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The Neocolonial Present - Theory and practice in the Middle Eastern cases of Nakba (1948-2023) and 100 years of Kurdish revolution

Neokolonijalna sadašnjost – Teorija i praksa blisko-
istočnih slučajeva Nakbe (1948-2023) i 100 godina
kurdske revolucije

Summary

Colonialism is primarily misunderstood as a historical artefact, scientifically placed into the past, never to be used again in the modern day. However, as a way of understanding the intertwining global cultural, political, and economic systems, it has exposed itself in this modern form, usually termed neocolonialism. The experience of decolonization and the sovereignty of nation-states gave postmodern society an illusion of living in the world system, where each state has the right to call for complete independence without the interference of hegemonic powers. As we delve into some aspects of neocolonialism, we will try to provide a theoretical overview of the cases of countries in the Middle East that still experience colonial structures today – whether through violence, economic resources and interference in the economy, political regime, or physical presentation of the ‘neo-colonizer’. For this paper, it is crucial to first go down the history lane of Middle East colonization processes and then analyze the political, cultural, and economic cases of neocolonial presence in specific areas, namely Palestine and regions inhabited by the Kurdish nation, which have been experiencing both political supremacy and violent repression as recently as 2023 and 2024.

Keywords: neocolonialism, Middle East, Palestine, Kurdistan, colonization, decolonization, Israel.

Introduction

Throughout post-colonial studies, colonialism has been examined from various perspectives. As the field progresses, new practices are being integrated into modern-day society. The term neocolonialism was coined before the de facto end of the process of decolonization. Therefore, we can argue that the efforts to withdraw colonial control over certain populations and nations have been unsuccessful in achieving their ultimate aim of emancipation and autonomy.

The purpose of this work is to delve into the intricate nuances of defining neocolonialism, particularly as it intersects with the contemporary realities of Kurdish and Palestinian societies, which are used in this paper as examples of neocolonial practices. Through a meticulous examination, this study aims to elucidate the complexities inherent in understanding neocolonial dynamics within these specific regional contexts, shedding light on its manifestations across socio-political, cultural, and economic domains.

The primary goal of this paper is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the impact and manifestations of neocolonialism within the contemporary Kurdish and Palestinian contexts while partly answering to the genocide of the Palestinians from October 2023 to the present, and the Kurdish struggle for political and cultural liberation in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Additionally, the paper seeks to contribute to academic discourse by providing insights and recommendations for addressing and mitigating the effects of neocolonialism on the affected populations.

The main questions of this research paper are:

1. How can neocolonialism be accurately defined and delineated within the contemporary global landscape, considering its historical roots and evolving forms of domination and exploitation in post-colonial societies?

2. What are the key indicators and manifestations of neocolonialism in Kurdish and Palestinian communities, and how do these dynamics shape socio-political structures, cultural identities, and economic systems in the region?

Its structure is divided into two parts: firstly, a theoretical analysis of the mechanisms and dynamics of colonialism and imperialism, whether psychological or material, through a genealogy that traces its evolution from Marxist thought to contemporary neocolonial analysis; secondly, a historical-practical analysis of how the examples represent clear-cut practices of neocolonialism that blend traditional methods with new. Through this multidisciplinary effort of theory and practice, the paper aims to not only trace the origins of the definition but also emphasize the importance of a new, broader, in-depth analysis of the neocolonial condition. The second part of this work will explore the history of the Palestinian and Kurdish cases to illustrate how this practice represents the middle ground between old violence and new surreptitious control. Building on the theoretical basis established earlier, we will understand how a system of narratives uses political, economic, and cultural mechanisms to enforce violent hegemonic practices.

In the history of Palestine, initial victimhood from traditional colonialism expanded to include oppression following the Nakba of 1948. This oppression, akin to ethnocide, has been subtly enforced,

fostering a narrative of dependence on Israel, which, in turn, relies heavily on the United States. This narrative justifies extreme actions for Israel's security, even approaching genocide. Meanwhile, the Kurdish nation, promised land in the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920, has faced occupation, repression, and massacres under the guise of being a minority.

To briefly introduce the key issues ahead, we will note that the trajectory followed begins with the theoretical basis for neocolonial systems, which includes the economic narrative of Capital as denounced by Marx, and Imperialism, as analyzed by Lenin. The choice to adopt Marxist thought in this work comes from the combination of material analysis with the ideological (non-material) structures that drive neocolonial actions. The material foundations will address the economic interests of colonial powers in maintaining their presence in the colonized land, whether territorially or through influence. However, to fully understand the term neocolonialism as coined by Kwame Nkrumah in 1965, a shift needs to be made: to understand hegemony as something that pervades not only the material grounds of exploitation but also the very nucleus of civil society. This will allow us to settle the discussion of neocolonialism as being fundamentally a political system of (co-)dependency, as the process of decolonization created the illusion of a newly independent nation-state global system. In this sense, neocolonialism acts as a hegemonizing tool that seeks to devalue the parts of the world already economically and culturally shaped by traditional colonial violence. Its invisible forms must then be made visible to confront and oppose its harm. This ar-

ticle thus represents an analysis of some major outlooks on neocolonial theories, as well as its surrounding apparatus of concepts and practices. It also represents an application of the logic established by the theoretical framework to the specific cases. The discussion will be led in the form of an analysis through the theoretical groundings that have been established in the first part of the article and will be tested on the Palestinian and Kurdish cases. All of this will serve the central goal of denouncing these practices as a continuation of the harmful occupation by hegemonic powers over territories, whether physically present or just conditioning through dependence, provoking thought and resistance.

