The colonial roots of counter-insurgencies in international politics

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Insurgencies are often stigmatized in policy discourses. This stigma is palpable, for instance, in the joint counter-insurgency doctrine of the armed forces of the United States. Here insurgent factions (and their violence) are described primarily as a source of insecurity that pushes ‘political regimes into overreactions’ and ‘discredit[s] government forces’ by drawing them into firefight that result in civilian casualties.1 The joint doctrine then underlines the importance of ‘understanding why and how an insurgency begins’, and goes on to assert that insurgents do not just ‘exploit existing grievances of the population; through their violent and disruptive operations, they also ‘create new grievances by attacking governance institutions, causing insecurity, and worsening conditions for the local population’.2 A similar perception is evident in an EU concept note on the ‘protection of civilians’ in EU-led operations. Here ‘armed groups, terrorists and insurgents’ are distinguished by their tendency to terrorize unarmed civilians through ‘sexual and gender-based violence, the threat of violence and/or killing, harassment [and] enslavement’.3 Equally, we could look to the writings of the former director-general of police for the state of Punjab in India, Kanwar Pal Singh Gill, who formulated the counter-insurgency strategy (also known as the Gill Doctrine) used against the Khalistan liberation movement. Gill wrote: ‘The movement for Khalistan was created out of a pattern of venal politics, of unscrupulous and bloody manipulation, and a brazen jockeying for power that is too well documented to be repeated.’ Subsequently, justifying the need for violent state-led counter-insurgency measures, he declared:

The defeat of terrorism in Punjab … was unambiguously the result of the counter-terrorist measures implemented in the state [of Punjab] by the security forces … the use

* This article is part of the January 2022 special issue to mark the 100th anniversary of International Affairs: ‘Race and imperialism in International Relations: theory and practice’, guest-edited by Jasmine K. Gani and Jenna Marshall. I am deeply grateful to the editors of this special issue for their invaluable feedback on previous drafts of this article. I would also like to thank the International Affairs editorial team and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

1 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Counter-insurgency (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2020), p. 3.
2 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Counter-insurgency, p. 4.

International Affairs 98: 1 (2022) 209–223; doi: 10.1093/ia/iiaab201
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of this coercive force was (and is) not just a necessary expedient, but a fundamental obligation and duty of constitutional government.  

Such antagonism towards insurgencies draws on the long-established scholarly perception that the ability to ‘injure, maim and kill’ belongs exclusively to the state. Whether this state-centrism builds on a Weberian understanding of the state’s monopoly over violence, a Hobbesian fear of the state of anarchy personified by insurgent factions, or the assumed synonymy between state-making and war-making evident in the writings of Huntington, Finer and Tilly, it is the state that is seen here as the legitimate practitioner of violence, as the guarantor of security, and thus in need of protection from violent insurgent groups. However, this presumed sacrosanctity of the state—codified in scholarship and promulgated through state-centric policies and practices targeting insurgencies—is also an outgrowth of the colonial legacies of international relations. Building on works that study the nature and ideology of colonial counter-insurgency campaigns, I argue that the present-day antagonism towards the scourge of insurgent violence is in fact an extension of the colonial hostility towards insurgent anti-colonial factions. In this article I thus establish the colonial roots of the current standing of insurgencies in international politics.

Empirically, I focus on the EU’s peacebuilding efforts in the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT), which—under the guise of statebuilding—are primarily concerned with supporting the state-like institutions and bureaucracies of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This approach to peacebuilding replicates the scholarly antagonism towards insurgencies in practice as it restricts the realm of sanctioned politics to the institutional limits of the PA. But, more importantly, it also follows a colonial logic of counter-insurgency, since it overlooks (and effectively delegiti-

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7 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (London: John Bohn, 1651).


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mizes) the political grievances of the Palestinian national movement, as well as the varied forms of often violent insurgent politics that find resonance in the context of a liberation struggle. Unsurprisingly, this ‘brand’ of engagement in the OPT has not resulted in peace—especially since it is premised on a certain antagonism towards insurgent politics. I therefore conclude that a substantial understanding (and recognition) of the political grievances that drive insurgent politics, and their appeal, is essential for effective peacebuilding. Below I begin with a discussion of the history of colonial antagonism towards anti-colonial insurgencies and their violence, before establishing the continuity of this legacy in the EU’s statebuilding efforts in the OPT.

