

THE WALL AT THE HEART OF PALESTINE

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If the separation wall between Israel and Palestine is placed within its historical context, then this shows that optimistic perceptions of the wall as a step towards peace are misplaced. The wall forms part of an older strategy linked to an overall Zionist and Israeli vision of imposing a settlement on the conflict by the use of force. This strategy aims at erasing the concept of Palestine out of memory and reality. It is argued that from 1948 onwards, Israeli state actions have gradually implemented the objective of the de-Arabization of Palestine. The aim of the wall is not so much to prevent suicide bombers, which it will not do, but to wipe out Palestine altogether. The world needs to wake up to these human rights violations before it is too late.

When I browsed through the latest articles on the separation wall between Israel and the occupied territories in the first months of 2004, it was clear to me even before the International Court of Justice in the Hague reaches its verdict about its effect on human rights, that the readers of this volume and other publications do not need yet another piece that summarizes the inhuman consequences of that wall. The wall is not yet completed, in fact large parts have not been built yet. But the eight meters concrete rise already in place in the Gaza strip since the mid 1990s and the new stretches built in the West Bank in the beginning of this century have already sowed havoc and destruction in Palestine¹.

It began with reports on the part of the wall that was inserted in the midst of an urban neighbourhood in east Jerusalem, Abu Dis. This quarter was halved, intimidating its inhabitants². It transpired

¹ Ahmad Sub Laban, Media Monitors Network, 20 March 2004.

² Sophie Claudet, *Sliced in two by Israel's barrier*, Agiance France Press January 10, 2004.

that the wall allows Israel to terrorize the population by forcing it to go through a limited number of gates between one area and the other. The International Red Cross reported that the wall hampered the maintenance of even the most elementary health and humanitarian services³.

As bricks were piled up, an increasing number of callous policies were exposed. It ruined the livelihood for hundred of thousands Palestinians living next to the wall, shattering the social fabric of rural life in the vicinity of the wall where farmers were unable to resume even a symbolic or elementary rhythm of village life⁴. As the Israeli journalist Amira Hass reported villages turned into semi ghost towns⁵ or totally lost their fields and Bustans.

This article can not add new information on these injustices and readers would have unfortunately to follow daily new reports to realize the damage caused by the wall. The aims of this article are to contextualize the wall policies within its historical and ideological milieu.

1. The Wall as A Peace Plan

Leading figures on the Israeli left, enthusiastically received the new Israeli initiative to build a wall separating Israel and the West Bank as far back as the middle of June 2002, when it was first announced publicly. These were the same politicians and public figures who supported the Oslo peace process, convinced it would inevitably lead to a lasting and comprehensive peace. The endorsement of separation by a wall was followed by a strong advocacy for the making of an independent Palestinian state. The security wall in their eyes is the demarcation of the future border between Israel and Palestine. If indeed the present wall is to delineate Israel's future boundaries, then it means that Palestine – the geopolitical entity for which the Palestinian national movement had been struggling for, ever since its inception – could be lost. The

³ BBC World Service Report, 18 February 2004.

⁴ Bill Kaufman, *Cement Barrier Chokes Life out of Palestinian Villages*, *Calgary Sun*, 8 March 2004.

⁵ *Nothing Left but Houses and Backyards for Land*, *Haaretz*, 4 March 2004.

wall, in such a case, brings almost to a successful completion the process begun by the Zionist movement in 1882, and continued vigorously by Israel since 1948, of de-Arabizing the land of Palestine. So far, the process was advanced by settlement, expropriation of land and expulsion. The wall is a new means to achieve an old plan to limit Palestine, after it had already been minimized into ridiculous size by the Oslo accord, which bred unknown and unfamiliar concepts of statehood in the international discourse: such as a state made of two parts with no geographical continuity, which are themselves bisected and bifurcated into cantons with no territorial integrity.

This optimistic perception regarding the wall is utterly misplaced, as were the interpretations of Oslo as a genuine peace process at the time. Far from heralding the arrival of a new chapter in the history of Palestine, the erection of the wall is very much a continuation of an old policy through new means. The policy is that of erasing Palestine, as a geographical, political and cultural entity from the map of the area stretching from the river Jordan to the Mediterranean. This is why it is essential to contextualise the proposed wall not just within the present Israeli policy and objectives, but also within a wider historical process which began in the late 19th century.

