

# Canada and Israel: Partners in the “Settler Colonial Contract”

By Azeezah Kanji

**AS ISRAEL** massacred Indigenous Palestinians **yet again** with **US-funded** weapons, and Canada yet again furnished ideological cover by blaming both sides and exalting Israel’s “right to assure its own security,” the affinities and solidarities between these settler colonial “democracies” are clear.

While Israel’s bombings have now ceased, the suffocating status quo for Palestinians — siege, settlements, checkpoints — remains firmly in place. These last eleven days of slaughter were an eruption of the continuous violence inherent to all projects of building a settler state on stolen land, in the face of Indigenous refusal to submit to colonial domination and disappear. In the words of Palestinian writer Mouin Rabbani, this is “a state of permanent conflict punctuated by periodic carnage” — also known in Israeli state terminology as “mowing the lawn.”

**Forms of colonial violence echo each other across space and time. From Canada to Palestine, settler rule is enforced by mass incarceration, extrajudicial killing, torture, and rape.**

Israel **brutalizes** Palestinian worshippers at Al Aqsa mosque, as Canada violates **sacred Indigenous sites** with judicially-sanctioned impunity, and **abuses and criminalizes** Indigenous protectors of sacred waters and lands.

Israeli police **protect mobs** attacking Palestinians and chanting “death to Arabs” in the streets, as Canadian courts **exonerate killers** like Gerald Stanley, who shot and killed young Cree man Colten Boushie: a continuation of the **long history** of states deputizing private settlers to enact violence and terror against the colonized.

Israel **ethnically cleanses** Palestinians from East Jerusalem through evictions and **demolishes** “unauthorized” Palestinian houses and **villages** (while simultaneously **facilitating** settlement construction), as Canada evicts Indigenous people from **encampments** and **prosecutes** land defenders for building shelters on their own territories. These are some of the most literal expressions of colonial “**domicide**,” making Indigenous people homeless on their homelands. On top of the erasure of Indigenous lives, societies, and histories is the erasure of the ability to talk about it.

This is achieved not only by overt assaults, such as Israel’s **bombing** on Saturday of the Gaza offices of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press, or Canada’s **arrests of journalists** for reporting on abuses of Indigenous rights. It is also quietly consolidated by the everyday refusal of **Canadian** and **international** media to call colonial practices by their legally-accurate names — **occupation, apartheid, genocide** — instead depicting Indigenous responses to violence as violence itself.

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## **While Indigenous peoples are incarcerated and shoved onto ever-vanishing slivers of their partitioned lands, the legal and political technologies of settler rule circulate freely across colonial borders and take root.**

For example, there is evidence that Canada's reserve system **served** as a model for South Africa's bantustans, **which in turn, have been an inspiration** for Israel's apartheid.

British land law and title registration regimes have been **transplanted** across colonies, from Australia to Canada to Palestine, enabling the conversion of Indigenous territory into colonial "property," while rendering Indigenous peoples as "illegal occupants" on their own lands. **Legal** and **military** precedents from America's genocidal "Indian Wars" have been carried over into the "War on Terror" — a mantle for states' ongoing efforts to stamp out Indigenous resistance, from **Palestine** to **Kashmir** to **Unist'ot'en Camp** to **Standing Rock**. All these "wars" are premised on the assertion that the targets — **once** called "savages," **now** called "terrorists" — may be subjected to extraordinary violence but are precluded from legitimately resisting with violence, or even **non-violence**, in return.

Philosopher Charles Mills famously elucidated liberal theory's underlying "**racial contract**": in which rights and freedom between white people have been predicated on the domination and exploitation of non-white peoples. In states like Canada and Israel, there is also a settler colonial contract: in which land, wealth, and political rights for colonizers require the dispossession and eradication of the colonized.

The terms of this implicit settler contract underwrite official documents like the 2014 **Memorandum of Understanding** on the Canada-Israel Strategic Partnership, which pledges to "deepen the relationship and cooperation" in areas such as border defence, counterterrorism, public safety, and trade.

The Memorandum begins by proclaiming Canada's and Israel's "shared commitment to a common set of core values such as democracy, free markets, security, peace, justice, human rights and freedom" — exemplifying the **long tradition** of weaponizing liberal "values" to justify systems of oppression and control.