Insurgencies, counter-insurgencies and the colonial endeavour

A politics of difference is inherent in the conception of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. There is a difference in material capabilities. Reis, for instance, notes that asymmetry defines the very nature of the conflict between the insurgent and the counter-insurgent. He adds that, since the former is ‘fundamentally weaker’ than the traditional military in terms of its material capabilities, it has to ‘organise differently both for the purposes of combat and to violently challenge the political status quo’. 10 Metz and Millen similarly consider insurgents and guerrilla factions to be ‘too weak’ to engage in traditional warfare or seize power through ‘conventional means’. Instead, insurgencies entail ‘protracted, asymmetric violence, ambiguity, the use of complex terrain (jungles, mountains, urban areas), psychological warfare, and political mobilization’, since these tactics help even out the relative material asymmetry between the conflicting parties. 11 As a result, for insurgent factions, asymmetry is not just a material reality; it is the tactical approach and strategy in warfare. 12 In fact, while characterized as a ‘weapon of the weak’, asymmetric tactics often ensure that such groups are formidable. 13

But a distinction between the insurgent and the counter-insurgent is not just a matter of the materiality of their tactical approach in warfare. It is a political matter that drives the stigmatization of insurgencies in policy discourses, where the politics of difference is animated by notions of (il)legitimacy associated with the political projects that drive the military actions of, respectively, insurgents and counter-insurgents. 14 As I have argued above, these ideas of (il)legitimacy are intimately tied to the longstanding perception in the academic literature that

political authority is granted to the state by ‘a collective’ to practise its ‘coercive powers’ with legitimacy. 15 But the conflict between the counter-insurgent and insurgent also entails a discursive ‘battle of ideas’. 16 And the ‘normative belief’ of the primacy of the counter-insurgent as the rightful practitioner of coercion prevalent in the academic scholarship is mobilized in policy discourses in order to (discursively) ‘hijack’ the insurgency and place it outside the scope of sanctioned politics. 17 This discursive trope is evident in the US armed forces’ joint counter-insurgency doctrine, the EU concept note and the Gill Doctrine, in which the politics of insurgents was deemed exploitative, venal, unscrupulous and manipulative. By extension, the military actions that resulted from this ‘brand’ of politics were also presumed to be those of upheaval and disorder. 18 Similarly, when Kilcullen likens insurgencies to cancer, he also views the politics of insurgents as cancerous and illegitimate. 19 Of course, the venality of the insurgency subsequently serves as the backdrop for the material efforts of the counter-insurgent, which are then legitimized on the basis of the presumption that the state is obliged to stand guard against the insurgency’s ‘bad’ politics. And what the counter-insurgent does is considered to be no more than a manner of ‘armed state (re)building’ operating as an antidote to the insurgency’s violent disaffiliation from sanctioned and legitimate forms of politics. 20

This recognition of the political dimensions of the conflict between the insurgent and the state is often termed as a ‘population-centric’ approach to ‘counter-insurgency theory and practice’. 21 But while this approach is integral to present-day counter-insurgency campaigns, it is hardly a recent innovation. ‘Asymmetric warfare’ was a central facet of colonial expeditions, 22 and contemporary counter-insurgency logics and the narrative of the venality of insurgency build on a legacy of colonial hostility towards anti-colonial insurgent politics. 23 The long shadow of colonial antagonism is, for instance, evident in the scholarly works of

Lieutenant-General David Galula, who served in the French Army between 1939 and 1962, and pioneered the population-centric approach to counter-insurgencies. Galula was the first to conceptualize the conflict between the insurgent and the counter-insurgent as ‘essentially of a political nature’, wherein political and military actions ‘cannot be tidily separated’. Instead, he proposed, military actions need to be calibrated against their political intentions, and vice versa. Today he is considered a ‘later-day prophet’ of counter-insurgency, and his writings have found global resonance in counter-insurgency campaigns such as the US ‘surge’ in Iraq in 2007. Galula’s *Counter-insurgency warfare: theory and practice* (1964) was also extensively cited in the 2006 counter-insurgency field manual of the US Army, and listed in the ‘annotated bibliography’ as an important source ‘that leaders can use to assess counter-insurgency situations and make appropriate decisions’.

