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Research Article

From Palestine to Turtle Island: Food as a weapon of colonialism and tool of liberation

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Abstract

This article examines the role of food as a weapon of colonization and a tool of liberation, with a primary focus on Gaza under Israeli settler colonial rule. The latest wave of Israeli military violence uses food militarization as a key tactic of colonial control and domination. Situating the current genocide in Gaza within broader settler-colonial contexts demonstrates how regimes use food and land to control and eliminate Indigenous peoples. The destruction of food systems in Palestine is part of a broader Israeli attack on land sovereignty, which reflects similar patterns of historical colonial land theft and environmental devastation where we write from, in Canada. In spite of this, food sovereignty remains a crucial aspect of resistance for Palestinians as well as Indigenous peoples in Canada and across the world. This article draws on a panel discussion organized by the Canadian Association for Food Studies/L'Association canadienne des études sur l'alimentation (CAFS/ACÉA), featuring insights from three scholars that connect food systems to colonialism

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and struggles for Indigenous self-determination. The discussion underscores the importance of Indigenous movements and mutual aid networks in the fight for land, food, and cultural sovereignty. These particular struggles are part of a larger global resistance against imperialism and colonialism, illustrating the power of food sovereignty as a means of survival, resurgence, and liberation.

Keywords: Imperialism; Indigenous food sovereignty; Palestine; resistance; settler-colonialism

Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle de la nourriture en tant qu'arme de colonisation et outil de libération, en se concentrant principalement sur la situation de Gaza sous le régime colonial israélien. La dernière vague de violence militaire israélienne utilise la militarisation de l'alimentation comme une tactique clé de contrôle et de domination coloniale. Situer le génocide actuel à Gaza dans des contextes coloniaux plus larges permet de montrer comment les régimes utilisent la nourriture et la terre pour contrôler et éliminer les peuples indigènes. La destruction des systèmes alimentaires en Palestine fait partie d'une attaque israélienne plus vaste contre la souveraineté territoriale. Elle s'inscrit dans des schémas semblables de vols territoriaux historiques par la colonisation et de dévastation de l'environnement qui ont été appliqués là où nous écrivons, au Canada. Malgré cela, la souveraineté alimentaire reste un aspect crucial de la résistance du peuple palestinien aussi bien que des peuples autochtones au Canada et dans le monde. Cet article s'appuie sur une table ronde organisée par l'Association canadienne des études sur l'alimentation / Canadian Association for Food Studies (ACÉA/CAFS), et présente les perspectives de trois chercheurs sur les liens entre systèmes alimentaires, colonialisme et luttes pour l'autodétermination. La discussion souligne l'importance des mouvements indigènes et des réseaux d'entraide dans la lutte pour la souveraineté territoriale, alimentaire et culturelle. Ces luttes s'inscrivent dans le cadre d'une résistance mondiale plus vaste contre l'impérialisme et le colonialisme, illustrant le pouvoir de la souveraineté alimentaire comme moyen de survie, de résurgence et de libération.

Introduction

On October 7, 2024, Hamas-led armed groups in Gaza launched coordinated attacks in southern Israel, resulting in over 1,000 deaths and 251 people taken captive. In response, the Israeli state initiated a massive bombing campaign and ground invasion into the Gaza Strip, marking the most significant military incursion into Occupied Palestinian Territories since the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the deadliest since Israel's establishment in 1948, killing over 45,500 Palestinian people to date. Many more thousands remain unaccounted for, believed to be buried under the rubble (United Nations, 2024a) . In an essay published by *Al Jazeera*, Ruwaida Amer (2024) vividly describes her family's struggle to survive under relentless bombardment, capturing the human toll of starvation as being "stripped of our human dignity". While ongoing

Israeli state violence against Palestinians is not new, in March 2024, Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, announced, "there are reasonable grounds to believe that the threshold indicating the commission of the crime of genocide...has been met" (United Nations, 2024a). More recently, a report to the United Nations General Assembly (United Nations, 2024b) from a committee monitoring the Israeli occupation concluded that Isreal was using "starvation as a method of war" (p. 13) and that its policies and practices "are consistent with the characteristics of genocide" (p. 25). Food militarization and weaponization (Fakhri, 2024; GRAIN, 2024) are tactics that have been used by other settler colonial states, including Canada, to control and displace Indigenous populations (Burnett et al., 2016; Carter, 1990; Daschuk, 2013; Mosby, 2013; Rotz, 2017).

Critical food systems scholars have demonstrated how colonialism and capitalism have shaped food systems over time (Holt-Giménez, 2017; McMichael, 2013; Wittman et al., 2011). In Palestine, we are witnessing an intensified version of the longstanding colonial and capitalist assaults on food and land sovereignty that have occurred across the globe. The infrastructure and economic power of the Israeli state (backed by the United States, Canada, and a small number of minority world countries) has been built upon "colonial expansion, land confiscation, the expulsion of Palestinians, and the expropriation of their wealth and property" (Englert, 2020, p. 1659). This dynamic is evident from Israel/Palestine to Canada/Turtle Island[1], with imperialist power rooted in the systematic destruction of Indigenous food systems and strategies of land theft, weaponization of food, and centralization of power. These dimensions of food systems, colonialism, capitalist accumulation, and dispossession are fundamentally intertwined.

