

## A Different View of Disengagement

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Many of those in favor of the Israeli disengagement from Gaza next month see it as the beginning of a territorial solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They hope it will be followed by Israeli withdrawals from parcels of the West Bank, eventually leading to an independent, viable Palestinian state.

This vision is flawed on two accounts. First, the political arena in Israel displays no indication of such a dynamic. Israeli preparations for the day after disengagement seems to be limited to the IDF gearing up for armed conflict and to intelligence officers speaking openly about the need to replace Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian leader. The second error of those who see the disengagement as harbinger of territorial solution is that it overlooks current realities in the West Bank.

The militarization of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since the beginning of the Oslo process, the dissection of the West Bank by Israel to three separate cantons, the disruption of Palestinian life by the inhumane separation wall and the severe deterioration of Palestinian economic and social life, have made Palestinian independence in our time unrealistic. Instead a situation has evolved in the Occupied Territories that is in many ways akin to the Apartheid regime in South Africa in its time. It has millions of subjects held in total spatial isolation, with limitations on freedom of movement that breed occupational stress, political paralyzes, poverty and despair. Several trips I made from my home in Tel-Aviv to Ramallah in recent weeks brought me to parts of the Palestinian town that a few years ago were prosperous suburbs and now look like some of the townships that grew under the heavy hand of Apartheid.

Granted, there are differences between Israeli control of the Palestinians and Apartheid. The ideological justification in Israel is not racism, it is security. And regulation is different: instead of parliamentary legislation based on racial categories, Israel administers the Palestinians by military decrees. But this is legalistic cosmetics. The resignation with which Palestinian drivers now avoid West Bank roads built for Jewish settlers, and the subservience with which they join the long queues of Palestinian vehicles at check-points, are contrasted with the casual way in which Israeli drivers glide through the same check-points in parallel, empty lanes. Both occupied and occupier now seem to take the bifurcated reality constructed for them for granted. Segregation burns itself on people's consciousness at least as effectively as does racist ideology.

Gaza after the disengagement will be identical to another element of the old South African regime - the Bantustans. A racialized native district, its perimeter patrolled by an occupying army, Gaza will be left to its own devices, trying to maintain a limited version of farcical self-rule. In South Africa this stupid lie wasted two generations in illusion and pain. In the case in hand Sharon will probably offer the Palestinians similar arrangements in parts of the West Bank, seeking to present them to the international community as 'the Palestinian State'. In reality, Israeli control of these Palestinian cantons will intensify, and a viable Palestinian state will drift even further.

The Palestinian uprising that is likely to erupt again in late 2005 or 2006 will be accompanied, as usual, by a struggle for public opinion both in Israel and abroad. The Israeli government will attempt to portray the bloodshed as 'another proof of the treacherous nature of the Palestinians', and will cling to the self righteous claim that 'Israel has no partner for peace amongst the Palestinians'. This spin must be countered as early as possible with an alternative, more realistic and more fair interpretation. The next round of this protruded conflict will come about when Palestinians lose hope of Israel's intentions to relinquish its control of their destiny and become convinced that it is oblivious to their dream of independence and of freedom.

This then is a pessimistic view of the next phase of the Israeli-Palestinian saga, a phase in which Israel attempts to manage the conflict within a bi-national, non-democratic state. But this will only be a phase. Apartheid endured less than 50 years before it imploded under the pressure of black despair at home and international sanctions abroad. When this took place, South Africa did not disappear. It merely changed, with universal citizenship, vote for all and a government that reflects black majority. This could happen in time in Israel/Palestine too. I am not sure, however, that Israelis and observers abroad who back the disengagement have such a scenario in mind.