

NORTH AFRICA, WEST ASIA

Israel's dual approach to Gaza and the West Bank: an overview

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The areas now known as the West Bank and Gaza, despite geographic differences, were once similar in social, cultural and economic terms. But through a long process of one occupation after another, they were set apart and differentiated.

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During almost thirty years of the British mandate, between WWI and the creation of the state of Israel, along with degrees of capitalist development, the two regions remained similar. After the first Arab-Israeli war, and with the establishment of the state of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip were created, and each fell under the occupation of a different neighbouring Arab state (Egypt and Jordan) for about twenty years. This had different consequences for each.

Gaza lost much of its territory, including agricultural lands and pastures to Israel, and was faced with a massive influx of refugees, nearly three-times the size of its native population. Hostile Egyptian policy towards Gaza, closing off access to Egypt, further deteriorated the socio-economic situation of the tiny strip, halting the evolution of traditional economic, social and cultural structures. The situation in the West Bank, first under the control of and later annexed by (Trans-) Jordan, was somewhat different. As part of Abdullah's ambitions, Palestinian refugees were offered Jordanian citizenship, and while many of them lived in camps, their situation was better than their fellow Palestinians in Gaza.

Israel's initial plan after the 1967 occupation of Gaza and the West Bank was to annex Gaza and divide the West Bank with Jordan. The plan was to create Palestinian enclaves in heavily populated areas and to annex the rest, including the Jordan valley and the entire border with Jordan and the Dead Sea, leaving only a corridor open into Jordan (Allon Plan).

Not sure of the future of Jordan and not trusting Palestinians to form a state in a continuous territory in the West Bank, the Drobbles and later Sharon Plans envisaged the establishment of settlements on the hilltops surrounding Palestinian towns and villages and the creation of as many Palestinian enclaves as possible. Although these plans were not formally adopted, many aspects of them formed the basis of all the failed "peace plans" that ensued. In Gaza, which Israel had once occupied for a year after the 1956 Suez War, Israeli military administration faced more radical resistance and adopted a much harsher policy of suppression, deportations and even forced relocation of some refugees.

At the same time, it began establishing Jewish settlements in different parts of Gaza, taking both

strategic locations and prosperous lands on the Mediterranean shore, taking control of all water sources. Consequently, Gaza remained undeveloped, impoverished, less educated, more religious and more and more reliant on UNRWA and foreign donations. In the West Bank, on the other hand, relatively more developed structures were in place, the local Palestinians were more educated, and except for a few interruptions, they were allowed to run their municipal and village administrations semi-autonomously.

Despite the differences, the policies of suppressing resistance, limiting movement by establishing numerous roadblocks and checkpoints, controlling access to water, and most importantly, establishing Jewish settlements were also followed in the West Bank. As part of a deliberate policy, both West Bank and Gazan economies became more and more dependent on Israel. With the closure of many Palestinian factories and farms, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had to earn a living by commuting to Israel and its settlements as cheap labourers.

This policy of course changed following the construction of the separation wall to prevent terrorist activities inside Israel and encroaching into the West Bank beyond the Green Line, also following the closure of the Gaza border.

Differentiations intensified

In both areas the Palestinian resistance was led by predominantly secular Palestinian organizations. However, Israel soon found new allies among Palestinian religious fanatics who opposed their secular and left counterparts. The Mujamma-al Islamiya, a front charity organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s received generous support from the state of Israel to establish mosques, schools and clinics. Years later, and just before the first Intifada, Hamas and Islamic Jihad emerged out of this extensive 'charity' entity, presenting Israel with a formidable fundamentalist religious enemy.

Some major changes did occur following the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, particularly in the West Bank, including the creation of a quasi-Palestinian state, the emergence of a growing number of Palestinian social, economic, academic and cultural institutions, NGOs, and a rapidly growing new middle class. The West Bank remained more or less calm, unlike Gaza, where the more desperate, impoverished, highly unemployed and less educated population was more easily radicalized and mobilized by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, leading to Sharon's decision to unilaterally 'disengage', while removing settlements.

Israel's two approaches to these two Palestinian territories became more pronounced after Hamas' electoral success and eventual forceful takeover of the government in Gaza in 2007. The policy of collective punishment and complete closure of Gaza from land, air and sea made the region even more impoverished on the one hand, and strengthened Hamas and jihad on the other.

However, Hamas' popularity was not because Gazans turned to Islamic fundamentalism; indeed many Gazans were against Hamas's obscurantist, brutal and openly anti-Semitic policies. Its growing popularity was because it was fighting against Israel, who Gazans saw as the source of their miseries. Hamas got support from the Islamist regimes and radical Islamists in the Middle East. More Gazans were pushed towards Hamas with the weakening influence of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, and the diminishing capabilities of UNRWA, whose funding was cut by shortsighted or ill-intentioned western governments, including the Harper government in Canada.

