

Oppression, Israel, and Apartheid

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When people are denied equal rights, whether or not they have them on paper, they are oppressed. More or less equal access to education, housing, employment, healthcare, law, political participation, and cultural expression, are the defining issues. From this standpoint it is quite clear that poor people are oppressed, regardless of their formal rights, because their capacity to exercise these rights is severely limited or curtailed by poverty.

However, there are many circumstances where this oppression moves beyond that structurally imposed by material inequality to take on the form of political oppression in which state agencies and other powerful social institutions ensure, with or without the sanction of law, that specific groups of people by reason of their gender, their race, their religion, their ethnicity, or their sexual orientation, are prevented from expressing themselves, or accessing social amenities and opportunities on the same terms as everybody else in that society.

From this it will be clearly seen that Bengalis in East London are oppressed; Gypsies in Hungary and Rumania are oppressed; women are oppressed in Saudi Arabia; Indian and Pakistani migrant labourers are oppressed in all the Gulf States; homosexuals are oppressed in Iran, and Tamils are oppressed in Sri Lanka. All of these people, and many other groups and populations around the world, are oppressed, in different ways, and in different circumstances, for profoundly different historical reasons. Sometimes this oppression is more or less spontaneous - the product of indifference to ingrained

disadvantage, prejudice, and ill treatment - at other times this oppression is imposed in a deliberate and conscious manner by authorities and privileged groups intent on maintaining advantages against the pressure of a feared but subordinate section of the population.

Consequently, the only thing that the oppressed have in common around the world is that they face indifference, prejudice, and ill treatment, because of who they are, or because they are deliberately singled out by the police, by government bureaucracies, and by other powerful social institutions, that are committed to ensuring, for whatever reason, that they are denied equal access to what their society has to offer.

If one approaches these problems from this point of view it is evident that the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel are oppressed. Despite having the right to sit in the Knesset, the right to vote and participate fully in elections, despite having formal access to all facilities and social benefits on the same basis as Jewish Israelis, Arab citizens cannot gain access to higher education in Arabic or in Islamic institutions with the same facility as Jews can access Hebrew or Jewish universities and colleges. They cannot leave or re-enter Israel as easily as other citizens, they cannot have friends or relatives to visit as easily as other citizens, and they cannot move about as freely as Jews, or decide where they want to live as easily as other citizens.

The reason for this is that the loyalty of Arab citizens to the Jewish state is always in doubt, and the sympathy of Arab citizens towards the enemies of Zionism and of Israel, is always suspected. Given that in the course of the foundation of Israel during 1948 some 750,000 Arabs were expelled or fled into exile, it is not unreasonable for Israeli police, soldiers, government agencies, and cultural organizations, to assume, that its Palestinian citizens might be less than enthusiastic when it comes to maintaining the Jewish and Zionist character of the state. From there, it is but a small step for many Israelis to assume or fear that Arab citizens cannot be trusted, should be exhaustively monitored and checked at police and border posts, should be controlled residentially, and restricted in their access to Islamic and Arabic educational institutions.

These fears arise from, and are exacerbated by, the direct oppression and subordination of the Arab Palestinians who live

across the 1967 line in the West Bank; Israel's Arab citizens cannot be hermetically sealed off from the Palestinians who, although stateless, reside in the occupied and annexed territories broken up by settlements housing half a million Jewish Israeli citizens, who are protected by a web of military highways patrolled by the Israel Defence Force. Israel's Arab citizens are culturally, racially, and linguistically, indistinguishable from the Arabs of the West Bank that it directly oppresses through the denial of freedom of movement, of free trade and open economic relations, and through the denial of statehood. Consequently, whatever the intentions and desire of the Israeli state, or of Israeli liberal opinion, their own Arab citizens suffer much the same sorts of disadvantages, and many of the humiliations meted out daily, to those Arabs who live on the 'wrong' side of the 1967 line.

