

Fragmenting Palestine And Palestinians

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The Palestine Chronicle, 20th November 2006

Before leaving for Palestine earlier in the summer, a friend of mine gave me a postcard by a Palestinian artist that expressed, he said, the fact that “the situation in the Middle East always seems to get worse, never better”. Sadly, three months in Palestine seemed to confirm this grim reality, as with each passing day, the occupation’s grip becomes tighter and ‘Palestine’ gets smaller. As 2006 begins to draw to a close it is useful to take a step back from the daily horrors in Gaza or the arrest raids in the West Bank, to assess three broad Israeli strategies vis à vis the Palestinians, and how they might be resisted.

The most readily observable Israeli policy is the fragmentation of what is left of Palestine, as across the West Bank and East Jerusalem the occupation aggressively pursues an accelerated process of fragmenting Palestinian territory. Fragmenting Palestine has always been a core Zionist strategy designed to weaken, divide and demoralise the colonised Arab population, yet one could say that this is reaching its zenith in the West Bank. In October, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported a 40% increase in West Bank roadblocks, up from 376 in August 2005 to 528 in September this year. The West Bank is now effectively split into ‘trisections’, as well as specific ‘enclaves’ for cities such as Jenin, Nablus and Tulkarem. These three main zones are enforced through checkpoints, roadblocks, and the permit system. This bureaucratic violence has also extended to the Jordan Valley, which, according to OCHA, is now completely closed to any non-resident Palestinians (excepting those working in the settlements of course). The increase in oppressive measures even includes a reported ban on farmers grazing their animals outside of a 100m radius of their houses.

East Jerusalem, meanwhile, is practically disconnected from the West Bank, due to the rapid construction of both the Separation Wall, and the new ‘terminals’, mega-checkpoints designed to hermetically seal ‘Greater Jerusalem’ (surely with the intention of realising annexation) from Palestinian locales in the West Bank. A map of the path of the Wall in Occupied East Jerusalem is almost enough to give one a headache; such is the convoluted, twisting nature of the route. The Wall as a whole currently has been completed along 406km out of an eventual total of 703km (OCHA figures). Thus fragmentation continues apace; Palestinian students from Gaza are forbidden from attending their universities in the West Bank, Nablus residents can not visit the Jordan Valley, tens of thousands find themselves on the ‘wrong’ side of the Wall, and Jerusalemites are separated from their West Bank kin. The list could go on, not to mention this year’s continued expansion of settlement blocs such as Gush Etzion and Giv’at Zeev, to name just two primary examples.

While Israel continues its relentless colonization, a second parallel strategy is required to divert the international gaze – I will call it the development-ization of the Palestinian question, or, its corollary, depoliticization. Regrettably, Israel finds willing collaborators

for this scheme from the ranks of the international community, the NGO sector itself, and even members of the Palestinian middle classes. There is historical precedent of course, for this strategy, going right back to when the refugee victims of the ethnic cleansing in 1948 were reduced to a humanitarian, rather than a political, issue, an approach reflected in UN resolutions and official documentation. Now, we see an Israel bending over backwards to express its eager desire for humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip, and even the new West Bank terminals being described in terms of a streamlined process for the benefit of the Palestinian workforce. A World Bank report published in August was a classic example of this ideologically-driven decoupling of the political and the economic; although the report clearly described the occupation's movement restriction policies, it attributed these to 'security concerns' rather than placing them in the wider context of colonisation. This is what makes possible recommendations to "oil the wheels of occupation", rather than dismantle them altogether.

Since the Oslo Accords, a NGO industry has taken root in the Occupied Territories that undoubtedly plays a vital role in Palestinian civil society as well as keeping life just about tolerable for impoverished, jobless, and besieged Palestinians. Yet there has always been a tension between a humanitarian imperative to meet the obvious needs of ordinary Palestinians, and the extent to which NGO's effectively subsidise the Israeli occupation. The language of development has particularly risen to the fore this last year owing to the sanctions imposed on the Palestinian people following the PLC elections in January, as well as following on from the Israeli redeployment in Gaza last summer. With aid agencies talking of impending crises, international focus became fixed on preventing a humanitarian catastrophe; in Gaza, meanwhile, the focus had been on economic regeneration following the evacuation of the settlements. The consequence is that Israel is able to dress up 21st century colonialism in the clothes of NGO-development speak, thus avoiding genuine sanction for its actions, and saving it some money into the bargain⁸. Members of the Palestinian ruling class, moreover, are complicit in this development-ization, since many personally financially benefit from the aid money that streams into the Occupied Territories. An unsavory truth perhaps, but reality nonetheless and there will be powerful vested interests within Palestinian society happy at this depoliticization/development-ization parallel process.