As we write in November 2024, over ninety-five percent of people in Gaza are facing severe and life-threatening levels of food insecurity The United Nations (2024c) reports that Gaza is in a full-blown famine, with people regularly going days without food. Top UN officials warn that, as Israel's siege of Northern Gaza tightens, the "entire population of North Gaza is at risk of dying" due to famine. Over the last year, there have been several news reports of infant starvation and people eating animal feed, contaminated grass, and drinking heavily polluted water to survive (IMEMC News, 2024). In fact, in a landmark decision on November 21, 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) rejected Israel's challenges to the Court's jurisdiction and issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. The Chamber found reasonable grounds to believe that Netanyahu and Gallant are criminally responsible as co-perpetrators for the war crime of using starvation as a method of warfare, alongside crimes against humanity including murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts (ICC, 2024). This ruling fully recognized the use of food as a weapon in the military invasion and genocide.

In the current military campaign, Israel has dropped over 75,000 tonnes of explosives on Gaza (Al Jazeera, 2024). According to satellite imagery, seventy percent of Gaza's tree cover has been destroyed or damaged and roughly one third of greenhouses have been demolished, with ninety percent destroyed in the north (Ahmed et al., 2024). Israeli tanks and trucks have decimated orchards, field crops, and olive groves, replacing them with military infrastructure. The artillery, heavy bombing, and demolition are major threats to air, soil, and groundwater

[1] The area of land that is now known as North America is understood to be Turtle Island by several Indigenous Nations, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabe, whose traditional territories cover large areas of central Canada and the United States (US), including the Great Lakes region.

(Ahmed et al., 2024). The invasion has filled Gaza with pollutants—including an estimated 80,000 tonnes of asbestos (Global Construction Review, 2024), chemicals, debris, and heavy metals—and its destruction of infrastructure and the near entire displacement of the regional population has created a growing sewage and waste crisis with people forced to live alongside makeshift landfills and waste dumps (Limb, 2024). The term "ecocide" has been used to describe the depth and breadth of destruction and disaster taking place (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Despite these realities food has remained a major site of resistance, with struggles for food sovereignty serving an essential role in Palestinian efforts for justice and self-determination (Nimer, 2024) as they have been for Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island, historically and today (Martens et al., 2016; Morrison 2011, 2020; Wittman et al., 2011).

In this article, we examine food as both a weapon of settler colonialism and a tool for resistance and Indigenous self-determination based on a discussion organised by the Canadian Association for Food Studies/L'Association canadienne des études sur l'alimentation (CAFS/ACÉA) Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine and the Right to Food (the Committee) on May 9, 2024. While the settler colonial question in Palestine is widely debated across the social sciences and humanities, our goal is to provide a perspective grounded in critical food studies. We aim to contribute to academic and activist discussions with a focus on the historical, political, and cultural significance of food. Food has repeatedly been used as a tool to seize territory, exert power, and control populations across settler-colonial contexts. As scholars living and working on stolen Indigenous lands, we recognize parallels between the settler-colonial processes occurring in Canada and Palestine. The ongoing crisis in Palestine vividly illustrates the assault on sovereign food systems as a key strategy of colonial conquest. Indeed, the land expulsions we see in occupied Palestinian territories today mirror those that took place across Canada in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the results of which have become normalised and invisiblized with time. However, struggles for Indigenous food sovereignty (see, for instance, the ongoing work of La Via Campesina[2])—as part of larger movements for self-determination—remain a vital force of resistance and solidarity across both contexts (NAISA 2024; ICA 2024).

This article was co-developed by members of the CAFS/ACÉA Committee. CAFS/ACÉA is a non-profit organization made up of academic researchers, food practitioners, activists, artists, and media creators who work to support critical, interdisciplinary scholarship and practice across food systems. The Committee was established in late 2023 out of collective concern regarding the increasing violence and aggression perpetrated by the Israeli state on the people of Palestine and the Canadian government's unapologetic support. After several meetings, the Committee agreed to host a series of sessions for CAFS/ACÉA members and the broader public. The first event, the subject of this article, was a panel discussion titled *Food, Empire, and Colonialism: From Palestine to Turtle Island*. It was publicized via the CAFS/ACÉA listserv and shared with partner organizations and networks across Canada and Indigenous territories. The virtual event was structured as a roundtable with three speakers and an interactive discussion with eighty-nine individuals in attendance.

The three speakers were identified by the Committee as individuals who had been directly involved in scholar-activism surrounding issues of Palestine and food systems and whose perspectives could offer insight into

[2] For more on La Via Campasina, see https://viacampesina.org/en/.

the current moment. They included Justin Podur, a professor at York University and an author and host of the Anti-Empire Project podcast; Max Ajl, a senior fellow at University of Ghent and an associated researcher at the Tunisian Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment; and, Yafa El Masri, a Palestinian refugee and postdoctoral research associate at Durham University. The panel aimed to explore connections between food, colonialism, and resistance by linking the ongoing genocide in Gaza with historical and contemporary colonial projects across Turtle Island and the Arab World. Panelists were invited to consider how imperial and colonial regimes have used starvation and the weaponization of food as tools of violence and control. In the context of the severe settler-colonial violence in Gaza, the discussion sought to address the role of food in culture, identity, political community, and connection to land. Additionally, we aimed to investigate strategies across different colonial contexts for revitalizing, repairing, and sustaining food sovereignty for colonized peoples striving for freedom, life, and liberation.