A Genealogy of Colonialism and the Shift into Neocolonialism

Defining neocolonialism's practice and the structure of its application is made difficult by the multipolarity of fields it touches. This requires a multidisciplinary effort involving anthropology, sociology, philosophy and history. To analyze it in the Palestinian and Kurdish cases, we need a framework that is presented here as a brief genealogy of colonial and imperialist thought, stretched from Marx to our time. These practices serve the great Capital, as it is ideological grounds that provide a self-justification of cultural affirmation of power and hegemony.

While Marx and Lenin did not write extensively on colonialism, their contributions include analyses of Capital and Imperialism, respectively. In the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx points towards the economic rationale of British colonialism in India, asserting how colonialism is an integral part of the development

of capitalism (Marx, 1990, p. 474). The provision of raw materials, markets, and inexpensive labor through the colonies creates the material ground for the industrial efforts of the bourgeoisie to thrive. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, more precisely, Marx (1995, p. 75) states how “it is slavery that gave colonies their value. It was colonies that created world trade. It is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry.” That is, the material conditions provided by the colony allow for the internal development of capitalism within the colonial power while exploiting the outer sphere of labor, which adds value to the territory. In this sense, the colony, its territory, and its people are only valuable only in terms of the gain they provide to the oppressor.

Lenin (1999, p. 290) adds in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* that imperialism is essentially a stage of capitalist development marked by a division akin to the division of labor. However, this fission occurs in terms of spheres of colonies and influence. The concentration of capital in a few large corporations, the export of capital to other nations, and competition for markets and resources are the stepping stones of the edifice of imperialism, which can be traced back to the Portuguese attempt to find an alternative route to the spice trade, as well as other efforts to control trade monopolies in the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, and the use of cheap labor to sustain those monopolies. For Lenin, only the revolutionary struggle puts resistance to this (Lenin, 1999, p. 290).

Such revolutionary struggles can be brought to the present through the Palestinian and Kurdish efforts for self-determination. The issue is that while the

Marxist-Leninist analysis of imperialism is fundamental to understanding power dynamics in relation to material conditions and the capitalist economic rationale underlying expansion, it lacks the fundamental aspect that is only brought forth through Gramsci. When discussing hegemony, Gramsci (1971, p. 145) divides society into two superstructural levels: civil society and political society. The first refers to a form of cultural power, and the second to the direct domination of groups.

Gramsci’s contribution aligns with Marxist thought on the level in which it attributes to the capitalist state the monopoly over the economy and industry, not only within its borders but beyond them. However, when taken in colonial context, it strives towards the redefining of civil society, whether in the colonial territory or the ‘homeland’. Hegemony, as the apparatus of social and cultural attainment of power, thus affects the colonized people in the the political and economic spheres but also extends into the cultural realm.

This, however, still tells us little about the definition of neocolonialism based on the grounds on which its critique has been formed. To move forward with such a definition, one must not only see it through the description of its affirmation but also through its negation – the decolonization process. Thus, the first step towards this end is to approach the fundamental concept that is seen in colonialist practice—violence. Resorting to Fanon (1963, p. 35), who most importantly combined Marxism with cultural and psychoanalytical aspects of violence regarding colonial thought, for, we see that “decolonization is always a violent

process.” Why must it always be violent? Because of the instituted logic of oppression affirmed by colonialism.

Fanon (1936, p. 35) sees the straying away from colonial practices through the specter of necessity. There is a need for a change that consists of a “total, complete, and absolute substitution” (Fanon, 1936, p. 35). A second question emerges: why is there a need for a change? First, because colonization is violently grounded on the idea of difference between the colonizer and the colonized, as the violence of the former over the latter implies a recognition in the same coin, in the inverse of it. The need emerges from this tension between the two groups, whose existence is defined within the colony:

“The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another ‘species’ of men and women: the colonizers.” (Fanon, 1963, p. 36)

The process of decolonization involves the forces at play in the colonial struggle: the strife between the oppressed and the oppressor. The tension between these opposing forces reveals the power dynamics through contrasts – on one hand, the ‘different’ as enemies; on the other, the ideas of identity and self-mastery:

“Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of sub-stratification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. Their first encounter was marked by violence and

their existence together—that is to say, the exploitation of the native by the settler – was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons. The settler and the native are old acquaintances. In fact, the settler is right when he speaks of knowing “them” well. For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence.” (Fanon, 1963, p. 36)

This means that the existence of the colonized as such derives its meaning from the immediate relation of being oppressed. When we examine works such as Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014, pp. 131-151), and his analysis of how the process of recognition of Indigenous peoples (in his case, of Canada) is still framed within a legal narrative of being a subaltern, we see how this logic becomes more evident. Therefore, the meaning of the colonized is determined by the conditioning of the invading force. It deprives natives of their identity and always positions it as secondary in relation to that of the colonizer. This lack of recognition is more clearly illustrated in Taylor’s (1994) work:

“[...] our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” (p. 25)

Regarding identity, the creation of a state of conditioning of a native population to serve the interests of a colonial

power prevents dialogical dynamics and instead rebuilds the identity of the colonized. The harm caused by this is psychological, persisting beyond decolonization efforts. Such psychological marks manifest as a sense of self-depreciation:

“Their own self-depreciation, on this view, becomes one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression. The first task ought to be to purge themselves of this imposed and destructive identity.” (Taylor, 1994, p. 26)