Apart from a few extreme settlers, the wall was widely welcomed in Israel. For most Jews in Israel it is not the demarcation of a final border represented by the wall that attracts them, but rather it is seen as the best security device that could put an end to the Palestinian suicide bombers. But it seems that for the politicians, mainly in the Labour party, who conceived the idea for the first time in 2002, the wall's importance lies in its strategic rather than tactical value. Two of the main contenders for the Labour's chairmanship, Haim Ramon and Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, in the 2003 elections presented the wall as a 'peace plan', not some means to prevent infiltration. It has always been the Labour party's wish to base peace on a dividing line. This party's chief slogan for the 1992 general elections was **'We are here and They are There'**, meaning that the Zionist dream can only be fulfilled with the total separation between Palestinian and Jews. What exactly would happen on the other Palestinian side of the wall never seemed to bother the peace visionaries of the Labour party. In terms of economic viability, natural and water resources (most of which the Labour party wanted to keep on the Israeli side of the divide), sovereignty (which the

Labour party did not wish to be full or complete as its 'Palestine' would include in it ex-territorial blocs of Jewish settlements) and security (which is meant to be exclusively in Israeli hands). A far more intricate question, is what would such a division mean for the one and a quarter million Palestinians inside Israel; are they 'We' or are they 'They'? This vision is compatible with Prime Minister Sharon's basic idea of how to 'solve' the Palestine question. He wished to do it without a wall when elected twice to power in 2001 and 2003, but has been persuaded after the last elections, for the sake of national unity and due to his inability to provide personal security to the Israeli citizens, to integrate the wall in his overall plans for Palestine. The Labour party suggests a wall that cuts the West Bank's 5000 square kilometers in two, leaving 2500 square kilometers of the West Bank in Israel's hand. For Ariel Sharon the added 2500 square kilometers are sufficient for the implementation of his dream of Greater Israel.

2. The Sharon Governments and the Wall Strategy

The wall is part of an older scheme, its present marketing and timing responds to a natural despair in Israel stemming from the inability of the government to provide personal security ever since the eruption of intifadat al-Aqsa. This is not the first time Ariel Sharon exploits temporary fears for the implementation of long term plans. In the summer of 1982, when the PLO's resistance war reached a new level of intensity and included, inter alia, the launching of Qatasha missiles into Israel, the Israeli settlers on the northern border with Lebanon were enlisted to support the invasion of their northern neighbor. Then, as now, the tactical objective, which is the end of violence, was not only not achieved, it did, as it is bound to happen this time too, result in worse forms of violence. The wall is quite probably going to produce more violence against Israel and of course, as always, against the Palestinians.

In 1982, as is currently happening, within the Israeli polity, the Labour opposition party was unable to offer an alternative. On the eve of Lebanon's invasion, the PLO offered an outlet and proposed a cease fire and an armistice. But Sharon had other plans. He violated a de facto cease fire with the PLO and sent the Israeli army to invade Lebanon so that he could install a government of his liking in Beirut and destroy the PLO's infrastructure there. The wall, this

time in the case of the West Bank, is Sharon's ploy to sidetrack the opportunities opened every now and then by regional and global mediations. More directly, Sharon's support for the wall came as a response to a Saudi peace plan, which was endorsed by the Palestinians and the Arab League. The peace track is one that has a potential of offering lasting security to both Israelis and Palestinians, but in a secure world, generals like Sharon do not thrive, and might even, politically not survive.

