



RECONCEPTUALIZING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: KEY PARADIGM SHIFTS

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In the near 20 years since the Oslo peace process began, Palestinians have suffered losses—socially, economically and politically—arguably not seen since 1948. This altered reality has, in recent years, been shaped by critical paradigm shifts in the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is understood and addressed. These shifts, particularly with regard to international acceptance of Palestine’s territorial fragmentation, the imperative of ending Israel’s occupation, the de facto annexation of West Bank lands to Israel, and the transformation of Palestinians into a humanitarian issue—have redefined the way the world views the conflict, diminishing the possibility of a political resolution.

IN A LETTER to Mohandas Gandhi written in February 1939, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber reflected on the Jewish people’s need for a homeland. The terms he used have surprising relevance to the Palestinian people as their dreams of a sovereign homeland collapse under the reality of territorial dismemberment, isolation, and economic ruin.

Dispersion is bearable; it can even be purposeful if somewhere there is ingathering, a growing home center, a piece of earth wherein one is in the midst of an ingathering. . . . When there is this, there is also a striving, common life, the life of a community, which dares to live today, because it hopes to live tomorrow. But when this growing center, this increasing process of ingathering is lacking, dispersion becomes dismemberment.¹

Today, there can be no doubt that Palestinian society, economy, and polity are being dismembered in the way Buber meant. The place of Palestinians in the country is being eroded in a manner arguably not seen since 1948. The political and economic failures of the past two decades in particular are astounding. Yet any attempt to assess these failures will find that traditional measures of decline are not only inadequate but inappropriate, serving to mask reality rather than clarify it.

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The problem is not only one of regression and contraction—of opportunities lost within a diminishing environment—but of transmutation, of opportunities precluded by an increasingly deformed environment.

This altered reality has, in recent years especially, been shaped and defined by critical paradigm shifts in the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is conceptualized and addressed.² These shifts, which will be examined at the conceptual and sectoral levels, cannot be understood outside a political framework that historically and consistently has aimed at diminishing and negating a Palestinian presence and the rights that naturally attend it.

DEFINING THE POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

Since 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the various peace settlements that have emerged have all been based on three key assumptions:

1. That the Palestinians refugees of 1948 would not be an issue or primary factor in negotiations;
2. That the Arab minority in Israel—those Arabs who remained within the newly created State of Israel—would not be part of any comprehensive settlement; and
3. That the only Palestinian territories subject to negotiation would be the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem—the 22 percent of pre-1948 Palestine occupied in 1967 (a position which the PLO accepted in 1988 and thereafter).³

Virtually forgotten is a crucial fact that Noam Chomsky has continually emphasized. After the U.S. veto of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict embodied in the January 1976 Security Council draft resolution,⁴ the crucial issue in diplomacy became whether a peace settlement should be based on UNSC 242 alone, or whether 242 should be supplemented by recognition of Palestinian national rights, particularly “the right to self-determination without external interferences . . . the right to national independence and sovereignty . . . and the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced and uprooted.”⁵ The United States, alone in the world apart from Israel, insisted that 242 could not be supplemented to incorporate Palestinian rights except in whatever territories Israel (and the United States) agreed to relinquish. Crucially, the United States after the 1990 Gulf War was able to impose its interpretation on the world, thereby providing both the means and the diplomatic support for Israel’s integration and subsequent *de facto* annexation of West Bank lands.⁶

Thus, according to the post-1967 settlement formula, 78 percent of pre-1948 Palestine (which later became the State of Israel) and at least 50 percent of the Palestinian people were to be excluded from any peacemaking

process. This formula also involved the U.S.-Israeli interpretation of 242 (which in fact was also the position of the UN)—the return of lands, not *all* lands occupied—and the rejection of Palestinian national rights. These parameters were incorporated into subsequent peace initiatives, including the 1991 Madrid peace talks, the 1993 Oslo agreement, and the 2002 American road map, among others.

Israel's intentions with regard to the occupied territories were illustrated early on in the 1967 Allon Plan, which, while never officially adopted by any Israeli government, defined the framework for Israeli land control. The plan called for the annexation of 25–40 percent of the West Bank, including Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings, a band of territory 10–15 kilometers wide along the Jordan Rift Valley, and the Judean Desert. In this way, the Allon Plan aimed to separate East Jerusalem from the West Bank as well as the northern from the southern West Bank (a reality imposed over twenty-five years later by the Oslo agreements). It also aimed to preserve Israeli control over the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea as a strategic buffer against the “eastern front” and to prevent the emergence of an independent Arab state. According to Palestinian scholar Leila Farsakh, “The unannexed part of the West Bank, comprising two unconnected areas to the north and south, and two-thirds of Gaza would be part of a Jordanian-Palestinian state.”⁷ The Allon Plan established the concept of security borders, used by Israel to justify land confiscations, and reasserted the importance of building Israeli settlements as a way of ensuring the incorporation of the maximum amount of land with the fewest number of Palestinians.⁸