The panel and subsequent discussion were recorded[3] and transcribed. Each of the three presentations was synthesized and reviewed by the speakers to ensure clarity and accuracy. The Committee then reviewed the text and, through reflection and dialogue, co-developed the article. Drafts were reviewed by the Committee and the three speakers (all co-authors), with feedback incorporated into the final text. A popular adaptation of this article was published in the Conversation Canada (Levkoe et al., 2024).

In the following sections, we provide background and context for the use of food as a weapon and tool of liberation in Palestine and Canada, including a brief overview of settler colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous food systems. We then present a synthesis of the three panel presentations, concluding with an overview of the main contributions from each speaker. We connect these insights to the key themes of food as a weapon of settler colonialism and a tool for resistance and Indigenous self-determination in both Canada and Palestine.

Background and context

The current military campaign in Gaza is part of Israel's long-standing assault on Palestinian land and sovereignty, ongoing since the 1948 Nakba and the establishment of the Israeli state (Massad, 2006). Several historical processes are essential to make sense of the actions of the Israeli state after its creation in 1948: the historical evolution of Zionism as both a nationalist movement and part of the larger European imperialist project; its contradictions as a secular ideology on one hand and its links between nationhood and religious Judaism on the other; and its adoption of strategies and tactics from other settler-colonial states and military imperial operations in the twentieth century (Khalidi 2020; Klein 2023). Key among these is the weaponization of food. While a detailed history of settler colonialism and Zionism is beyond the scope of this article, we highlight the structural dimensions of settler colonialism in Palestine, its similarities to Canadian settler colonialism, and its impacts on Indigenous food sovereignty.

[3] A recording of the panel discussion is available at https://foodstudies.info/resources/committees.

Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism that focuses on seizing land for material gain and social reproduction, achieved through the invasion of territories with the intent to dominate and displace Indigenous populations (Ajl, 2023a; Coulthard, 2014; Harris, 2018). To secure land for settlement and economic expansion, settler colonial projects—like other forms of colonialism—employ a range of strategies, from direct violence and starvation to assimilation, political repression, and cultural erasure. This erasure includes the suppression of Indigenous stories, ways of life, and presence, whether on maps, in symbols, or through place names.

Settler colonialism, as a form of imperialist relations rather than white supremacy or hatred alone, has been met with strong and ongoing Indigenous resistance. As a theoretical framework, settler colonialism provides a lens to understand the dynamics of colonial capitalism and the broader struggle for national liberation, as well as the larger political project that drives the destruction of Indigenous food systems (Ajl, 2023a). Indigenous food systems in particular are directly targeted by settler-colonial regimes, as they are deeply connected to land, Indigenous nationhood, identity, and cultural continuity—all of which these regimes seek to erase (Morrison, 2011; 2020; Whyte, 2018). However, the destruction of Indigenous food systems is not unique to settler colonialism. It is a hallmark of all forms of colonialism and capitalist expansion, both of which aim to dismantle Indigenous sovereignty and replace it with models that serve global capitalist economies (Ajl, 2023a).

Settler colonialism in Israel/Palestine and Canada/Turtle Island emerged from distinct historical and political contexts and at different historical time periods, yet both share a common foundation of state building through processes of destruction and displacement (Wildeman & Ayyash, 2023). Despite political, cultural, and economic differences, both regimes have used similar land-centred strategies, including state policies and legal mechanisms, to expropriate land and displace Indigenous populations. In Palestine, the Zionist movement played a primary role in establishing the settler colonial regime. Zionism first emerged in the nineteenth century as an ethno-cultural nationalist movement linked to imperialist expansion and backed by the British, with a goal to establish a nation state for the Jewish people (Beinart, 2012). Centuries of antisemitic violence that came to a horrific climax with the Nazi holocaust provided a justification for the emergence of the Israeli state in Palestine in the post-World War II era. The dominant proponents of Zionism eventually focussed their political energies on the colonization of Palestine, believed to be the Jewish homeland according to historical and religious texts (Khalidi, 2020; Massad, 2006; Pappe, 2016), with the national Zionist project constructing the myth that Palestine was "a land without a people for a people without a land" (Muir, 2008, pg. 1). The emergence of settler colonialism in Palestine occurred far more recently than in Canada, where this process was initiated in the sixteenth century by the French and the British. Both regimes, however, are rooted in Western Imperialism and have resulted in significant Indigenous displacement and harm (Shipley, 2020; Wildeman & Ayyash, 2023).

