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Those familiar with the United Nations know that there is one state which stands in defiance of practically every U.N. resolution that affects it: this is the state of Israel. In the international community, the name Israel stands for the exercise of power with impunity. Israel consistently and persistently defies the international community – not because it is the world's sole superpower, but because it is backed up by the world's sole superpower.

Within America, it is easier to criticize the U.S. than it is to criticize Israel. The same Americans who will uphold your democratic right to criticize any government in the world, including the United States, consider any criticism of the state of Israel as potentially anti-Semitic, if not in intent than in effect. Why? Why do American liberals not use the same standard for the state of Israel that they would not hesitate using for every other state in the world, including the United States? What explains the enduring nature of the special relationship between the US and Israel? A number of answers have been offered to this question: ranging from the lure of oil to post-Holocaust morality which see Israel as the quintessential victim, from state reasons such as geopolitics to the power of the Israeli lobby – AIPAC – in shaping U.S. foreign policy. No doubt, each of these highlights one in a complex of motivations that have reproduced U.S. policy to Israel. But they don't explain the enduring nature of that relationship. To understand that enduring motivation, I think it necessary to understand how the political project called Israel resonates with American historical sensibilities.

To understand that historical sensibility, it is instructive to look at American history from a radically different vantage point. I propose to look at the relationship between the U.S. and Israel through a different set of lenses, crafted in an African experience. It presents us with a radically different vantage point because it reflects a radically different historical trajectory. If you look at America from the southern tip of the African continent at the end of the apartheid era—say, if you gaze across the Atlantic from Cape Town--Africa and America do not just appear as two names of two different continents, but also names that signify two radically different historical trajectories. With the end of apartheid, the African experience stands for the end of settler colonialism – unlike the American experience, which signifies the triumph of settler colonialism. Two major developments – the Dred Scott case and the Civil War that followed, and the Civil Rights struggle after the Second World War – mark high points in the history of U.S. citizenship. American citizenship has evolved from a racialized settler identity to a non-racial settler identity. Here, I would like to look at American cosmopolitanism through nativist lenses.

Africa had different experiences in settler colonialism. The best known, and widely condemned internationally, is the experience of apartheid in South Africa. Less well known were two other 19th century experiences: Liberia and Sierra Leone. Liberia was founded as a settlement of freed American slaves, and Sierra Leone for freed British slaves, meaning those American slaves who fought with Britain in the war of the American Revolution and then settled in Britain. In the late 1970s, when I was a lecturer at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, I

remember listening to intellectuals from UMOJA, an organization that stood for the rights of native Liberians, claiming that Liberia was a settler-colonial state, no different from apartheid South Africa. The Tanzanian and East African audience was reluctant to accept the analogy: even if willing to support the struggle of native Liberians as just, we were unwilling to equate Liberia with apartheid South Africa. This was for one reason: we saw Americo-Liberians as returning natives, even if returning after centuries, not settlers.

I recalled this September 2002 when we organized a conference called “A South African Conversation on Israel and Palestine” at Columbia University. Just as it was then important to recognize the difference in subjectivity between Americo-Liberian and white South Africans, so it seems important to recognize the subjectivity of the Israeli Jew. From this point of view, it is the Liberian analogy rather than the analogy with apartheid South Africa – that Israeli Jews see themselves as returning natives, even if returning after millennia, rather than settlers – that might yield more fruitful insights into the Israel-Palestine question.

The Liberian analogy also allows us to locate US-Israeli relations against a broader historical canvas. America’s response to major catastrophes – first slavery, then the holocaust – has crystallized a tendency among Americans to see settler-colonialism as a solution, not a problem. Take the example of America’s response to the survivors of slavery and the survivors of the Holocaust, two major catastrophes in American history. In both cases, the American solution was a return home, but a return that so antagonized the relation with those who were already home, who had never left home, that in each instance the project turned into one of settler-colonialism.

