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The Jailer State
Israel has turned Gaza into a massive prison, and is choosing to prolong the cycle of state terror and prisoner resistance that goes with that, writes Israeli academic Oren Yiftachel

"We have a great opportunity now in Gaza to smash and flatten them…[We] should destroy thousand of houses, tunnels and industries, and kill as many terrorists as possible…"

So declared Eli Yishai, Israel's Deputy Prime Minister, a few days ago. On the same day Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni promised "to topple the Hamas Regime", and Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert demanded in every forum to "hermetically seal" the Gazan-Egyptian border.

These, and many similar statements by Israeli leaders, sketch in painful clarity the "political geography of mass incarceration" increasingly evident in Israel/Palestine. Under this regime large populations are locked into specific areas against their will, and often against international law, and are then subject to the mercy of their wardens. Typically, when the conditions of imprisonment become unbearable, a rebellion erupts, and is suppressed by violent collective punishment, which in turn sets the conditions for the next uprising.

This is how Israel is now treating its rebelling prisoners in Gaza. As its leaders' statements show, Israel seeks to lock them in the tiny strip and punish them with enormous force. At the same time Israel is further institutionalising the geography of incarceration and with it the likelihood of future uprisings.

This is not a new phenomenon, nor is it peculiar to the Palestinian situation: European colonialism widely used mass incarceration of indigenous groups, condensing them in reserves and Bantustans, to enable whites to freely exploit land, minerals and labour. Today too, racist governments attempt to deal with the existence of unwanted populations by applying methods of spatial containment and violent "punishment", as evident in the cases of Chechnya, Kosovo, Kashmir, Darfur and Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka. The key to this spreading political order is the prevention of the rebelling region from gaining state sovereignty, leaving it "neither in nor out" of the state's control system. As a non-state entity, resistance of the jailed against colonial power is often criminalised, leading the state's self-righteous claim that it has no choice but to further oppress the anti-colonial struggle.

Importantly, the mass incarceration strategy is usually not the preferred option. It is typically employed only when the colonial power has lost some of its ability to settle and control the land by other, softer, means, and when the option of ethnic cleansing has become too embarrassing or unpopular. Much to the regret of racist regimes, this is the situation today. Hence, mass incarceration remains one of the main policy options for colonial states aiming to dominate indigenous populations.

Back to Israel/Palestine: Gaza had turned into an open-air jail by the late 1940s when over 150,000 Palestinian refugees were driven by Israel into the small region (covering just 1.7 per cent of British Palestine), joining its 60,000 previous residents. The refugees were never allowed to return to their lands and homes which were confiscated and destroyed. Ironically, it was during the "peace process" of the early

90s that the incarceration of Gaza intensified, with a sequence of closures, movement restrictions and the construction in 1994 of a massive barrier around the Strip. Following the 2005 disengagement and the election of Hamas, Israel's illegal siege around the area was taken up a notch with a near-total blockade of movement and trade.

Gaza is a severe case, but it's not unique. Since its establishment, Israel's ethnocratic regime has worked incessantly to Judaise the country by confiscating Palestinian lands, constructing hundreds of Jewish settlements and restricting the Palestinians to small enclaves. This began with the military government inside the Green Line until 1966, and the establishment of a "fenced area" for the Bedouins in the south, which operates until today. Since the 1990s, the ghettoisation of Palestinians continued with the demarcation of areas A, B and C in the occupied territories, with the advent of closures and checkpoints, and finally with the construction of the wall — all helping to fragment Palestine into dozens of isolated enclaves.

The long-term geographical impact of the Judaisation policy has been dramatic. For example, the Palestinians in Israel, constitute 18 per cent of the population, but control less than 3 per cent of the land. In the entire area between Jordan and sea, the population is just under 50 per cent Palestinian, but they control only 13 per cent of the land. Critically however, Judaisation seems to have reached its limits, and since the Oslo period Israel has been re-arranging its colonial geography to fit that realisation.

