeated and granted central importance, serving as the primary moral lesson of the Exodus from Egypt, the founding myth celebrated during the holiday of Passover. In *halakhá* or rabbinic law, the requirement to provide equitable treatment to the *ger toshav* – the non-Jew living within the community – is developed

¹ For a salutary exception, see Halper (2021).

extensively (Mallek, 2020). However, much like liberal-humanitarian logic of asylum, this normative framework conditions ethical comportment towards the *ger toshav* on the maintenance of a distinction between citizen-hosts, who enjoy full political rights, and migrant-guests, who enjoy some human rights but not the right to full participation in the political community. While the status of Jewish communities as themselves “guests” in diaspora situations historically rendered this category deeply ambiguous, the “return” enabled by the establishment of the Israeli state has encouraged deeply discriminatory interpretations of the law (see e.g. Goldmintz, 2013).

The *haredi* or “ultra-Orthodox” movement, historically opposed to the assertion of Jewish sovereignty in the land, offers an alternative interpretation. Following closely in the footsteps of luminaries such as Elazar Schach and Isaac Breuer, the contemporary *haredi* scholar Joseph Kaminer (2023) argues for a replacement of the State of Israel with a “State of Abraham” in which “the Sovereign of the land is none other than the Holy One, blessed be He.” However, rather than the “binational” ancestor of Isaac and Ishmael invoked by the Abraham Accords, the figurehead of Kaminer’s desired state is a humble servant of God who recognises *himself* as a *ger toshav*, “a stranger and resident” in the land (Genesis 23:4). In this state, citizenship is not conditioned on national belonging because all residents of the land, including Jews, are migrants and strangers.

In the Islamic tradition we find a valorisation of migration far more radical than the liberal-Westphalian tradition of statecraft allows. In the Qur’an, sovereignty over the whole earth is posited as belonging to God. Thus, an overinsistence on human-imposed boundaries can be seen as impertinent if not blasphemous. Migration (Ar. *hijra*) is not only legitimised but even mandated as a response to oppression (see Qur’an 4:97). Abraham’s own departure from Mesopotamia is a case in point; but for Islam the *hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina is a foundational event, comparable in importance to the Exodus in the Jewish tradition. Deducing proper behaviour from conduct of the *muhājirūn* (migrants) and the *anṣār* or “protectors” who received them, Islam obliges believers to abandon places of persecution (Masud, 1990) and those who reside in the places to which they flee to receive them as equals (Zaman, 2016, pp. 31–37). On this basis Islamic *shari’a* law can be seen as much more welcoming to migrants and refugees – regardless of religion – than modern international law (Abou El Fadl, 2020; Elmadmad, 2008). And indeed, poor Muslim countries are among those hosting the largest numbers of refugees today, though they receive little credit or support for their generosity.

In a narrative shared by the two traditions, Hagar/Hajar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham and the ancestor of the Arabs and the Prophet Muhammad through her son Ishmael, plays a subaltern but indubitably blessed role. Both traditions recognise her unique relationship with God, founded on His care for her and her child at their darkest hour of abandonment and abjection (Al-Fassi, 2025; Kaminer, 2023, pp. 8–9).

God's love for Hagar, an abused, enslaved reproductive worker, a migrant, refugee and single mother, stands for a divine concern with the most abject and marginalised of human subjects, exploited, ignored and maligned by precisely those states purporting to take up the mantle of Abraham. Even her name is cognate with the Arabic *hijra* and its modern Hebrew derivative, *hagirá*. Remaining within the ecumenical dialogue but pushing Kaminer's conceit further in the direction of a revolutionary feminism of colour (Thabede, 2022; Wadud, 2006, chap. 4), we might choose to imagine the state of those who are strangers and migrants before God as the state not of Abraham, but of Hagar.

A standard to peoples

The prospect of a post-national, open-bordered "State of Hagar" is of course utopian (or – to remain within the religious register – messianic). Rather than seeking to stabilise the decrepit Westphalian system of nation-states, a state of free asylum at the meeting-place of three continents would be a shot at the very heart of that system. With frontiers open to Africans and Asians, and constitutionally opposed to playing the role of border enforcer that other Mediterranean countries have taken on (Afriyie, 2025), such a state would be an imminent threat to imperialism and a catalyst for revolutionary change in the region and beyond, "a standard to peoples, whose counsel nations shall seek" (Isaiah 11:10).

Utopianism, not to mention messianism, is obviously distant from the register common to the policy spaces where "realistic solutions to the conflict" are commonly discussed, above all with a view to normalising Palestine-Israel within the presumptively secular "rules-based international order" with the border-policing nation-state at its heart. Given the rapid disintegration of this order, it does not strike me as very "realistic" to refuse to colour outside the lines in the pictures it has handed down to us. Nevertheless, I would like to quickly address one aspect of the *problematique* of solutions that my focus on NJNA rights does not cover: the consequences of the Nakba.

In an open-bordered State of Hagar, no one's right to residence would take precedence over anyone else's: Palestinians, Jews and all others would all be free to come live in the land – as they have for most of its history. After a short period of residence, all such comers would enjoy full citizenship, a vote in elections at all levels, and the freedom to associate and make political demands along any lines they desire. But this abstract formulation cannot suffice to atone for the grave sin that has been committed – and that continues every day to be committed – against the Palestinians. What full moral and material reparations for the ongoing Nakba might look like, perhaps within a religiously informed outlook, is not a matter for this paper. But without such reparative justice (Táíwò, 2022), free migration and full democracy are inconceivable: for only "if the wicked restore a pledge, make good what they have taken

by robbery, follow the laws of life, and do not commit iniquity, shall they live, shall they not die” (Ezekiel 33:15).

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