In fact, both the Lebanon and the wall chapters are a reflection in Sharon's career of an overall Zionist and Israeli vision of imposing a settlement on the conflict by use of force. This would erase the concept of 'Palestine' out of memory and reality and substitute it with its rival name and definition, that of Eretz Israel. In this Eretz Israel there are regions of Judea and Samaria, which may have a considerable number of 'Arabs' in it, however they are not supposed to possess the power of granting the country its name or character and may be expelled in due course or when the conditions ripen. Palestine the country had been scratched out of the Zionist conscience and thought very early on; in fact from the moment the first wave of Jewish immigrants arrived on the land in 1882. As long as the Jewish community in Palestine was a minority and under the auspices of the British mandate, Palestine's effacement was symbolic as there was no military power to wipe it out on the ground. Nevertheless Palestine was totally excluded from the Zionist settlers' discourse and narrative.

3. The Wider Historical Context – The De-Arabization of Palestine

When the opportunity to translate visions into reality came along in 1948, Palestine was eliminated not only in word but also by sword. The UN partition resolution gave the Zionist movement 56% of Palestine. The 1948 war provided an opportunity to take over 78% of it, and it was thought for all intents and purposes that Palestine as a geo-political or cultural entity was gone.

But Palestine persisted in the refugee camps, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as among the Palestinian minority in Israel itself. It survived the 1967 war and the fall of 100% of Palestinian land under Israeli control. In the first decade of the occupation, the Labour government, hoped to rub out Palestine from the regional

and global awareness by offering a functional and territorial division of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with Jordan, but to no avail.

In 1977, with the rise of Likkud to power, the Greater Israel ideology was meant to wipe out the concept of 'Palestine' by massive settlement of Jews in the occupied territories, by an adamant refusal to even discuss the future of the refugees in any diplomatic negotiations, and by insistence that the Palestinians in Israel were not a national group but rather religious communities of Christians and Muslims who had no right for self determination or national collectivity.

This too did not work and the first Intifada broke out in 1987. The uprising forced the Israelis, for the first time ever since 1948, to consider Palestine as a possible political entity, in the form of an independent state next to Israel, to be established within the occupied territories. This was at least the principle agreed upon in the Oslo accord. In retrospect, it seems that the Israeli government had no intention of creating Palestine on 22% of historical Palestine. At the same time, it seems that the PLO, now turned into the Palestinian Authority made the most significant ever Palestinian concession, by consenting for a mini Palestine, as the geopolitical realization of its vision as a liberation movement.

But even that limited wish was not granted to the PLO. Mini Palestine was bisected to areas A, B, and C and the Gaza Strip cordoned and encircled by an electric wall like a huge prison – leaving much of 'Palestine' – in fact 42% of the West Bank and about 20% of the Gaza Strip – under direct or indirect Israeli occupation. This was the situation during the 'peace process' and yet Israelis and Americans, and some Europeans, fail to understand why the 'peace process' did not inspire the Palestinians to trust the diplomatic way as the best means of fulfilling their dreams of self-determination and independence, albeit in a mini-state. When this reality was presented to President Arafat as a 'take it or leave it' ultimatum in Camp David in the summer of 2000, the second intifada broke out.

4. The Wall and The Suicide Bombers

The unarmed uprising turned into an armed one as a result of a harsh Israeli retaliation to the demonstrations and street protestations. Gradually, mini Palestine was re-occupied. Whether under direct or indirect rule, the occupied population found itself in

the same dismal conditions: unemployed, starved and strangled without anyone being able to move or properly make a living. This situation produced the suicide bombers, which not surprisingly, was recognized by Mrs. Blair, the British Prime Minister's wife, and I suspect many others. Reprehensible as they are when used against innocent citizens, they are the product of despair (as indeed has been pointed out recently by a petition signed by Palestinian intellectuals who both condemned the attacks and explained their context).

The Israelis have tried all possible means of crushing what they call the 'terror infrastructure', as if F-16, Tanks and Commando units can do much against young Palestinian men and women willing to turn into fire balls in the midst of a Jewish crowd. The human loss on the Israeli side is catastrophic in numbers, relative to Israel history and the number of citizens; the tragedies are amplified by the fact that in some cases entire families perished in such attacks. The almost incomprehensible cowardice of the Israeli press, particularly the electronic one, prevents the Jewish society from being exposed to the background that produced these personal and familiar calamities. There is no mention of land occupation, the humiliation, the assassinations, mass arrests, destruction of houses and starvation that bred these suicide attacks. With such a narrowing of the public mind, it is no wonder, that the wall is accepted unconditionally and uncritically by many Israelis as a magic formula.

