



Contradictions and Dialectics: Reshaping Political Space in Israel/ Palestine. An Indirect Response to Lina Jamoul

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Here we shall stay
Like a brick wall upon your breast
And in your throat
Like a splinter of glass, like spiky cactus
And in your eyes
A chaos of fire.

If we get thirsty
We'll squeeze the rocks
If we get hungry
We'll eat the dirt
And never leave.

(Here We Shall Stay by Tawfiq Zeyyad)

I chose to open my indirect response to Lina Jamoul with this famous Palestinian poet, not only because of its obvious relation to the geography of oppression and resistance, but also due to its referral to a “wall”, as a symbol of strength, persistence and obstruction. A wall of a different kind will be the center of my short essay, in which I analyze recent changes in the political geography of Israel/Palestine, focusing on “the wall/fence” (separation barrier) now being unilaterally constructed by Israel in the West Bank, in contravention of international law.¹

Some 90 miles of a planned 298 miles of the barrier have already been built, consisting of a 60–100 meter-wide strip, made of two electric fences and two track roads in the rural areas; and 41 miles of high concrete wall in and around Palestinian cities. Some 51,000 acres of Palestinian land are to be affected—appropriated, cleared, or declared “out of bounds” for West Bank Palestinians.²

My main argument is that the construction of the barrier and the recent declarations of small Israeli territorial withdrawals constitute attempts to manage the growing contradictions of the state's "ethno-ocratic" regime. The recent adjustments, my argument continues, accelerate a process of "creeping apartheid" gradually unfolding in Israel/Palestine.

The contradictions have erupted in full force during the recent al-Aqsa Intifada (uprising), which has cost nearly 4000 lives, three-quarters of them Palestinians. This level of violence has now moved Israel to unilaterally transform the area's landscape by building the barrier, and further constrain Palestinian development, rights and movement. But, in this move, Israel also presents limits to its own expansion, including a (promised) voluntary evacuation of colonial Jewish settlements, for the first time in the history of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict.

My approach highlights a point overlooked by the other pieces in this debate, namely, the *dialectical nature of spatial and political change*. It seems that a "blind spot" has led Jamoul, Falah and Gregory to portray the Palestinians mainly as passive victims of Israeli aggression. Yet Palestinian agency in general, and violence in particular, play a major role in the reshaping of Jewish-Palestinian space. The dialectic manifests in an ever-radicalizing Palestinian struggle and ever-deepening Israeli oppression, causing the human misery powerfully described by Jamoul. Notably though, this process is asymmetric, with the Jewish state mastering far greater military and economic power than its Palestinian counterparts.

The barrier's route runs within occupied territory to include the majority of Jewish settlers on "the Israeli side", effectively annexing to Israel 15% of the West Bank. When completed, it may improve Jewish security, but will have some grave consequences to the Palestinians: some 210,000 of them will be caught between the barrier and the Green Line, or cut off from their own lands and livelihood. Further, Israel's demand to surround many settlements by the barrier "for their security" presents an absurdity—more Palestinian land is now illegally seized, to protect settlements, which illegally seized Palestinian land in the first place!

Critically, Israel's intent to withdraw from Gaza and small parts of the West Bank is linked to the construction of the barrier, as explicitly stated by the hawkish former Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who recently changed his mind about the withdrawal, like most Likud leaders:

My change of mind about Gaza is based on the construction of the security fence which, as you know, would incorporate most West Bank settlers within the Israeli side. It's clear that American support

to the fence is given due to our withdrawal from Gaza ... so strategically, this is a new situation with net benefits.³

How can we explain this apparent U-turn? I suggest that the contradictions of Israel's regime have grown to a point where they can no longer be reconciled or ignored. This has now required a major tactical change in order to maintain the Israeli ethnocratic system. The recent steps represent a new phase, a new method, to pursue the ultimate goal of the Jewish state—maximize the Judaization of Palestine, while maintaining Israel's image as a "normal", democratic nation-state.

Let us take a short detour and describe the political geographic concept of "ethnocracy". I have developed the concept to account for regimes found in contested territories, in which a dominant ethnic nation appropriates the state to further its expansionist aspirations, while keeping some features of formal democracy.⁴ Ethnocratic states are typified by high levels of oppression over indigenous, and (to a lesser extent) immigrant minorities. Minorities, in turn, usually develop forms of resistance, typically around issues of land control and settlement, which tend to essentialize identities and polarize the spatial and political systems. Typically, gaps between the state's democratic self-representation and persisting forms of minority oppression develop into "cracks" in the ruling hegemony, and often destabilize the regime. Ethnocratic regimes can be found in Serbia, Estonia, Malaysia, Latvia, pre-1989 Lebanon, pre-1999 Northern Ireland, or nineteenth century Australia.