Israeli Arabs have for many years been unable to secure Israeli citizenship or rights of residence for fiancés or spouses who come from the West Bank. Some exceptions are made if the Arab in question can demonstrate some special service or loyalty to the Zionist state.¹ The application of the Citizenship and Entry laws were 'softened' further in 2005 by the assumption that West Bank men over 35 and women over 25 are less likely to be terrorists or active enemies of the Zionist state. However, it is more difficult for Arab citizens to acquire leases from the Israel Land Administration, which controls access to 93% of the country's land;² the same is true of building permits. Both, leases and permits for land or building in Israel are, of course, impossible if you are an Arab from the West Bank. The privileges and rights, which accompany military service with the IDF, or engagement in national service

¹ The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law (temporary provision) 5763 – 2003, 3 (2): http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/citizenship_law.htm accessed 21/05/11.

² Israel Land Administration: http://www.mmi.gov.il/envelope/indexeng.asp?page=/static/eng/f_general.htm

² Israel Land Administration: http://www.mmi.gov.il/envelope/indexeng.asp?page=/static/eng/f_general.htm accessed 21/05/11. See also 'Israel's Land Ownership Policies' at *Palestine Facts*, http://www.palestinefacts.org/pf_1991to_now_israel_land.php accessed 21/5/11. See also: 'Basic Law: Israel Lands' at http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic13_eng.htm accessed 21/05/11.

in social and welfare activities are unequally applied and distributed. Consequently, the infrastructure enjoyed by Israeli Arab communities are generally inferior to those of Jewish citizens; Israel's Arab citizens are, by and large, poorer and experience a higher level of unemployment than their Jewish neighbours.³

The pro-Palestinian Left in Britain, and around the world, is not wrong about any of this. Palestinians are oppressed - they are denied the exercise of equal rights - by the Jewish state in Israel, and by many of its agencies. They are also oppressed by many other powerful Jewish institutions and community bodies dedicated to preventing everything from, Arab men dating Jewish women, to preventing Arabs moving into particular districts or neighbourhoods.⁴

Inequality is fundamental to Israel; it is in the DNA of states like Israel or Pakistan. These states declared their ethno-religious character at their foundation; they maintain it in their constitutions;⁵ it is their *raison d'être* - it is why they were created. Consequently, they insist that they have a particular ethno-religious character. Therefore, we cannot be surprised to learn that citizens that do not share the core religious or ethnic sympathies, character, and commitments of the state will be regarded as less than wholly Pakistani or Israeli and treated unequally. A distinction must be made here between theocracies like Iran and Saudi Arabia where the religious authorities have significant powers regarding the framing, application, and enforcement of the law, and Israel and Pakistan which while not being theocracies, are respectively Jewish and Islamic states. Israel, of course, is not like Pakistan in many other respects, not least because it is the only *Jewish* state in the

³ '(Article 5) E. Economic, social and cultural rights', *Inside Israel (Armistice Line [Green Line] of 1948-49)*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cehd/docs/ngos/jointngo6-PartIII-2.pdf> accessed 21/05/11.

⁴ For a formal rebuttal based on the formal rights of Arab citizens see *The Virtual Jewish Library* at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/myths/mf18.html#a> accessed 21/05/11. This rebuttal simply takes the form of detailing what the legal rights of Israel's Arab citizens are on paper.

⁵ Israel does not have a formally codified constitution – however, it has a body of laws, in which the rights and duties of the citizen are specified. See *Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel*, May 14th, 1948. See also, *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty* at: http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic3_eng.htm accessed 21/05/11.

world, while Pakistan shares its explicitly Islamic character with a number of other polities.

Whatever the efforts of Jewish Israeli socialists and liberals down the years this is a circle that cannot be squared. A liberal state requires that all citizens be treated equally irrespective of their religion or ethnicity. This is indeed the formal position in Israel (as it is in Pakistan⁶), but in reality Arabs who constitute more than twenty per cent of Israeli's population, drawn from Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Bedouin communities, automatically represent a demographic threat to the Jewish character and commitments of the state, and are inevitably considered to be less reliable citizens when Jewish Israel confronts its Arab enemies.⁷

It is for reasons of this sort that states like Israel and Pakistan should never have been established. However, they both exist now - they are both very substantial 'facts on the ground', and they cannot be approached effectively by challenging the historical reality (or legitimacy) of their foundation.