Canada employed various methods to displace Indigenous peoples, including development of laws and policies designed to legalize their displacement and facilitate settler encroachment and accumulation. Key examples include the Indian Act (passed in 1876), the Homesteading Act (also known as the Dominion Lands Act of 1872), the Pass System (1882-1935) (Barron, 1987; Kelm & Smith, 2018), and, more recently, the parks system (Rose, 2020; Vranich, 2023). These laws and policies attracted settlers by allowing them to claim

land for a nominal fee while restricting Indigenous peoples to designated reserves and limiting their access to land outside these areas (Carter, 2016; Manuel & Derrickson, 2021; Simpson, 2014). Together, these measures enabled extensive settler expansion at the expense of Indigenous lands and rights— specifically the expansion of food production for export. In Palestine, the Zionist movement, with direct support from the British, established the state of Israel through both violence and policies like the Absentee Property Law of 1950 (Sneineh, 2022). This law legalised the appropriation and settlement of Palestinian lands and properties following the Nakba of 1948. Much of this land was previously used for agriculture, and its loss has severely impacted Palestinian food sovereignty. In its place, Israeli settlements and more capital-intensive models of agricultural production expanded, with citrus production becoming especially prominent: "investments flowed in for land purchase, primarily through the private sector, which owned most of the Zionist land until World War II, and became the [British] Mandate's major export sector, and even dominated the Jewish-Zionist sector of production" (Ajl, 2023a, p. 270; also see Karlinsky, 2000). Moreover, similar to Canada's creation of national parks that displaced Indigenous communities under the guise of conservation, Israel established parks that worked to displace Palestinians from their lands (Desjarlais, 2022). The establishment of these parks not only destroyed Palestinian villages and agricultural systems but also symbolized a broader strategy of dispossession that framed Palestinian presence as incompatible with nature conservation efforts. Such practices reinforce a colonial environmental order, as Desjarlais (2022) and Sasa (2023) describe, whereby tree planting and conservation initiatives in these parks entrench settler presence while erasing Palestinian presence on and connection to the land.

GRAIN (2023) and Amnesty International (2022) have argued that the destruction of Palestinian agriculture and fishing in both Gaza and the West Bank has been a key component of Israel's ongoing colonial project. Prior to October 7th, roughly one-third of Palestinian farmland lay within "access restricted areas," cutting off 113,000 farmers from their lands (Amnesty International, 2022). Since Israel's construction of a separation wall following the failed 1993 Oslo Accords, large portions of the West Bank, ninety percent of which is farmland, have been under direct Israeli control, with a separation barrier dividing farmland and pastureland from hundreds of Palestinian villages, access to which is governed through Israeli permits and checkpoints. Access to water resources and infrastructure is likewise controlled by Israel, including the collection of rainwater. As a result, Palestinians in the occupied territories consume four to six times less water than Israelis (Amnesty International, 2022).

Israel's blockade of Gaza has been in place since 2007 and has severely affected fishing, an essential part of both food access and cultural practices, due to fuel shortages and restricted access to equipment. Even before the current military invasion, approximately eighty-five percent of fishing areas along the Gaza coast were off-limits to Palestinians, with those who enter unauthorised zones facing risks such as gunfire, imprisonment, and the confiscation of their boats (Amnesty International, 2022). These persistent and evolving strategies of settler colonialism, rooted in notions of "making the desert bloom" as a form of settler land improvement (George, 1979), aim to undermine Palestinian food sovereignty and disrupt connections to land and waters, a key site of cultural continuity and Indigenous nationhood (Whyte, 2018). Despite these challenges, food cultivation and cultural practices persist, along with movements for Palestinian self-determination (Nimer, 2024). Although the scale,

pace, and technologies of violence in Israel's current military campaign have escalated in the last year, they represent the culmination of a long-term, systematic assault on Palestinian land and food sovereignty. This ongoing assault includes the destruction of farmland, the killing and starvation of livestock, the devastation of tree crops, and the dismantling of local food economies.

Many of the settler-colonial strategies at work in Palestine, including the creation of a mythical national entitlement to land, the attempted severing of Indigenous nations' connections with land, and the weaponization of food, are familiar in the Canadian context. These include: the religious justification for the seizure of Indigenous lands via the doctrine of discovery, originating in the fifteenth century, which gave Christians so-called divine rights to claim non-Christian territories and underpinned colonial law in Canada (Barker, 2021; Miller et al, 2010); the destruction of Indigenous food systems such as bison herds, which were replaced with European cattle (Daschuk, 2013); the creation of the Royal Canadian Military Policy to subdue Indigenous people when they were the majority population on the Prairies (Gerster, 2019); settler campaigns for frontier oil and mineral extraction; the replacement of Indigenous food systems with settler state-sponsored programs of agricultural modernization (Carter, 1990, 2016; Yellowhead Institute, 2019); the creation of an apartheid legal system through the Indian Act (Kelm & Smith, 2018); and the restriction of Indigenous movement via the Pass system (Barron, 1987). These settler-colonial, imperial, and supremacist regimes have varied across different contexts and times, but their underlying logics and goals are similar.

Perspectives on food, empire, and colonialism

In their analysis of the role of food in the current assault on Gaza, Justin Podur, Max Alj and Yafa Al Masri offered insights into the relationships between food, genocide, and colonial expansion more broadly. In this section, we begin with Podur, whose analysis places the current assault on Gaza into a broad global and historical context, highlighting the weaponization of food as a strategy of British imperialism by means of food system globalization. From here, the decades-long assault on Palestinian food sovereignty and the current famine in Gaza are not byproducts of Israeli self-determination, but rather tools of settler colonialism evident in other places. Ajl focuses on the Arab region, reflecting on the Palestinian experience in the context of imperial and colonial expansion. Finally, El Masri draws from her experiences and relationships as a Palestinian refugee to share a personal account of how war and genocide have impacted food culture, practices, and memory for her people. She also presents the role of food in material, cultural, and political care work and practices of resistance. Moving from a global analysis of how imperial and colonial regimes weaponize food, followed by a regional analysis of colonial expansion across the Arab world, to a local ethnographic account of food culture and resistance for Palestinian refugees, these three scholars guide us through diverse spaces, scales, and layers of complexity.