Furthermore, states Farsakh, “If the Allon Plan provided the territorial framework for establishing Israel’s control of Palestinian land in the [West Bank and Gaza Strip],” the 1978 Drobless Plan provided the “master plan for translating this control into a Jewish geographic and demographic reality.”⁹ The objective of the Drobless Plan, which established a framework for the fragmentation of the West Bank, was to integrate parts of the territory into Israel through settlement expansion within and around Palestinian areas, and through the building of settlement blocks and settlement infrastructure connecting settlements with each other and with metropolitan Israel. In this way no Palestinian state would be established.¹⁰ Fundamentally, Drobless aimed to normalize and institutionalize land expropriations by eroding 1967 borders, thus making territorial retreat problematic, if not impossible. The idea, if not to make annexation easier, was to make separation harder.

With the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, which allowed Israel to intensify and expand its settlement activities in the West Bank, and later US-led negotiations, Drobless’s objectives have arguably been surpassed by reality. Thus, an impoverished and de-developed Palestinian entity in the Gaza Strip is almost completely severed from the West Bank; large areas of the West Bank are integrated into and effectively annexed

to Israel through the expansion of settlements and their infrastructure and the building of the separation barrier; and a near majority of West Bank lands are inaccessible to Palestinians for either residential or economic use.

In its 2011 report on poverty in the West Bank and Gaza, the World Bank echoed the degradation of Palestine's reality:

Following the Second Intifada of 2000, the Palestinian economy began to resemble no other in the world. Limited say over economic policies and trade, the extent of dependence on Israel and international aid and a regime of internal and external closures has created an economy characterized by extreme fluctuations in growth and employment and an increasing divergence between the two territories: *the West Bank a fragmented archipelago; and Gaza an increasingly isolated island* (emphasis added).¹¹

In other words, the U.S.-Israeli peacemaking formula has now reached, or is certainly approaching, its *maximal* interpretation.

KEY PARADIGM SHIFTS: RECONFIGURING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Palestinian reality shaped by the processes described above forms the context for several critical paradigmatic shifts, which have redefined the way the world views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Perhaps the most critical of these shifts, proceeding almost imperceptibly in recent years, is the acceptance by key members of the international community of the territorial and demographic fragmentation of the occupied territories. From the beginning of the occupation in 1967, the international community regarded the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit. This consensus was made explicit in the 1993 Oslo Accords and theoretically obtained until Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza in September 2005.

The denial of territorial contiguity, which came to define the status quo after Oslo, remained unchallenged by the international community. Acceptance of the new reality was facilitated by the isolation of the West Bank and Gaza, largely completed by 1998. Indeed, the separation of the two territories had long been an Israeli policy goal, *especially* during the Oslo period. According to Israeli journalist Amira Hass,

The total separation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank is one of the greatest achievements of Israeli politics, whose overarching objective is to prevent a solution based on international decisions and understandings and instead dictate an arrangement based on Israel's military superiority. . . . Since January 1991, Israel has bureaucratically and logistically merely perfected the split and the separation: not only between Palestinians in the occupied territories and their brothers in Israel, but also between

the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and those in the rest of the territories and between Gazans and West Bankers/Jerusalemites.¹²

The Israeli economist Shir Hever revealed that on 20 April 2007 Brigadier General Yair Golan, then commander of Israeli forces in the West Bank, stated in a lecture delivered at the Van Leer Institute that “separation and not security is the main reason for building the Wall of Separation and that security could have been achieved more effectively and more cheaply through other means.”¹³ The *New York Times* captured the essence of the problem in a 2006 editorial: “[I]magine a map of Manhattan. The West Bank would be, very roughly, East Harlem and the Upper East Side. Gaza would be Battery Park City, far to the southwest. Now imagine trying to create a fully functioning city with its own economy out of these pieces while an entirely independent, antagonistic city remained in between.”¹⁴ There is no doubt that the internal separation and isolation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the disunity thus created—a split Palestinians have called *wakseh* (humiliation or ruin)¹⁵—is the single most critical problem facing the Palestinian people at present.

A related paradigm shift concerns the way in which the occupation itself is perceived. From its beginning, there had been an implicit (and often explicit) belief among Palestinians, many Israelis, and members of the international community that the occupation could and would end, that Israel’s expansion into Palestine would be stopped. That was how many understood the Oslo process. The belief that occupation was reversible and *should* be reversed was largely unquestioned, and was the catalyzing force behind many social, political, and economic initiatives.