It is often assumed that if we can disentangle the writings of the likes of Galula from the ‘unsavoury’ political contexts in which they are embedded, we can still draw out ‘valuable lessons’ that are relevant for contemporary counter-insurgency policy-making. Yet, in keeping with Galula’s own assertion that the political and military facets of such a conflict cannot be neatly distinguished, it is also critically important to acknowledge that his writings on counter-insurgencies build on learning from French colonial counter-insurgency campaigns. A sense of colonial antagonism towards anti-colonial insurgencies was thus central to Galula’s influential work, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958* (1963). In it, he does not engage in a substantial discussion of the political grievances and aims of the Algerian national movement. Galula describes them solely as ‘a small group of leaders’ who are concerned with ‘overthrowing the existing order’. Further, he argues, insurgents are not just concerned with ‘attract[ing] supporters’. Having ‘freedom from any responsibility’ of governing or maintaining state-like order, they are ideologically driven to use ‘any means toward their ends, including terrorism to coerce neutrals and to cow enemies’. While describing the mandate of the counter-insurgent, Galula admits that the colonial state is ideologically weak, despite the colonial army being materially stronger than the insurgents. Nonetheless, Galula considers the colonial government to be endowed with legitimacy as it is responsible for maintaining ‘law and order’ and countering the disorder of insurgent politics.

Before Galula, British Army officer Major-General Charles Edward Callwell was considered the most prominent theorist of counter-insurgency warfare. But Callwell’s writings also draw on lessons from British colonial counter-insurgency
campaigns. Colonial antagonism (towards insurgent politics) was therefore unmistakable in his *Small wars: their principles and practice* (1906), in which he considers insurgents to be ‘savages and semi-civilised races’, and argues that it is their savagery that justifies the counter-insurgent’s (i.e. the colonial state’s) wartime measures. And, while these measures to crush the ‘insurrectionary movement’ wreak havoc on the ‘savage lands’, Callwell insists they are intended to have a moral effect on the insurgents.

In a broader sense, the present-day politics of difference in counter-insurgencies all but replicates what Partha Chatterjee once called the ‘rule of colonial difference’: that is, a logic of colonial governance whereby the institutions and resources of the colonial state are mobilized to create and maintain a racialized hierarchy (and distinction) between the colonized and the colonizer. This distinction, Chatterjee argues, accounts for the very essence of colonial power. The rule of colonial difference was then very much at play in colonial counter-insurgency campaigns, as western conceptions of ‘racial and cultural hierarchies’ shaped ‘military thinking and practice’ in the nineteenth century. Specifically, stereotypical notions of the colonized as ‘uncivilized people’ gave the colonial counter-insurgency an evangelical quality that subsequently allowed colonists ‘to present their conquest of “savages” as divinely ordained’. As a discursive trope, Guha termed this narrative the ‘prose of counter-insurgency’, which was employed in the service of the colonizer and designed to overlook the political grievances of the colonial subjects. With regard to the grievances that resulted in peasant uprisings under the British Raj, he points out that such ‘insurrections’ were hardly ‘spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs’. On the contrary, they were a result of a considered decision to undo the colonial structures and institutions that had entrenched the insurgents’ state of subalternity. Yet, in the colonizer’s prose, the history and politics of the colonized are rarely acknowledged. Instead, the rebellious peasant is conceived as ‘merely … an empirical person or member of a class’, detached from the political project to dismantle the colonial oppression embodied in the Raj. Moreover, as was the case in, say, the British colonial government’s response to the Barasat uprising of 1831 and the Santal rebellion of 1855, the insurgent’s politics was deemed no more than a form of fanaticism that defied the ‘authority of the [colonial] state’, led to ‘atrocities on the inhabitants’ and disturbed ‘the public tranquillity’.