We are where we are, and we need to proceed from where we are. The tragedies, which accompanied the expulsion of centuries old German communities from Eastern and Central Europe in 1945,⁸ are not going to be reversed, any more than the vast movements at the same time of Poles, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians are subject to revision.⁹ The Greeks expelled from Anatolia during the foundation of the modern Turkish

⁶ Fundamental rights are guaranteed by on paper by Pakistan's Constitution, regardless of religion or ethnicity. See particularly, 'Safeguards as to educational institutions in respect of religion, etc.', *The Constitution of Pakistan*, Chapter 1, paragraph 22.

⁷ Jewish 76.4%, (Mostly Arab religious groupings: Muslim 16.8%, Christian 2.1% Druze 1.7%, Other 3.9%.) 'Israel', *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html> accessed 21/05/11.

⁸ Some twelve million ethnic German civilians, men, women, and children, were expelled from their ancestral homelands, villages, towns, and cities, in Eastern and Central Europe following the collapse of the Nazi armies. See: Giles MacDonogh, *After the Reich: From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*, London: John Murray, 2007, *passim*.

⁹ Vast exchanges of territory between the Soviet Union and Poland resulted in Poland being literally moved west into former German territory. These arrangements were ratified at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 and resulted in the expulsion of millions of Poles from territory annexed by the Soviet Union and the wholesale uprooting and transportation of the populations of entire regions, towns, and cities.

state in the early twenties are not going to return 'home'.¹⁰ The Italians are not going back to Rijeka (never mind the Hungarians), and the Slovenes, Austrians, Jews, and Germans are not going back to Trieste.¹¹ The massacres and injustices, which accompanied the partition of India in 1947-48, are not going to be undone - whatever happens in Kashmir; the maintenance of open wounds for sixty or seventy years by Pakistanis, Indians, Kashmiris (or Palestinians), keeps the pot on the boil, but it does not have the possibility of resolving the problems, righting historical wrongs, or of changing the facts on the ground.

Clearly the Palestinians must have a state, but that state must be based upon full recognition of Israel's right to exist. A Palestinian state cannot be predicated upon the 'right of return' to Israel of Palestinians (and their descendants) who were expelled or fled in 1948; Palestinian statehood cannot be based upon the unraveling of 1948, or the basic elements of the armistice of 1949. Of course, the unilateral Jordanian annexation of the West Bank, and Egyptian control of Gaza are dead letters, but Hamas, and all other Palestinian parties to the negotiations, must accord Israel full recognition, accept the right of the Jewish state to exist within the boundaries established by the war of 1948, and accept its right to protocols and arrangements which offer it the possibility of defence *in depth* of those boundaries established and recognised by all sides as

¹⁰ During the Greco-Turkish War, 1919-1922, the ancient communities of Greeks in Anatolia, entire towns, and villages, were systematically burned and their Greek inhabitants massacred or expelled by Turkish nationalists engaged in creating the modern Turkish Republic. Anatolia was simply cleared of its Greek communities and of the Armenian communities that had survived the earlier genocide.

¹¹ Rijeka (Fiume) was once Hungary's port and naval base on the Adriatic. The Hungarian authorities favoured Italians over Croats and Slovenes, and succeeded in giving the city a largely Italian population. Following the dissolution of the Hapsburg Empire, and considerable upheaval, the city was annexed by Fascist Italy. The city fell to Yugoslav forces at the beginning of May 1945; the communists executed hundreds of Italians, and the widespread random killing of Italians, resulted in the flight of the Italian population - Rijeka is now a Croatian city. A similar fate befell the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, population of Rijeka's sister city on the Adriatic, Trieste. In 1945 Trieste fell to Yugoslav partisans and the 2nd New Zealand Division. The Partisans of the 8th Dalmatian Corp ran the city for over a month; it was a period characterized by wholesale disappearances and killings - Trieste is now an Italian city - with only its handsome architecture to remind one of its Austro-Hungarian and Slovenian past, and of the city's massacred Jews.

international frontiers.