This belief has itself been overturned: the changes imposed on Palestinians, especially in the eighteen years since Oslo, have shown that the occupation cannot be stopped, at least not in the short- or medium-term. Many if not most Israelis, virtually unexposed to and untouched by the everyday realities of the occupation, accept—even embrace—the status quo, which is considered durable. If occupation has changed over time, it is in the sheer nature of its expansion and force—not in its mitigation or inversion. The etiology and imperative of expansion remains unchallenged. Perhaps the most powerful illustration of occupation’s entrenchment lies in the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements and their infrastructure.

The effect on Palestinians has been extremely damaging. Arab lands and the use of those lands have been lost: according to B’Tselem, the Israeli human rights organization, Israeli settlements control approximately 42 percent of the West Bank (with 21 percent of settlements’ built-up area lying on private Palestinian land).¹⁶ Furthermore, and in line with the objectives of the Drobless Plan, Arab lands are being incorporated and consolidated into a new spatial and political order that aims to eliminate any physical separation between Israel and increasingly large areas

of the West Bank, diminishing the presence of Palestinians and precluding the emergence of any viable entity that could be called a Palestinian state (including on the eastern side of the barrier). I seriously doubt that the occupation could now be stopped even if the Israeli leadership wanted to stop it, which they do not.

The apparent normalization of the occupation assumes a different but no less compelling form in the Gaza Strip. With its 2005 disengagement, Israel has argued that it no longer occupies Gaza. Yet under international law, Israel remains an occupier through its continued control over Gaza's borders, airspace, sea, and population registry. In recent years, however, Gaza's status as an occupied territory has ceased to be a matter of undue international concern, the focus of attention having shifted to Gaza's enforced isolation and economic defeat.

The progressively routine nature of the occupation points to another important paradigm shift. Prior to Oslo there was a belief among Israelis and within the international community generally that peace and occupation were incompatible. The former could not be achieved in the presence of the latter. This, too, has changed. In the West Bank, a vast settlement road network has been built, facilitating the lives of Israelis who regard settlements as natural outgrowth, a buffer providing protection and security as well as convenient (and familial) links to Israel proper. The integration of the settlement blocs and their infrastructure into Israel—justified by the argument that the West Bank, or parts of it, belong to Israel—is no longer contentious among Israelis; on the contrary, it is viewed as necessary and normal (as is the imperative of isolating and containing the Gaza Strip). Again, the international community has largely conceded.

According to Israeli analyst and activist Jeff Halper, "For [Israelis], the Israeli-Arab conflict was won and forgotten years ago, somewhere around 2004, when [U.S. President George W.] Bush informed [Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon that the U.S. does not expect Israel to withdraw to the 1967 borders, thus effectively ending the 'two-state solution,' and [when] Arafat 'mysteriously' died."¹⁷

For many Israelis and several key international donors, it is no longer even a question of normalizing the occupation, but of eliminating the term altogether as inapplicable, especially in light of a strong and expanding Israeli economy, the virtual cessation of suicide attacks inside Israel in recent years, and unqualified U.S. support and protection. In a March 2010 poll, only 8 percent of Israeli Jews named the conflict with Palestinians as the "most urgent problem" facing Israel, placing it fifth after education, crime, national security, and poverty.¹⁸ Halper further states that in a more recent poll, "'security,' the term Israelis use instead of 'occupation' or 'peace,' was ranked eleventh among the concerns of the Israeli public, trailing well behind employment, crime, corruption, religious-secular differences, housing and other more pressing issues."¹⁹

In fact, silence about the occupation has become the key condition for continued international funding of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hence, Palestine's effective dismemberment and the permanence of its territorial fragmentation—as well as Israel's policies of collective punishment in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip—are accepted by certain members of the international community as legitimate, benign, and manageable, especially given the virtual absence of criticism from Palestinian officialdom. Israel's separation from Palestinians, whether in Bethlehem or Khan Yunis, along with its determination to do whatever is necessary militarily, politically, and economically to maintain that separation, has become mundane. In this regard, a well-known Israeli activist stated at a recent conference at Harvard University that getting the Israeli army out of the West Bank would be equivalent to regime change.²⁰

Crucially, the occupation has been transformed from a political and legal issue with international legitimacy into a simple border dispute where the rules of war, not of occupation, apply. This represents another critical paradigm shift in the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is understood. This new interpretation has been made explicit in the case of Gaza, where Israel affirms that its sole post-disengagement obligations to Gaza's people "are those mandated by the law of armed conflict, which continues to apply, so long as the violent conflict between the Israeli military and armed groups in Gaza continues."²¹ Legal scholar George Bisharat elaborates:

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Since 2001 Israeli military lawyers have pushed to re-classify military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from the law enforcement model mandated by the law of occupation to one of armed conflict. . . . Today most observers—including Amnesty International—tacitly accept Israel's framing of the conflict in Gaza as an armed conflict, as their criticism of Israel's actions in terms of the duties of distinction and the principle of proportionality betrays.²²

The international community, then, has largely come to accept Israel's recasting of its relationship with Gaza and the West Bank from one between occupier and occupied to one between warring parties. This international shift no doubt accounts, in part, for the overwhelming popular support among Israelis for the devastating December 2008 attack on Gaza known as Operation Cast Lead. Many Israelis and members of the international community no longer feel uncomfortable with the occupation at a time when the occupation has grown more oppressive and unjust.

