

Neither Two States Nor One: The Disengagement and “Creeping Apartheid” in Israel/Palestine

Oren Yiftachel

Department of Geography and Environmental Development, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva 84105 Israel

Under my leadership there will be no empty concessions to the Palestinians ... the fate of Nezarim and Kfar Darom [the most isolated Jewish settlements in Gaza] is the same as Tel-Aviv (Ariel Sharon, *Maariv*, 11 December 2002).

It is impossible to continue keeping 3.5 million Palestinians under occupation—yes it is occupation, and it is bad for Israel ... Controlling 3.5 million Palestinians cannot go on forever (Ariel Sharon, 26 December 2003).

These two statements by Israel’s Prime Minister—made within the short space of 12 months—appear to represent an incredible political transformation. They voice diametrically opposing views on Israel’s intentions for the occupied Palestinian territories. Can Sharon, the leader most associated with aggressive control of the Palestinians, now be advocating the end of Israeli colonialism?

Moreover—unlike most other Israeli leaders—Sharon has turned his intentions into concrete action by recently leading Israel to a unilateral evacuation of 25 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank. This was the first time that Israel willingly evacuated settlements from what it considers the Jewish homeland, that is, Palestine/Eretz Yisrael, between Jordan and the sea.

How can we account for this transformation? Do these moves actually herald the long-awaited crossing of the peace watershed? Are we heading toward the end of Israeli colonialism as part of a two-state solution?

My answer in this short essay will be negative. I will argue that the recent moves by

the Sharon government are indeed significant, as they point to a new phase in the evolving political geography of Israel/Palestine and to the continuing decline of the Greater Israel agenda. However, this change is unlikely to lead in the foreseeable future to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state; rather, it will entrench Israel/Palestine in a state of “neither two states nor one,” framing a process I have called “creeping apartheid.”

A New Phase

The disengagement was the last in a series of Israeli manoeuvres which have combined to create a new phase of spatial politics, best conceptualized as “oppressive consolidation.” The contours of this new phase are complex, marked by a mixture of small territorial concessions and the unilateral introduction of new forms of oppression. It follows decades of unabated Zionist demographic and spatial expansionism, characterized by Jewish-only immigration to Israel/Palestine, the construction of some 200 Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories and in Palestinian regions within Israel, massive land confiscation, and uncompromising attempts to Judaize the entire Israel/Palestine space. Transition to the new phase occurred gradually, as a result of two violent intifadas, the failure of peace talks, and growing pressure against Israel’s illegal colonialism in an increasingly antagonistic international environment.

In the early 1990s Israeli elites began to realize that further expansion bears high military, economic, and social costs that run

counter to the rising agendas of globalization and liberalization. Consequently, they launched a series of moves to consolidate major territorial and political gains. These were often confused and contradictory. They included aggressive policies such as of a wave of new “outpost” settlement, accelerated expansion of existing settlements, increased “anti-terror” offensives, and the separation wall; during the same period, however, Israel also recognized the Palestinian national movement and the PLO, allowed the establishment of a Palestinian state-in-waiting, and retreated (often temporarily) from the main Palestinian towns and cities (and, most recently, from the entire Gaza Strip). Significantly, this period saw the mainstream of Israeli society moving to support territorial concessions.

Yet—barring the unlikely imposition of massive international pressure—this change is not sufficient to bring an end to Israeli colonialism. Zionism remains a deeply ethnocentric movement, premised on belief in its “historic right” over the entire “promised homeland” (Palestine/Eretz Yisrael) and on the associated Othering of the Palestinians. This makes it unable to deal seriously with the core issues of the conflict, such as Israel’s role in the 1948 Nakbah, Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem, legitimate borders, and the status of the Palestinians in Israel. This inability is wrapped in the Israeli discourse by ceaseless public invocation of (often genuine) communal fears of anti-Jewish violence and a distorted representation of Palestinian and Arab intentions towards Israel. These factors have stirred Israel to adopt *unilateralism* as a key method of operation (see Meital 2005).

Ethnocracy, Judaization, and Two States

I have developed an ethnocentric theory to account for regimes and societal processes found in contested territories in which a dominant ethnic nation appropriates the state apparatus to further its expansionist aspira-

tions while keeping some features of formal democracy. Ethnocratic states—such as Israel—are typified by (internal and external) colonial oppression of minorities, which invariably resist this oppressive order. This asymmetric dialectic tends to essentialize identities and polarize spatial and political systems. Examples of ethnocratic regimes include Serbia, Estonia, Latvia, Sri Lanka, pre-1989 Lebanon, and 19th-century Australia (see Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004).

Significantly, the heart of ethnocracy—the ethnicization project—does not necessarily entail *territorial* expansion. If the ethnic character of the state is under threat, ethnocracies may contract geographically, preferring to guard two fundamental tenets—ethnic dominance and a democratic facade—in order to maintain internal and international legitimacy. In such cases, the ethnicization force is applied internally, working to cement greater political, cultural, and spatial control for the dominant group. This is how the 2005 disengagement should be perceived: as assisting Israel’s Judaization project by ridding itself of a large Palestinian population, thereby deepening Jewish control elsewhere in Israel/Palestine.

The disengagement sets an important precedent of removing Jewish colonial settlements in Israel/Palestine and, as such, has the potential to begin a new historical momentum toward complete decolonization. But this outcome is unlikely in the near future, for several major reasons.