## **Examining how these values are operationalized by Canada in its defense of Israel reveals the deeply skewed meaning of such terms in the colonial lexicon.**

"Democracy" involves Canadian **political leaders valorizing** Israel as "the only democracy in the Middle East," never mind that it **meets** the **legal definition** of **apartheid**. Meanwhile, Canada has been a leader in refusing to recognize the outcomes of Palestinian democracy, at least when it **conflicts** with Israel's desired result — effectively holding democracy for Palestinians hostage to the interests of the state colonizing them.

"Free markets" refer to the removal of barriers to settler enrichment from the expropriation and exploitation of Indigenous lands. The Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement, for example, **permits** goods manufactured in Israeli settlements to be accorded the same preferential status as goods manufactured in Israel — in violation of the **international legal prohibition** against treating the occupation as legitimate. While the Trump administration's **decision** to start labelling settlement products as "made in Israel" elicited widespread condemnation, this extremist position was **already** Canadian practice, **repeatedly defended** by the Canadian government in court.

"Security" entails Israeli security companies invested in the **open-air caging** of Palestinians also contributing to the tools of **mass institutional** incarceration of Indigenous and Black people by the Canadian state. For instance, the perimeter securitization equipment for Canada's federal prisons is **procured** from Senstar, a Canadian subsidiary of Israeli **apartheid wall constructor** Magal Security Systems. Senstar actually **boasts** of producing enough fencing to encircle the world — a chilling measure of its **global reach**.

“Peace” means little more than the violent pacification of resistance to oppression, aided by the **circulation** of tactics and technology between settler states. Canadian police – front-line enforcers of Canada’s settler sovereignty – have **trained** with Israeli security forces, while Israel **recruits** Canadians for its occupation army in overt contravention of Canadian law. **Canadian-manufactured** engines power Israeli drones that **terrorize** the people of Gaza; in turn, Israeli companies advertising their products as “**battle-tested**” on Palestinians sell drones to the **Canadian government**, to augment its surveillance over **colonized** Arctic waters and land.

“Justice” translates into Canadian charities being **listed** as “terrorist entities” for daring to donate medical equipment to Gaza, while cases against corporations for bolstering illegal Israeli settlement activity are **thrown out** by Canadian courts. Canada’s activism for impunity extends into the international arena. The Canadian government officially **opposes** the International Criminal Court’s **investigation** into Israel’s war crimes and crimes against humanity, **insisting** that Palestine should be precluded from appealing to the ICC since it is not a state. Perversely, the very source of injustice against Palestinians – the denial of their sovereignty – is used as a reason to bar them from justice: a colonial catch-22.

**“Human rights” looks like Canada repeatedly voting against UN resolutions affirming the fundamental rights of Palestinians, while defending Israel’s de facto “human right to dominate” under the aegis of “self-defence.” (In fact, no state has a right to self-defence in international law against a people it is occupying, but rather an obligation to protect their safety and well-being.)**

Writer and activist Arundhati Roy has **critiqued** human rights for functioning as a discount substitute for justice. But when it comes to Indigenous peoples, advocacy for even this bare minimum by non-violent means – whether by **blockades** or **BDS** (boycott, divestment, sanctions) – is treated by Canadian political leaders as the “radical” source of aggression rather than the response.

And so, what “freedom” amounts to is the freedom to continue policies of apartheid, appropriation, and annihilation, by repression of the freedom to protest against them. As Israel attempts to **erase** Palestine from the physical landscape, social media platforms **erase** Palestinians from the virtual landscape, and Canadian governments try to **erase** Palestine solidarity from the political landscape by institutionalizing the conflation of criticisms of Israel with antisemitism.

Palestine is often imagined in Canada as a far-off “foreign policy” issue; the colonial devastation on graphic display in Gaza, Al Aqsa, and **Sheikh Jarrah** depicted as distant and dissociated from Canadians’ own place and time. Al Aqsa may literally mean “the farthest,” but in Canada nothing could be closer than the violence of colonialism. It is as close as the stolen words of justice on our tongues, the stolen lives mourned in our hearts, and the stolen land beneath our feet.

From Canada to Palestine, Indigenous people have risked their safety, freedom, and lives time and time again, to expose the injustices and inhumanities of colonial rule and to show the beautiful possibilities of a world organized differently. Maintaining that the situation is too “unclear” or “complex” to act in solidarity with them is not an innocent move, but yet another **colonial move to innocence**: tacitly upholding the settler contract, in all its brutality.

## **RESOURCE LIST FROM THE TORONTO PALESTINE FILM FESTIVAL**

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