The growing obsolescence of occupation as an analytical and legal framework leads to another important paradigm change: Israel's policy

shift from ongoing occupation to annexation and imposed sovereignty with regard to the West Bank, parts of which are claimed as de facto sovereign Israeli territory. This shift also reflects a change in Israeli policy: whereas previously policy sought to control and dominate the Palestinian economy, shaping it to Israel's own interests (as during the first two decades of occupation), current policy fractures and debilitates the body economic and, perhaps most striking of all, transforms Palestinians both in Gaza and in those parts of the West Bank slated for annexation from a people with national and political rights into a humanitarian problem for which the international community becomes largely if not wholly responsible (see below).

The change in Israeli policy, which depends in part on international acquiescence to the West Bank's cantonization, is exemplified in the building of the separation barrier (62 percent completed, with 80 percent of its route lying inside the territory²³), cutting Palestinians off from their lands and leaving communities within isolated enclaves;²⁴ massive Israeli settlement expansion and the construction of a settlement road network from which Palestinians are effectively barred; hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints obstructing Palestinian movement in the West Bank; restricted access to major Palestinian cities ("one or more of the main entrances are blocked to Palestinian traffic in 10 out of 11 major West Bank cities"²⁵); limited access to the Jordan Valley by nonresident Palestinians (4 out of the 5 roads into the Jordan Valley are not accessible to most Palestinian cars and nearly "80 percent of the land in the Jordan Valley is off-limits to Palestinians, with the land designated for Israeli settlements, 'firing zones' and 'nature reserves'"²⁶).

The shift in Israeli intentions from occupation to imposed sovereignty is expressed in another less obvious, more banal, but no less dramatic way that powerfully demonstrates Israel's unquestioned control over Palestinian land. A notice issued by Israel's Civil Administration—Judea and Samaria entitled "Easing of Restrictions on the Palestinian Population during "Eid El-Adha,"—7–14 December 2008,"²⁷ states:

The following steps were decided upon in order to improve the daily life of the Palestinian population in the Judea and Samaria region during this period. The decision to take these steps was made following security assessments by the IDF Central Command and the Civil Administration.

During the 'Eid el-Adha period (7–14 December '08):

- **Beit-furik (Beit-dajan) checkpoint** (east of Nablus) will operate on a "normally opened" system (up to now it was limited for the villages only).
- **Awarta checkpoint** will allow for movements of all commercial vehicles without permits (up to now it operated on a permit basis).

- **The new Hawara checkpoint** will be opened this week facilitating movements in and out of the city of Nablus.
- **All checkpoints around Nablus** will extend their operation from 21:00 to 24:00. (relevant for the period of the 'Eid-El-Adha, 7–14 December).
- **Arab Israelis are allowed to enter area A** (relevant for the period of 'Eid-El-Adha 7–14, December).
- **Unlimited quota for permits** issued for family visits to Israel; married men aged 40 and above, married women at all ages (relevant for the period of 'Eid-El-Adha, 7–14 December).

Eid Mubarak!

While such notices make evident Israel's control over the borders between areas A, B, and C, it is Area C that is the object of the state's annexationist ambitions. Comprising almost two-thirds of the West Bank, including the majority (87.5 percent) of the strategic and economically important Jordan Valley and Dead Sea,²⁸ area C is subject to full Israeli control and home to over 300,000 Israelis and about 150,000 Palestinians (less than 4 percent of the total Palestinian population). Some 100,000 Palestinians living in area C also live in localities lying partly in areas A and B, with the remaining 50,000 living in communities located entirely in area C, including the Jordan Valley.²⁹

It is important to note that the number of Palestinians living in the Jordan Valley has declined by 80 percent—from 250,000 in 1967 to 50,000 today.³⁰ Their more recent displacement from area C is due to a variety of Israeli administrative practices, including restricted freedom of movement and access to services; (longstanding) restrictions on land and water use, and on building; lack of security; and settler and military harassment and violence.³¹ Such practices, it would appear, have been adopted as part of an annexationist agenda. Indeed, during the Israeli-Palestinian talks in January 2012, Israeli envoy Yitzhak Molcho was reported to have told the Palestinian delegation that either they allow a permanent IDF presence in the Jordan Valley or Israel will be forced to annex it.³²

Another illustration of this agenda is the 26 December 2011 decision by the Israeli Supreme Court (sitting as the High Court of Justice [HCJ]) affirming the legal right of Israeli companies to engage in mining and quarrying operations in the West Bank, in effect robbing Palestinians of their own economic resources. Responding to the court's judgment, the Israeli human rights group Yesh Din observed: "[D]espite the clear prohibition in international law against the mining of natural resources in new quarries in occupied territory (quarries that did not exist prior to the occupation)," the ruling was based on the assumption that "in a long-term occupation the economic reality often demands the opening of new quarries."³³ It is noteworthy that the 2011 decision—which contradicts international law, international humanitarian law, and international

human rights law—reverses the HCJ's 1983 decision affirming that “an area held under belligerent occupation is not an open field for economic exploitation.”³⁴ The 1983 decision, reaffirmed in 2004, had guided court rulings for nearly thirty years.