Fanon (1963) explores this psychological aspect to see how the long-lasting violence of colonialism creates a common consciousness of the settler’s rebuilding of an order that is said to not have existed before, with its supposed gifts of civilization coming with a self-instilled sense of superiority, pushing all that is native – the people, the language, the culture – outside of its own space. Thus, the colonized, through self-depreciation or the narratives constructed by the oppressor, are now seen as ‘savages,’ while the civil world appears as a ‘great corrector.’ This new relationship creates the following structure:

“The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, “They want to take our place”. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.” (Fanon, 1963, p. 39)

Following Fanon, Albert Memmi examines the psychological impact of defining colonial politics as a division between us and them, while also analyzing the debates and environments contemporary to his work. As this paper is written, the efforts to dehumanize and erase

Palestinian existence further reinforce Memmi’s point about the social-psychological structures of colonialism relying on deletion and the use of moral-cultural justifications to validate such oppression (Memmi, 1974, p. 121). Memmi also argues that colonialism is doomed to collapse under its own weight. From a Marxist perspective, the surplus value of maintaining the colony—whether industrially or oppressively—will lose its profitability, not only in economic terms but also culturally and globally. The apparent self-assured superiority of the colonizer, based on material conditions and a grasp on power, will ultimately fall due to the false premise on which it stands. Memmi draws from Fanon’s considerations on how this supposed superiority is founded on primordial division, arguing that if there were to be absolute unity within the settlement, such a condition would be seen as frail (Fanon, 1963, pp. 81-84).

The capacity for unity is hindered by a dynamic rooted in recognition, where the colonizer positions himself as the provider that the colonized depend upon, while the latter internalizes this view of themselves (Fanon, 1963, pp. 130-135). This internalization could be called “colonial consciousness” and leads to a loss of identity and culture. The colonized slowly adopt the values, beliefs, and language of the colonizers, reinforcing the power dynamics and completing the psychological oppression and cultural erasure, which are just as damaging as material depletion of goods and the enforced labor, along with physical oppression (Memmi, 1974, p. 122). The colonial logics behind this have not been withdrawn. From Fanon and Memmi to Mbembe, we notice that exploitation, political control, and cul-

tural hegemony have maintained colonial values over local perspectives and identities (Mbembe, 2017, p. 134). That is, the recognition and dependency arise from the perpetuation of the colonizer's values as being hierarchically superior to those of the colonized.

At this point we have outlined an idea of colonialism, and thus neocolonialism, through its theoretical description, but a precise definition has not yet emerged. We understand that all practices within the colonial sphere stem from a set of preconditions that range from economic, industrial, and psychological to socio-cultural factors. These practices seem to value the settlement based on the profits it can extract from it and are grounded in fundamental psychological and social divisions that seek to extend hegemonic control of the territory. Therefore, the definition of colonialism proves difficult to articulate both concisely and comprehensively. This difficulty was already noted in Horvath's 1972 article, *A Definition of Colonialism*: "The academic establishment possesses no widely accepted theory of colonialism, nor does any substantial agreement exist upon what colonialism is" (p. 45).

Even if there seems to be no concrete way to define colonialism theoretically, we must propose to define it by its practice, through the multifaceted and complex apparatus of control, oppression, and violence. Neocolonialism can be seen as an extension of such practices in more discreet and underlying forms of hegemonic control. Despite contradictory views on colonialism in society – one portraying it as a 'dirty business' orchestrated by malevolent interests and the other praising it for bringing civilization into

a 'savage' world (Horvath, 1972, p. 45). Horvath (1972) defines it as "a form of domination – the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups" (p. 46), and thus as a cultural change process.

The shift in colonial practices is noted by I. J. Samuel-Mbaekwe (1986, p. 81), who defines two forms of colonialism: the first, during the 17th century, is the classic form where European powers conquered the New World and Oceania; the second, in the 19th century, involved expanding into Africa and Asia looking with the aim of obtaining surplus capital, rather than merely expanding populations and territories. Economic interests are often veiled by ideological justifications for such power exercises. Neocolonialism thus applies the same methods to colonialism, subtly, with economic interests at its core, presenting itself as investment, protection, and negotiation, when in fact it only furthers the hegemonic and economic expansion over the neocolonized. The lingua franca remains that of the colonizer, as do the political system, the economic structure, and the social norms. Although territorially decolonized, the national-economic-political-cultural experience remains colonized.

Edward Said's (1972, pp. 1-2) work confirms such a central and critical condition. He refers to the Orient as the deepest and most recurring image of the Other, which the West failed to define merely as a neighbor and, in addition, used to define itself. By portraying the Orient as an experience, a contrasting world, or an imaginative story, the West succeeded in the visual portrayal of itself. As a result, the Orient became "an integral part of European material civilization and cul-

ture” (Said, 1972, pp. 1-2). This discussion reaffirms the divide between the West and everyone else.

Said’s work (1972, p. 3) on Orientalism examines how the West inversely defined itself by defining the Other to stand vis-à-vis with, while simultaneously deleting and restructuring it, maintaining a self-determined authority. This authority has not been erased from Western civilization even after a century of decolonizing efforts. The desire to control and to obtain what it can from the colony is grounded in a long-standing sense of self-importance in directing humankind at large. As Fanon (1963) notes, “it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and perpetuates his existence. The settled owes the fact of his very existence, that is to say, his property, to the colonial system” (p. 41).

