

## After Liberation

### Time Travel in the Levant and Doing Ethnography in the Future

Sami Hermez

**Abstract:** This article might be read as speculative fiction. Yet, with some political imagination and belief, it should be read as what has come to pass—an inevitable reality. This is the first time anyone has exposed the facts of what happens in the Levant after Israel's collapse. The account is based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bilad Al-Sham (AlSham for short), approximately ten years after the liberation of Palestine and the fall of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Through conversations with interlocutors from Deir Yassin in the land of AlSham, this article also intervenes in present-day debates around decolonization, arguing that for decolonization not to be mere metaphor, we need to better understand its processes and come to terms with the inevitable armed resistance it employs. Finally, the article also makes a case for the need for time-traveler researchers so that people can have some blueprints for the more hopeful and beautiful world that will inevitably be built.

**Keywords:** Bilad Al-Sham, decolonization, Palestine, Israel, violence, ethnography of the future, time travel

I had spent the day traveling by train from Deir Yassin to Beirut, stopping for several hours with Jonah in Naqoura to swim in the clear blue sea that neither of us had swam in before. I had previously never been that far south and Jonah used to be Israeli, so he couldn't cross to Naqoura for obvious reasons during the existence of the Israeli state. And even after he began commuting, first to Damascus and more recently to Beirut, the edges of the Mediterranean had become overrun with jellyfish and lionfish due to warm temperatures coupled with increased pollution. Thus, Jonah had never swam in the sea until recently, when the global climate movement, using sabotage at a massive scale, had forced an improbable environmental reversal.

Jonah was born in Jerusalem but had grown up in Tel Aviv. His grandparents had come over from France shortly after World War II, his grandfather had fought in several Israeli wars, including in the Lebanese state's territory in 1982. His parents were both born in the Givat Shaul neighborhood near Jerusalem in the late seventies; the name has since been reverted back to Deir Yassin. After the dismantling of the Israeli state, a few abandoned buildings built post-1948, in what was Givat Shaul, have now been demolished and turned

into green spaces, and the Kfar Shaul Mental Health Center has been rebuilt a few streets down to make room for returning Deir Yassin residents to live in their old homes—now renovated using money seized from the Jewish National Fund (JNF). Jonah has an apartment there, and I had met him while conducting an ethnography of how the Deir Yassinites are living their lives since returning to their ancestral lands.

When the Israeli state fell, Jonah told me his parents were in disbelief, terrified, and in total depression. As middle-class European Jews, they feared for their lives and could not imagine living under the prospect of Arab rule and left back to France, where they had always maintained citizenship. Many had left after the fall, or liberation, depending on which Jews one asked. Jonah did not hold his parent's strong beliefs or concerns. He stayed, but he could not convince them—now he mostly visits them in France, even though his parents, like anyone who left or fled, could technically return to live in Bilad Al-Sham (what everyone around me called AlSham for short).

Many Western Jews left—the figures suggest almost two million when accounting for those who had already made a life for themselves abroad, those that migrated before liberation, and those that fled during the battles and even after. I was also told that despite the leadership's pronouncement that Jews should not be attacked if they surrendered or renounced their Zionism, there were a few massacres by different factions of the resistance—some in cold blood, others as a result of two-way combat where the community did not surrender. All this certainly struck fear in the community, even when the attackers were publicly denounced, and even when the resistance, from its upper echelons, its Central Command, laid out principles that “this is not a war against any people but an ideological war against Zionism,” and “we fight not from hate, but from love for all who wish to live as equals,” and “protect all civilian life, for our morality is all we have and the basis on which

God will judge us,”<sup>1</sup> and many other slogans that were meant to ensure ordinary people would be safe, and even when some of the harshest fighting was against paid-for-hire Arab forces that somehow thought fighting alongside Zionists would be a better deal. Still, a great number of Ashkenazi Jews remained—the early figures counted approximately 1–1.2 million out of an initial 3 million, and some maintained a good status in society too, especially around Tel Aviv, despite most no longer being landowners, and even to the dismay of some nationalists.

Most Eastern Jews, on the other hand, remained. Only some returned to Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, while the rest simply enjoyed their ability to move freely within Arab countries they only heard about from their parents. I asked about these communities every now and then, wondering about people’s previous national identities and how they operated in their present. My friends from Deir Yassin kept pushing me to stop approaching my research and observations by pointing to these differences. Fadi, for example, would say, “We’re just communities with different practices. The process of liberation was also a process of recognizing and living with difference. It tore apart this old fetish with the politics of identity. The sooner we accept this, and the sooner we cut nation and race out of our system, the better off we’ll be. And most people here recognize this, so we don’t need you coming from elsewhere to re-highlight this for us. Don’t bring your problems and ways of thinking here.” I always felt embarrassed by these words, especially after the second or third time someone reminded me that I was bringing it up.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes are my rough translations from the original slogans in Arabic.

