Zionism's dead end: Separation or ethnic cleansing? Israel's encaging of Gaza aims to achieve both

By Jonathan Cook
Global Research, June 27, 2008
27 June 2008

The following is taken from a talk delivered at the Conference for the Right of Return and the Secular Democratic State, held in Haifa on June 21.

In 1895 Theodor Herzl, Zionism's chief prophet, confided in his diary that he did not favour sharing Palestine with the natives. Better, he wrote, to "try to spirit the penniless [Palestinian] population across the border by denying it any employment in our own country ... Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly."

He was proposing a programme of Palestinian emigration enforced through a policy of strict separation between Jewish immigrants and the indigenous population. In simple terms, he hoped that, once Zionist organisations had bought up large areas of Palestine and owned the main sectors of the economy, Palestinians could be made to leave by denying them rights to work the land or labour in the Jewish-run economy. His vision was one of transfer, or ethnic cleansing, through ethnic separation.

Herzl was suggesting that two possible Zionist solutions to the problem of a Palestinian majority living in Palestine — separation and transfer — were not necessarily alternatives but rather could be mutually reinforcing. Not only that: he believed, if they were used together, the process of ethnic cleansing could be made to appear voluntary, the choice of the victims. It may be that this was both his most enduring legacy and his major innovation to settler colonialism.

In recent years, with the Palestinian population under Israeli rule about to reach parity with the Jewish population, the threat of a Palestinian majority has loomed large again for the Zionists. Not surprisingly, debates about which of these two Zionist solutions to pursue, separation or transfer, have resurfaced.

Today these solutions are ostensibly promoted by two ideological camps loosely associated with Israel's centre-left (Labor and Kadima) and right (Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu). The modern political arguments between them turn on differing visions of the nature of a Jewish state orginally put forward by Labor and Revisionist Zionists.

To make sense of the current political debates, and the events taking place inside Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza, let us first examine the history of these two principles in Zionist thinking.

During the early waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine, the dominant Labor Zionist

movement and its leader David Ben Gurion advanced policies much in line with Herzl's goal. In particular, they promoted the twin principles of "Redemption of the Land" and "Hebrew Labor", which took as their premise the idea that Jews needed to separate themselves from the native population in working the land and employing only other Jews. By being entirely self-reliant in Palestine, Jews could both "cure" themselves of their tainted Diaspora natures and deprive the Palestinians of the opportunity to subsist in their own homeland.

At the forefront of this drive was the Zionist trade union federation, the Histadrut, which denied membership to Palestinians — and, for many years after the establishment of the Jewish state, even to the remants of the Palestinian population who became Israeli citizens.

But if separation was the official policy of Labor Zionism, behind the scenes Ben Gurion and his officials increasingly appreciated that it would not be enough in itself to achieve their goal of a pure ethnic state. Land sales remained low, at about 6 per cent of the territory, and the Jewish-owned parts of the economy relied on cheap Palestinian labour.

Instead, the Labor Zionists secretly began working on a programme of ethnic cleansing. After 1937 and Britain's Peel Report proposing partition of Palestine, Ben Gurion was more open about transfer, recognising that a Jewish state would be impossible unless most of the indigenous population was cleared from within its borders.

Israel's new historians have acknowledged Ben Gurion's commitment to transfer. As Benny Morris notes, for example, Ben Gurion "understood that there could be no Jewish state with a large and hostile Arab minority in its midst." The Israeli leadership therefore developed a plan for ethnic cleansing under cover of war, compiling detailed dossiers on the communities that needed to be driven out and then passing on the order, in Plan Dalet, to commanders in the field. During the 1948 war the new state of Israel was emptied of at least 80 per cent of its indigenous population.

In physically expelling the Palestinian population, Ben Gurion responded to the political opportunities of the day and recalibrated the Labor Zionism of Herzl. In particular he achieved the goal of displacement desired by Herzl while also largely persuading the world through a campaign of propaganda that the exodus of the refugees was mostly voluntary. In one of the most enduring Zionist myths, convincingly rebutted by modern historians, we are still told that the refugees left because they were told to do so by the Arab leadership.

