
Power, Propaganda and the Promised Land

EUPHEMISMS THWART UNDERSTANDING AND RESOLUTION OF ISRAELI/PALESTINIAN ISSUE

By Gary Fields



Palestinian farmer Tawfiq Hasan Salim of Jayyous reacts following the destruction of his olive trees by settlers from Zufim. (Photo: Gary Fields)

Language, as George Orwell remarked, is a proxy for power. According to the celebrated author of "1984," those in power use language to disseminate truth selectively through a process of representation and concealment. When applied to the region of Israel/Palestine, Orwell's insights reveal how this interplay of representation and concealment permeates the exercise of power, and why, absent changes in the discourse of the powerful side, there is little reason to expect any progress in the situation.

This month, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reiterated Israel's intention to build 3,500 additional units of housing for Jewish settlers in the Palestinian West Bank while demanding at the same time that the Palestinian leadership do more to dismantle what the Israeli leader refers to as the "terror infrastructure." A critical examination of these words testifies to the asymmetry of power between the two sides, while providing insights on why the conflict stands little chance of abating.

The term, "infrastructure of terror" is an emotionally charged metaphor commonly employed by the powerful side in the conflict to condemn what it insists is the single obstruction to peace between Israel and the Palestinian people. This term, however, is far from a neutral representation of why hostilities between the two groups persist. Its use bears witness to issues in the conflict rendered invisible by the stronger of the two belligerents.

When invoked by the powerful side, this potent slogan empties the conflict of all references to the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territory. In the process, this metaphor creates a language about the situation purged of issues deriving from the occupation such as housing settlements, water rights, freedom of movement and sovereignty. It shrouds these issues beneath the same veil of silence hiding the occupation itself. The consequence

is a conflated sense of who has power and who is subjected to domination, and a discourse distorted by the concealment of issues most fundamental to the conflict.

Instead of occupation and its consequences as the basis for dialogue between the powerful and those under its military rule, the focus on the terror infrastructure shifts responsibility for the conflict to an implacable and timeless set of hatreds. Irrational in character, primordial in their persistence, these hatreds, insist the powerful, have no connection to the experiences of people living under military rule, and no relationship to the history of how one side has come to dominate the other.

What results from this exercise in representation and concealment by the powerful side is a discourse about the conflict disengaged from any relationship to the historical past.

Such aversion to past history has profound consequences on the status of grievances harbored by the weaker side. The language of historical forgetting proffered by the powerful essentially denies the experiences of an entire people living under military rule, thereby eliminating their grievances from view. The irony of the stronger side deploying such a language of historical amnesia is indeed palpable

As a diversion from the occupation and its impacts, purveyors of the infrastructure of terror resort to ongoing repetition of the metaphor, much like the manipulation of slogans in Orwell's "1984." Such repetition has a clear motive and objective. Embedded in the metaphor are implicit but no less powerful affirmations about good and evil, along with representations of "them" as perpetrators and "us" as innocent, beleaguered victims. When subjected to ongoing repetition by the leaders of the stronger side, these embedded meanings of culpability and innocence pervade the collective psyche in much the same way that the language of "newspeak" in "1984" becomes accepted uncritically as truth. This language of self-righteous victimhood, critiqued eloquently by Israeli historian Benny Morris, elevates the virtues of the powerful side and privileges its claims, while denying the history of "the other" and rendering its claims unseen.

The idea of concealing the history and experiences of a people under occupation also permeates the language of the powerful side on housing for Jewish settlers.

In this discourse, the powerful side is represented as a benevolent provider of essential services for its citizenry, with the housing problem assuming the character of a demographic, if largely technocratic imperative. What the stronger side neglects to mention in this seemingly benign representation, however, is how such housing has come into being, and the role it plays in reinforcing the dominance of the occupier and subverting the aspirations of the occupied for sovereignty on their own territory.



Palestinian children are dwarfed by the massive wall in Bethany. The Wall prevents Palestinians from entering Jerusalem. (Photo: Gary Fields)

The process of creating housing for Israeli Jews in Palestinian territory begins with an expropriation order, issued by Israeli civilian or military planning authorities, in which Palestinian land outside the borders of Israel is seized for a "public purpose" and converted to Jewish "state land." The land is then rezoned for housing by Israeli planning authorities while the former users, invariably Palestinian farmers or shepherds, and the former uses are declared absent and nonconforming.