<sup>2</sup> It was bad enough that I was already doing an ethnography of their community, worse still when these issues emerged. Subjects of the new land had immediately recognized that Western forms of knowledge production were very much entangled in the making of the colonial power that had a hold over them. They had quickly dismantled disciplinary practice and academia as we know it. In the early years, all foreign researchers were banned. The

Jonah and I left Naqoura around 4 p.m. and were in Beirut by 6 p.m. When we arrived, we met some friends for a drink—they were Deir Yassinites who remained in Beirut after the formation of AlSham, and part of a family who let me follow their life. When I told them about our day and mentioned that I was slightly annoyed our train was delayed in Tel Aviv, one of them said, “I wish they had just changed the name of that city. It’s been done before. You know, like Bombay to Mumbai. The colonial reference to the Israeli state is so jarring in my mind.”

“I see what you mean,” I said, “but maybe it wasn’t the right time. We needed to make the anti-Zionist Jews feel welcome as we rebuilt this land, and every other village or city name was changed in the first few months.” I felt comfortable speaking as a “we” after spending a year doing fieldwork and because I had explained my family’s rootedness in these lands—my daughter was currently living in Aleppo and my son between Haifa and Gaza City, as I had learned.

“Still, is this what you call decolonial?” my interlocutor asked, somewhat torn.

In my yearlong time doing fieldwork in the future, this question of decolonization after liberation remained a big question. Now that I have returned, I want to think through ongoing debates around decolonial futures that take place in the present by analyzing some of the ways I experienced them during my fieldwork in the future, at a time when the Israeli state had been dismantled and I was traversing the field of what the world of the future knew

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more opaque to the world, the freer they could be to carve out their paths. I was allowed to work, first because I was from AlSham and, second, because ten years had passed. And to be fair, while nation had really been rooted out in surprising ways, it was not that they had become deracialized communities. There were communal problems, but overall, the system had learned to accept difference in profound ways that my line of questioning often seemed out of place to them, dis-timed, if I am to be truthful.

as AlSham. Before I do this, it will be useful to provide a brief context first about my methodology and second about how AlSham came about. However, as I am not a historian, I will keep this context general, since the purpose is not to provide a full account of events but simply to provide you with enough details to situate my fieldwork and the debates.

## Methodology

In the current approach to thinking about anthropology of the future, scholars tend to examine what we mean by the future, how is the future lived from our present, and what sort of things about the future consume our current everyday lives. For example, we may analyze and theorize anticipation, expectation, imagination, foresight, fantasy, and technology.<sup>3</sup> Thus far, I have not encountered an anthropology of the future conducted in the future, where someone has time traveled, done an ethnography in the future, and returned to write about it. Perhaps this is because time portals are not easy to find, or maybe scholars are too afraid, preferring instead to theorize about how we live in the present with impending futures. But imagine if more anthropologists were to time travel! What would they find, and what would their ethnography look like upon their return? What sort of openings would this time travel provide for the way we think about life in the present and about how we plan for the future? What ethics might this present us with?

Methodologically, from a linear perspective, I was dis-timed. And the experience was surreal, to put it mildly. My dis-timed-ness had the effect of also positioning me out of place, or at least, on most days this is how I exhibited my discombobulated feelings to hide the fact that I had been, how shall I call it . . . thrown out of time. It was all quite ironic, because for

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Pels, “Modern Times”; for discussions on anticipation and expectation, see Bryant and Knight, *Anthropology of the Future*; Hermez, *War Is Coming*. Anthropologists have also written about speculation and ethnography. See Anderson et al., “Speculative Anthropologies.”

the first time in my life, I felt the world as so familiar, in place, yet I couldn't let on to this.<sup>4</sup> I could not let anyone be onto me lest this change how they understood their own present and future, lest this disturb their destinies. Thus, to understand what happened between our time and their time, I had to supplement my ethnographic work with a lot of historical research, digging into the time between then and now. There was a plethora of literature, especially after the 2023 genocide in Gaza, laying out ethical programs of liberation,<sup>5</sup> de-Zionization,<sup>6</sup> and decolonial violence.<sup>7</sup>

I made sure to keep my dis-timed-ness to myself. I knew no one would believe me and, if they did, it would make things worse. It could change their own sense of what they knew about the world and how they knew it. But my secret felt unethical. I wanted people to confide in me and share their lives, yet I could not do the same. I elected to listen and to position myself as wanting to learn from them and their place (and time), rather than revealing the way we do things, so as not to have them adopt the cultural baggage I brought to the table.

I spent around eighteen months in the future, returning only once after ten days because I did not understand time and was afraid my family would be worried. Once it was clear that two years would be equivalent to a mere minute, I leaped in again and did not return for the duration of my fieldwork. I spent my months between Deir Yassin, Jerusalem,

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<sup>4</sup> I couldn't help but think of Edward Said's *Out of Place* as I walked around. If only he could see the world now, and, in fact, at the university, Maya (Jonah's partner who will appear later in this paper) had been assigned this text as a historical comparison. The Shami (Levantine) present subjectivity offered a counterpoint to Said's past.

<sup>5</sup> Hawari, "Ethical Liberation."

<sup>6</sup> Barghouti, "De-Zionization and Ethical Decolonization." Omar Barghouti builds on previous work such as Barghouti "Organizing for Self-Determination."

<sup>7</sup> Farraj, "Ethical Violence in Decolonization."