The other camp, the Revisionists, had a far more ambivalent attitude to the native Palestinian population. Paradoxically, given their uncompromising claim to a Greater Israel embracing both banks of the Jordan River (thereby including not only Palestine but also the modern state of Jordan), they were more prepared than the Labor Zionists to allow the natives to remain where they were.

Vladimir Jabotinsky, the leader of Revisionism, observed in 1938 — possibly in a rebuff to Ben Gurion's espousal of transfer — that "it must be hateful for any Jew to think that the rebirth of a Jewish state should ever be linked with such an odious suggestion as the removal of non-Jewish citizens". The Revisionists, it seems, were resigned to the fact that the enlarged territory they desired would inevitably include a majority of Arabs. They were therefore less concerned with removing the natives than finding a way to make them accept Jewish rule.

In 1923, Jabotinsky formulated his answer, one that implicitly included the notion of separation but not necessarily transfer: an "iron wall" of unremitting force to cow the natives into submission. In his words, the agreement of the Palestinians to their subjugation could be reached only "through the iron wall, that is to say, the establishment in Palestine of a force that will in no way be influenced by Arab pressure".

An enthusiast of British imperial rule, Jabotinsky envisioned the future Jewish state in simple colonial terms, as a European elite ruling over the native population.

Inside Revisionism, however, there was a shift from the idea of separation to transfer that mirrored developments inside Labor Zionism. This change was perhaps more opportunistic than ideological, and was particularly apparent as the Revisionists sensed Ben Gurion's success in forging a Jewish state through transfer.

One of Jabotinsky disciples, Menachem Begin, who would later become a Likud prime minister, was leader in 1948 of the Irgun militia that committed one of the worst atrocities of the war. He led his fighters into the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin where they massacred over 100 inhabitants, including women and children.

Savage enough though these events were, Begin and his followers consciously inflated the death toll to more than 250 through the pages of the New York Times. Their goal was to spread terror among the wider Palestinian population and encourage them to flee. He later happily noted: "Arabs throughout the country, induced to believe wild tales of 'Irgun butchery', were seized with limitless panic and started to flee for their lives. This mass flight soon developed into a maddened, uncontrollable stampede."

Subsequently, other prominent figures on the right openly espoused ethnic cleansing, including the late General Rehavam Ze'evi, whose Moledet party campaigned in elections under the symbol of the Hebrew character "tet", for transfer. His successor, Benny Elon, a settler leader and rabbi, adopted a similar platform: "Only population transfer can bring peace".

The intensity of the separation vs transfer debate subsided after 1948 and the ethnic cleansing campaign that removed most of the native Palestinian population from the Jewish state. The Palestinian minority left behind — a fifth of the population but a group, it was widely assumed, that would soon be swamped by Jewish immigration — was seen as an irritation but not yet as a threat. It was placed under a military government for nearly two decades, a system designed to enforce separation between Palestinians and Jews inside Israel. Such separation — in education, employment and residence — exists to this day, even if in a less extreme form.

The separation-transfer debate was chiefly revived by Israel's conquest of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. With Israel's erasure of the Green Line, and the effective erosion of the distinction between Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, the problem of a Palestinian majority again loomed large for the Zionists.

Cabinet debates from 1967 show the quandary faced by the government. Almost alone, Moshe Dayan favoured annexation of both the newly captured territories and the Palestinian population there. Others believed that such a move would be seen as transparently colonialist and rapidly degenerate into an apartheid system of Jewish citizens and

Palestinian non-citizens. In their minds, Jabotinsky's solution of an iron wall was no longer viable.

But equally, in a more media-saturated era, which at least paid lip-service to human rights, the government could see no way to expel the Palestinian population on a large scale and annex the land, as Ben Gurion had done earlier. Also possibly, they could see no way of persuading the world that such expulsions should be characterised as voluntary.