After all, Israel - although not an 'innocent' by any means - has been invaded by Arab armies on three separate occasions since the foundation of the state, and has, as a matter of historical record, been attacked by its neighbours far more often than it has attacked them.

Negotiations for the closure and evacuation of Jewish Settlements upon territory unilaterally annexed by Israel after the War of 1967, and on land throughout the West Bank, could only begin on the basis of Hamas and Fatah's acceptance of Israel's legitimacy, and upon acceptance that the refugees and their descendants do not have a 'right of return' to what were their ancestral villages and farms, which now lie inside Israel, because such a move would undermine the integrity and security of the Jewish state.

There is no possibility whatsoever of bringing about peace on the basis of the dissolution of the Zionist state, unless you mean a Carthaginian Peace, a peace in which the Jewish state is utterly destroyed, its citizens dispersed, in order to be replaced by a largely Arab population, and a predominantly Arab state. This is certainly what Hamas, and most of Fatah, want. They are perfectly prepared to make deals and come to agreements short of this, but so far they have been unwilling to sacrifice the 'right of return', or to accord legitimacy and full recognition to the Jewish state. This is because in the long run most of the Palestinian parties envisage the dissolution of the Jewish state.

This is where the parallels beloved by much of the pro-Palestinian Left break down. Those who suggest that Israel is an Apartheid state want to envisage Israel as a kind of South Africa, the Apartheid state that keeled over in response to wholesale popular resistance of great masses of youth, and worldwide boycotts. Unfortunately, these parallels are the product of either lazy thinking, or unwarranted 'optimism', or both. Apartheid South Africa owed its origin in the first instance to the repression and subordination of black pastoralists and hunters by Dutch farmers. This dispossession of the black population was then regularised and enshrined in a multitude of provisions and practices imposed by the British colonial authorities. Attempts by the big bourgeoisie, and the big mine owners in particular, to break the 'colour bar', resulted in the Rand Revolt in 1921-22 in which white workers, ably

assisted by the South African Communist Party, fought to maintain white privilege, and the division of the country's working class along racial lines. In the event twenty thousand troops had to be deployed by Prime Minister Jan Smuts who also sanctioned the use of artillery, tanks, and aerial bombardment; hundreds of workers were killed, including some leading members of the Communist Party.¹²

The big bourgeoisie in South Africa, dependent upon foreign investment, always struggling for cheaper labour had, unlike the white workers, the Afrikaner farmers and their allies, no particular commitment to the structured racial division of the working class. However, as the British Empire decayed and Afrikaners gained in political clout in the late nineteen forties, they enshrined the racial divisions and racial oppression of the black population in a series of laws, which denied full political equality to the black and coloured masses, prescribed permitted places of residence, and restricted movement by the use of internal passports and employment laws. These oppressions led to the endorsement of armed struggle by the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. In the fullness of time, this armed struggle, mass resistance among school children and youth, and worldwide boycotts resulted in bringing the Afrikaner parties to their knees. However, as long as the danger of social revolution existed the international bourgeoisie backed the Afrikaner regime as it murdered children in the streets, assassinated ANC leaders, and jailed and tortured whoever it could get its hands on.

The logjam was finally broken by the collapse of Communism in 1989-1991. The implosion of the Soviet Union and of the worldwide communist movement opened up the possibility of overturning Apartheid without social revolution, and without the threat of communism. The rest is history. The super-exploitation of the black masses continues apace, the whites that could not adjust, and had sufficient resources, have fled to Western Australia, and other suitable climes, leaving the white Anglo and Afrikaner urban bourgeoisie to share the fruits of life in the gated communities of the 'Rainbow Nation' with the new class of black officials, professionals and investors. The

¹² See Baruch Hirson, *The General Strike of 1922*, at <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/supplem/hirson/1922.html> accessed 21/05/11.

poor whites and white farmers are indeed embattled but powerless. South African mining interests, and South African capitalism more broadly, was protected by the settlement with the ANC.