As in most ethnocratic projects, the Jews initially benefited greatly from the expansion strategy. Until the late 1980s, the identity, economic and territorial goals reinforced one another. Israeli conquest of the West Bank and Gaza, and colonial settlement strengthened Jewish national identity and introduced a large pool of cheap labor and free (confiscated) land into the expanding Israeli economy. During the expansionist phase, Israel used an effective double-discourse: internally, it presented the Palestinian territories the "eternal Jewish homeland", thereby "naturally" including Jewish settlers as full state citizens, despite residing outside the official state borders. At the same time, internationally, Israel presented the same Palestinian territories as "temporarily occupied", hence excluding their Palestinian inhabitants from political participation, leaving them powerless to shape the future of their own homeland.

But like most other ethnocratic regimes, Israel began to face the increasing contradictions of the system. These surfaced with the attempt to manage the Palestinian first Intifada (1987–1993), which was accompanied by growing polarization between the Palestinian

minority inside Israel and the state, as well as growing tensions between religious and secular Jews over the future of the Territories.

The Oslo Accords constituted the first attempt to “square the circle” of democracy and colonialism. They entailed mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO, with the latter declaring a cessation of the armed struggle. They included a promise of substantial Israeli withdrawals, and the establishment of an autonomous Palestinian Authority. But the “peace process” ground to a halt with the outbreak of Palestinian terror in Israeli cities, and the 1995 assassination of Israel’s Prime Minister Rabin (by a nationalist Jew), and the 1996 elections of the Netanyahu Rightist government.⁵ Israel imposed a growing system of territorial control over the Territories, built dozens of new Jewish settlements and enforced increasing restrictions on Palestinian movements—all leading to deep economic and political crises. Notably, not one Jewish settlement was evacuated during the “Oslo period”.

The al-Aqsa Intifada erupted following the failed attempt to reach permanent peace. During the 2000 negotiations, Israel treated, as it does now, the occupied West Bank as an area open for negotiation, while the Palestinians believed that their 1993 recognition of Israel as a sovereign state on three-quarters of historic Palestine would allow them to be sovereign in the remaining lands, that is, the West Bank and Gaza. Israel’s attempt to annex 10–15% of the West Bank in order to keep Jewish settlers in their place, as well as its refusal to address its role in the 1948 Nakbah (Palestinian “disaster”), to resettle Palestinian refugees, or to allow Palestinian sovereignty over occupied Temple Mount, broke down the negotiations. While Barak’s offers were indeed the most serious the Palestinians have ever received from Israel, they still fell short of anything the Palestinians could accept.

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority was seriously weakened by the paucity of Israeli withdrawals, economic decline, widespread corruption, and the rise of Islamic organizations. It could not control, and tacitly endorsed, the eruption of violence against Israel, triggered by Sharon’s provocative visit to Temple Mount in September 2000. The second Intifada quickly escalated into a bloodbath, with both Israel and the Palestinians using unprecedented levels of violence. Israel began a systematic destruction of Palestinian Authority facilities, and launched a terrorizing military campaign against Palestinian leaders and civil society. The Palestinians widened the use of deadly suicide bombing in the heart of Israeli cities, causing widespread death, disruption of daily life and deepening economic crisis.

Given the depth of ethnocratic perception in Israel, and the fear still embedded in Jewish culture following a history of persecutions and Holocaust, the impact of renewed Palestinian violence, coupled with repeated anti-Jewish public statements, calls for the “liberation

of the entire Palestine”, and the return of refugees into Israel Proper, has been powerful, if predictable. Most Jews closed rank, stigmatized the entire Palestinian population as “supporting terror”, legitimized a public discussion on “transferring” the Palestinians out of their homeland, and shifted politically to the nationalist Right. This was amplified by 9/11 events and the rise of American Rightist foreign policy, with Israel as a main ally in the “war against terror”.