Israel therefore declined to move decisively in either direction, neither fully carrying out a transfer programme nor enforcing strict separation. Instead it opted for an apartheid model that accommodated Dayan's suggestion of a "creeping annexation" of the occupied territories that he rightly believed would go largely unnoticed by the West.

The separation embodied in South African apartheid differed from Herzl's notion of separation in one important respect: in apartheid, the "other" population was a necessary, even if much abused, component of the political arrangement. As the exiled Palestinian thinker Azmi Bishara has noted, in South Africa "racial segregation was not absolute. It took place within a framework of political unity. The racist regime saw blacks as part of the system, an ingredient of the whole. The whites created a racist hierarchy within the unity."

In other words, the self-reliance, or unilateralism, implicit in Herzl's concept of separation was ignored for many years of Israel's occupation. The Palestinian labour force was exploited by Israel just as black workers were by South Africa. This view of the Palestinians was formalised in the Oslo accords, which were predicated on the kind of separation needed to create a captive labour force.

However, Yitzhak Rabin's version of apartheid embodied by the Oslo process, and Binyamin Netanyahu's opposition in upholding Jabotinsky's vision of Greater Israel, both deviated from Herzl's model of transfer through separation. This is largely why each political current has been subsumed within the recent but more powerful trend towards "unilateral separation".

Not surprisingly, the policy of "unilateral separation" emerged from among the Labor Zionists, advocated primarily by Ehud Barak. However, it was soon adopted by many members of Likud too. Ultimately its success derived from the conversion to its cause of Greater Israel's arch-exponent, Ariel Sharon. He realised the chief manifestations of unilateral separation, the West Bank wall and the Gaza disengagement, as well breaking up Israel's rightwing to create a new consensus party, Kadima.

In the new consensus, the transfer of Palestinians could be achieved through imposed and absolute separation — just as Herzl had once hoped. After the Gaza disengagement, the next stage was promoted by Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert. His plan for convergence, limited withdrawals from the West Bank in which most settlers would remain in place, has been dropped, but its infrastructure — the separation wall — continues to be built.

How will modern Zionists convert unilateral separation into transfer? How will Herzl's original vision of ethnic cleansing enforced through strict ethnic separation be realised in today's world?

The current siege of Gaza offers the template. After disengagement, Israel has been able to cut off at will Gazans' access to aid, food, fuel and humanitarian services. Normality has

been further eroded by sonic booms, random Israeli air attacks, and repeated small-scale invasions that have inflicted a large toll of casualties, particularly among civilians.

Gaza's imprisonment has stopped being a metaphor and become a daily reality. In fact, Gaza's condition is far worse than imprisonment: prisoners, even of war, expect to have their humanity respected, and be properly sheltered, cared for, fed and clothed. Gazans can no longer rely on these staples of life.

The ultimate goal of this extreme form of separation is patently clear: transfer. By depriving Palestinians of the basic conditions of a normal life, it is assumed that they will eventually choose to leave — in what can once again be sold to the world as a voluntary exodus. And if Palestinians choose to abandon their homeland, then in Zionist thinking they have forfeited their right to it — just as earlier generations of Zionists believed the Palestinian refugees had done by supposedly fleeing during the 1948 and 1967 wars.

Is this process of transfer inevitable? I think not. The success of a modern policy of "transfer through separation" faces severe limitations.

First, it depends on continuing US global hegemony and blind support for Israel. Such support is likely to be undermined by the current American misadventures in the Middle East, and a gradual shift in the balance of power to China, Russia and India.

Second, it requires a Zionist worldview that departs starkly not only from international law but also from the values upheld by most societies and ideologies. The nature of Zionist ambitions is likely to be ever harder to conceal, as is evident from the tide of opinion polls showing that Western publics, if not their governments, believe Israel to be one of the biggest threats to world order.

And third, it assumes that the Palestinians will remain passive during their slow eradication. The historical evidence most certainly shows that they will not.

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