

The Seventh Generation

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

-From the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

Palestine's Problems: Checkpoints, Walls, Gates and Urban Planners

by TOM ANGOTTI

East Jerusalem, Occupied Palestine

Part One in a series on urban apartheid.

It takes two hours every day for Palestinians to cross the military checkpoint from Bethlehem to Jerusalem so they can get to work. Bethlehem is in the West Bank and Jerusalem, though divided, is part of Israel. The checkpoint is flanked by the giant Israeli Wall. Once they are in Israel, Palestinians are then confronted with gated communities that are off-limits to them.

The checkpoint, the Wall and the gate are the most visible signs of Israel's control over Palestinians and their land. But the invisible weapon is urban planning. Israeli geopolitical strategy to control and occupy all of Palestine has been imbedded in its approach to housing, urban development and the location of human settlements. Behind the physical and symbolic barriers lie the invisible urban and military planners.

The Checkpoints

The Bethlehem checkpoint is one of around 500. Some divide Israel and the West Bank, like the Bethlehem checkpoint, but most are within the West Bank. To get an idea what this means to Palestinians, imagine having to pass a military checkpoint to commute between San Francisco and Oakland. Or to go from your house to your backyard orchard. The Israeli Army controls all movement between West Bank towns, within some towns and also between

Israel and the West Bank. Israel doesn't allow Jewish citizens to enter the West Bank, except for those living in illegally-built settlements in the West Bank. They take exclusive Israeli-built and -protected roads to get to and from their homes. These roads are off-limits to Palestinians. This is one of the most developed examples of apartheid urbanization in the world, with separate settlements, separate roads and separate standards of living.

The Palestinian commuters from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, mostly men over the age of thirty, are herded like cattle through turnstiles and fences and run through metal detectors, surveillance cameras and document checks. They are the "lucky" ones—the small minority that got permission to enter Israel to work, where there are more jobs and higher pay than in the West Bank. But the commuters have to go back to Bethlehem the same day or they will be hunted down. Every worker has a magnetic card that must be swiped in the morning and again in the evening so that the Israelis will know if they miss the return trip. Palestinians are, in effect, prisoners of a powerful security state able to engineer the movement of people and their use of public space. Israel is the world's leading innovator and producer of high-tech military and surveillance equipment, and a major contributor to the strategy and technology of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

As an older white North American, I could avoid all this humiliation at the checkpoint and didn't even ⇨

have to stand in line or flash my passport. I fit the acceptable racial profile. On the Israeli side, I stood with two women from Women for Human Rights, an Israeli group that witnesses this daily violation of the right to the city and takes notes documenting it. Young Israeli soldiers toting rifles and machine guns swaggered and smiled at us. On the Palestinian side, there were only street vendors and taxi drivers. Paradoxically, once in the bustling streets of the West Bank town, despite the occasional bombed-out and demolished building, occasional tourist destination and the ever-present Wall, I felt free and welcomed.

The Wall

Israel started building its giant Wall enclosing the West Bank in 2002, after the launch of the second Intifida, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation. While Israel claims the purpose of the wall is defensive, a careful look at its route shows

that it was planned as a land grab that would further shrink the boundaries of a future Palestinian state. Violence and attacks on Israelis have declined sharply in the last few years because of political agreements between the two sides, not the Wall, which is filled with gaps, far from complete and possible to evade with a little ingenuity.

The Wall, like the Israeli settlements— with some 300,000 settlers in the occupied territories— aims to create “facts on the ground” that would dictate the parameters of an eventual negotiated settlement. The Wall, most of it built on Palestinian land, takes huge loops that incorporate illegal Israeli settlements built on Palestinian land. If completed, the 760-kilometer Wall would effectively turn the Palestinian territory into a handful of isolated Bantustans and make a viable Palestinian state with a unified economy and infrastructure impossible. Following the example of Gaza, Israel would effectively turn Palestinian towns into prisons and be able to monitor and control all movement between them. This dark dystopia would result in one of the most technologically sophisticated apartheids in the history of cities.

The Gated Communities

The Israeli settlements in the West Bank are designed and function as exclusive gated communities. While some actually have physical gates, many do not, controlling access through other means. The “gates” are often symbolic and take the form of electronic surveillance perimeters. Israel’s Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon engineered the location of settlements with the strategic thinking of a military planner playing

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LEFT: The Bethlehem checkpoint.

RIGHT: The wall.

FAR RIGHT: Gated community.

the urban planning game. The settlements are placed on hilltops where they can oversee the daily life of Palestinians and, should the military need to intervene at any time, provide them with the most strategic sites. The idea is that the architects and planners charged with developing the settlements blend military and urban planning so as to create a symbolic and real sense of superiority and control over the land and people below. Palestinians are not allowed in, though exceptions are made for some service workers. In his brilliant book, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, Eyal Weizman shows how Israel's control of the high ground and monopoly of the underground water supply constitute a "vertical occupation" that has resulted in the destruction of Palestinian agriculture and the displacement of entire villages.

Gentrification and Ethnic Cleansing in Israel

The planning paradigm for the Israeli settlements in the West Bank has been reproduced within the state of Israel and is now deeply imbedded in the urban structure. We see it in the gated Israeli communities that have sprung up on hilltops in the mixed Arab-Israeli regions and cities. There, too, the exclusive neighborhoods seek to reinforce economic and social dominance through segregated living and work environments.