Therefore, the shift from traditional colonialism to neocolonialism is a transition from territoriality to the central concept of dependency. Neocolonialism represents an overall state of global dependency on colonial powers. This state of affairs presents itself as the most dangerous stage of imperialism (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 9). It was Nkrumah who posited the fundamental question of dependency which emerged from the process of decolonization, which, in an apparent affirmation of independent nation-states, surreptitiously established an economic and political system marked by (co-)dependency, thus rendering territories once colonized incapable of reversing the process (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 9). This form of dependency is the same one that led President Sukarno of Indonesia to tell the US in a UN assembly in 1965: “Go to hell with your aid.” A forced dependency that,

when defied, leads to mass killings such as those witnessed in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966, targeting those who defiantly challenge the hegemonic structure of neocolonialism (Bevins, 2020).

As such, neocolonialism wields its power, aiming to devalue regions that were formerly victims of traditional colonization. While refraining from overt violence and territorial occupation, influence remains hidden in culture, in the economic and political structure, geopolitical influence, and alignment with Western interests. It may seem easy to dismiss this as ‘business as usual’ in a capitalistic global trade system, but, as Uzoigwe (2019, p. 60) notes, one must not neglect the term and the role it has in perpetuating fragile material and political conditions in Asia, South America, or Africa. Hence, the passage from traditional colonialism to neocolonialism is one that, in the history of colonial thought, imperialism, capitalism, power, and hegemony, can only be understood as a shift of control through violence to control through subtlety and dependency. This brief genealogy proves there is still something to say, and that we must note in contemporary cases how these methods still thrive between traditional violence and subtle control.

The Palestinian Case: Oppression and Interest

The Palestinian case is one that, from the Nakba of 1948, established the separation of Palestinians from their Zionist neighbors turned occupiers. What is now seen as a long-lasting occupation of the territory by Israel is preceded by an argument analogous to the German concept of Lebensraum, first introduced by geographer Friedrich Ratzel. This narrative

finds its grounds in the first fundamental Zionist text dating back to 1896: Herzl's *The Jewish State*. Although its broader goal was to find a solution to European antisemitism, it outlines how the only solution for the vitality and historical survival of the Jewish people is to unite them under an independent state, for, as Herzl pointed out:

“We are one people – our enemies have made us one without our consent, as repeatedly happens in history. Distress binds us together, and, thus united, we suddenly discover our strength. Yes, we are strong enough to form a State, and, indeed, a model State.” (Herzl, 1946, p. 12)

This state, for historical reasons and due to already being a colonial one (as a British protectorate), was proposed to be Palestine (Herzl, 1946, p. 13). However, Herzl's (1946, p. 14) first concern with not interfering with local populations was set aside by the time of the Nakba of 1948. The process of creation and expansion of the Jewish State (what would become Israel) was set to be “gradual, continuous, and cover many decades.” (Herzel, 1946, p. 12).

The conflict of 1948 revealed itself as the first instance of expansionism on ethnic grounds in the relationship between Israel and Palestine. This is evident in the biological warfare targeting Palestinian villages' water supplies in an attempt to prevent refugees from returning to the territories claimed (Morris and Kedar, 2022, pp. 752–776). It is a pattern equally present in the Hebraization of the occupied territories, which entails actions such as demolishing of mosques, replacing them with synagogues and changing local names to Hebrew (Bardi, 2016,

pp. 165-171). These initial efforts, more than a mere occupation, represent —as discussed in the theoretical part of this paper—an attempt at colonization. This involves erasing the identity of the occupied, followed by the perpetuation of this dynamic within the logic of colonization, creating a dependency on the occupier. Palestine faces an existential threat from Israel, and only through Israel can it hope to maintain any form of existence.

If we look at the UN Partition plan, which reduced historical Palestine to 44% of its territory, and by 2008 to 15% (PSC *Disappearing Palestine maps*, 2020), the territorial space of Palestinians was subject to consistent occupation, establishing a relation between two entities within the same territory as laid out by 1993's Oslo Accords.

These accords did not establish a Palestinian state but instead granted the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) administrative autonomy over parts of the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for the development of Israeli settlements and, most importantly, handing over security control to Israeli forces (United Nations, 1993). These accords precisely established the logic of colonialism that sits between traditional colonialism and neocolonialism: while perpetuating a sense of autonomy, they create a dependency of the occupied on the occupier (particularly regarding security). The accords, as noted by Said, represent a “Palestinian Versailles,” signifying total submission and humiliation (Le More, 2008, p. 65).

However, to further illustrate how the Palestinian case represents a form of neocolonialism, we must delve deeper into the hegemonic logic of dependency

at play. We have already observed how even the institutional and practical structure of the occupation reveals a colonial logic characterized by erasure. From all arguments thus far, we can conclude that, in this case, there is a neocolonial dependency which is firstly existential—that is, Palestine exists while Israel allows it to exist in Gaza and the West Bank—but also material. Neocolonialism as an occupation through dependency also requires delving into the established economic relationship.

The economic relationship between Israel and Palestine is one in which the latter is always cast, due to the reasons aforementioned, in the role of the occupied. It lacks sovereignty, and its autonomy is thus limited. The undeniable aspects of neocolonial nature are present in the economic ties, including control, dependence, resistance, and exploitation, which warrant consideration when analyzing their relationship (Shu et al., 2021, p. 506). If we look at the Palestinian labor force, a report from the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicates that construction, especially on the West Bank, constituted the major increase in Palestinian employment (42.3%) between 2020 and 2021 (ILO, 2022, p. 22). In the same report, it is noted that the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank increased, contrary to UN resolutions (such as 76/82) (ILO, 2022, p. 29).