Justin Podur: Colonial regimes and the dismantling of food systems

Podur reminded us that the systematic and deliberate destruction of Indigenous food systems in Palestine and Lebanon by Israel is part of a broader pattern observed

throughout the Middle East and in other regions where colonial and imperial regimes have weaponized food. In a recent article, Bilal Nour Al-Deen (2024) describes the Israeli scorched earth policy towards Southern Lebanon, which has caused severe environmental and agricultural devastation to the region. Israeli forces have destroyed or damaged 6,000 hectares of agricultural land, including 60,000 olive trees (some of which were 300 years old) as well as citrus, banana, almond, and other non-fruit trees. Additionally, fields have been destroyed and poisoned and fisher people have been killed. As an expert from Lebanon's Southern Green Association puts it, "there is a clear, deliberate burning of the forest cover, destruction of olive vines and fruit trees and contamination of the soil, which explains the intensive use of white phosphorus" (quoted in Nour Al-Deen, 2024).

The destruction of agricultural land, creation of famines through war, engineering of hunger, and enforced dependence on foreign-produced food commodities have been common practice in occupied Palestine since the time of the Nakba. Israel's destruction of the orange, cedar, and olive trees in Lebanon and Palestine is not incidental. Colonial powers often target the livelihoods of occupied peoples by destroying food sources. During the Gorta Mor or Great Hunger in Ireland from 1844-1852 (misnamed and minimised as the "Potato Famine"), this caused nearly one million deaths and forced another million to flee, while Britain continued to export food from Ireland to the mainland. Similarly, after the British East India Company began taking over parts of the subcontinent in 1757, India experienced periodic famines that persisted until its independence in 1947. In *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Mike Davis (2001) estimates that between thirty and sixty million people died in a series of preventable famines in regions including India, China, Brazil, Ethiopia, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and New Caledonia. Davis argues that these deaths were a direct result of the forced integration of local food systems into the global economy controlled by the British Empire—focused on food export and commodification for imperial interests, rather than local sustenance and food sovereignty.

Similarly, the Industrial food regime, dominated by US hegemony that emerged after World War II (with the involvement of international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), has deployed food as a weapon at many different stages to ensure control over the system in the interests of both US foreign policy and corporate profits. Scholar Vandana Shiva has documented this process in several books, including the recent *Oneness vs. the 1%* (2020). Countries in the global south were encouraged—often by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—to borrow and invest in cash crops for export to earn sufficient foreign exchange to service their foreign debt (McMichael, 2013). This approach was part of the broader Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) introduced by institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, especially following the debt crisis of the 1980s. Countries across Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Ghana, Mali, Kenya), Latin America (e.g., Brazil, Mexico, Colombia), the Caribbean (e.g., Jamaica, Haiti), and South and Southeast Asia (e.g., India, Philippines, Indonesia) were targeted by these programs. SAPs often required participating countries to reduce spending on agriculture and food subsidies, especially for local production, which left populations food insecure, more dependent on food imports, and at higher risk of poverty and starvation (Patel & McMichael, 2009). Gershman and Irwin (2000) argue that SAPs facilitated a net transfer of resources from developing to developed countries, exacerbating poverty by reducing incomes and limiting access to essential social services.

These consequences exacted a "cruel toll in deteriorating life quality, massive physical and psychological suffering, and squandered human potential" (Gershman & Irwin, 2000, pp. 24–25). Many of these nations now find themselves trapped in debt as they have integrated into volatile international agricultural commodity markets, facing fluctuating prices and rising costs for seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, and equipment. This integration undermines local agri-food trade and self-sufficiency. Countries often struggle to repay their loans, leading to economic restructuring and further privatization of national assets, which typically benefits US and allied corporations within the global food system. When local governments resist this erosion of sovereignty and cannot be easily manipulated or overthrown, foreign sanctions are frequently imposed, resulting in widespread hunger and economic instability (Podur, 2020).

These realities amount to the imposition of a monocultural and ecologically harmful agricultural model that replaces the diverse and intergenerational food systems of Indigenous cultures. Regarding Palestine, we observe a conflict that encompasses not only a struggle for land but also a battle over food systems. The intentional destruction of Palestine's food system serves as a primary tool of colonial and imperial power. This is a clear and intense assault on an Indigenous people and their traditional food systems, comparable to the most egregious examples of colonial oppression we have seen over the past 500 years.