After creation of the state of Israel in 1948, most Palestinians fled or were forced out of their homes and villages and became refugees. But many stayed, and today Palestinians within the state of Israel account for about 20 percent of the population. Half of all Palestinian households are under the poverty line compared to a national average of 18 percent.

They remain second-class citizens, usually living in segregated residential enclaves and often threatened by displacement and gentrification. It is here that Israel's urban planners play their role, often unconsciously, as implementers of a broader geopolitical strategy, a land grab and ethnic cleansing of historic proportions.

The Palestinian population in Israel is concentrated in the Galilee region in the north, the Negev desert to the south, East Jerusalem and in "mixed towns" like Haifa. In all of these areas, exclusive Israeli hilltop settlements are part of a conscious policy of "Judaizing" areas with Arab populations—a concept that might also be called ethnic cleansing—through government land use and housing policy. The Israeli government owns 94 percent of the land and leases it freely for the construction of new Jewish settlements; they also provide the infrastructure and subsidize services. The Palestinian population, however, is rarely given permission to build or expand. To meet the needs of a rapidly growing population, Palestinians often build without legal approval, but they are subject to heavy fines and/or demolition orders. Some 18,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished.

Jaffa was an Arab settlement on the Mediterranean Sea that is now a neighborhood in the metropolitan region of Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city. Palestinians there are being pushed out by real estate investment. As land values and rents go up, many Palestinians can no longer afford to stay.

Fahdi, a community organizer in Jaffa fighting gentrification, says there is a larger significance to his struggle. "My family was from a [Palestinian] village →

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north of here. It was confiscated by Israel. My family had papers showing they had owned the land since the Turkish period. They came to Jaffa. I am a citizen of Israel, but we can't get our land back. Everything for me starts with that."

Fahdi described the recent case of a Palestinian who couldn't get permission to add rooms to his house and now faces eviction for a building violation. He has an option to buy but with current real estate prices what they are, cannot afford to. In another case, a renter facing eviction is willing to buy the property valued at approximately \$160,000, but the government will only accept cash and no bank will lend the family money because they do not have sufficient income. Fahdi noted that while Palestinians struggle to hold on to their homes, gentrifiers move in with ease and have no problem getting permission. They include Jews from Europe looking for second homes by the sea, and Israeli settlers from the West Bank who bring with them both an ideological mission to separate themselves from Palestinians and guns that are publicly displayed to make sure their mission is known.

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In the Galilee region, the landscape is also being transformed by Israeli hilltop settlements, while Palestinian towns are unable to get official permission to grow. According to Neighbors, a group of Israelis and Palestinians dedicated to planning with social justice, 91 percent of the land in Arab settlements is used for housing as opposed to 55 percent in Jewish settlements. This is a direct result of the official policy of limiting the growth of Palestinian towns. With so little land for expansion, there is little room left for public open space and services.

In the southern region of the Negev, 76,000 Bedouins live in settlements that the Israeli government has designated as unrecognized, illegal and subject to eviction whenever the land is needed for infrastructure or the military, or simply at the whim of the Israeli government. And in Arab East Jerusalem, which is directly administered by an Israeli civil administration, Palestinian neighborhoods get minimal services like garbage collection and street repairs while also facing incursions by both Israeli gentrifiers and religious sects seeking to Judaize the city.

Thus, urban planning throughout Israel is firmly rooted in Israel's long-term geopolitical strategy of controlling all of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, the dream of Israel's Zionist founders. Its realization was interrupted by the resistance of the Palestinian people who owned, lived on and worked most of that land. Israel now directly controls 78 percent of it, and the rest is under limited Palestinian control in the West Bank and Gaza, where Israel can and does intervene militarily and take land when deemed in their interest. Incredibly, if a

TOP: Sachnin, A Palestinian Town.

BOTTOM: A Jewish settlement

settlement is ever reached in the current negotiations, Palestinians are likely to end up with only about 15 percent of the land.

The Right to the City

Despite official policy, there are many hopeful signs of change. Resistance and struggles against displacement are widespread in Palestinian communities, which work in partnership with human rights and social justice groups in Israel. The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) organizes protests and Planners for Planning Rights (Bimkom) brings professional and legal expertise to bear to protect communities from displacement. A host of organizations continue to challenge the Israeli checkpoints and Wall.

But Israel has little incentive to change course and agree to a two-state solution and the establishment of full rights for Palestinians. It has the most powerful military and largest nuclear arsenal in the Middle East and is one of the largest recipients of U.S. military aid. And the Bush administration carried forward the U.S. tradition of tolerating the Wall, checkpoints and gradual incursion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory even while issuing ineffective verbal protests. While the incoming Obama administration has given no signs it will change course, there is an opportunity now for progressive people in the U.S. to raise their voices as President Obama seeks to reinvent the U.S. role in the Middle East and address continuing demands from Arab nations for a just peace in Palestine. Obama opposed a U.S. war in Iraq that mimicked Israel's high-tech, scorched-earth strategy—the same strategy that failed miserably in Israel's 2003 attack on Lebanon. But it will take a lot of pressure from within the U.S. to move Obama's cautious foreign policy team past the powerful Israeli lobby. Urban planners should tell the incoming administration and Congress that the right to the city is a fundamental human right.

Tom Angotti teaches at Hunter College, City University of New York, and during his sabbatical year is doing research and writing about urban enclaves and urban agriculture. For more information about the issue raised here, see: www.bimkom.org; www.icahd.org; www.stopthewall.org; www.btselem.org.

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