This last point leads us to the third Israeli strategy, that of the division of the Palestinian political class. This too has historical precedent, though with notable differences. Like the pre-Oslo negotiations conducted in secret while the First Intifada still raged, the Hamas-Fatah split, and even Fatah-Fatah splits, are being encouraged and provoked in order that compliant – or 'moderate' – Palestinian leaders may once more have an unrivalled authority over political and resistance policies. 'Good' and 'bad' natives are familiar categories, from empires of old to the classification of moderate/extreme Muslims in the 'war on terror', and in Palestine, it is Mahmoud Abbas and prominent (though by no means all) Fatah elements on whom Israel, as well as the US and its Arab allies, pin their hopes.

A superlative analysis of this effort to execute a coup comes from Joseph Massad, writing in Al-Ahram recently. "The plan", Massad summarises, "is that the Fatah/PA rulers would do their utmost to provoke Hamas to start the war at which point Fatah, with the aid of the intelligence services of friendly Arab countries, as well as assistance from Israel and

the US, would crush Hamas and take over”. Massad describes in detail the level to which Fatah elements, Israel, the US, and pro-US Arab governments are working together for a common purpose: “The Israeli cabinet in turn has recently approved the transfer of thousands of rifles from Egypt and Jordan to Abbas's forces. The Israelis also approved a US request that Israel allow the Badr Brigade -- part of the Palestine Liberation Army currently stationed in Jordan -- to deploy in Gaza”.

Although co-opting Fatah to topple the Hamas government has been the primary tactic, attempts at dividing Hamas itself have also been made, as Ramzy Baroud reported in Palestine Chronicle two weeks ago: “the 'discussions' in London were clearly geared toward wooing Hamas to reveal its moderate face, thus to offset and perhaps challenge the extremists in Damascus, therefore, creating yet another rift within the Palestinian camp”. Such a rift, Baroud wrote, “carries all the symptoms of Oslo: good Palestinians singled out and groomed for a photo op to be scheduled later, secret 'dialogue' followed by 'memorandums of understandings,' then treaties, then VIP cards to those involved in the positive engagement and lonely prison cells to those who dare defy it”.

Typically, identifying Israeli stratagems, of which this article describes three primary contemporary ones, is easier than suggesting viable alternatives. Without an international mechanism for pressuring Israel to abide by international law, counteracting their asymmetrical strength on the ground, it will be exceedingly difficult for Palestinians to prevent Israel’s ceaseless colonization drive in the West Bank, and the fragmentation of the ever-disappearing Palestinian state. Lobbying, campaigning, and awareness-raising by the Diaspora and Palestinian activists therefore remain vital in efforts to stop and reverse the fragmentation of the Occupied Territories.

Resisting the development-ization of the Palestinian question is also tricky, due to the undoubted humanitarian need of the inhabitants of the West Bank, and especially the Gaza Strip. Moreover, effective governmental infrastructure, expanding civic education initiatives, and consolidating medical and community provision can be seen as genuinely in step with the spirit of the moqawama, restricting humiliating dependence on Israeli ‘benevolence’ and building up the Palestinian body politic. What is needed then is a combination of this kind of uncompromised, patriotic commitment to social and economic development, as well as a refutation of those who deny or conceal the umbilical cord between Zionist colonization and the stunted, dependent Palestinian economy it has birthed.

The third strategy is perhaps the most sinister, with its clear implication of members of the Palestinian political class, and requires wisdom and decisiveness from those within the Hamas government, Fatah, and other factions who are resolutely opposed to these Israeli/US driven efforts. Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation and colonization will be most significantly crippled should the national leadership be more interested in orders from Tel Aviv and Washington than the demands and inalienable rights of the people they claim to represent. Challenges aplenty, therefore, and creative, determined answers from every level of Palestinian society will be essential in foiling the latest Israeli strategies.