

Occupation without Borders: An Investigation and Comparison of Policing in Black and Palestinian Communities **Ala'a Alattiyat, Class of 2023**

I am researching policing of Black and Indigenous people globally from a comparative politics lens, focusing on American policing of Black (and more specifically African American) peoples in predominantly Black cities and Israeli policing of Indigenous Palestinians in historic Palestine. I intend to find answers to some key questions: In what ways does American policing of predominantly African American cities resemble “occupation?” Is it an “occupation?” Can states perpetrate “occupation” against its own people? In what ways does race in the development of governments affect future state violence? What are the similarities and differences between state violence in the United States vs in Palestine?

My hypothesis is that police departments in predominantly Black American cities are perpetrators of occupation due to the lack of consent to governance possessed by these communities as well as due to the repression of community rebellion by police. I argue that the Memphis police department serves as an occupational force serving the US government to police and oppress African Americans. US policing in predominantly African American cities resembles occupation in their violence against and disconnection from the communities in which they “serve.” They also utilize similar apartheid tactics to those used by the Israeli Defense Force in Palestine to oppress their respective communities.

For Palestinians and African Americans, this oppression comes from settler colonial states perpetrating race based violence. A key difference between these occupations is that the IDF in Israel is a current technique of enacting settler colonialism in trying to gain control of the whole geographical area between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea; whereas for African Americans, police serve as a continuation of previous settlerism from hundreds of years ago in order to ensure the existing racial order remains. Nevertheless, they remain with the same intentions and result— a militarized occupation of indigenous/pseudo-indigenous groups.

I have chosen to compare African Americans as a minority population to Palestinians as an indigenous population because I am regarding African Americans as a “pseudo-indigenous” group to the US. I am regarding them as such firstly because they existed on the land that the US is on *before* the foundation of the nation and form a non-dominant group in said geographic area. Furthermore, the state of erased origin creates a forced homeland in the US. This resembles the definition indigenous peoples, who have a distinct culture and systems and have historical continuity from the dominant culture and government, like Palestinians for example.

I answered my research question using existing bodies of research about what occupation means and how police interact with the communities which they police, with “occupation” being defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as “control and possession of hostile territory that enables an invading nation to establish military government against an enemy or martial law against rebels or insurrectionists in its own territory.” I will use this definition as my standard to examine occupation in the US as well as to label what Israel is doing to Palestine as an occupation.

Other tools used to collect related data are interviews and narrative collection. I have asked people who work with the Memphis police department as well as African American residents and community leaders in Memphis, Tennessee about their opinions on policing, community, and the gap between police departments and civilians. I seek to find out whether or not one could view police departments as a power separate from the community capable of oppressing them through state sanctioned violence— and whether or not this could be classified as occupation. I choose Memphis as my main case study because it is a predominantly African American city where white people are overrepresented in the police department. It is an accurate microcosm for predominantly Black cities because it has a full history of Black oppression, such as redlining, lynchings, and massacres. This history helps us follow the progression of occupation since the development of the state.

While this research is still underway, my interviews overwhelmingly support the fact that African American community members feel more in danger by police than protected, similar to how Palestinians living under occupation feel around the IDF. Every civilian interviewed expressed fear, anxiety, and distrust when asked about their feelings while interacting with the police. Furthermore, when asked to put their likelihood of utilizing police on a scale of 1-10, answers were consistently between 1 and 3. I also found that states *can* perpetrate occupation against their own people, as Israel is a functional single state perpetrating a definite occupation against the indigenous Palestinian population in similar ways to American policing techniques of African American communities.

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