A casual observer could easily foresee that the wall will not be an obstacle for future suicide bombers. However it will serve the past and present ideological ambitions of Israel to wipe out Palestine altogether, a far more convenient solution than compromising, reconciling or being accountable for the past. With the help of the wall – euphemistically called in Israel 'the fence,' Sharon delineates what Palestine shall be for future generations: half of the West Bank, bisected into isolated cantons, with diluted numbers of Palestinians and an island consisting of 75% of the Gaza Strip. In these areas, Palestinians can run their own municipal affairs, but no more than that. They can even call these regions a State. Judging by President Bush's statement of June 24, 2002, this is not far from the American current vision of a solution. President Bush expects democracy, transparency and economic prosperity. This cynicism, or insipidity, damages American-Palestinian relationship further and may in a more distant future harm the US relationship with

the Arab world significantly. Bush has not only ceased to be an honest broker, (he never was), but has become the facilitator of the Israeli attempt to wipe Palestine out of memory, consciousness and existence.

5. Siege Mentality – The Wall around Israel

The wall could also work in some ways against Israel's interests. This has already transpired during the Israeli siege of the Muqata, where while Arafat was isolated, Israelis were for a while ostracized by most of the world, so here too a similar situation can develop. The wall encircles Israel as much as it cordons off Palestine. This new wall, stretching along the longest border Israel has, the Eastern front, can only increase the already prevailing Israeli psychical sense of isolation and aggravate the psychological siege mentality Israelis have been suffering from over the years which is one of the best explanations for the intransigent and aggressive policies their successive governments have been pursuing.

But the wall is far more destructive for the Palestinians under occupation. It is impossible to talk of a process of deterioration or worsening conditions, when reality is now so bleak and inhuman. Unfortunately, it can become worse.

Will the world at large remain silent as it has done for so many years in the face of yet another attempt to erase Palestine, or will the wise words of Cherry Blair, Desmond Tutu, Jose Saramago, Oliver Stone, Ted Turner, and others who have seen with their own eyes and have warned against the impending calamity (a criticism for which they were immediately branded as anti Semites and pro-Nazis) open the eyes of the international community? Or will the world follow CNN's suit and like this huge network succumb to Israel's pressure and cease, as a result, its basically balanced coverage on the conflict?⁶

Judging by the American polices, even before the occupation of Iraq, but indeed even more so, after the war, they seem to be based

⁶ The Israel Minister of communication has tried to remove the BBC world service from the Israel satellite and cable networks as punishment for its '*biased*' coverage, one can only hope that BBC will not give in as CNN did.

on President George Bush's statement on Palestine, on the eve of the US congressional elections in autumn of 2002 in which he ordered his administration to cease any public criticism of retaliatory Israeli policies in the occupied territories.⁷ The new discourse is that Israel has the 'right to defend itself' – the banner with which American policies in general have been justified ever since September 11, 2001. Within such an atmosphere, the voices aforementioned remain out in the wilderness of an indifferent world. Palestine, once not so long ago, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan with an indigenous Arab population, is going to be walled within less than 15 per cent of its original size. This is the preferred solution of the Israeli Labour and Likkud parties and the American administration.

The wall is therefore not just a tactical device intended to fend off suicide bombers. It is a means in an overall strategy, now fully exposed to the world. But where is the world in this? Where are Europe, the Arab world and the Asian and African nations? One can understand why Germany hesitates to take a clear stance on the issue (although it is high time that it absorbs the moral lesson from its past conduct – its moral obligation to the Holocaust should place it at the head of the camp that opposes crimes against humanity, land occupation and abuses of human rights, even if those are ultimately committed by victims of that very holocaust). But what about the other members of the EU and the UN? They may wake up when it is too late. Too late not only for the Palestinians, but also for the Israelis who would find it even more difficult to be accepted, or even survive, in the Middle East, after a second Nabkrah of their own making.

⁷ Until that time the discourse was one of unease with such collective punitive actions as house demolitions, curfews, closures and assassinations.