Beirut, Tartus, and Amman. Moving between them by train was simple, and many of my interlocutors that I came to know were commuting for work or to see family or friends on their regular three-day weekends. I frequented many cafés with my interlocutors, participated in town hall events in Deir Yassin, attended neighborhood discussions in various cities in AlSham, and interviewed individuals working in government offices—most interestingly those working as Heat Officers<sup>8</sup>—and a number of people working for deconstruction companies, charged with de-developing cities in an ethical and sustainable way with a vision for providing people with beautiful opportunities to continue living in the cities if they wanted to. I was most curious about the land under the rule of the former Israeli state and spent much time there visiting previously erased villages besides Deir Yassin. There, I spoke with returned Natives as well as the Jews who remained. Importantly, near Jerusalem and Ramallah, I visited former Zionist settlements in what was the West Bank and engaged in conversations with people about how they dismantled them, and with the few former settlers who chose to stay and renounce Zionism. In some cases, there was no trace of the settlement. In other places, the surrounding communities decided to retain parts for community affairs. Maale Adumim, one of the largest, was interesting. Ten years on, it was still a deconstruction zone and being dismantled after large areas of it were bombed in the war. I spent time with de-developers, some of whom were residents of Deir Yassin, but other interlocutors were Jewish, Armenian, and Kurdish residents of Jerusalem. I also met with linguists who were tasked with managing the revival of language, especially endangered ones like Aramaic and Ladino, and with professors who explained to me the transformation in higher learning.

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<sup>8</sup> This exists today; see Visram, “Meet the Seven Chief Heat Officers.” These officers are tasked with responding to the dangers of extreme heat and finding solutions to reduce heat in urban centers. However, in the future, they take on far more important roles, determine major development policy, and are credited for turning urban centers in AlSham into livable spaces.

Writing this project in our time now has come with its own complications. First, I am writing under a pseudonym so that enemies in the future, and there are many, cannot locate me when I time-jump—Sami Hermez is not my real name and any resemblance to a real person is purely coincidental. Second, I recognize that readers today will enjoy this as speculative fiction, nothing more; that I am a person of wild imagination. But what if you took me seriously using some political imagination and belief? What if you believe I have seen the future, believe that I have been there, that all this is inevitable? After all, aren't futures made with political imagination and a whole lot of faith in our visions?

One last methodological point concerns my responsibility to people in various times, rather than to interlocutors fixed in the present, or at best to their ancestors. To those that are reading in the present who will soon be both past and future, I write to propel an imagination and to make you believe so you may act to bring about a beautiful future I have witnessed. To those in the future whom I do not want to mess with, I anonymize them so they will not recognize themselves and through them, me. Thus, this ethnography is based on composite characters and composite experiences to protect people's futures. Where is the real and what is fiction is beside the point, as together they converge to form the future.

## **Future Context**

In the not-too-distant future, in a time that remains anonymous to protect it from meddling, an underground anti-Zionist network reached out to the resistance in the lands of the Lebanese state and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>9</sup> Together, they developed a plan to

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<sup>9</sup> In the larger project I am working on, I elaborate on various aspects of everyday life in this future time in the land of AlSham, as well as how the new order came about and came to be lived. Here, I only have space to recount a few critical junctures to provide context for a theoretical point about the process of decolonization after land is liberated. Some in the future will disagree with my recounting of this liberation process, not because it didn't happen this



bring down the Israeli state and communicated this with the resistance that had grown in the Syrian state after the fall of Asad. The collaboration was built on mutual trust and a simultaneous development of the contours of what would come after; chief among this was that the struggle and future could not be a national one—this also meant moving beyond a Palestinian national struggle that only reinforced divisions in the Levant and prevented a unity of resistance. It took years to realize their plan and position anti-Zionists in key places within the Israeli state and military. At a mutually agreed time, and after years in which several wars were waged and where the resistance accumulated various wins—points against the enemy in its long struggle—the anti-Zionist network emerged and began assassinations of key Israeli political and military leaders. Taken off guard, the army was thrown into chaos as the resistance pushed ahead from Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, but also to some extent from Jordan. The battles were brutal, and initially large parts of Beirut and Damascus were pulverized, and the West Bank experienced the type of genocidal violence that the Gaza Strip saw after October 7, 2023. However, the military could not sustain the fifth column sabotage and defections for too long (which, importantly, included the sabotage of nuclear warheads to prevent anyone from firing them), and the battles were taken into the lands of present-day Israel. It took another year to take full control and declare the Israeli state dead.

At that point, the world was in limbo. What happened next was, to put it no other way, magical. The Central Command of the resistance, a group of fourteen people coming from various regions and communities of the present-day Lebanese, Syrian, and Israeli states, as well as the West Bank and Gaza Strip, held a press conference declaring the Israeli,

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way, but because debates continue as to what the critical junctures were. Suffice it to say that I found this narrative most compelling in the archive even though other factors played a role in liberation.