This marked an increase in employment, with 22.5% of all Palestinians working in Israel and the settlements (UNCTAD, 2023). These two elements highlight how Israel uses even the otherwise unemployed Palestinian workforce to further its expansionist goals, simultaneously making these populations depen-

dent on Israel for labor and salaries while reinforcing the existential threat to them. As settler colonialism, it is also neocolonial, since Israel clearly benefits from perpetuating this state of affairs. The lack of sovereignty here also encompasses material conditions for development, such as education, not only due to recent events but also because of a history where Israeli occupation and conflicts have hindered the establishment of schools, training of educators, and management of classroom overcrowding, with educational administration in the region being handed over to Israel (CEMOFPC, 2011). The so-called autonomy of Palestinian territories prescribed in the Oslo Accords is thus constantly challenged by obstacles that seek to maintain control over the limitations of material conditions in these lands.

The economic framework exposed here aligns with what Khalil Nakhlel (2014, pp. 1-2) describes as a “neoliberal process of re-colonizing the South, occupying armies, destroyers, and missiles were replaced by invading systems and agents.” He further mentions that the regulation of public sectors, privatization of public services, and schemes in the housing market subtly reduce the chances for the local population to live a dignified life (Nakhlel, 2014, p. 2).

These practices resulted in crippling debt that reached its peak in 2021 (CEIC, 2023), despite the vast donations since the Oslo Accords aimed at peace and development, as well as humanitarian aid totaling \$40 billion since 1994 (Shaban, 2022). Nevertheless, this amount falls short of the funds the US alone has given to Israel over the years, mostly for military aid (nearly \$300 billion since 1948) (Masters & Merrow, 2024).

On this developmental level, Palestinian society is fracturing (Nakhlel, 2014, p. 2). Even without considering the succession of wars and obstacles imposed by Israel, on a purely material level, the initial support given to an occupied people, alongside the intentional crippling of its economy, results in the dependency characteristic of neocolonial practice. There is an illusion of Palestinian self-governance (Nakhlel, 2014, p. 2). This is true in other neocolonial structures, but it is more evident here given the specific circumstances of this case. Along with military control over a captive market, there is an addition of so-called ‘predatory classes’—including politicians, landowners, and financiers—who exploit vulnerable groups and collaborate with the occupation while seeking personal gain (Nakhlel, 2014, p. 3). Nakhlel (2014, p. 3) also mentions how all these groups position themselves to exploit Palestine’s land, welfare, and market.

Neocolonial mechanisms of control work not only on material grounds but also through pervading civil society and its economic basis. Up to 1993, Israeli authorities were the ones to decide on housing construction, starting a business, and entering or leaving the country. After the creation of the Palestinian Authority, the autonomy was always challenged.

Even on economic grounds, Israel absorbed 79% of Palestinian exports and was the only source for 81% of imports (UNCTAD, 2023). In 2022, Israel represented 72% of total Palestinian trade (UNCTAD, 2023), which, given the privileged position, allows Israel to define prices and maintain Palestine’s dependency while reaping the benefits (UNCTAD, 2023).

The subordination of Palestine has thus become what has been called the “finalization of the apartheid system” (Fleischman, 2004, p. 310). The division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ by the Israeli government has imposed a superstructure that renders a two-state solution not only an illusion but an impossibility. Thus far, neocolonial practice continues by meeting any Palestinian insurrection with violence, as seen recently in Rafah (Amnesty International, 2024).

Applying theory to these practices, we see more clearly how there is a simultaneous historical effort balancing between the deletion and conservation of Palestine as an entity that, not fully autonomous, is neocolonized within what is now Israeli territory. The ideological narrative of Israel’s safety is debunked by the aforementioned comments on the disparity in funding or aid between Israel and Palestine. Stemming from Marx, ideology is a self-justifying form of the ruling class to maintain the division (Marx, 1998, p. 307). Furthermore, the material structure of Palestine, when analyzed, reveals the nature of the occupation, mixing traditional colonial occupation with a so-called ‘Partition’ that rapidly evolved into a sequence of expansions and wars, deepening the fissure between the Israeli people and the occupied Palestinians.

The Kurdish Case: From Rebellion to Institutionalization

In October 2019, then-President Donald Trump withdrew US troops from the Turkish-Syrian border, previously the sole deterrent to Turkish actions in northern Syria, where the SDF safeguards the Kurdish population. This decision, made after a call with Turkish President Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan, heightened tensions. Despite international criticism of Turkey's actions against its Kurdish minority, Erdoğan regards the Kurdish independence movement as a terrorist menace. The Kurdish issue, rooted in historical and ongoing conflicts with the states they reside in as minorities, reflects a struggle for recognition of autonomy, cultural preservation, and linguistic expression, with some Kurds advocating for the creation of an independent Kurdistan (Barši Palmić, 2022, pp. 1-2).

The Kurdish homeland has been a perennial battleground, embroiled in territorial, religious and resource disputes throughout history, of a social and political nature (Short & McDermott, 1975). Organized into tribal societies, the Kurds have historically strived to maintain autonomy amidst invasions and power shifts (Short & McDermott, 1975; Nader, 2015). Despite enduring Ottoman rule, the Kurds retained their cultural distinctiveness deeply rooted in their tribal structure (McDowall, 2004).

The decline of the Ottoman Empire witnessed the rise of Kurdish nationalism, spurred by the European notions of nation-states in the late 1800s. However, the post-World War I settlement failed to deliver on the promises of Kurdish self-determination, leaving the population fragmented and oppressed (Dechner, 2007). Under Atatürk, Turkey pursued a policy of assimilation, seeking to suppress Kurdish identity (Kinnane, 1964). All of this fueled an occupation of a colonial nature.