Max Ajl: Colonialism and food system transformation across the Arab region

Ajl delved into the impact of colonialism in the Arab region, examining the critical roles of land and food systems in the struggle for regional and local sovereignty and liberation. Echoing Podur, Ajl contends that the situation in Gaza is not an isolated case but should be understood within the broader context of colonialism and the integration of the Arab world into the global capitalist economy. He argues that the history of the Arab region from the eighteenth century to the present has been marked by a series of colonial impositions, the creation of de facto settler colonies, the semi-proletarianization of Arab populations, and concentration of land ownership (Ajl, 2021). The eighteenth century saw a period of significant European settlement and colonial expansion, both globally and within the Arab region specifically (Amin, 1977). Direct forms of land grabbing and displacement were employed by European powers (primarily Britain and France) alongside debt development policies, including SAPs, that undermined local and regional economies and the region's cultural and political sovereignty. Throughout the nineteenth century, states like Egypt and Tunisia, under leaders such as Muhammad Ali Pasha in Egypt, pursued sovereign development policies (Batou, 1993). These efforts, aimed at modernizing their economies and asserting political autonomy, inadvertently made them more vulnerable to direct colonization and land acquisition by European settlers, who perceived these moves as threats. The process of primitive accumulation—characterized by land seizure and the displacement or depeasantization of local and Indigenous populations—was evident in regions such as Palestine, Algeria, Morocco, and Libya, and resulted in severe genocide and land alienation in Tunisia specifically (Lutsky, 1969). This widespread land dispossession had profound economic, political, and cultural repercussions across the region. One result was a turn to primary sector economies across the region alongside the establishment of several regional military bases. Together, this disrupted local development while also turning these areas into battlegrounds for European inter-imperial conflict.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria all began producing export crops for the benefit of European colonial powers, creating conditions for forced return to primary production (Lutsky, 1969). During this time, export-oriented commodity production became further entrenched across the Arab region. People became workers on European estates, and all suffered from colonial income deflation and a decrease in cereal consumption per capita. Along with massive land concentration, this semi-proletarianization of the population produced widespread regional slums and bidonvilles and created large reserve armies of labour. These slums and reserve armies became central to some national liberation struggles in the Arab region (Ajl, 2019).

The harsh conditions of exploitation imposed by European powers fueled widespread national liberation movements, which can be better understood as peasant uprisings. These movements began in Palestine from 1936 to 1939 and reemerged in 1948, with volunteers coming from Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and other regions (Kanafani, 1972). As Frantz Fanon (1968) emphasized, the struggle for access to land was a central factor driving these armed national liberation movements in the region.

During the period of national developmentalism from 1952 to 1970, post-liberation Arab popular republicanism emerged as a vision for organising society around principles of popular participation, dignity, and development, in contrast to monarchies. However, due to the Cold War, the US sought to undermine any independent development efforts, whether capitalist or communist, to ensure the dominance of client states in the region. In response, peasant and labour movements across the region became increasingly organised from below. These early post-colonial peasant movements achieved significant victories in the struggle for food and land sovereignty through newly independent nation states (Kadri, 2016). Notable examples include agrarian reforms in Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s, the Ba'ath Party's agrarian reforms from 1963 to 1970, cooperative and farmer-led movements in South Yemen and Algeria, and the Dhofar Revolution in Oman, which resulted in changes to land tenure and credit allocation. These reforms improved food availability and supported import substitution, industrialization, and widespread nationalization, with peasants and land playing central roles in Arab republicanism. Amidst this context, the ideals of Maoist China offered an alternative development model centered on a worker-peasant alliance. China's approach to sovereign industrialization, agrarian reform, and indigenous technological development provided a different perspective on development, influencing thinking in the region (Ajl, 2023b).

With the end of the Cold War, the development options available in the Arab region were severely limited as opportunities for supporting popular movements were overshadowed by US-led neoliberal policies, a shift that also contributed to the siege of Iraq. Moreover, international foreign policy efforts targeting Palestine, including the Oslo I and Oslo II agreements, along with widespread anti-terrorism legislation, politically and ideologically besieged Palestinian and national liberation forces (Kates, 2014). As a result, throughout the 1990s, rural poverty surged in parts of the Arab world that avoided direct conflict, such as Egypt. By the 2000s, rural poverty in these areas had reached near-crisis levels, approaching 100 percent.

Finally, more recent US aggression in the Arab region—such as the invasions of Iraq in 2003, Lebanon in 2006, Syria from 2011 to 2015, and Yemen in 2015—has severely undermined and destroyed state sovereignty across the Arab region. The focus of the national struggle has shifted to defending political

sovereignty itself, a need that extends beyond Palestine to include countries like Yemen and Syria. Consequently, class struggle has become primarily centered on securing political sovereignty and creating the necessary political space for meaningful popular development.

Yafa El Masri: Food and belonging among Palestinian refugees

El Masri examined the experiences of Palestinian refugees, with a particular focus on women, in the context of colonial expansion and displacement. She also investigated the crucial role of food in preserving cultural memory and maintaining connections amid profound loss and upheaval.

After the forced displacement of 1948, many Palestinians became stateless refugees living in waiting zones in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Referred to as Palestine Refugees in their host communities, they were granted neither citizenship nor other forms of naturalization or legal status by host states[4] (Shiblak, 1996). As a result, they are excluded from accessing work, healthcare, education, and other state services in the places where they have lived for decades (Abdulrahim & Khawaja, 2011). This situation creates a dual exclusion—both from their temporary host countries and from their homeland—leading to widespread poverty, food insecurity, and a loss of heritage and identity (El Masri, 2020).