Now the similarities between South Africa and Israel are sparse indeed. It is true that the Israeli state is founded upon the oppression of the Palestinian population - its Arab citizens and those Palestinians living in the West Bank. However, it is in no sense dependent economically upon its own Arab population, or on that in the West Bank. Israel could manage perfectly well without an Arab population; indeed many Israelis would like nothing better. Now, South Africa without a black population is inconceivable. All attempts to summon up enthusiasm and interest in an Afrikaner homeland during the 1990s foundered upon the realisation that such a white homeland would be one without farm labourers and servants. Afrikanerdom and Anglo-Apartheid was always founded upon the exploitation and servitude of the native Africans. Zionism in Israel on the other hand is based upon the expulsion of most of the Arab population and the political oppression of the remaining 1.5 million - indeed the Zionist state only occupies the West Bank for strategic reasons - and the Settlers only occupy the West Bank with the long term objective of permanently wresting control of what they call Judea and Samaria from the Palestinian population - indeed most of the ultra Orthodox Jewish settlers would be perfectly happy if all the Arabs on the West Bank left the territory altogether.

Israel is founded upon the displacement and political oppression of the Palestinians, not upon their exploitation - although I'm sure that goes on too. In South Africa the mode of rule - Apartheid - was at stake not the territorial integrity of the state or the exploitation of the black masses. This is the fundamental reason why comparisons between Israel and Apartheid-era South Africa are absurd. Comparisons also break down the minute one looks at the nature of any possible settlement. The South African settlement was based upon the sidelining and defeat of largely rural Afrikaner political interests and concerns, once it was made abundantly clear that the ANC and the SACP would not create a social revolution, but would, on the contrary, guarantee the interests of the white bourgeoisie and of big capital. This is why a revolutionary crisis and an

open civil war were averted, and the fighting between South Africa and its proxies against populist and communist forces in Mozambique, Angola, and Namibia could be brought to a close.¹³

In Israel the state represents the interest of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population. (Incidentally, it has the overwhelming support of the majority of Jews worldwide.) Despite an extraordinarily fractured political culture, endless shifts, and toing and froing in the Knesset, there is no body of opinion in Israel that believes that implementation of a Palestinian ‘right of return’, or the replacement of the Zionist state with some other kind of structure, would protect the Jewish national homeland, or guarantee the security and safety of its Jewish population. This is why there is no Israeli ‘Mikhail Gorbachev’ or ‘F. W. de Klerk’ waiting in the wings of history with a plan to dissolve Zionism.

For as long as Hamas, Fatah, the other Palestinian parties, and the pro-Palestinian Left, worldwide, continue to demand the ‘right of return’ for the 1948 Palestinian refugees, and their descendants, to the land that is now Israel, they are implicitly calling for the dissolution of the Zionist project, and hence for the dissolution of the Jewish national homeland.

However unlikely such an outcome is in practice, it is, of course, not inconceivable. In which case we would merely replace the problem of Palestinian refugees and Palestinian statelessness with Jewish statelessness and Israeli Jewish refugees. When the broadly pro-Palestinian Left piously insists that all could live happily together they are simply adding bad faith to the grandstanding that is their usual stock-in-trade. The ‘two-state’ solution will have to be founded upon full Palestinian recognition of the legitimacy and integrity of Israel or there will be no solution at all.

Finally, the oppression of the Palestinians by the Israelis, can only be brought to an end, (1) by the establishment of a secure and prosperous Palestinian homeland with its own sovereign state, and (2) by the growth in the sense of security and

¹³ Mozambique: the civil war was brought to an end in October 1992; Angola: civil war was ended in 2002, although the communist forces – the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola and their Cuban allies, had settled with South Africa and the United States between 1988 and 1991; Namibia became independent in March 1990.

confidence enjoyed by Israel, which would result in the withering of the fear and suspicion which Israeli Jews inevitably feel towards those whom they currently oppress. In other words, only peace will bring an end to the oppression of the Palestinians - their oppression is the direct consequence of the War between the Jews and the Arabs - only the ending of this war will bring about the end of the oppression.