The disputes that arose between the Kurds and the countries in which they are present as a minority are not disputes between equal powers, but throughout his-

tory and even today, they resemble ethnic cleansing, cultural oppression, and forced assimilation. Therefore, in the case of the Kurds, there is a doubling down on the colonial practice: first through the primordial division between ruler and colonized, and second through the deletion of the people.

The vast territory without a nation which comprises the Kurds stretches from Turkey to Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Due to the unique ethnic background, history, culture, and collective spirit among the people, this region represents an area of struggle for recognition of autonomy—a struggle that often takes the form of unifying all Kurds into a single country, Kurdistan (Barši Palmić, 2022, pp. 1-2).

This multifaceted struggle, whether regional or unitarian, makes the colonial case of the Kurds a complex one, as multiple efforts of suppression are at play. Although the Kurds in Iran have faced forced assimilation throughout history, with arrests and suppression of contestatory movements, the focus of the present analysis is on the Turkish, Iraqi, and Syrian cases, where the political and civil rights struggles for recognition of ethnic Kurdish populations are more obvious or more generally known.

Ismail Beşikci, through his research into the oppression of the Kurdish population, described their situation in Turkey as an 'internal colony' (Beşikci, as cited in Duruiz, 2020). "While in most anti-colonial national liberation struggles, the colonized people had to struggle against a single state, in Kurdistan the struggle is against four states, each with distinct relations and interests in the international arena" (Duruiz, 2020). Compared to the African colonization process, where the

territory of colonies was visibly marked on the map, this was never the case for the Kurdish territory. Additionally, Beşikci (as cited in Duruiz, 2020) points out: “Kurds [are] ‘a nation that could not even be a colony,’ since a colony at least retains a political status, albeit a lowly one.”

One of the main points emphasized in the first part of the paper is the violence of neocolonial forms. Beşikci’s examination of how Kurdistan was colonized is also notable for the distinctions he makes between neighboring colonies and those overseas.

These differences go beyond just the capacity of the state, as they allowed for encompassing the specific methods of repression and destruction employed. Unlike in overseas colonies, where vast distances separated the colonizer from the colonized, making domination challenging due to logistical and technological constraints, adjacent colonies like Kurdistan faced more immediate and intense oppression.

This was evident in the swift bombing of Southern Kurdistan within thirty minutes of a warplane departing from Baghdad, leading to a deeper infiltration of oppression and violence into society (Beşikci, as cited in Duruiz, 2020).

The geographical position is one of the main focuses in discussing neocolonial practices in the Kurdish case. As has been pointed out, Kurds are an ethnic group caught in between the mountain ranges of four different countries, while a larger portion of the population lives in specific Kurdish villages, mostly in Turkey or Iraq. Unlike Palestine, Kurdistan is not defined by structured borders on a world map (Bedirxan, 2017), which makes Kurds the largest ethnic group without a

home.

While Kurdistan was promised to the Kurds in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres (Barši Palmić, 2022, p. 25), their homeland never came into existence, being prevented by its newly formed neighbors. The biggest influence on that was the formation of the Turkish Republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Since then, Kurds have not only lived in this geopolitical region as second-hand citizens but have also had their cultural and social identity revoked and oppressed (Barši Palmić, 2022, pp. 25-26).

In Turkey, the Kurds are subsumed in the State. Their existence is denied and coincides with the portrayal of ‘uncivilized’ mountain Turks in Orientalist narratives. The Turkish State established a pattern that persists to this day: 1) Turkish authorities try to forcefully assimilate non-Turkish groups; 2) these latter groups rebel, forming resistance units; 3) the state continues repression with the aggressive measures to assimilate the unassimilated (Heper, 2007, p. 1).

The Kurdish presence in Turkey is marked by unrest and violence, including attempts at suppression by the occupier and revolt by the occupied as the only perceived solution to the issue. Kurdish villages often suffer attacks and burnings (Short & McDermott, 1975). The control apparatus and suppression of the Kurds spill over into a constant wariness of these movements in neighboring countries, where the strife for identity and autonomy may surge (Short & McDermott, 1975). This unresolved issue in Turkey raises questions regarding the feasibility of complete assimilation. It remains a question of colonizer and colonized.

A portrait of Diyarbakir, a Kurdish city

in Turkey, is an illustration of neocolonial formations in geographical instances. Focusing on the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan, Bedirxan (2017) scrutinizes whether the conflict represents an internal war or a form of colonial occupation. The city's layout reveals a stark colonial divide, with military dominance pervading nearly half of its territory. Non-local inhabitants, predominantly from western Turkey, maintain an aloof stance from the local community, perpetuating a colonial-like separation. The conflict has engendered two distinct zones in Diyarbakır—a heavily militarized area and a perilous death zone marked by relentless violence.

“An informant suggested that ‘if you move the flags and the army out of Diyarbakır, there is no State here.’ All the police cars and tanks carry Turkish flags and, at least once a day play a very nationalistic song ‘Ölürüm Türkiyem’ (I Would Die for My Turkey)” (Bedirxan, 2017). In 2016, the armed conflict between the Turkish state and PKK escalated, shifting its focus to city centers where self-governance was proclaimed in various districts. Utilizing a strategy of intermittent curfews, the Turkish state effectively severed external connections and deprived these areas of essential resources like food, electricity, and water. Residents faced coercion to evacuate, and those unable or unwilling to comply were stigmatized as terrorists and subjected to lethal force (Bedirxan, 2017).

