

Build Bridges, Not Walls

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In a 1923 polemic, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, pioneer of revisionist Zionism, insisted upon the use of force to break Arab resistance to Jewish settlement of Palestine, an imperative he cast in metaphorical terms as "The Iron Wall." Written as a challenge to Labor Zionism, the Iron Wall with its combative vision would gradually emerge fully ascendant within the Israeli political mainstream. Today, Jabotinsky's prescient metaphor has assumed a haunting reincarnation as the World Court in The Hague stands poised to pronounce upon the legality of this apparition. Rising upon the Palestinian landscape in a cloak of concrete and concertina wire, the wall erected by Jabotinsky's modern-day political progeny in Israel admits to a conflict over territory and rights of citizenship, communicating a stark asymmetry of power between the conflict's two protagonists.

More than a physical barrier imposed by the powerful upon the region's stateless and dispossessed, the wall expresses a collective psychology of conquest articulated most succinctly by one of its leading proponents, Moshe Yaalon, the Israeli army chief of staff.

He insists that "the Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people."

How did a wall converge with this sentiment, and what is likely to transpire from such convergence?

Among early 20th century Jews aiming to resolve the Jewish question, there existed a now overlooked tradition of emancipation highly critical of the bellicose vision linking Jabotinsky to Yaalon.

As early as 1919, Julius Kahn, a Jewish congressman from California, wrote a letter to President Woodrow Wilson that was signed by 299 rabbis and Jewish laypeople who opposed creation of a Jewish state in Palestine because displacing Palestinians would be "contrary to the principles of democracy." Others, notably Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, crafted a vision of Jewish emancipation based not on conquest, but on cooperation between Jews and Palestinians. Regrettably, the ideas of Kahn, Magnes and Buber did not prevail when history collided with calamity in 1947-48. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and the cynically hostile response of allied governments to Jewish efforts at resettling in Europe and the U.S., it was perhaps understandable for Jews to conclude that only a Jewish state would resolve what appeared to be the world's intractable anti-Semitism.

The fact is, however, Palestinians living in the territory chosen for this experiment had nothing whatever to do with the anti-Semitic scourge inflicted upon European Jewry. Sadly, they were the ones forced to pay compensation for this European crime. And pay they did.

Mythical representations of Israeli state-building in 1948 depict a heroic, even miraculous struggle against an implacable Arab adversary. Palestinians, in this narrative, deserted their homes at the behest of corrupt Arab leaders in the expectation of recouping their losses through

victory over a supposedly beleaguered Jewish defense force.

Israeli historians themselves, from Anita Shapira to Avi Shlaim, have discredited this founding myth. In its place is a more sober account of Israeli military superiority and a more honest acknowledgment of the forcible expulsion of between 700,000 and 800,000 Palestinians.

Historian Benny Morris of Ben-Gurion University, indeed no friend of the Palestinians', has offered the most detailed scholarly accounts of this population transfer. "Without the uprooting of the Palestinians," concedes Morris in a January interview in Haaretz, "a Jewish state would not have arisen. There was no choice but to expel that population."

What the framers of the emerging state hastened to do after this remaking of territory was to institutionalize what Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel refers to as an "ethnocracy," in which rights of citizenship are allocated not on the basis of democratic principles but instead on demographic ones. The clearest example of this commitment to demography is the Law of Return by which Israel facilitated Jewish immigration while denying Palestinians with centuries on the same land their legal right to return to their homes.

If 1948 represents the politics of dispossession, occupation of further Palestinian territory reveals a politics of immobilization, the cutting of the routes whereby people, goods, and ideas circulate in providing the means of communication at the core of any economy and society. While the occupation consists mostly of settlements and the repopulation of Palestinian territory with 435,000 Israeli settlers, the essence of the occupation lies in the notion of control; in the construction of segregated roads connecting settlements and disconnecting Palestinian towns, and the prohibitions on movement of Palestinians and Palestinian goods through a system of permits and checkpoints.

When communication is strangled and society is immobilized, life itself becomes untenable. In such circumstances, human populations either wither or migrate. It is this eventuality, a land emptied of Palestinians, to which the occupation aspires--which brings us back to Jabotinsky and the wall.

The wall is an escalation of immobilization. Indeed, what Israeli leaders are doing with the wall inside occupied territory reveals their true aims. One need only go to Abu Dis outside Jerusalem to observe such politics of immobility.

Here on a stretch where the wall reaches 6 1/2 feet and cuts the town in two, Palestinians, in order to go from one side of town to the other, confront concrete. They can often be seen scaling the wall and passing children over the barrier in full view of Israeli soldiers stationed there to prevent such "incursions" but too ashamed to stop individuals from trying to conduct their lives in conditions made humiliating and burdensome.

In Qalqilya, the wall performs a more onerous mission of immobilization, literally keeping human beings caged. "There is a big difference between a prison and what the wall has done to us," insists Abdul-latif Khaled, a hydrologist with the Palestinian Hydrology Group in Jayous, near Qalqilya. "In prison, the authorities try to keep you in. Here, the Israeli authorities are trying to make us go out."

In these circumstances, the wall is creating a landscape of unintended consequences. In seeking to separate Jews and Palestinian, the wall is working paradoxically toward creation of a single territory. By seizing additional Palestinian land and obliterating any remaining geographical contiguity in the West Bank, it is undermining the territorial basis of Palestinian statehood and redefining the political choices open to Palestinians for resolution of the conflict.

While a separate state remains perhaps the option of choice among most Palestinians, what was once considered a utopian idea--a secular binational state in which Jews and Palestinian Arabs would share historic Palestine on the basis of one person, one vote--is gaining currency as the wall expands and further shrinks Palestinian territory, and as settlements become irrevocable

historical facts.

"The two-state solution is no longer in a coma," observed Omar Barghouti, a Palestinian political analyst, commenting on the wall at a January conference of academics in Jerusalem. "It is truly dead." Even Ahmed Qureia, prime minister of the Palestinian Authority whose entire political fortunes rest on creation of a Palestinian state, has conceded that the wall may force Palestinian society into seeking a single, secular, binational state as a solution to the conflict.

In pursuing Jabotinsky's iron wall to its logical conclusion, the Israeli leadership may have unwittingly forced its own hand. Absent a viable territorial basis upon which a Palestinian state could emerge, Israel seemingly has three alternatives. It can continue the occupation and in five years become an apartheid-like state ruling militarily over a majority Palestinian population; it can use force in an apocalyptic-like transfer of the Palestinian population; or it can reject as an historical failure Jabotinsky's militarism rooted in the contradiction of a religious-based civil society, and embark upon an alternative articulated by the likes of Kahn, Magnes, and Buber but not yet tried.

Legality aside, the wall stands as an affront to human dignity and Jewish memory itself. In the spirit of rediscovering a lost tradition, dismantling this oppressive symbol opens an opportunity to frame a vision in which Jews and Palestinians have equally legitimate claims upon the territory with equal rights of return in a truly democratic path to peace.

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