The same prose was evident in *Political trouble in India 1907–1917* (1917), a report by James Campbell Ker that documented revolutionary and anti-colonial activities in India for the colonial administration’s director of criminal intelligence. In large part, these activities were described as seditious acts intended to undermine

34 Wagner, ‘Savage warfare’, p. 221.
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the authority of the colonial state. Here too there was little by way of recogn-
ition of the colonized’s grievances. This survey led to the establishment of a
‘Sedition Committee’ that further raised the alarm regarding revolutionary move-
ments and eventually resulted in the Revolutionary and Anarchical Crimes Act (the
Rowlatt Act) of 1919. This law expanded the colonial administration’s powers and
allowed it to enforce harsh measures to suppress anti-colonial political activities
and maintain order in the colony. The most noteworthy consequence of the law
was the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in Punjab, where a public meeting had been
organized to protest against the Rowlatt Act. The colonial antagonism towards
anti-colonial insurgencies was subsequently self-evident in the words of Brigadier-
General Reginald Dyer, who oversaw the massacre. In his report on the killings in
Jallianwala Bagh, Dyer wrote:

I fired and continued to fire till the crowd dispersed, and I considered that this is the least
amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral and widespread effect it was
my duty to produce if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand the
casualties would have been greater in proportion. It was no longer a question of merely
dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point
of view, not only on those who were present, but more specially throughout the Punjab.

To be sure, this prose of counter-insurgency was not unique to the British
or French colonial enterprises. It equally animated other colonial counter-
insurgencies, such as the efforts of the Dutch administration in the era of decolo-
nization in Indonesia. Indonesian anti-colonial and revolutionary activities were
also deemed to be acts of extremism, while their often brutal suppression by the
Dutch colonial forces was considered necessary acts of policing, meant to ‘restore
peace and order’. Thus, while in practice these ‘acts of policing’ resulted in large-
scale violence such as the massacre in Rawagedeh in 1947, they were rationalized
as unintended consequences of ‘legitimate military action’.

Admittedly, compared to the colonial campaigns against revolutionary and anti-
colonial activities, contemporary counter-insurgencies operate in vastly different
different political circumstances. MacDonald notes that many of the ‘successes’ of colonial
counter-insurgencies can be attributed to a ‘relatively permissive international
context and broad domestic support for imperialism’. In comparison, present-
day counter-insurgencies have to contend with ‘normative and material shifts in
the international system’ and a relatively less permissive international political
landscape. Nonetheless, despite their operating in different political contexts, I

39 Habib, ‘Jallianwala Bagh massacre’, p. 3.
Amritsar 1919: an empire of fear and the making of a massacre (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); K. L.
pp. 25–61.
42 Fein, Imperial crime and punishment, p. 21.
45 Paul K. MacDonald, ‘Retribution must succeed rebellion: the colonial origins of counter-insurgency fail-
argue here that counter-insurgencies today replicate a colonial politics of difference. The next section will explore the role of this colonial logic of counter-insurgency in the EU’s statebuilding efforts in the OPT.

**The EU and the coloniality of its counter-insurgent statebuilding in the OPT**

The making of the EU has often been likened to the making of an empire. The former President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso once admitted:

> Sometimes I like to compare the European Union as a creation to the organization of empires … because we have the dimensions of empires. But there is a great difference. The empires were usually made through force with a centre that was imposing a dictate, a will on the others and now we have what some authors called the first non-imperial empire. We have, by dimension, 27 countries that freely decided to work together to pool their sovereignty … I believe it’s a great construction and we should be proud of it. 

Similarly, Zielonka explains that, with its enlargement into eastern Europe, the EU can no longer be considered a ‘Westphalian federation’. Instead, it displays the features of a ‘neo-medieval Empire’ that encompasses several disparate ‘political units’, multiple levels of governance, unclear territorial boundaries and a limited ability to project external power. Marks accordingly places the EU on a historical trajectory of empire-making in Europe that begins with the Roman empire. He further argues that, not unlike its predecessors, the EU is ‘exerting imperium (power, authority)—albeit without violence or exploitation—as it strives to exercise authority over a European population ‘with diverse histories, languages and religions’.