Lebanese, and Syrian states dead, and announcing the establishment of the land of AlSham as an administrative zone that rejected any national identification, politicization of identity, or other standardizations of a state (such as no unified anthem, flag, education curriculum, laws, or drive to force people into national unity, etc., just a set of principles), and announced that it would be open to work with its neighbors to be included symbiotically with this land or to relate to it as a separate entity. “Be kind to difference; resist the will to sameness.” This was their constant mantra, one of the principles by which communities would live. AlSham would reject enmity with its neighbors and had no intention of expanding. The only exception was Jordan, where people had been revolting against the King for years, and a branch of the resistance, albeit weaker, had grown and confronted the Zionists during the war as well. While I need to uncover more of how this episode unfolded in Jordan, I did learn that the king’s son was secretly supporting the resistance. After the fall of the Zionist state, the king could no longer fight back and abdicated to his son, who declared the lands of the Jordanian state incorporated into AlSham, in exchange for retaining local rule over the large governorate of Amman, not as king but with the old title of Shareef.

The resistance leadership also declared that no Jewish settler would be forced to leave but Zionism would be banned, and anyone who felt strongly about this political ideology should consider leaving. Already scores of Jewish people had left during the yearlong battle, but then there were some retaliations against Jews in the weeks after that pushed hundreds of thousands to leave. The world shut its borders to any Jew who did not already have a passport. For all the talk of anti-Semitism and moral posturing for over a century, the EU declared “Not another Jew!” The US leadership, already facing its own separatist insurgencies and losing some of its southern territory, couched the limits to immigration in legal processes and a general anti-immigrant sentiment.

For their part, in AlSham, the leadership punished anyone who retaliated against any groups of people, including Jews (we can call this punishment through “imprisonment” for now, although the AlSham anticolonial prison requires its own research). The events around the departure of Jews, predominantly European and American, as well as how so many ended up staying, the different narratives that existed, the way many prospered in the new land and swore by it, and the reasons for a persistence of an underground Zionist movement, as well as the emergence of Muslim and Christian nationalist movements—these are explored in the larger project still under development. Suffice it to say that the new order returned all land in the Israeli-controlled areas to its original inhabitants but gave current tenants one year to find other housing.<sup>10</sup> They could also remain as renters if the original inhabitants agreed. The new order abolished the real estate market—land could be privately owned, but it could only be sold back to the government at a set price (cost + inflation), so there was no longer speculation or a real estate market.<sup>11</sup> It was a compromise to maintain some of the elite support that the new order could not completely alienate. With the return of the Natives to their land and the abolishing of settler subjects, a principal requirement for decolonization was met.

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<sup>10</sup> The process of land return will be elaborated on in the larger project. For now it is enough to say that although most Jewish settlers lost ownership rights, not all did, as it depended on village/region. They also could legally purchase land, like anyone in AlSham. I believe some of the thinking around land return was based loosely on Salman Abu Sitta’s work “The Feasibility of the Right of Return,” but the new government also built on ideas like the Islamic Waqf to create a new system of collective entitlement in all of AlSham.

<sup>11</sup> The economy of land ownership and private property, which was not abolished but transformed and curtailed, requires its own investigation and research publication. I invite others to explore the documents I collected and do this analysis.

## Decolonial Futures after Decolonization

During my time away, I spent a lot of time with Jonah and his partner, Maya, who had an Iraqi Jewish mother and an Armenian father. I learned that Jonah was conflicted, or so it seemed, and I could see he held onto some Zionist ideas—that Jews needed a national homeland. In some ways, he was no different from Muslim and Christian nationalists that still roamed the land trying to stir up trouble. Perhaps this is why he became sensitive when I broached questions of communal identity. He was trying to shed the nationalism himself and I was not helping. But every now and again, he would hang on to national difference—by this, I mean the idea that people were territorially bound rather than just being defined by shared language, meaning, and history. It felt relatively benign though. He seemed a good person and this offered much fruitful debate and discussion. Maya often got annoyed by his politics but seemed to treat him like her project.

Thus, when our friends raised the issue of the naming of Tel Aviv, Jonah was somewhat bothered and defensive. “You want to destroy all Jewish life, is that it?” he shot out.

“No, Jonah, you’re missing the point,” Imad, who was from Deir Yassin but chose to rent out his property—a kind of reparation—and live in Beirut, responded. “Tel Aviv was the capital of the Zionist state, it conjures up so many memories. The sooner it is out of our lexicon, the sooner we can move forward with acceptance.”

“They have already evacuated most Jews from Tel Aviv. It’s become run-down now. There has been no investment in that city. What more do you want from the city?”

After the war, it is unclear what happened exactly, and more work needs to be done to unearth the events. One story goes that there was a subversive policy to ensure that the Jews that stayed in AlSham could not organize and were incentivized/nudged/forced to move to different cities and villages in the land. In this way, the Jewish population in places like

Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Deir el-Zur, and elsewhere grew, while their numbers in Tel Aviv shrunk to a few hundred thousand. Another story says that the anti-Zionist Jewish leadership promoted this policy to integrate the community. It is possible that both stories are true. Jonah's use of the word *evacuated* was likely a reference to this, and something those around me would have understood.

For me, this moment offered a way to think about the difference between *decolonial thought* and *anticolonial struggle*. I define decolonial thought as being the ideas around decolonizing knowledge, imagining decolonial futures, and thinking about decoloniality, whereas anticolonial struggle is about building movements, organizing within collectives, confronting colonial states, and challenging colonial legality. Separating the two is not to imply that anticolonial struggle does not require decolonial thought. It does. Rather, the separation intends to highlight the way scholars (but also activists in our present neoliberal world) take comfort or see as the endpoint of their action an investment in decolonial thinking at the expense of anticolonial action—one that demands a deeper layer of sacrifice and confrontation (whether armed or unarmed)—and how this can torpedo liberation in the present.