In response to this double exclusion, Palestinian refugees embrace food and food-making practices as a means of resistance and cultural preservation. Networks of sisterhoods in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon bring together women to safeguard and pass on culinary traditions from their villages of origin through cooking, food preparation, and sharing. These networks and practices not only help preserve cultural memory and identity but also counter food insecurity and establish an alternative humanitarian care network. Food sharing serves as a form of resistance against injustices related to food and land and is intricately linked to the broader struggle for the Palestinian right of return.

El Masri is a Palestinian who was born and grew up in the Bourj el-Barajneh refugee camp in Lebanon, where approximately 25,000 Palestinian refugees reside. Her mother had a very close-knit community of friends that grew up together in the refugee camp and cooked food together. When they discussed what to cook, they learned about each other's villages, dishes, soils, and climates and shared stories of home through food. These conversations were casual but also political. For example, one woman's food was considered very spicy, and she explained this by recounting that, historically, Gaza was a major trade port, particularly in the spice trade between Asia and Europe.

El Masri also learned about culturally significant Palestinian foods at the local market and on the land. At the market, vendors shared that Black Calla, or *Arum Palestinum*, also known as *the* Palestinian plant, is a culturally significant food used for stomach disorders. However, toxins need to be removed before eating it and making it into a traditional Palestinian dish. Olive oil, another key food, is purchased by refugees from places close to the Palestinian border. Geographical

[4] Forms of integration, citizenship, or access to rights vary from one state to another. For example, while Palestine refugees are denied citizenship and all forms of rights and access to public services in Lebanon, they enjoy access to a wider range of rights without access to citizenship or naturalization in Syria. In Jordan, even though many Palestine refugees do have access to citizenship and public services, their citizenship documentation is different from those of Jordanians and entails a lower range of citizen rights.

factors, such as full sun exposure and temperatures that never drop below fifteen degrees Celsius, create a good harvest of olives and, therefore, make the best olive oil. The women would pass on stories about culturally significant foods such as thyme, mallow, and sage that they harvest in the landscapes nearby. For example, they recounted that *Maramieh* (meaning "that of Mary"), a type of sage, is what Mary would collect and boil for baby Jesus, to calm his stomach aches and cure his digestive problems.

The lands that refugees were separated from, denied access to, and deprived of knowing are now accessible through the knowledge that is shared and passed down. Refugees connect with these places through stories, shared practices, and the plants and recipes that are handed down from generation to generation. Collective cooking plays a crucial role in addressing food insecurity by facilitating food sharing. According to UNRWA (2024), more than half of the families in Palestinian refugee camps experience food insecurity. Many of these refugees manage this challenge through food sharing—exchanging and sharing culturally significant ingredients and meals. This practice helps sustain their food access and intake while preserving their Palestinian identity in exile. These informal care networks provide an alternative to official humanitarian aid, enabling refugees to support one another with a deep understanding of each other's lives and struggles. This support system allows refugees to live with dignity and avoid the need to publicly rely on increasingly limited humanitarian food services.

Collective cooking and the sharing of culturally significant foods offer emotional access and connection to the land and culture. These practices not only foster a sense of belonging but also serve as a form of resistance against the socioeconomic exclusion caused by Palestinian land dispossession and Lebanese state refugee policies. For Palestinian refugees, who often feel displaced from the lands they inhabit, cooking becomes a way to assert their presence and identity both in their colonized homeland and in their current residence, while they await the possibility of returning home.

Geographies of refugee and colonized food access are shaped by host community policies and settler colonialism. Informal food networks play a crucial role in addressing unequal food access by allowing refugees and colonized peoples to preserve their cultural identities through shared food practices and memories. These networks can serve as a vital tool in exile or against land and food injustices, making food a central element in radical movements advocating for the right of return (El Masri, 2024). While food insufficiency is often framed as an issue of poverty and underdevelopment, food also fosters a sense of belonging and connection to the land. Food underpins the right to the land, and food reveals how we know ourselves and our ancestral lands and culture.

Discussion

Podur, Alj, and El Masri's contributions underscore the ongoing and systemic issues related to food, land, and forced displacement within the settler-colonial contexts of Arab countries and Palestine, which parallel those in Canada. They also highlight how food has been utilized as a tool for resistance and Indigenous self-determination.

Podur illustrated the role the destruction of sovereign food systems has played in colonial projects across different times and places. He argued that the

situation in Palestine mirrors patterns seen in other settler-colonial regimes that have dismantled Indigenous food systems and forced self-sufficient populations into a commodified global food system, often precipitating or aggravating famine in their wake. Racism was used to dehumanize these groups and justify their poverty, food insecurity, and oppression. The global changes initiated by European colonialism and imperialism in the nineteenth century persisted into the post-World War II era under US hegemony, with support from international organizations like the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as transnational corporations. Newly independent nations were often trapped in structural dependency and neo-colonial relationships, leading to the continued destruction of sovereign food systems and resulting in famines, land grabs, and environmental crises.