The difference between Gaza and the other enclaves is the depth of its isolation and its persistent rebellion. The Hamas leadership never accepted the Oslo illusion, or the promise of "two states for two people" enshrined in the "roadmap" or the "Annapolis process". They have realised that the promise has become an empty rhetoric which enables the ongoing colonisation of their lands. In the meantime, the promised Palestinian state has become fragmented, suffocated and impoverished.

And what has been Israel's response to this crisis? The deepening of mass incarceration, "necessitated" to protect Jewish settlement, maintaining at the same time a massive campaign of personal incarceration, during which Israel has arrested over 10,000 people, and imprisoned them without trials, a group which includes dozens of Palestinian parliamentarians. The incarceration policy has thus resulted in the creation of prisons within prisons.

While the geography of incarceration is typically explained as a security measure, its appeal is also increasing for economic reasons. During the current age of globalisation, personal, commercial and financial movement has become essential for development and prosperity. The geography of mass incarceration helps to keep the unwanted outside the riches of this process. Therefore, the ongoing fortification around Gaza, including the current invasion, also put in place a system of protecting Jewish economic privileges.

Palestinian violence plays an important part in the creation of this geography, through the hostile dialectic between coloniser and colonised. For example, the shelling of Israeli civilians by Hamas and suicide bombing of previous years are clear acts of terror, which gave legitimacy within Israeli society to carry out the incarceration policy. But Palestinian violence, and particularly the shelling from Gaza should also be perceived as a prison uprising, currently suppressed with terror by the Israeli state, which kills many more civilians and creates infinitely more damage than the initial act of

resistance. This is the cycle of suppression, resistance and suppression maintained through the which exists within a geography of incarceration

It is important to note, however, that the option of rebellion only intensifies the punishment and killing, but not the basic geography of imprisonment. Hence, even after the current invasion is over, Israel will undoubtedly continue to use this strategy in both Gaza and the (non-rebelling) West Bank, and in softer forms inside the Green Line, where Israel's Palestinian citizens are also contained in small enclaves. I have termed this process "creeping apartheid" — an undeclared yet powerful political order which creates vastly unequal forms of citizenship under one ruling power. Rights under such regimes are determined by a combination of ethnic affiliation and place of birth. This cannot be illustrated more vividly than by noting the differences in mobility and property rights — Jews are free to move and purchase land in almost the entire area under Israeli control, while Palestinians are limited to separated enclaves — Gazans in Gaza only, Jerusalemites only in Jerusalem and so on.

This type of political geography tends to result in a chain of absurdities. Here is one: the invasion and destruction of Gaza is carried out by an ousted Israeli Government, and is actively supported by a defeated US Administration. The two governments which lost power are violently attacking in their dying days the democratically elected Government of Palestine. This leads to the next absurdity: instead of condemning and placing sanctions on Israel, which has put Gaza under siege for the last two years, the world has imposed sanctions over the Hamas Government. In this way the occupied are punished twice: once by the brutal occupation, and a second time attempting to resist.

Sadly, these absurdities are not surprising, being part of the geography of mass incarceration, under which the colonial power will recognise the prisoners' leadership only if they refrain from rebelling against their incarceration, as is currently the case with the Abbas regime in the West Bank. In the case of a rebellion, however, its leaders are likely to be oppressed and often eliminated.

What may be slightly (but not entirely) more surprising is that Israeli leadership and society have not learnt from history that a geography of mass incarceration exists on borrowed time. Such as geography can never receive legitimacy, and hence cannot create security for the jailing side. On the contrary, instability and constant rebellions are likely to undermine the incarcerating regime itself.

To conclude, against the reality of mass incarceration, it may be advisable to listen to Mahmoud Darwish's wise words: "My prison guard looks me in the eye/ I can see his fear/ Like me, he knows that/ today's warden is already tomorrow's prisoner.

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