Ten Israeli and internationally owned companies currently operate in the West Bank, and 75–94 percent of their output is transferred for use by the Israeli construction industry. Explaining the implications of the HJC ruling, Yesh Din further notes,

On its face, the new rule allows the occupier (in a long-term occupation) to make endless use of the variety of objects found in the occupied territory: to pump its water sources, to transfer its archeological artifacts to elsewhere outside the territory, to use areas within it for garbage disposal, to sell public real estate, and more. *Therefore, the court's interpretation in actuality creates a license for pillage in occupied territory, while one of the central purposes of the laws of occupation contained in international humanitarian law is to prevent such exploitation of occupied territory, and thus even stipulates that under certain circumstances such exploitation will be considered a war crime* (emphasis in original).³⁵

The state's annexationist aims are similarly clear in Israel Railways' plan for establishing a major railway system in the West Bank consisting of eleven new rail lines “in accordance with ‘a legal commitment the ministry [of transportation] made to the High Court of Justice.’”³⁶ The plan calls for 475 kilometers (295 miles) of rail lines, which can be compared with the 1100 kilometers (683 miles) of rail lines in Israel. Stated differently, although the West Bank is just over a quarter the size of Israel, the proposed railway network will be 43 percent the size of Israel's railway system. According to *Ha'Aretz*, “An emphasis is being place[d] on ‘continuity between the rail network within the Green Line [Israel's 1967 borders] and the planned network in Judea and Samaria.’”³⁷

The paradigmatic shift from occupation to annexation has also been accepted by key members of the international donor community, especially after Hamas's electoral victory and seizure of Gaza and refusal to accede to the Quartet's demands. Not only have major donors participated in the draconian sanction regime imposed on Gaza, they have privileged the West Bank over Gaza in their programmatic work. In this way, donors have reinforced the division of Palestinians into two distinct and isolated entities by offering exclusivity—economic, political, and diplomatic—to one side and criminalizing the other.

An important corollary of the shift to annexation and imposed sovereignty is another paradigmatic shift involving the transformation of Palestinians (in the eyes of Israelis and some members of the international community) into intruders in their own land, living in submission and dependence. Within this construct, Palestinian resistance to Israel's

occupation—including attempts at economic empowerment—are now illegitimate. A recent example is Israel’s announced plan to demolish six European Union–funded wind and solar energy projects in the West Bank, which provide electricity to six hundred Palestinians living in poor villages in the South Hebron Hills.³⁸ It would appear that any attempt at an economic—let alone a national—community among Palestinians is denied.

While the shift to viewing Palestinians as intruders applies to both territories, it is particularly egregious in the Gaza Strip. Following Hamas’s 2006 electoral victory and 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was reshaped to center on Gaza and on Israel’s hostile relationship with Hamas. Israel has, in fact, explicitly referred to its closure policy as a form of “economic warfare” (intensified by Israeli-controlled buffer zones along Gaza’s northern and eastern perimeters, accounting for nearly a third of Gaza’s land), intentionally designed to undermine Gaza’s economy and productive capacity as part of its policy to bring down the Hamas regime (see below).³⁹

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Well before the 2008 invasion of Gaza, Karen Abu Zayd, at the time UNRWA’s commissioner-general, warned that “Gaza is on the threshold of becoming the first territory to be intentionally reduced to a state of abject destitution with the knowledge, acquiescence and—some would say—encouragement of the international community.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the Israeli human rights organization GISHA reports that the massive restrictions imposed on Gaza’s trade following Hamas’s June 2007 takeover—severing trade with Israel and the West Bank, Gaza’s major export markets—were not justified on “security grounds” (e.g., that the entry of goods pose a threat to the border crossings themselves or would allow transfer of goods that could serve a military purpose). Instead, the entry of goods into the Gaza Strip was henceforth limited to a “humanitarian minimum” that includes only those goods considered “essential to the survival of the civilian population.”⁴¹ According to Abu Zayd,

Humanitarian and human development work was never meant to function in an environment devoid of constructive efforts to resolve conflict or to address its underlying causes. Indeed, humanitarian work is profoundly undermined in a context where there is implicit or active complicity in creating conditions of mass suffering. This is the situation bedeviling Palestinian prospects.⁴²