However, any conception of the EU as an empire would need to account for the ‘decisive role of colonial imperialism’ in the making of its positionality in international politics. At its very inception, the European Economic Community was concerned with ensuring that the territoriality of the ‘new community [was] not delimited by the European land mass’. Instead, the colonies in the possession of European states were seen as falling equally within the purview of its territorial responsibilities. In this sense, the Treaty of Rome, say, or a construction like Eurafrica, which was meant to ensure ‘complementarity’ and ‘interdependence’ in relations with Africa, were, in essence, a way of extending the ‘colonial management’ of territories beyond Europe, under the pretext of a ‘customs union’.

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46 José Manuel Barroso, speech to journalists in Strasbourg, 10 July 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2RAl0c9qoE.
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said, the colonial legacy of the EU is not just a matter of institutional continuities. It is also a matter of the ideological and discursive construction of the very idea of ‘Europe’ in general and ‘the EU’ in particular. Implicit in ideas of the normative power of the EU are fetishized notions of metropolitan socio-cultural superiority and the ‘backwardness’ of the postcolonial milieu in Africa, Asia and Latin America. 53 This is visible in the assumption that ‘norms and rules developed in the context of EU polity-building and policy-making’ are unequivocally ‘good’ and universally applicable. Nicolaïdis terms this belief ‘EUniversalism’, 54 and it is the foundational ethos that drives the criteria for EU membership that candidate countries are expected to fulfil on their path towards European integration. 55 Further, this assumption of the normative superiority of the EU is mobilized beyond the territorial limits of Europe as it establishes a global hierarchy wherein European-ness (and western-ness) are seen as synonymous with modernity, 56 while the non-European (and non-western) world is considered devoid of the same. 57

Not surprisingly, then, the EU replicates this coloniality in its bilateral relations with Palestine. In general, being the largest single donor, the EU has a multiplicity of humanitarian and political priorities that shape its engagement with the OPT. For instance, the 1997 Euro-Mediterranean Interim Association Agreement on trade and cooperation between the European Community and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) stated that the EU was concerned with promoting diplomatic dialogue, ‘liberalization of trade’, ‘balanced economic and social relations’ and ‘social and economic development’ in the OPT, as well as ‘regional cooperation’. 58 The EU–PA Action Plan—first approved in 2013 and extended until the end of 2021—specifies that the relaunching of the peace process, the


56 The synonymy between ‘European-ness’ and modernity is indeed foundational to the normative power of the EU. This does not preclude European states that are not members of the EU from drawing a similar synonymy when formulating their normative role in international politics; however, their mobilization of ideas of ‘European-ness’, ‘western-ness’ and modernity is outside the scope of the empirical focus of this article. On this, see Gérald Berthoud, ‘The “spirit of the Alps” and the making of political and economic modernity in Switzerland’, Social Anthropology 9: 1, 2001, pp. 81–94; Sarce Makdisi, Romantic imperialism: universal empire and the culture of modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Volker H. Schmidt, ‘Multiple modernities or varieties of modernity?’, Current Sociology 54: 1, 2006, pp. 77–97.


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reduction of ‘poverty and social exclusion’, the facilitation of ‘territorial management and access’, and the improvement of the ‘quality of education, research and innovation’ in the OPT are some of the most important policy priorities of the EU.⁵⁹ Between 2014 and 2020, as part of its European Neighbourhood Policy framework, the EU also contributed €2.2 billion in financial assistance to the OPT. This included contributions to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, support for the private sector and initiatives to attract foreign investment to the OPT.⁶⁰