Ajl provided an overview of Western imperial destruction in the Arab region, including Palestine, and its effects on food systems. Starting in the eighteenth century, many Arab countries experienced a series of colonial invasions, leading to the depeasantization and semi-proletarianization of Arab populations, as well as the concentration of land ownership in emerging settler colonies. These conditions sparked widespread national liberation movements throughout the region, including in Palestine. In the post-colonial era, Western imperial interests and Cold War geopolitics led to further interventions by external forces. Like Podur, Ajl highlighted the collusion between global capitalist interests and regional politics, which supported oppressive regimes aiming to suppress the struggles of subordinate and marginalized peoples.

El Masri examined how people become refugees and the specific impacts of war on women, who are often displaced into refugee camps but continue to preserve their food culture and sovereignty. She emphasized the deep connection Palestinians maintain with their food, highlighting that this connection reflects their ancestral ties to the land and the crops it produces. The recipes and meals of the Palestinian table represent a long-standing relationship between the people and their land, built over generations. El Masri also pointed out that food is one of the first aspects targeted by settler colonial violence to undermine Indigenous peoples and their connection to the land. Despite these efforts, Palestinian women actively resist this systematic separation. They leverage relationships, memories, stories, kitchen spaces, markets, and even the very structures designed to exclude them (such as refugee camps) to re-establish their connection to the land and its produce. As she reflected on food sharing in her own refugee camp, we saw its links to broader forms of resistance, including the struggles unfolding in Gaza amid forced starvation.

In both Canada and Palestine, the destruction of Indigenous land and food systems is central to the settler-colonial project. Although the Israeli and Canadian contexts differ in terms of historical realities, they share many stories of land, food, and cultural dispossession. In Canada, the Indian Act restricted Indigenous hunting and fishing on lands seized by the government. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, persistent land seizures and efforts at cultural assimilation aimed to dismantle Indigenous food systems and replace them with settler farming and food production. Today, the Indian Act continues to limit the ability of First Nations peoples to make decisions, take control of their own food systems, and attain food sovereignty (Grey & Patel, 2014).

We see a similar assault on Indigenous food sovereignty in Palestine. In Area C of the West Bank, agricultural production is severely restricted and frequently demolished. The Israeli government has enacted policies that damage Palestinian food systems,

including the destruction of essential agricultural structures such as animal shelters, storage rooms, and agricultural roads (HRW, 2016). Additionally, access to water has been restricted, and large areas of the West Bank have been designated as military zones or appropriated for Israeli settlers, further limiting Palestinians' ability to use the land for food production. Indeed, both regions are experiencing a broader trend toward restructuring food systems to focus on export commodity production, which aligns with the interests of Western nations and corporate actors.

These discussions emphasize the roles food systems play in the interconnected systems of settler colonialism, imperialism, enclosure, dispossession, and capitalist accumulation. In each case, communities are forced into capitalist food systems designed to benefit governments and corporations. In fact, similar connections can be drawn between these cases and the current counterrevolutionary war in Sudan (Abbas et al., 2024; Hayes, 2024). Currently, half of the Sudanese population is severely food insecure. However, this violence and starvation are deeply rooted in nearly sixty years of British colonial rule followed by decades of "neoliberal privatization policies recommended by the World Bank," which "decimated the agricultural sector long before this [current] war began" (Hayes, 2024). These policies, like those employed elsewhere, have destroyed local and Indigenous food systems, making the population "more dependent on food imports from the Gulf, Asia, and Europe." (Hayes, 2024).

A common thread running through these cases is the disregard for people's dispossession and the denial of their basic rights, from being removed from their lands and traditional food systems to losing the ability to feed themselves and access food. Another key thread is the role of Indigenous movements, revolutionary efforts, and aid networks in supporting Indigenous survival and the fight for land, food, and cultural sovereignty. A liberated Palestine must, therefore, be understood and achieved within a broader lens of "world-wide struggle against imperialism, neo-colonialism, and underdevelopment" (Ajl, 2023a, p. 279).

Food can also be used as a powerful tool of resistance by enabling communities to take back power and control of their food systems, maintain their cultural identities, reduce economic dependence on oppressive regimes, and sustain their population during crisis. In the Palestinian context, food sovereignty initiatives like victory gardens during the First Intifada demonstrated how local food production supported political resistance and community subsistence (Nimer, 2024). In the Canadian context, Indigenous peoples have used food as a tool for resurgence and resistance through reconnecting to land-based food and governance systems, revitalizing ecological knowledge, and rekindling relationships with the human and more-than-human worlds (Coté, 2016; Robin, 2019). By reclaiming control over food systems, Indigenous peoples challenge the deliberate de-development policies imposed by settler-colonial regimes, resist forced dependency, and strengthen their capacity for steadfastness in the face of ongoing oppression and violence.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented perspectives on how food is used both as a weapon of settler colonialism and as a tool for resistance and Indigenous self-determination, from Palestine to Turtle Island. While each place and context differ, the patterns of settler colonialism, enclosure, dispossession, and capitalist

accumulation share many similarities. In both regions, dominant powers have used food to control land and Indigenous populations. Despite these challenges, Indigenous peoples have continually used food as a form of resistance, bringing communities together, revitalizing cultures, rebuilding relationships, and fostering global networks of solidarity. Though we write this at a specific moment in time, the issues we discuss will profoundly affect both Indigenous and settler populations for years to come. We hope to highlight the critical connections between food and food systems and invite scholars in food studies to continue this conversation and take meaningful action.

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