In the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead, Gaza suffered between \$660 and \$900 million in damage to its civilian infrastructure, “while total losses from the destruction and disruption of economic life during the invasion were put at \$3–3.5 billion.”⁴³

In the West Bank, the punishment takes another form. There, the transformation of Palestinians into intruders is powerfully seen in the changing nature of physical destruction. Amira Hass has described a steady process of destroying many vestiges of Palestinian life in the West Bank as they have historically existed. Old roads long used by Palestinians traveling between major towns and surrounding villages are being eliminated, as are traditional intersections, buildings, and certain commercial areas. Another more anecdotal illustration concerns certain road signs in the West Bank, which have the Hebrew names of towns transliterated into Arabic and the Arabic name encased in parentheses.⁴⁴ What is happening is no less than the erasure of a Palestinian presence in the West Bank.

What has emerged, argues Mouin Rabbani, are two political-economic models. The West Bank model is characterized by restricted levels of institution-building; isolated pockets of business and commercial development, itself shaped by a cantonized geographical entity and fragmented, externally dependent and constrained economic base; and the professionalization of security forces. This model is devoid of political content and does nothing to confront the occupation; to the contrary, it advocates silence and represses criticism. The Gaza Strip model, on the other hand, is characterized by intensified closure, isolation, collective punishment, and economic subjugation, with a leadership strengthened by the occupation but unable to do anything to address it.⁴⁵ Both models have failed, and their failure underlines the fact that the Palestinian state has long been a U.S.-Israeli project, not a Palestinian one.

SOME PARADIGM SHIFTS AT THE ECONOMIC LEVEL

“We started with food aid and we have returned to food aid.” Thus concluded a Palestinian economist in Ramallah in 2007. Her words powerfully capture what is perhaps the most dramatic paradigm shift in how Palestinians are perceived and addressed: from a society (worthy of) pursuing developmental change to an impoverished community seeking relief—what analyst Sami Abdel Shafi referred to as “engineering Palestinians into perpetual beggars.”⁴⁶ The resulting “humanitarianization” and immiseration of Palestinians has many illustrations. Between 2001 and 2008, for example, the level of donor aid to the Palestinian government increased 500 percent. By 2008, total foreign assistance to the government and other sectors reached 58 percent of the GDP (having stood at 18 percent of the GDP in 2000), with a huge percentage directed to humanitarian assistance.⁴⁷ By 2010, approximately 80 percent of families in Gaza relied on some form of humanitarian aid, and 79 percent of West Bankers living in area C lacked sufficient food—figures that remain largely unchanged at present.

Among the factors accounting for the shift from political to humanitarian priorities are the following:

- The total fragmentation of the geographical base of the Palestinian economy, with the virtually complete separation and isolation of Gaza and the West Bank and the cantonization of the West Bank.
- The use of aid as a form of punishment inflicted by Israel (in the form of closure and then intensified closure [or siege]⁴⁸) and, critically, by the international community—a situation of punishing the occupied rather than the occupier. This is seen not only in international participation in the siege on Gaza (which has terminated all normal trade, especially exports), but also in continued American threats to withdraw financial support from the PA as a way to secure official Palestinian support for U.S. demands (e.g., participation in direct negotiations with Israel) or as punishment for pursuing initiatives that the United States opposes (e.g., the 2011 UN membership bid). (Never have economic issues been so central to the political conflict as they are now).
- The growing ineffectiveness of international aid, particularly after 2006. Since then, assistance—composed primarily of humanitarian relief, social sector infrastructure, and services—has been provided outside any meaningful economic framework, having little if any bearing on sustainable economic development, the more recent fiscal successes of the Ramallah PA notwithstanding.

The Palestinian elections of January 2006 were a turning point, marking the shift—first unchallenged and later actively supported by the international donor community—away from any commitment to Palestinian self-determination to an emphasis on relief and charity. In fact, one could argue that donors themselves have undergone a profound paradigmatic shift in their role from practitioners of development to providers of relief.

Economic activities, then, are evolving in response not only to decline and breakdown, but also to the donor governments' unwillingness to meaningfully (i.e., politically) challenge the status quo. Addressing the impoverishment of Palestinians has become the financial responsibility of a compliant and complicit international community, which not only acceded to this terrible reality, but strengthened it. According to a November 2010 internal donor document, "Donors are indirectly not following universally accepted humanitarian principles and by [their] inaction allow for the continuation of illegal policies to take place."