While the Kurdish are primarily situated in East Turkey, there is grounded data on the Turkish republic economically disregarding Kurdish-populated regions. Researcher Mutlu (2001, p. 103) noticed a concerning trend at the start of a century:

the Eastern and Southeastern regions of Turkey have experienced a significant decline in income per capita relative to the national average since the 1960s. While other regions like Marmara and Aegean have progressed, the Eastern and Southeastern regions have fallen behind (Mutlu, 2001, p. 103).

In 1935, the Eastern region had approximately 47% of the per capita income of Marmara, and the Southeast had 51%. However, by 1985, both regions' per capita income had plummeted to about one-fourth of Marmara's level. There's a consensus that the East remains neglected, potentially resembling an internal colony within Turkey. The Turkish government underdeveloped the East and Southeast parts of Turkey by positioning most of its transforming industry in the western regions while gathering resources from the East, such as minerals and water.

The Turkish government has, as illustrated in the data, monopolized the economic state of regions in a strategic system of undermining the power and identity of Kurds. In the cultural and social spheres, the Kurds have been renamed in Turkey as ‘mountain Turks,’ with multiple Turkish governments over the years stating that the Kurds as an ethnicity do not exist (Barši Palmič, 2022, pp. 27-28). Being a nation whose name has been banned has resulted in building collective consciousness resorting to political struggle and violence.

If we look at the case of Syria, throughout the 20th century and earlier, the Rojava area in modern Syria played a key role in shaping new borders and the region's economic function. The Syrian monarchy was proclaimed in 1920, with Great Britain and France exerting signifi-

cant influence post-World War I. Despite decolonization, these powers imposed their policies on the new Arab nations, leading to the rise of pan-Arab nationalism against French colonialism (Flach et al., 2019, p. 47).

Kurds, excluded from this movement, sought autonomy in Rojava and joined the Communist Party, resulting in the formation of the Kurdish nationalist PDK-S in 1957 (Flach et al., 2019, p. 49). In the 1960s, the majority of Kurds were denied citizenship and, therefore, did not have the right to vote, own real estate or buildings, or be employed in public and state administration. It was only in 1992 that the first children with Kurdish names could be entered into the civil register (Gunter, 2014, p. 2; Flach et al., 2019, pp. 52-53).

The convulsion of the Syrian civil war produced the emergence of Rojava. Designated as a special province in 2012, it quickly became a focal point for Kurdish aspirations for self-governance and autonomy. The region, comprising a diverse populace of Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs, and other ethnic groups, witnessed the rise of democratic governance models and a hint of a possible self-governed region, away from the chains of neocolonial oppression, propelled by the efforts of Kurdish fighters and activists (Gunter, 2014, pp. 1-2; Savelsberg, 2019, pp. 359-361).

The efforts to free (or decolonize) the Kurdish territory became central when it emerged as a possible state of stable democratic practice, without constant interference or suppression by external forces. Central to this struggle is the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), which promotes a democratic confederacy, portrayed by Abdullah Ocalan, as the way

forward in the efforts to unite the Kurdish communities of Syria and rooting the movement of self-governance and determination (Flach et al., 2019, pp. 83-92). Over time, the PKK has grown increasingly controversial, labeled a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, some Western countries, and EU entities (FAS, 2004). Founded in 1978, it initially emerged amid Kurdish uprisings in Turkey, gradually gaining dominance and radicalizing the Kurdish national movement there (Marcus, 2007, p. 1). Guerrilla units formed, swelling to over 50,000 individuals within a few years (Marcus, 2007, p. 1).

In 1984, the PKK began guerrilla actions and armed attacks against Turkish officials, leading to escalating violence. The Kurdish resistance, spearheaded by the PKK, evolved in response to state oppression and violence against Kurdish populations (Protner, 2015, p. 12).

In practice, this meant the evacuation and destruction of nearly 3,000 hamlets and villages, along with all the inhabitants' possessions, condemning them to a life of poverty in cities across Turkey; forced displacements of individuals and families to western Turkey; constant surveillance by the military, police, special counter-terrorism units, and intelligence services; a 6 p.m. curfew (after which anyone seen outside their home could be shot); interrogations, torture, extrajudicial detentions, and imprisonments on charges of alleged affiliation with a "terrorist organization"; disappearances and unresolved killings (Protner, 2015).

As stated, neighboring states, which would border Kurdistan if it were to emerge as a state, do not support efforts for its formation. Their reservations stem not only from their rejection of Kurdish

culture but also from their economic and political interests: “During the colonial divisions, British and American companies, controlling the oil fields of Kirkuk and Mosul in Iraq, sacrificed the birth of a Kurdish state” (Negri, 1997, p. 30).

Presently, two regions with substantial Kurdish populations are distinguished by their wealth of oil resources: Rojava in Syria and the Kurdish territory in Iraq. Kirkuk stands at the forefront of economic considerations. Since 2014, it has emerged as the epicenter of the Kurdish political struggle in Iraq and has played an indispensable role in advancing Kurdish economic interests, earning recognition as a bastion of Kurdish heritage.

Kirkuk is endowed with ample oil reservoirs, notably hosting the Kirkuk oil field, Iraq’s third-largest, boasting reserves totaling 13.5 billion barrels. Should Iraqi Kurdistan pursue independence from Iraq and establish its own autonomous state, Kirkuk would become an integral part of Kurdistan.