Having seen the future where decolonization of land has occurred and other forms of decolonization are ongoing, it is clear that imagining a decolonized future in currently occupied Palestine must occur as part of an anticolonial struggle that requires careful movement building with a range of tactics for confronting colonial forces. The way I saw it, the conversation about naming the city after liberation seemed quite in its place. However, it struck me that we have similar discussions around language and knowledge in our present time before having physically decolonized land and, importantly, independent of movements that seek to confront the liberation of land. Projects that imagine decolonial futures cannot reasonably be anything but metaphorical—and diversions for real decolonization—unless

they are accompanied by real and serious commitments to decolonizing land, in particular through attachments to anticolonial movements, and then sacrificing for that vision. Here, sacrifice can come in many forms, but decolonial scholars cannot skirt the question of armed resistance and, importantly, must accept it as a natural part of the anticolonial process. This does not mean they should themselves carry arms or declare support for armed resistance (it's best for everyone that they don't!), but one has to accept that such futures cannot possibly come about without a range of tactics, some of which will include carrying arms, using sabotage, destroying property, and other acts that may be viewed as violent, simply because power will not hand itself over without a fight—this is what I was told and what the record showed, anyway.

While I might promote a policy, movement, or action that is unarmed, it is unrealistic to ask all the oppressed to adopt only those methods and remain unarmed, while the oppressor practices all forms of violence—from land theft, military aggression, and imprisoning those it deems security threats, to outright ethnic cleansing and genocide—and it is especially problematic if scholarship, theorizing, and horizons of possibility do not account for the inevitability of armed resistance in the overall decolonial struggle. In fact, it is the policy of the oppressor to break the back of the oppressed, to make resistance appear futile, so that even if the oppressed wanted to resist, they would do so in the most peaceful means possible, perhaps taking comfort in land acknowledgments.

In the decolonial literature of the last decade, decolonization has taken a much more sanitized turn to focus on knowledge production instead of how to kick out or expel the settler or overturn the power of the colonizer. The settler (in cases of settler colonialism) or colonizer (in other forms of colonialism) is not expected to sacrifice their way of life in any meaningful way; they are just expected to make more room for other knowledge systems, or slowly and gradually decolonize. Thus, we turn to decolonize the syllabus, the classroom, or

the university but are less open to writing about how to burn them down or, more importantly, how to take back land and the movement building and struggle this requires. And we certainly do not think of decolonization as a potentially violent process that can still be ethical. For these things, we must return to the teachings of Fanon and others of the 1960s. The turn to decolonization in the 2010s, however, was metaphorical,<sup>12</sup> and when it tries to not be so, it remains sterile and rarely up to the challenge of what decolonization requires. The primary issue is that those calling for decolonization rarely take it as a lifelong process requiring sacrifice. And even when people are against settler colonialism, they are often far too invested in the architecture of life set up by colonialism, or their interests entangled in this architecture, to propose radical but realistic measures.

Scanning the literature, the sense I get is a sort of ambiguity over the urgency of decolonization—while urgent, the response rarely matches this urgency. Life goes on while settler subjects continue to settle.<sup>13</sup> Settler colonialism has become so integrated into the state form that one does not know how to differentiate those two structures anymore, and there is only so much decolonization one can imagine. For example, in an inspiring article, Rumitapa Dutta et al. provide several ways to stand with the oppressed in their resistance, but still, none of these ways acknowledge the armed possibilities that the oppressed may engage in.<sup>14</sup> Or take the collective *Gesturing towards Decolonial Futures*,<sup>15</sup> which, in its ten-point commitment, also says next to nothing about the inevitability of armed resistance. These are

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<sup>12</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.”

<sup>13</sup> In my archival research from the future, I noticed the Al Aqsa Flood Operation of October 7, 2023, was one turning point, and you will see some shift in the literature in the years to come.

<sup>14</sup> Dutta et al., “From Rhetorical ‘Inclusion’ toward Decolonial Futures.”

<sup>15</sup> For more on this collective, see *Gesturing towards Decolonial Futures*, <https://decolonialfutures.net> (accessed March 20, 2024).

just two examples of great scholarship and initiatives on decolonization that, nevertheless, skirt this issue or make it absent. Importantly, what I found in the archives, all dating to 2026 and beyond, was that at one point there grew to be a synergy between the armed and nonarmed struggle, whereby each understood the value of the other while recognizing the need to remain at arm's length, and the scholars of resistance understood how to carve an ethical discourse that became impenetrable.<sup>16</sup>