The rapidly increasing need among growing numbers of Palestinians and inadequate donor support (apparently due to the failure of certain donor governments to meet their financial obligations) have recently produced another even more untenable outcome: UNRWA's planned termination, announced in February 2012, of its cash subsidies (40 shekels, or \$10 per person per month) for Gaza's poorest (some 21,000 families, including 9,000 already below the poverty line) and its cash-for-work

programs. It will also end its evening medical services, and reduce by half its other health services for Gaza's refugee population.⁴⁹

To this deepening tragedy must be added the fact that the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee had been withholding approximately \$147 million in FY 2011 Economic Support Funds (ESF) approved by Congress for USAID's humanitarian and socioeconomic programs in the West Bank and Gaza. The hold was imposed last August in response to the Palestinian membership bid at the UN. Among the projected consequences are the termination of a USAID-funded early childhood education project affecting 270,000 persons, including 170,000 children; the closing down of activities designed to improve the psychosocial wellbeing of, and protection for, at least 1,500 young children and their mothers; the ending of programs aimed at increasing the employability of young people, affecting 10,000; and the discontinuing of local health clinics and projects for the rehabilitation of water infrastructure in disadvantaged communities.⁵⁰

The committee chair, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, reportedly had stated that she would not release the hold on the ESF funds until she had spoken with Prime Minister Netanyahu. The executive branch threatened to override Ros-Lehtinen's objections (and that of Representative Kay Granger, chairwoman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations⁵¹). However, Ros-Lehtinen lifted only part of her hold on funding, releasing \$88.6 million, and *prohibited* the use of funds for assistance and recovery programs in Gaza. She also rejected any funding for road construction in the West Bank (except for security-related roads), trade facilitation, tourism promotion, scholarships for Palestinian students, additional assistance for PA agencies and ministries, and promoting Christian tourism to the Holy Land (including the reconstruction of Christian sites in the West Bank).⁵²

The reduction of Palestinians to a "humanitarian issue," a demographic presence in impoverished enclaves, unable to mobilize politically and dependent on the "goodwill" of the international community, is a tragic waste of human and economic potential. As Gazan economist Omar Shaban remarked, "Why do you look at me as a person who just needs food? I need books, I need software, I need toys. I can be part of the civilization of the world. . . . Before the new Israeli policy [of easing the siege in June 2010], we used to have five soft drinks. Now we have seven. I'm still in prison, regardless of the food you provide me. I want to be free. It's not about food."⁵³ Palestinians want to work and be productive; instead they have been made dependent on foreign aid to survive, and growing numbers are forced into poverty. By treating Palestinians in this way, international aid denies them a voice, rendering them invisible and by implication, incapable of articulating a vision that departs from the damaging one imposed upon them.

The paradigm shift that reduces Palestinians from a political to a charitable issue is most visible in Gaza, where it is amplified by the

identification with Hamas. This transformation has been accompanied by another equally dangerous shift. Since the Hamas electoral victory in January 2006 and its takeover of the Strip in June 2007, Israel's goal is no longer simply Gaza's isolation, but its disablement. Israeli policy has shifted from addressing the economy in some manner (whether positively or negatively) to dispensing with the concept of an economy altogether. That is, rather than weaken Gaza's economy through punishing closures and other restrictions, as had long been the case, the Israeli government has imposed an intensified closure (or siege) that treats the economy as totally irrelevant, "a dispensable luxury."⁵⁴ The impact of Israel's policy shift is clear in the near total collapse of Gaza's private sector, the driver of economic growth. Prior to Operation Cast Lead, the private sector was already severely weakened by Israeli closure policies, which prevented the import of raw materials and the export of finished products. By September 2008, at least 95 percent of Gaza's 3,750–3,900 factories had closed, and at least 100,000 workers, virtually the entire private sector, had lost their jobs.⁵⁵

Gaza's economic irrelevance was also seen in a decision by some Israeli banks (including the country's largest commercial bank, Bank Hapoalim) to refuse all direct transactions with Gaza, a decision that followed Israel's 19 September 2007 designation of Gaza as a "hostile territory."⁵⁶ Perhaps the most dramatic expression of Gaza's economic redundancy was the Israeli Supreme Court's decision in November 2007 to approve fuel cuts to Gaza (deemed permissible since it would not harm the population's "essential humanitarian needs"⁵⁷). This was followed in January 2008 by the court's approval of electricity cuts (and in May 2008 by a lowering of acceptable levels for fuel and electricity). The court stated, "We do not accept the petitioners' argument that 'market forces' should be allowed to play their role in Gaza with regard to fuel consumption."⁵⁸ Hence, once the government decides how much fuel it will allow into Gaza, the economy has no role. States analyst Darryl Li, "In place of any legal framework, the state has proposed—and the court has now endorsed—a seemingly simple standard for policy: once [undefined] 'essential humanitarian needs' are met, all other deprivation is permissible."⁵⁹ Thus, according to the Supreme Court, it is acceptable to harm Palestinians and create a humanitarian crisis for political reasons.⁶⁰