Nonetheless, Iraq is actively opposed to this scenario, currently striving to maintain control over the Kirkuk deposits to safeguard its own interests:

“Before the discovery of oil, the mountains did not and still do not provide sufficient resources. Today, foreigners control most oil-rich Kurdish areas. Even if Kurds controlled oil-rich cities like Kirkuk, their exports would depend on forces that have subjugated them for centuries. Kurdistan lacks access to international waters, a significant factor in the emergence of most major powers.” (Namdar, 2020)

Therefore, Kirkuk is not merely a subject of debate regarding ownership and belonging; it is a question of the utiliza-

tion of natural resources and their accessibility to Kurds.

In Iraq, the Kurds faced a history marked by genocide. The Anfal operation, recognized internationally as a genocide, saw the mass killing of Kurdish civilians between 1986 and 1989, orchestrated by Saddam Hussein’s regime, with the goal of a complete eradication of the Kurdish people. Despite the horrors of the Anfal genocide, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was founded in 1992 as a semi-autonomous entity and has served as a bastion for identity and resilience within the Iraqi State’s framework (Flach et al., 2019, pp. 83-92). Nevertheless, the KRG’s quest for self-determination faced a setback when the 2017 independence referendum (which gathered 93% of votes supporting it) was unrecognized by the Iraqi government (Spooks and Dooks, 2017).

Kurds have a saying: “No friends but the mountains,” reflecting how they have often been forsaken by their political allies (Gunter, 2014). The USA has played a role as a supporter of the Kurdish cause, especially during the fight against ISIS in Syria, where Kurdish guerilla soldiers played an important role. However, in 2019, the Kurds lost their support due to a lack of self-interest from the American government.

The Kurdish question has been part of discussions at the United Nations, which has remained neutral in most of the political and social struggles between the Kurdish population and their neocolonial oppressors. In 1946, there was an appeal to the UN for Kurdish self-determination and sovereignty, which was unsuccessful.

In the 80s and 90s, the UN condemned the Iraqi use of chemical weapons over

Kurdish-populated areas and, later in 1995, instructed the Iraqi government to sell limited amounts of oil from Kirkuk for humanitarian needs.

This changed in 1998, with only 13% of profit going to Iraqi Kurdistan. While there have been discussions of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence since 2010 and additional condemnations of the Anfal genocide, the UN stated it is a domestic issue and is taking a neutral position on it (Gunter, 2014).

What we can gather from the Kurdish case, connecting it to the Palestinians, is that the search for autonomy has been stifled by the hegemonic powers of the region and their interests in denying or erasing their existence.

The frontier between genocide and mere colonialism here is thin. With its vast oil reserves and strategic importance, whether in Iraq, Syria, or Turkey, the Kurds navigate a complex geopolitical landscape while remaining steadfast in their commitment to their rights and aspirations (Spooks and Dooks, 2017; Mansfield, 2016). The Kurds, much like the Palestinians, have found themselves in a dual state: of repression and direct violence on one hand, and on the other, of absolute institutional dependency on the states in which they inhabit. The small grants of autonomy serve here the sole purpose of feeding this dependency. And thus, neocolonialism thrives.

Conclusive Remarks

In a final note, we would like to point out a few aspects of each topic approached by this article. Firstly, the genealogy of colonial thought, connected to imperialism and capitalism, allows us to clearly see the theoretical framework of

neocolonialism as a derivation from traditional colonial practices.

After the process of decolonization, these practices persisted in a different logic: dependency through forceful coercion. Neocolonialism must then be defined as a system in which, through a combination of classic modes of oppression, ideological justification, and subtle mechanisms of control, a hegemonic power retains control over a region, seeking to exploit its material goods and population to serve the national interests.

This is achieved not only through political and economic control but also through psychological efforts to maintain the power dynamic of colonizer and colonized, where the latter remains dependent on the former.

In the Palestinian case, this is evident when analyzing the material and political history of the relationship created after 1948. The overview of settler-colonialism in Palestinian territories demonstrates neocolonial practices that simultaneously erase and perpetuate Palestinian dependency and suffering.

This approach aims to justify the existence of the Israeli state as it is, eliminate any opposition, and take advantage of Palestinian infrastructure. This has resulted in Gaza and the West Bank becoming symbols of this justification for existence and control over the population through its material conditions.

In the Kurdish case, spanning a vast territory, the neocolonial practices must be analyzed in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq individually.

However, they share one common feature: whether through assimilation or apparent autonomy within the state, the Kurds remain dependent and controlled

by the states they inhabit. The ethnic grounds of Kurdish identity are targeted for elimination because they threaten the region's power dynamics and could destabilize state interests. Therefore, this relationship seeks to erase Kurdish identity while maintaining Kurdish existence; that is, Kurdistan's existence is denied even if the Kurdish people exist. This narrative further fuels the neocolonial stance of instrumentalizing territories by applying a rationale that maintains distance while enforcing proximity through dependency.

With all of this said, neocolonialism remains a present and rising force that must be faced with awareness and resistance, making it essential to support the various claims of any people who fight for their right to autonomy and self-determination so these populations finally prosper unchained.

Neocolonial thought, contrary to its practice, should be wielded as a weapon

to fully uncover the full extent of these practices and how they surpass traditional colonialism rather than merely being a different instantiation of the colonial structures of the past. The fight against neocolonialism requires not only understanding the underlying thought but also recognizing the material structures that grasp industries, economic interests, ideological narratives, and the dynamics of collective identities, whether of the occupied or the occupiers.

Only through this recognition will it become possible to identify and condemn the instances of neocolonialism and make demands for the cessation of these activities.

The step forward must involve activism, partisanship, and the engagement of these topics within the institutional frameworks of governments that hold responsibility or play a role in subsidizing neocolonial practices.

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