Yet, since the first donor conference dedicated to ‘reconstruction and development in the West Bank and Gaza’ was held in 1993,⁶¹ international donors have been increasingly concerned with ‘building and sustaining ... institutions and bureaucracies’ as encompassed in the state-like PA.⁶² Statebuilding has therefore been a central focus of the EU as well. The EU–PA Action Plan, for instance, notes that the EU previously supported the Palestinian government’s ‘Palestinian Reform and Development Programme (PRDP) 2008–2010’ and the ‘National Development Plan (NDP) 2011–2013’.⁶³ Both programmes were concerned with promoting the institutions of the PA, in preparation for the future sovereign Palestinian state.⁶⁴ The Action Plan further underlines the EU’s commitment to institutional and legislative reform that would result in a state ‘based on the rule of law and respect for human rights within a functioning deep democracy and with accountable institutions’.⁶⁵ In 2008, the EU established the Mécanisme Palestino-Européen de Gestion et d’Aide Socio-Economique (PEGASE), which provides direct financial support to the PA and covers ‘recurrent costs such as civil employee salaries and pensions, social expenditure, private sector arrears and essential public services’. This assistance is intended to reduce the ‘large budgetary deficit’ of the PA, decrease its debt to the public sector and, in keeping with the PRDP, support statebuilding efforts and institutional reform.⁶⁶ In 2020 PEGASE received €159.05 million in contributions, of which €85 million were allocated for public sector salaries and pensions.⁶⁷ Responding to a letter of invitation from the PA in October 2005, the EU also established the EU Police Mission for the

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Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS). The mission supports the ‘establishment of sustainable and effective policing arrangements under Palestinian ownership’. 68

Support for statebuilding measures, in and of itself, cannot be considered a colonial mode of engagement, although this primacy of the state is codified within the academic literature. To that we could add that the state-centrism that is integral to the disciplinary myth of International Relations (IR) also goes on to shape the common consciousness of those educated in the field. This hierarchy, which places statecraft above other forms of (insurgent) politics, is relayed through the curricula of IR courses; and, as Vitalis argues, the norms and traditions of the discipline (along with its state-centrism) influence the intellectual orientation of generations of students ‘who will become public intellectuals, politicians and policy-makers’. 69 As in the case of the EU’s role in Palestine, these public intellectuals, politicians and policy-makers then go on to further propagate this disciplinary state-centrism through policy and practice. Yet, in a political context that is defined by a Palestinian national struggle and the effort to dismantle an Israeli occupation, the EU also defines statebuilding as synonymous with peacebuilding. This claim to synonymy, I would argue, mirrors the colonial prose of counter-insurgency as it fails to recognize the grievances of the national struggle and the way in which nationalist insurgent politics exceed the scope of statebuilding activities. For instance, the European Council’s joint action statement that established EUPOL COPPS outlines the need for support in ‘political, security, economic, humanitarian, and institution building fields’ in order to build an independent Palestinian state. Yet the eventual arrival of this state is not seen as the culmination (or recognition) of the Palestinian struggle for independence. Nor does the document mention the Israeli occupation. Instead, the (Palestinian) state is seen solely as a way of ensuring ‘peace and security with Israel and [Palestine’s] other neighbours’. 70 Similarly, a report on the first decade of the European Security and Defence Policy, published by the EU’s Institute for Security Studies, does little to recognize the grievances of the Palestinian ‘insurgent’ or outline the aspirations of the Palestinian liberation struggle, in its assessment of the EUPOL COPPS. Instead, in making reference to the political context, it mentions ‘the ongoing power struggle between Israel, the PA and Palestinian factions’, and notes that the mission has ‘raised the profile of the EU’ in matters of policing, rule of law, conflict management and counterterrorism efforts in the OPT. 71

For its part, the EU–PA Action Plan underlines the EU’s commitment to the two-state solution and, in doing so, acknowledges that ‘settlements [and] the separation barrier were built on occupied land, [and that] demolition of homes and evictions are illegal under international law and constitute an obstacle to peace’. 72

Nonetheless, there is no acknowledgement that Palestinian insurgent politics is a consequence of these violations of Palestinian rights in the OPT. Instead, the Action Plan sanctions statebuilding as the sole means of mitigating the conflict and securing the rights and freedoms of Palestinians, and places other modes of insurgent political responses in the category of ‘terrorism’ and as a threat to Israeli security and the two-state solution.\(^\text{73}\) The broader framework of the EU’s engagement in the OPT is, however, framed by its commitment to the Middle East peace process. It is within this context that the EU specifies its position with regard to contentious issues such as the borders of the forthcoming Palestinian state, the Israeli settlement movement, the status of Jerusalem and the future of Palestinian refugees. The EU, as a member of the ‘Quartet’,\(^\text{74}\) recognizes that resolving these issues is the key to achieving a peaceful resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and securing Palestinian sovereignty. Furthermore, it pledges its practical, economic and political support to ‘advancing the Palestinian statebuilding process, promoting good governance and encouraging economic recovery with a view to enhancing the viability of the future Palestinian state’. But here too statebuilding is considered as a means of securing Israel against Palestinian insurgent politics (or what is termed ‘terrorism’),\(^\text{75}\) rather than as an acknowledgement of the political grievances and aspirations of the Palestinian national movement.\(^\text{76}\)