Specifically, when it comes to the Israeli state, the Native today has not surrendered any rights and does not do so into the future. The settler society in Palestine has not become legitimized or normalized today either, so there has always been a process of decolonization infused with urgency—we see it now and I saw how it played out in the future. People cannot talk about decolonizing a school system in Palestine today while land and people are being expropriated and eliminated in front of their eyes. Yet no one will situate Hamas or Hizballah in decolonial theory, and when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is analyzed as an anticolonial movement, it is usually situated historically rather than to think of their armed action within a decolonial future. The literature on decolonization conjures all sorts of definitions and ideas that dilute its urgency. For example, from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang we learn that there is internal and external colonialism, but while this can theoretically be argued, the danger is that it turns our attention to the problematics of the colonized (who are themselves colonizing in this formulation) before doing the hard work of

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<sup>16</sup> It felt refreshing to see the debate around violence and nonviolence in the future, mostly, and remarkably, settled. Liberation required both. Once solidarity groups understood this, they became far more effective in confronting power. Groups that did unarmed global solidarity work understood they needed to be strategic and keep discursive distance from armed resistance so the powerful don't easily come down on them. Those that wanted to engage in armed resistance globally made sure not to be involved in unarmed groups.



liberating land.<sup>17</sup> Decolonization is about repatriation of land and life first.<sup>18</sup> A people needs land as ground to exist and decolonize all other aspects of the world.

As recounted above, what occurred in AlSham, and what I learned in my travels, was a violent process (against everyone) that maintained an ethics that valued all life while balancing the need to bring justice to the previously oppressed Native. The beneficiaries of the Israeli system could not, on the whole, continue to keep the benefits they enjoyed in the old system and had to be called to account at some level.<sup>19</sup> Yet the process had to reject revenge in all its forms. The life of the Jewish settler had to be respected, but their way of life, based on injustice, naturally could not be maintained. The choice of whether to stay, however, was up to the settler, not the new rulers. No one would be expelled, but many left on their own accord—afraid for their lives, uncertain of their future, unable to live equally with non-Jews, or holding onto Zionism as a way of organizing society that became impossible under the new system.

In other words, following Fanon's injunction to build the world of the "you,"<sup>20</sup> and Lorenzo Veracini's ethical position of killing the settler but keeping the human in them, the resistance and what came after it sought to kill all traces of the settler subject but keep the people, the living bodies, as new ethical subjects.<sup>21</sup> Where the people refused to de-Zionize, to give up their property rights and their national rights, and to shed their settler being, they either found no place in the new society and left out of fear or disgust, or in many unfortunate

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<sup>17</sup> Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 4.

<sup>18</sup> Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 21.

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis on the beneficiaries of South African apartheid benefiting from the new system, see Meister, *After Evil*.

<sup>20</sup> This idea was first elaborated in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. To consider how such a world can be built, see also Hermez, "Dehumanization in War and Peace."

<sup>21</sup> Veracini, "Decolonizing Settler Colonialism."

cases, were imprisoned (and deported if they had another nationality) or killed in resistance and reprisal attacks. The principle, however, as people recalled for me, was always repeated, “Do not kill the Man in them, we are only after the settler mind.” There was a reemergence of a lost anticolonial struggle, a reemergence of the meaning of the human with an indigenous grounding to refer to all life absent of hierarchies of humanity.<sup>22</sup> And, in fact, going after the settler mind meant a great deal of the resistance was naturally focused on making the settler see, feel, and think anew, a process that in itself did not require arms and actually worked through many forms of global boycotts, sanctions, and other forms of pressure from the global solidarity movement. It was the response and intransigence of the settler, their violence, that made armed resistance a requirement.<sup>23</sup>

My interlocutors had vastly different ideas of the full breadth of decolonization because they had gone through its most fundamental process—the repatriation of land followed by the implementation of transformative policies. In the years after the fall of the Israeli state and the formation of the land of AlSham, the Central Command of the new land, or Higher Council as it was now called, had seen to it that all residents on its land were protected. But it also sought to eliminate race thinking by devaluing nationalist thought and sentiment at every turn. Colonially constructed territory-based communities (such as Lebanese, Jordanians, Syrians, Palestinians, and, of course, Israelis) were abolished—and I noticed the older generation were often called out by their younger kin when they sometimes reverted to these identifications. On the other hand, linguistic, religious, and historical

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<sup>22</sup> Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality”; Fassin, “Inequalities of Lives, Hierarchies of Humanity.”

<sup>23</sup> The logic of the armed resistance factions was as it is today. It could not win in an all-out war. The struggle had to be gradual and to accumulate wins. But it understood that as the Zionists lost, they would force the war instead of negotiate. Thus, the resistance had to be ready for an all-out armed confrontation at any time.

communities (for example, Jews, Sunni, Shia, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrian, etc.) were valued and their differences promoted and protected, although they had no claim to national rights, which meant they could not pursue a unified territory. Any talk about the relative worth of communities was looked down on with contempt and the Higher Council had recommended that the local curricula implement a change to the way people thought about difference.<sup>24</sup>

When Jonah argued with the others about the naming of Tel Aviv, it came in this context of change. He felt the world was not only changing but something was also disappearing, never mind that his friends and most people in AlSham saw it as a disappearance of racism and oppression. For Jonah, a dying privilege always brought out his inner conflict. However, what I had seen in my travels in AlSham ten years after its unification, especially when traveling through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, was that he was channeling a minority of Western Jews who stayed but still held onto a nostalgia for Zionism.

