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Territory, history and democracy

By Gary Fields

If the respite in the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis is to be more enduring than ephemeral, then the road map to peace must ultimately resolve what lies at the core of the conflict.

This conflict is about territory and the divergent destinies of two groups. One group is powerful and exercises control over territory and rights of citizenship; the other, incomparably weaker and territorially dispossessed.

On the powerful side stands an advanced industrial state with one of the world's most potent military arsenals. On the other side is a stateless people in an economic space of dependency with no military, their rights of citizenship held in abeyance by the government of the powerful. In this context, the issues begging for resolution are twofold: the Israeli occupation and settlement of Palestinian territory entering its 36th year; and the right of Palestinians to reclaim homes and property appropriated by Israel after 1948.

Two historical moments are definitive in elevating territory as the basic frame of this conflict.

In emerging as a state in 1948, Israel succeeded in seizing territory belonging to Palestinian Arabs in one of the most thoroughgoing land transfers in modern history. Owing to Israeli scholars such as Benny Morris, we now know far more about Israel's role during this campaign in creating the refugee problem. Forcibly transferred from their homeland, Palestinians have a legal basis, affirmed by U.N. Resolutions 194 and 3236 to return to their former homes in Israel. For its part, the Israeli government stands by now-discredited historical myths in denying responsibility for the problem, recasting the Palestinian exodus as "voluntary," while declaring the issue to be a "nonstarter." Scant are the possibilities of an enduring peace without resolution of this issue.

Israeli denials of this claim derive from a form of territorial control with a decidedly religious and ethnic objective. Israel exercises sovereignty over its own territory through a system of citizenship in

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which rights are allocated by religion. Although commonly referred to as a democracy, Israel, as Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel reveals, is more accurately an ethnocratic state where the system of religious-based rights forms the basis for denying Arabs formerly living in present-day Israel the right to return to their homeland.

The 1967 war marked the beginning of Israeli occupation and colonization of Palestinian land. While occupation is fundamental to the matrix of control designed by Israel to subjugate Palestinian territory, settlements, affirmed by U.N. Resolution 446 to "have no legal validity," are central to Israeli policy in establishing geographical "facts" in the areas of occupation aimed at compromising the contiguity of Palestinian territory and undermining Palestinian efforts to gain territorial self-determination.

Little wonder, based on the re-

alities of military rule and settlement, that roughly 1,000 Israeli soldiers known as the Yesh Gvul, are refusing service in the Occupied Territories, declaring that they "will not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people."

In addition to its control over territory, Israel also has succeeded in controlling the discourse used to define the conflict, emptying it of historical references and insisting that the conflict is about one thing — terror. In what is an enormous irony given the stronger side's emphatic — and important — reminders about the need for historical remembrance, such an explanation jettisons the historical reference points needed to give meaning to what is occurring.

It is this ahistorical frame that the U.S. government and major media employ in referring to the conflict. Putting aside for the mo-

ment the stronger side's own credentials as purveyors of violence, depictions of the conflict as irrational terror are analytically empty without reference to the issues of occupation, settlement and dispossession, and the disparity of power and control that these issues represent.

Among these issues, settlement is arguably the most volatile. Sadly, the road map appears poised to repeat the miscues of the Oslo process, which demurred on the settlement issue, thereby enabling Israel to double settlements since 1993 and further shrink the possibility of creating a viable Palestinian territory.

Instead of forcing upon Israel the dismantling of settlements, the road map has enabled the Israelis to reclassify certain newly created settlements as "outposts," and distinguish them from "legal" settlements. The fact is, all settlements, including outposts, are illegal.

Nevertheless, in pursuing this policy of occupation and settlement, Israel may have sealed a Faustian deal for itself. It is far from clear whether the settlers, subsidized by successive Israeli governments, can be removed and whether the current regime has the will to undertake what is certain to be a violent confrontation with this religiously fanatical group.

If the settler problem remains intractable, and if by consequence, a viable Palestinian territorial entity is unattainable, and if it is further assumed that Israel cannot submit Palestinians indefinitely to military rule without rights of citizenship as it has since 1967, there is seemingly only one solution. In this situation, Israel would appear to have little choice but to grant citizenship to Palestinians, thereby paving the way for creation of a secular democracy for the entire area of Palestine/Israel with rights deriving not from religion but from principles of equal rights for all citizens.

Such a solution, in fact, may be the only way out of the contested territorial claims of both sides. It could preserve the idea of a Jewish homeland, but recognize Jews and Palestinians as equals with equally legitimate claims upon the territory. The road map fails to resolve these historically defined territorial claims.

It may very well be time to consider a different path to territorial self-determination, democracy and peace.