It is instructive to look at the similarities between the two projects, Liberia and Israel. First, both projects united the victims and perpetrators of the catastrophe in question. Liberia was a project enthusiastically championed by both former slaves and former slave-owners, both the victims of slavery and its beneficiaries. Look at the champions of the project of Israel, and Greater Israel, today, and you will find both the most ardent Zionist Jews and the most anti-Semitic sections of the Christian right, led by Jerry Falwell. Second, this unity has been around a civilizing mission, with a marked insensitivity to natives. The Americo-Liberians thought it their god-given right to civilize native Liberians who had never left home. Not only that, their notion of “civilization” was forged in the land of slavery; it reflected the artifacts of the “civilization” into which they were denied entry in bondage, artifacts all the way from the top hat to the green dollar to the White House. Zionists who return to Israel see Palestinians as interlopers, squatters – without a right grounded in a Biblically-sanctioned “civilized” history – who must now clear the way for the rightful owners of the land.

The African experience tells us that the claim of a civilizing mission can take many forms. Who can forget that South Africa claimed to be “the only democracy in Africa” just as Israel today claims to be “the only democracy in the Middle East”? This was and is true, in both cases, but in no case the whole truth. True, many natives in Dar-es-Salaam or Kampala had less rights than some natives in Johannesburg or Durban, and that Palestinians in Israel have greater rights than do natives in the Arab world. The larger truth is that the “civilizing mission” was never meant to include the natives. It was never meant to generalize the regime of rights or democracy to natives. The whole truth is that Zionist Israel, just as the colony of

Liberia and apartheid South Africa, reflect a contradictory unity, a democratic despotism, in a single and contiguous space. On a more general level, it is no different from the “civilizing mission” that Western power brought to the colonies in an earlier era. To begin with, the “civilizing mission” shut out the vast majority of the colonized from the project of modernity and democracy. But when natives resisted this exclusion, it turned around only to stigmatize them as anti-modern and unworthy of democracy.

The democratic despotism that settler colonies practiced in a single and contiguous space also characterizes the global organization of democratic empires. For this very reason, democratic empires have an advantage over empires of old or the Soviet empire of yesterday: democratic empires are potentially self-correcting. Anyone who lived through the anti-war movement in the era of the Vietnam war would recognize the importance of this advantage. A key lesson of the Vietnam War, one that we cannot afford to forget today, is the importance of the anti-war and anti-imperialist movement inside the U.S. and the real constraint this movement exercised on the use of American military power, preventing its being unleashed on the people of Vietnam.

After Vietnam, this lesson was also learnt by official America. The US administration held the American press responsible for defeat in Vietnam: it held the press responsible for creating a popular movement against the war. After defeat in Vietnam, official America had a new agenda: tame the press and restrict press freedom. That restriction has come to be. It is a result of a combination of factors. First, successive US administrations argued that the American press only reported “our” atrocities, never “their” atrocities. After the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the accusation had a ring of credibility. From then on, right through to Iraq, the American press has tended to turn to official America for accounts of “their” atrocities. In doing so, it has contributed to removing foreign policy from processes of democratic accountability – as amply demonstrated by press reportage on the first Gulf War. The operation of market forces has given rise to the second development contributing to the erosion of press freedom in the U.S. This is the changing ownership of media giants, most of whom have been bought over by corporations based in either the defense or the entertainment industry. The third reason for the continuing erosion of press freedom arises from the Achilles Heel of American liberalism, its blind spot, Israel. As the Iran-Contra scandal unraveled during the second Reagan administration, it revealed such a gross executive disregard of legislative accountability that the consequences were likely to be no less than after the Watergate scandal. This did not happen for one reason: liberals in Congress and in the press hesitated. Why? Because Israel was involved.

The state of Israel is a state. It is not a religion, nor a people. Without a distinction between state and religion, we shall forsake the minimal prerequisite of a secular polity. Without a distinction between state and society, power and people, there can be no democracy. This is not to deny that Zionism in Israel – like Jim Crow racism in the U.S. or apartheid in Israel – is not just a state project but also a social project; it is, though, to insist on the need to distinguish analytically state from society so as to claim the right of a democratic struggle over which societal projects may be translated into state projects and which must be blocked. The Israeli state must be submitted to the same scrutiny as any other state, not only for the sake of

the Palestinian people, or the Israeli people, but, now more than ever, for the sake of humanity.