Initially, the Higher Council had left the name of Tel Aviv intact, a gesture of good will. But now, as trust was built, talk of the name change had returned. “Call it Al-Manshiye or Jaffa. What’s the big deal?” Imad said, continuing with the conversation. Again he repeated the Bombay/Mumbai example.

“Why don’t they put it to the residents of Tel Aviv and see if they want the name change?” Jonah proposed. It was a solid proposal. Everyone was silent. Perhaps that would

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<sup>24</sup> Research to understand the development of this curriculum is a project worth undertaking in itself. Also important was that the Higher Council needed to protect the land from outside interference in the initial years. Thus, it forced all embassies into one compound that was subject to surveillance, which limited the activities of foreign diplomats. Money from Western donors was replaced with funding from the coffers of the new government. These policies are also worth exploring.

be best. If trust has been built, if they were all meant to govern locally, then Tel Aviv shouldn't be governed any different from Beirut. No one would propose a name change of Beirut without asking its residents, so the same could be said of Tel Aviv. Not asking the residents could create an unnecessary communal rift that the last ten years were building against.

"I think it does speak to an inherent distrust that Shamis view Tel Aviv as a city whose future they can all control and shouldn't be left to the residents," Jonah continued. "The Jewish population there isn't even a majority anymore. And if you're worried they would vote as a block, they won't. Almost all those who remained have denounced the history of the Israeli state and feel a mask was lifted from their face. I think they're crazy. It was much better for us under Jewish-Zionist rule."

"Oh, please, Jonah. This is why the name needs to change. So people like you can stop recalling this terrible past. Jews have fared quite well in AlSham, and the community is no longer associated with being genocidal killers. Many of those that stayed and were well off before have retained some of the best positions and are overall well off, despite a portion of them losing land. There was little retaliation."

"Little retaliation? More than two million Jews left!"

"Yes, but they are free to come back whenever. They didn't lose their right to live here. And anyway, they left of their own accord or as a result of the Zionist movement continuing to fight and leaving no choice for the resistance to wage a violent campaign till the end," Imad retorted. "They were not poor little victims living in peace. These were settlers wanting to live in a situation of racial superiority rather than give up their land and wealth to live as equals. And despite this, still we called on them to stay. We gave incentives for them to establish lives in Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, and elsewhere. Arab Jews were even

given aid if they wanted to return to Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, and other countries. Why did you stay if you think it's so bad? Why didn't you leave when your parents did?"

"I couldn't leave my home. I had to give this place a chance. And don't get me wrong, I'm glad I did. But now the land is bustling with renewed conversations to erase the past. Leave it alone. Most names were already changed."

"That's not true," Maya chimed in. "So many villages, even some Palestinian ones depopulated in 1948, remained with Hebrew names given to the place by Zionists because residents didn't return or when they did, they were too few and had bigger issues to deal with. Look at Kiryat Shmona, it remained."

"And you would change it if you could! I just think what's done is done. We need to look forward."

"Ten or twelve years is not a long time to undo a century of settler colonialism, Jonah," Imad said with a concerned voice. "Names remind us of all the pain and resentment. Do you want us to continue to resent Jews every time we remember places? We are not calling for Tel Aviv to be renamed Auschwitz, it won't be a name that instills fear or hurt in you."

Jonah fell silent, but I felt he wasn't convinced. Over time, I encountered a number of Jews who, like him, were conflicted between the good life they could have in the land of AlSham, that did not retaliate against them and did not deny them opportunities, while also remembering all the wealth, power, and prosperity their community had in the land they called Israel. One always looks back with nostalgia, especially to more prosperous times that were lost. This nostalgia was a powerful mobilizer in the present and in the way Jonah dealt with the world around him and what he wanted out of it. It was, in itself, a variable of politics. Left unaccounted for, it could become the undercurrent for political mobilization and

even violent resistance to bring back the past. I could see the efforts of civil society, under broad direction from the Higher Council, trying to build a new narrative so the Jewish people in AlSham could look back on this past as a time of dark ages rather than a golden age. To some degree they had been successful so far, with much help from Jews worldwide who had turned against the Israeli state and vehemently opposed such a state operating viciously in their name.

In the conversation between Imad, Maya, and Jonah, I felt Imad was seeing decolonization as something that should happen overnight—Tel Aviv’s name should have changed as well, and everything should have been done on the first day to erase all colonial structures. On the other hand, Jonah seemed to be saying that decolonization was over, and it was enough. But Maya, Jonah’s partner, intervened, almost anticipating my thought: “I think this is definitely a conversation we should be having now, but I also think it was fine that it didn’t happen back then. We cannot end centuries of European colonialism, and all its transformations, in a day or a year or ten years. Some questions will be quick, others will take time to resolve. But we can’t settle by saying it is enough. We can’t settle. We have to remain unsettled.”

Everyone gave her their attention. She was reflecting principles of the new world they were building—a recognition that the work was not settled. It was, in fact, in one of the early communiqués of the resistance’s Central Command after the land was liberated and unified. I saw the text myself. They had said, “Do not consider this moment the end of settler colonialism. We have liberated land, but we have much work to do to liberate life. We will always be unsettled, for the work of restoring the world must be ongoing and will certainly hit against blocks of incommensurability—those moments when things seem unresolvable, don’t make sense, are so knotted and entangled. We will overcome together only to hit new incommensurabilities.” They went on, but this reminded me of Tuck and Yang, who said that

decolonization “is incommensurable.”<sup>25</sup> Someone had been reading, or perhaps decolonization was always so intuitive for anyone who wanted to see.