Israel's new approach to Gaza also is seen symbolically in the shift in crossing points for exports and imports between Gaza and Israel from Karni/al-Muntar, under joint Israeli-Palestinian control, to Kerem Shalom/Karm Abu Salim, operated solely by Israel. Karni was long the main, best equipped, and most efficient commercial crossing point into Gaza, whereas Kerem Shalom, a small crossing near the Egyptian border, is more like a gate in a fence incapable of handling many kinds of commercial items.⁶¹ At Karni there was a defined system of security procedures

and distribution protocols, but at Kerem Shalom cargo is “offloaded from trucks and then left on pallets in the open for Palestinians to come and pick up when they are allowed to approach”⁶²—as though they are animals in a pen. On 2 January 2012, Israel destroyed buildings and facilities at the Karni crossing, further diminishing if not destroying any possibility of Gaza’s economic recovery and by extension, Palestine’s.⁶³

For some time, it has not been a question of economic growth or development, change or reform, freedom or sovereignty. Rather, for Gaza, the issue is one of essential humanitarian needs, of reducing the needs and rights of 1.65 million people to an “exercise in counting calories” and truckloads of food.⁶⁴ In this way, Israeli policy diverts attention from, and in fact justifies, the destruction of Gaza’s economic infrastructure and productive capacity,⁶⁵ goals largely accomplished with the December 2008 attack. Within such a scenario, aid can at best be a palliative, states the World Bank, “slowing down socio-economic decline [rather] than [serving as] a catalyst for sustainable economic development.”⁶⁶ Thus has Gaza’s already fragile economy been transformed from one driven in large part by private sector productivity to one dependent on humanitarian assistance and public sector employment.

Economic marginalization, while most visible in Gaza, is a problem in the West Bank as well. Already in 2009, the World Bank observed, “Large amounts of donor aid have produced insignificant growth and an increase in economic dependency, despite the consistent improvement in PA governance and security performance.”⁶⁷ In its recent 2012 report, the World Bank argued that although economic growth continues, it is not sustainable, since constraints, particularly on private sector development, remain formidable. These constraints include a high dependence on donor aid as the principal driver of economic growth; continued settlement expansion; restrictions on trade, including on exports to Israel and needed imports of machinery and raw materials; and the severing of access to the crucial East Jerusalem market, the commercial and cultural center of the West Bank.⁶⁸

A critical component constraining if not precluding any real economic development in the West Bank is highly restricted access to area C, which as noted constitutes well over half the West Bank and contains crucial water resources. According to the World Bank, if Palestinians gained access even to 12,500 acres (or 3.5 percent) of the uncultivated land in area C, the Palestinian economy could produce \$1 billion of revenue annually.⁶⁹ Without question, there can be no viable economy in the West Bank without area C, particularly the Jordan Valley.

Israel’s planned and now legally sanctioned economic exploitation of Palestinian resources (which also points to the powerful ties that remain between the Israeli and Palestinian economies) is another striking illustration of the paradigmatic shift from occupation to annexation and imposed sovereignty, and of occupation’s envisioned permanence and

irreversibility. As a dear friend, the late Dr. Hatem Abu Ghazaleh, told me long ago, “There is nothing more permanent than the temporary.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE: A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Perhaps more than anything, the adverse changes examined in this article reflect the terrible failure of the near twenty-years-long Oslo peace process to resolve the conflict. This failure is due, fundamentally, to the fact that the Oslo process was driven by politics not legality, leaving wholly unchallenged the core problem: an unbroken and deepening occupation, which from its inception has been defined by different forms and degrees of collective denial and dispossession. This reality has been amplified by the profound failures of the Palestinian leadership, and by the consistent unwillingness of the international community (including key Arab states) to apply the rule of law by which they claim to live.

Yet, almost two decades of accelerated decline and loss have also given rise to some new and unprecedented strategies and policies, both at the Palestinian official and civil society level, which reflect a new dynamism, particularly in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings. These changes represent potentially new paradigm shifts. At the official level, perhaps the most notable are the continuing attempts at factional reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas and the bid for statehood membership in the UN. In the civil society sphere, the widespread adoption of peaceful, nonviolent resistance as the dominant strategy for dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is highly significant, and has as its main component nonviolent mass mobilization around a rights-based agenda that solicits support from the international community, including Israel. This includes a renewed campaign around the refugee right of return, which has reasserted itself after years of absence during the Oslo period; a boycott and divestment movement; and a strengthened relationship between Palestinians in the occupied territories and the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

While the situation remains uncertain and at times despairing, and the future is impossible to predict, the political terrain is undeniably changing in a way arguably not seen since the first Palestinian uprising in 1987. The key question is whether these new dynamics can be sustained and strengthened under the weight of new and continued internal and external assaults. But they do speak to certain beliefs vital to Palestine’s future: that the status quo ante is no longer tolerable, that a viable national movement must embrace Palestinian refugees beyond Israel/Palestine, and that future change must be rooted in the rule of law. This was the message—forcibly silenced—once before, and possibility resides in the fact that it is the message once again.

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