The colonial prose of counter-insurgency was already inscribed into the very foundations of the institutions and bureaucracies of statecraft (and statebuilding) in the OPT. On 9 September 1993, chairman of the PLO and Fatah leader Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin exchanged ‘Letters of Mutual Recognition’. Rabin’s letter acknowledged that the PLO was the ‘representative of the Palestinian people’ and agreed to begin negotiations. Arafat, in his communication, ‘recognize[d] the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security’ and accepted UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Additionally, he declared, ‘the PLO renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence and will assume responsibility over all PLO elements and personnel in order to assure their compliance, prevent violations and discipline violators’.\(^\text{77}\) This declaration was significant in that it marked a stark departure from Arafat’s 1974 speech at the UN, in which he insisted that the ‘freedom fighter’s gun’ was an inalienable part of the Palestinian national struggle.\(^\text{78}\) More significantly, though, by renouncing violence and assuming the (counter-insurgent-like) responsibility of preventing future violent acts as well as disciplining ‘violators’, it replicates the colonial prose


\(^{74}\) The other members of the ‘Quartet’ are the UN, the United States and Russia.

\(^{75}\) In fact, the presidency conclusions of the Berlin European Council meeting in March 1999 explicitly state: ‘The European Union is convinced that the creation of a democratic, viable and peaceful sovereign Palestinian State on the basis of existing agreements and through negotiations would be the best guarantee of Israel’s security and Israel’s acceptance as an equal partner in the region’ (European Parliament, *Berlin European Council 24 and 25 March 1999: presidency conclusions*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/ber2_en.htm).


\(^{78}\) ‘Palestine at the United Nations’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 4: 2, 1975, p. 192; Somdeep Sen, ‘It’s Nakba, not a party’: re-stating the (continued) legacy of the Oslo Accords’, *Arab Studies Quarterly* 37: 2, 2015, p. 168.
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of counter-insurgency as Arafat discursively criminalized the often violent forms of insurgent politics that find resonance in a revolutionary and liberation context.

The ‘Letters of Mutual Recognition’ were followed by the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, also known as the Oslo Accords. As the first agreement between the state of Israel and the PLO, it established the PA and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Together, these bodies represented an interim mechanism for self-governance that, at the time, was proclaimed the institutional precursor to the future sovereign Palestinian state.79 But while the Accords failed to secure Palestinian sovereignty, the Fatah-led PA has prevailed and institutionally ensured the continuation of the prose of counter-insurgency. Specifically, with financial and political support from donors such as the EU, statebuilding processes have been accorded sacrosanctity as a defence against Palestinian insurgent politics—or, as Arafat termed its practitioners, ‘violators’—and as a presumed pathway to peace. Consequently, the PA bifurcates the spectrum of Palestinian politics into categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy. In this framework, statecraft and the PA encompass the realm of official, sanctioned and legitimate politics, and entrance into this realm is reserved for factions that have renounced insurgent tactics. These factions are then recognized as political representatives who are stakeholders in peace negotiations.80 More significantly, though, they are also granted access to the state-like resources of the PA in order to police and govern the Palestinian population. Ostensibly, its state-like political mandate allows the PA and its functionaries to posture as “neutral” law enforcement bodies that maintain security and order.81 Yet in practice, this mandate mirrors the logic of counter-insurgency in Ker’s Political trouble in India 1907–1917, Callwell’s Small wars or the British Raj’s response to the Barasat uprising: that is, it works to disrupt Palestinian insurgent politics.