The subsequent confrontations with Israel and rocket launches by Hamas exacerbated the conditions. Massive bombardments throughout Gaza in 2008, 2009, and 2012 led to thousands of

Gazans killed or injured and infrastructure and utilities destroyed. Israel also further reduced the maritime boundary of Gaza, which not only took away Palestinians' chances to access and explore the newly found natural gas resources in the Mediterranean, but also deprived already impoverished Gazan fishermen from fishing. The most recent bombardments with new rounds of thousands of Gazans dead or injured and massive destruction of cities is the continuation of the same policy.

In the West Bank, the situation has been different. Urban development projects have been under way through all the major cities and their suburbs. Ramallah, the administrative capital and the economic center of the Palestinian Authority (which now formally calls itself the State of Palestine), is rapidly growing and constructing modern office buildings, apartments, mansions, hotels, restaurants, schools, hospitals, and boutiques. So, to different degrees, are the other seven cities under the control of the PA. The majority of the 155,000 government employees, along with the thousands of employees of internationally supported NGOs that form the bulk of the new middle class live in these urban areas.

The rapidly growing middle class and other key structural changes that have taken place in the West Bank have many social and political ramifications. Once a predominantly agricultural society, the agricultural sector today employs only 11.5 percent of the working population. The service sector is the largest employer (36.1%), followed by trade (19.6%) and construction (14.4%), and manufacturing over 12%. The survival of all these sectors of the economy is very much dependent on maintaining good relations with Israel. The complex and contradictory position of the new middle classes needs special attention. On the one hand it is comprised of professionals, doctors, lawyers, academics, managers, and all progressive intellectuals and artists, without whom a modern society cannot survive, and no viable Palestinian state would be possible. On the other hand, these strata, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, and unlike the vast majority of their fellow Palestinians in Gaza, have things to lose, and are politically cautious. So, while deploring the continued occupation of their territories and the humiliations they suffer daily, they also have concerns related to continued employment, their kids' education, their mortgages, etc.

The decline of radicalism in the West Bank also reflects the experience they had during the second Intifada, when in 2002 Israeli forces re-occupied Ramallah, cut off the city's electricity, water and communications systems, and with tanks and bulldozers destroyed much of the infrastructure and buildings of the city, including Yasser Arafat's compound. As well, they obviously also look at the experiences of Gaza in 2008-2009, 2012 and now in 2014. Despite all these, considering the fact that 70 percent of Palestinians are below the age of 29, high unemployment and hopelessness can trigger another uprising with disastrous consequences

It seems that so far as Palestinians submit to the terms and condition of the right-wing Israeli government, they can survive and even prosper to a certain extent in the enclaves left for them in the West Bank. From the Israeli viewpoint, if the Palestinian Authority does its job properly, an important part of which is protecting and securing borders with Israel and the separation wall, and acts as a sort of colonial administration, it can grow and expand. It is noteworthy that of the 155,000 employees of the PA, 66,000 or 42 percent are security and police personnel, making it proportionally one of the largest police force in any country of the world. But if Palestinians in the West Bank and the PA seriously challenge the imposed Israeli policies, not accepting the continuous expansion of the Jewish settlements, insisting on ending the occupation, maintaining their claim over East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, the right of return for refugees, and an equitable access to water, then they will have to suffer the predicament faced by Gaza.

It is not inconceivable that Gaza could have also shared somewhat similar experiences as the West Bank. But this was not an option for Israeli's right coalition or for Hamas. In the same manner that Hamas needs Israel to justify its existence, the right-wing Israeli government needs Hamas to justify

its policy of preventing the formation of a viable Palestinian state and continued expansion in the West Bank. Just before the start of the current Israel-Hamas war, Hamas' popularity was at its lowest. Its sources of funding were severely reduced particularly after the closure of tunnels by the new Egyptian regime, and it was not able to pay the salaries of its employees, while 37,000 PA employees in Gaza continued to receive their paychecks. The Hamas leadership's unexpected acceptance of the formation of a unity government under PA rule was a major sign of its weakness. Had they been seeking it, this could have been an opportune moment for Netanyahu's right wing coalition to welcome this development as a step towards a genuine peace process. Instead, both Netanyahu and Hamas leadership turned the brutal killing of three young Jewish settlers, followed by the brutal murder of a Palestinian teenager, into another opportunity for military confrontation. It was also a good excuse also for Netanyahu to announce the latest land grab in the West Bank.

Could there be a third option?

The present situation in both Palestinian regions cannot continue forever. For Palestinians to achieve their legitimate demands and have a lasting peace with Israel, they need to unite and gain serious support from two external forces; the international community, and progressive and pro-peace groups in Israel.

At the international level, while initiatives like the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) Movement have had success they cannot create the type of momentum similar to that of the anti-apartheid movement, largely because major financial support for Israel comes from the US government and Christian and Jewish organizations.

More education, mobilization and initiatives are needed particularly in the western countries. As for the Israeli pro-peace left, while it has tragically dwindled, it is still a very important actor with the potential of assisting Palestinians. A genuine and just peace cannot come before the Israeli public elects a progressive government and replaces the hawkish and rightwing coalition, and before the Palestinians are united and work towards a democratic secular state and lasting peace with Israel.

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P.S.

• Open democracy. 16 October 2014:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/israels-dual-approach-to-gaza-and-west-bank-overview/>

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