But the “war on terror” was not enough. The Israeli public, and especially the mainstream middle classes, demanded a major change. They sought to maintain the illusion of a “normal”, democratic state, while continuing the control of Palestinian areas. They demanded “security”, a return to economic growth, while keeping the Palestinians voiceless and powerless. There were dissenting voices, calling for genuine ending of the occupation and returning to sincere negotiations, but they were marginalized by the weight of the nationalist discourse.

The main response was the construction of the separation barrier. This began as an initiative of the Zionist left, but was cleverly hijacked by the ruling nationalist Right, which shifted the route eastwards into Palestinian territories. Despite the “painful ideological compromise” of withdrawing from parts of the Land of Israel, the political Right could clearly see the benefits of the Gaza-barrier “package”. First, it would “answer” a major demographic “headache” because, without Gaza, Jews could maintain a solid majority in the area under Israeli control for another generation. Second, the barrier will take annexation of most settlers a step closer, hence ensuring their political support. The unilateral move will also probably generate further Palestinian resistance, and subsequently strengthen the political Right, whose narrative often draws on continuous ethnic hostility.

Therefore, a new political geography, with its roots in the Oslo period, is now being etched into the landscape. The new political space does not resemble any of the two traditional visions for peace: (a) two national states, or (b) one (binational or secular) polity. Instead, we are witnessing the making of political space marked by “neither two states, nor one”, as Palestinians are left in the twilight zone between occupation and ghettoized self-rule.

I have conceptualized this process as “creeping apartheid”, whereby the vast majority of territory and resources between Jordan and Sea are controlled by Jews, while the Palestinians who comprise nearly half the population are constrained to several “self-governing” enclaves, covering around 15% of the land, and lacking real sovereignty, freedom of movement, military power, control over water and air, or contiguous territory. This is a natural (though not inevitable) development of ethnocentric perceptions, driven by fundamental assumptions regarding the “natural” right of one group to control

“its” (self-defined) homeland, while controlling other groups residing in the same political space.

This reality is “creeping” because (a) it is unfolding without any official declaration; and (b) the ethnic stratification of civil status is diffusing into Israel Proper, with greater segregation and new legal controls imposed on Israel’s Palestinian-Arab citizens. The separation barrier accelerates this process, driving Israel to relax its control over small pockets of territory, for the benefit of reinforcing its hold on other parts, hence deepening the reality of “separate but unequal”. But the new Israeli “solution” may, at best, be only short lived, as disgruntled Palestinians are likely to mobilize against the new spaces of oppression and destabilize the new spatial order.

Finally, critical thinkers cannot but reflect on the disastrous effects of Palestinian violence. The recent success of the East Timorese non-violent struggle gives a new breath of life to this strategy, which could undoubtedly improve the moral standing of the Palestinian cause, expose the contradictions of Israel’s ethnocracy, while better reaching the substantial peace-oriented Jewish publics. But this is a topic for a different debate, until which we may be inspired by the following lines from the young Israeli poet, Rammi Sa’ari, who aspires to untie the violent axis knotting ethnicity and land:

We must return all—
 All blood to the sores
 All territories to the land
 And all victims to the wars...
 We must return all—
 Even the globe, the entire space
 We must return to the big time,
 Which lies ahead

Endnotes

¹ In my piece, I chose not to challenge several of the problematic statements and factual errors in Jamoul’s account. Although I support much of her critique of Israeli policies, I have serious reservations about parts of her essay, especially sentences such as “the Jews are now committing their own holocaust” or the implicit glorification of terrorist suicide bombers, putatively in the name of “humanism”. I believe that even engaged and politicized scholarship must maintain factual and moral accountability.

² See <http://www.btselem.org/>

³ Israeli Radio, Channel B, 19 April 2004, “Hakol Diburim”. Notably, the initiative to withdraw from Gaza was rejected by a referendum of Likud members on 2 May 2004. However, I suggest that this move will continue to be on the agenda of most Jewish parties, which will now seek other political means to promote this “necessary” spatial readjustment.

⁴ For details, see Yiftachel (2000); notably, the term “ethnocracy” has been used in the literature previously, but never developed into a model or a theoretical concept.

⁵The first act of mass violence was committed by a Jew, who killed 29 Palestinians in a Hebron Mosque in February 1994; this was followed by dozens of terrorist attacks on Israelis, killing over 150 civilians during the 1994–1996 period.

References

Yiftachel O (2000) Ethnocracy and its discontents: Minority protest in Israel. *Critical Inquiry* 26:725–756