This practice of land seizure is never revealed in the discourse about housing settlements. Instead, the process is imbued with an aura of apolitical neutrality. Despite these administrative trappings, however, there is no recognized legal authority for Israel to carry out such expropriations. Indeed, there is only one principle that enables the occupier to engage in such practices - force. It is the military strength of the stronger side - along with the backing it receives from the United States - which enables the occupier to build housing in Palestinian territory.

So successful is the Israeli discourse of concealment on this issue that it has managed to convince American news organizations to refrain from mentioning the words "settlement" or "illegal" when referring to these installations. The preferred term has become "Israeli neighborhoods."

These housing settlements, scattered throughout the West Bank, undermine the contiguity of Palestinian territory and in this way constitute perhaps the single greatest obstacle to the creation of a sovereign Palestinian territorial entity.

Mayors of municipalities throughout the West Bank, in small towns such as Qaffin and Husan, and larger cities such as Qalqilya and Bethlehem, emphasized in conversations with me recently how this process has taken land belonging to, and used by their local constituents. The effect is to shrink these towns and the living spaces of Palestinians, and to sever communication links in Palestinian economic and social life.

When Prime Minister Sharon talks about adding 3,500 housing units to Israeli settlements, he does not mention what happens to Palestinians when this expansion occurs.

I witnessed this expansion process first-hand last year. I saw settlers from the Israeli West Bank settlement of Zufim adjacent to the Palestinian town of Jayyous seize land belonging to Jayyous resident Tawfiq Hasan Salim, an olive farmer whose family has owned the land in question for the past 200 years. Salim's farm happened to sit on land coveted by Zufim for growth. With protection from Israeli occupation forces, contractors hired by Zufim uprooted and bulldozed Salim's 300 olive trees to make way for settlement expansion. It is a process of inexorable enlargement for the stronger side, gradual extinction for the other.

Housing built by the occupier in Palestinian Territory is actually but one element in a broader Infrastructure of domination referred to by the Jerusalem-based, Israeli Committee to End House Demolitions as "The Matrix of Control." In addition to housing settlements on expropriated Palestinian land, this matrix includes military checkpoints controlling access and circulation of commodities and people throughout Palestinian territory; roads linking settlements to one another and to cities in Israel on which Palestinians are forbidden to travel; water expropriated from Palestinian aquifers and diverted to Israeli cities and settlements; and the newest and perhaps most visible and pernicious element, the Separation Wall built inside Palestinian territory cutting communication between Palestinian people and communities, separating farmers from their own land, and disrupting Palestinian economic and social life.

From the occupation, to the settlements and the Wall, the entire apparatus behind the Matrix of Control is illegal under provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention and now most recently by the Opinion of the International Court of Justice.

The matrix is how Palestinians experience the occupation on a daily basis, and is what keeps Palestinians in a state of subordination. The elements of this matrix have basically destroyed the Palestinian economy, transforming it into a state of complete dependence on the economy of the stronger side and impoverishing the Palestinian population. It has created a system of segregation in which people enjoy rights to free movement and living standards based upon religious identity.

These elements of the matrix are mutually reinforcing. It is housing settlements constructed throughout the territory of the occupied people that necessitates road construction, the diversion of water resources, the expansion of the Wall, and the strengthening of the occupation itself. At the same time, it is the occupation that enables the construction of more housing settlements and support elements. These mutually reinforcing facts on the ground are

the real story of the conflict.

In his classic work, Orwell observed that those who control the present control the past, and those who control the past control the future. As long as the powerful side in this conflict continues to exercise control over the present, it will conceal the history of the "other" as a means of perpetuating its power into the future.

In truth, the conflict in Israel/Palestine is not about the Infrastructure of Terror -- and let there be no misunderstanding about its deplorable character. If the Infrastructure of Terror was eliminated tomorrow, the fundamental relations of power that perpetuate this conflict would remain intact. This conflict turns on the facts of one group of people dominating and subjugating the other. It is about discursive rationalizations that justify such domination and render the people under domination invisible.

It is only when these facts on the ground are dismantled, and the discourses justifying them cease, that there can be any starting point for justice in the region.

Gary Fields, author of Territories of Profit (Stanford), teaches in the Communication Department at the University of California, San Diego and is working on a new book on the Israeli Separation Wall.