Geography

The disengagement should be analyzed not in isolation but as a “package” with parallel Israeli moves to enlarge settlements and construct the wall in the West Bank. Symbolically, these policies were approved by the government in the same meeting in February 2005. Materially, the geography of the West Bank has become increasingly fractured by the growth of the settlement blocs, the check-point regime, gerrymandered municipal

separation wall and a new Israeli strategy of creating “ethnic roads.” These oppressive measures were coupled with institutional and military impediments to Arab economic development and housing construction.

Notably, this geography is dynamic. Israel may well conduct further small “disengagements” by unilaterally evacuating remote settlements, especially in the Nablus and Hebron areas. However, this is not likely to alter the fundamental obstacles to creating a viable Palestinian state; rather, it will function to ease Israel’s problems of managing Palestinian populations. Limited Israeli withdrawals will accelerate a *Bantustanization* process, creating autonomous Palestinian enclaves decorated by state symbols but with little genuine sovereignty free of Israeli control (see also Falah 2005; Farsakh 2005).

Violence

Israel’s ethnocentric mindset and its associated unilateralism stand behind a steadfast refusal to enter negotiations. This is likely to generate Palestinian anti-colonial activities, triggering state violence and terror against mobilized Palestinians. Backed by American interests in a supportive post-9/11 international environment, Israeli measures include target assassinations, occasional raids, and a range of controls over movement, housing construction, and economic development.

The Palestinians, in turn, have used a persistent strategy of anti-Israeli violence and terror propelled by the growing influence of radical Islam. This has had disastrous consequences both for Palestinian democratization and for Jewish–Palestinian trust—so necessary for building peace with a Jewish public still traumatized by its own history of displacement and genocide. Being embedded in Palestinian politics, violence is likely to continue, notwithstanding the recent calming efforts by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. This will create a further Israeli “security need” to tighten control over the Palestinian territories, fuelling further hostil-

ities, which would seriously impede genuine progress toward the two-state solution.

Israeli Politics

A new consensus is in the making among Jews: Israel should control the area west of the separation wall and wait for Palestinians to make the “necessary moves” for peace (such as disarming Hamas and Islamic Jihad, stopping incitement, and supporting further concessions, especially regarding the Right of Return). This consensus has been aptly described as a paradigm shift in the Jewish public *from conflict resolution to conflict management* (Sussman 2005). It allows many Jews to perceive themselves as “progressive” (by supporting the partition of the Land of Israel) while at the same time preserving their privileged position. It should also be remembered that, in the spectrum of Israeli politics, the nationalist position that supports territorial concessions is considered “centrist.”

The likely persistence of Palestinian violence, and the ethnocentric discourse interpreting this violence solely as attempts to destroy Israel (not simply to end the occupation), is likely to maintain solid support for the Jewish fascist and religious Right. This bloc is likely to form the main opposition to the Israeli government, which will likely remain of centre-right colours (in Israeli terms). Despite possible reconfiguration of the Israeli political landscape, in which new parties often rise and fall, in terms of substance, there is little hope for the re-emergence of an influential peace-oriented Left.

The Palestinian citizens of Israel are pivotal here too. Support of their brethren in the Occupied Territories and their campaign against the discriminatory nature of the Israeli state was radicalized following the events of October 2000 and the police killing of 13 unarmed Palestinian citizens in stormy demonstrations during the outbreak of the second intifada. Subsequent events have created a profound Arab–Jewish rift in Israeli politics, impeding the creation of a left-of-

centre Arab–Jewish political alliance. This political constellation, which is closely associated with events in the Occupied Territories, leaves Israeli politics wide open for control by ethnocentric parties and leaders for the foreseeable future. Several elements may attempt to change the political agenda to focus on social issues, but their impact is likely to be limited.

Therefore, the likely dynamics of geography, violence, and politics in Israel/Palestine continue to present profound impediments to the emergence of two viable states based on the 1967 borders. But let us not be mistaken: No political leader is likely to sing the epitaph of the two-state solution. Rather, they will continue to feed the illusion of possible peace, while buttressing a “politics of suspension,” placing the status of Palestinians in a perpetual state of uncertainty (see Azoulay and Ophir 2005). This state of suspension is actively shaped by Israeli policies, as clearly spelled out by Sharon’s senior advisor, Dov Weisglass:

The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process ... [we] prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda. And all this with authority and permission. All with a [US] presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress. (qtd. in Shavit, Benn, and Ettinger 2004)

From “Creeping Apartheid” to Binationalism?

The disengagement has indeed made a significant difference to the political geography of Israel/Palestine, but a close examination reveals not a crossing of the watershed toward ending Israeli colonialism in favour of a two-state solution but, rather, an Israeli policy of “oppressive consolidation,” a “politics of suspension,” and a perpetual probability of mutual violence. These have combined to

create a political geographic order best described as “creeping apartheid.”

Under this order, a hierarchy of rights is gradually institutionalized and legalized based on ethnicity and location. This order is “creeping” because it has never been openly declared, nor endorsed by any political movement. In a game of deception, all actors turn a blind eye and continue to support the illusion of impending peace. This order is also “creeping” because Jews continue to settle in the West Bank, the illegal wall is still being constructed, and the treatment of some groups among Israel’s Palestinian citizens increasingly resembles the fate of their brethren in the Occupied Territories (see Yiftachel 2001, 2005).

This predicament requires new thinking among peace-seeking Israelis and Palestinians. Several avenues are possible, along religious, liberal, revolutionary, and post-nationalist lines. My approach calls for serious re-examination of binationalism as possibly a superior moral, political, and geographic order for the future of Israel/Palestine, but one that is best introduced gradually. Discussion of this option has already begun in several intellectual and political arenas and, given developments in Israel/Palestine, is likely to accelerate in the near future.

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