Maya continued: “Just think back to these last ten years. The way the settlers fought and refused, and how forceful we were towards them. But as settler power decreased, so did armed resistance against the settler. Soon, as you all can see, the figure of the Jew as settler transformed into just another figure among the variety of communal figures—like Kurds, Sunnis, or Maronites. And everyone had to adapt away from nationalist thinking.” It felt like Maya was taking the opportunity to teach me a lesson in history. “The Jew as a historical victim now even garners sympathy. We speak out against any attacks on them in Europe, and you even see deep alliances between Jews and Shamis in Europe, where previously this was impossible because Zionists made sure of this to maintain their narrative. But we have to continue the process of decolonization, not as an attack on Jews, but to root out Zionists. Jonah, you know as well as anyone here that Zionists and other nationalists are lurking. We have decolonized the land but we must still work on the mind.”

Maya was reflecting the counterpoint to what I see in the literature today. Much of it puts the cart before the horse; unable to decolonize land, scholars have resigned themselves to trying to diagnose and decolonize mindsets. However, in my ethnographic context where land was repatriated, nationalist identities abolished, sovereignty returned to a higher power, communities simply living as tenants of Mother Nature, and governance localized and transformed, it was now necessary to remain vigilant and continue the process of decolonizing mindsets. “Centuries of European colonialism,” as Maya said, do not get overwritten in a few years.

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<sup>25</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.”

## Concluding Remarks

In my travels in the future, I came to understand decolonization from observing it in action, far away from the theoretical. In the archive, I learned of the policies, ideologies, and political organization that built and insisted on the ethical approach, while in my travels and conversations I saw processes of decolonization in real life—dismantling of architecture, new ways of thinking of land and environment, but also ongoing debates and disagreements on how to keep a society in motion. And in between the desired and the real, it was safe to say that decolonization would never achieve utopia, but it did appear to create conditions for what I might simply describe as a golden period.<sup>26</sup> It is a time when Palestine is liberated, and what we know as the states of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria are no longer, and the people of these lands are trying to live their lives with new ways of thinking. New ways that for some may echo of precolonial times but are drastically different, infused as they are with all the knowledge and material experiences we acquired in the interim.

New ways of thinking, battling the trappings of the nation state—these come with their problems, but the liberation of land had an almost immediate effect. If nothing else, people could breathe better again in AlSham. People told me this and I felt it myself. It didn't surprise me, to be honest. Before my travels, I had come across the work of Simmons, who had already diagnosed the problem of settler colonialism as producing a “settler atmospheric”—toxicities and choke points. It is precisely this atmosphere that I felt had gone through detoxification in AlSham,<sup>27</sup> even if other pollutants still existed all around and

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<sup>26</sup> On this point, literature and scholarship by Jews in the diaspora was conflicted. I came across plenty that were a kind of sigh of relief for Jews worldwide, and still others by former Israeli Jews who left but spoke of the memory of settler subjects as oppressive, but there were also those who continued to write about memory with nostalgia for the “beautiful land of Israel and the honey they produced from the dessert.”

<sup>27</sup> I came upon the article by Simmons through the important work of the Yellowhead



atmoterrorism—turning the environment into a weapon against your enemy—was still something people had to contend with,<sup>28</sup> and even if the war and the remnants of the Zionist army continued to leave so many toxins on the land.

What I saw in AlSham, and what I felt around my interlocutors in Deir Yassin, people like Fadi and Jonah, or in Beirut around people like Maya and Imad, was that liberation brings about an ability to breathe, to move freely, not just on one's land but in one's mind and body. It brings about an end of suspension, an ability to imagine various sovereignties coexisting where it could not before. What I saw transformed in the absence of settler atmospherics is the deintensification of anxiety, paranoia, and conspiracy. Time, bodies, and affect are able to move again, unsuspended. Liberation, of course, brings with it massive continuities too, continuities that ground change and make it possible. But what was clear to me, and what was perhaps most fascinating, was that in this future time that I witnessed and among the people I lived with, the rhythm of anticipation of state violence is broken.<sup>29</sup>

**NOTE:**

This article was mostly written in spring and summer 2023, several months before the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on October 7, 2023. The genocide of Palestinians in Gaza meant I would not put the final touches to send it out to a journal until a year later. In the editing process before the final submission, I made minor edits, namely referencing the genocide, as I had not been told about it during my travels, and the fall of Assad, because it was timely to the present context. I wish to thank Imad for opening his home in Deir Yassin to me and

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Institute. See Habtom and Scribe, "To Breathe Together." See also Yellowhead Institute, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org>. (Accessed: January 30, 2025)

<sup>28</sup> Sloterdijk, "Airquakes."

<sup>29</sup> Simmons, "Settler Atmospherics."

introducing me to his family and friends. This paper is dedicated to all the martyrs who will give their lives on the road to our inevitable liberation.

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