This propensity to disrupt was evident in June 2021, when the activist Nizar Banat died while in the custody of the PA’s security forces and the PA suppressed the protests that followed.82 Alongside its authoritarianism,83 the PA has a long history of employing policing mechanisms intended to circumscribe the violent

80 Sen, “It’s Nakba, not a party”’, p. 187.
insurgent politics (targeting Israel) of armed factions such as Hamas that opposed the criminalization of the Palestinian armed struggle. In the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, leaders and members of Hamas were arrested, deported and assassinated by the Fatah-led PA’s security forces. When Hamas won control of the PLC in 2006, it assumed the role of the governing entity at the helm of the PA. Yet it did so without renouncing its military operations, thereby threatening to ‘blur’ the Oslo-mandated demarcation between the realm of official politics and that of the insurgency. Subsequently, Hamas faced counter-insurgent tactics from Fatah, including an attempted coup. Eventually, following a military confrontation between the two factions, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in June 2007, and the Palestinian coastal enclave has since been under siege. The persisting political division between Hamas and Fatah has stood as a metaphor for the political fragmentation that has resulted from what Mandy Turner calls a colonial mode of ‘mission civilisatrice’: that is, a mission to create Palestinian ‘partners of peace’ who operate in keeping with the (counter-insurgent) logic of western peacebuilding efforts, and in opposition to the logic of the insurgency (and the insurgent).

I have argued here that the EU’s engagement in the OPT, whether as extension of its own colonial legacy or through its insistent political and financial investment in a brand of counter-insurgent statebuilding that is antagonistic to Palestinian insurgent politics, is shaped by a colonial prose. Given that this ‘brand’ of peacebuilding has been ineffective, in the next section I propose reparative approaches that counter the coloniality of present-day counter-insurgency policies.

**Postscript: on reparative approaches**

This article establishes the colonial roots of the current standing of insurgencies in international politics. Specifically, I have argued, contemporary counter-insurgency policy approaches are shaped by the prose of colonial counter-insurgency campaigns and their antagonism towards anti-colonial factions. And, just as anti-colonial insurgent factions were stigmatized in the colonial discourse as solely a source of disorder, so too contemporary counter-insurgency approaches treat insurgent politics as positioned outside the scope of sanctioned politics. Empirically, I have demonstrated that this colonial logic of counter-insurgency foundationally animates the EU’s peacebuilding efforts in the OPT. The EU’s efforts

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are largely focused on building and sustaining the state-like institutions of the PA, as it considers statebuilding to be synonymous with peacebuilding. However, this manner of engagement in the OPT helps bifurcate the Palestinian political landscape in a way that accords statecraft a sense of legitimacy as a sanctioned mode of politics. At the same time, following a colonial modus operandi, Palestinian insurgent politics that are animated by the values and grievances of the Palestinian liberation movement are also placed outside the realm of sanctioned politics.

It is, of course, self-evident that this mode of peacebuilding has done little to secure peace or Palestinian sovereignty. But the logic of colonial counter-insurgency is not meant to operate as a mechanism of political reconciliation. On the contrary, it is animated by a politics of difference that is antagonistic to insurgent politics. In proposing an alternative, reparative approach, I suggest that any effective peacebuilding effort would need to rethink (and remake) the epistemological foundation of present-day policy approaches to insurgencies. This rethinking would need to be rooted, not in a sense of (colonial) antagonism, but in a commitment to understanding how and why insurgent politics find resonance in revolutionary and anti-colonial contexts. To this end, the violence of insurgent factions—theorized in scholarship as a source of insecurity and contrary to the Weberian understanding of the state’s monopoly over the means of war-making—requires destigmatization. Further, a reparative approach would require a deeper engagement with scholarly works on the politics of revolutionary, anti-colonial violence that recognize the fact that historically insurgent tactics have found resonance as more than tools of disorder: for the political community that espouses these tactics, they are equally a mode of communication that is evocative of the resilience of their political identity and aspiration. That said, any recognition of how and why insurgent tactics find resonance would, in effect, result in a recognition of the underlying political grievances. Doing so would not just counter the discursive tropes of the colonial prose that overlooks the political grievances of the insurgents; it would also bring into focus the political projects of the insurgencies and recognize that—especially with regard to peacebuilding efforts—substantially addressing the political grievances of insurgents is essential for effective policy-making.