A LAND DIMINISHED:
REFLECTION ON GAZA’S LANDSCAPE

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IALIIS-BZU-WPS 2011/16 (ENG)
CPE Module

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Design & Layout: Yasser Darwish

2011

* Co-financed by the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies (IALIIS) - Birzeit University (BZU) & the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The views expressed in this publication cannot in any circumstances be regarded as the official position of IALIIS, BZU or IDRC.

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I am going to begin with a story, one I have written about before but it bears retelling. I have many stories of my days in Gaza and shall share some of them with you but will begin with this one.

It was the summer of 1985 during my first visit to Gaza. I was taken on a tour of the area by a friend of mine named Alya who has since passed away. As we drove along Gaza’s coastal road I saw an elderly Palestinian man standing at the shoreline with some boxes of oranges next to him. I was puzzled by this and asked Alya to stop the car. One by one, the elderly Palestinian took an orange and threw it into the sea. His was not an action of playfulness but of pain and regret. His movements were slow and labored as if the weight of each orange was more than he could bear. Not understanding what I was seeing, I asked Alya why he was doing this and she explained that he had been prevented from exporting his oranges to Israel and rather than watch them rot in his orchards, the old man chose to cast them into the sea. I have never forgotten this scene and the impact it had on me.

Over 25 years later, after peace agreements, economic protocols, road maps and so called disengagements, Gazans are still casting their oranges into the sea. Yet Gaza is no longer where I found it so long ago, but is actually someplace far worse and more dangerous.

Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians, now in its 43rd year, has, without question, resulted in the systematic incapacitation of Gaza’s economy, and in the slow but consistent decline of its society, a process that I first defined as “de-development” in my earliest writings. De-development refers to a process that undermines the ability of an economy to grow and expand by preventing it from accessing and utilizing critical inputs needed to promote internal growth beyond a specific structural level. Unlike underdevelopment, which may distort but not forestall development entirely, de-development precludes, over the long term, the possibility of any kind of developmental process even a disarticulated one, by destroying the economy’s capacity to produce. In Gaza, the de-development of the economic sector during the first two decades of Israeli rule transformed that economy into an auxiliary of the state of Israel. Today, given the
massive destruction of its economic base over the last five years in particular, the full effects – both economic and social – of the de-development process are painfully visible.

When I began my research I was primarily concerned with the economic impact of Israel’s then almost 20-year occupation of the Gaza Strip because it was the economy that so starkly and unsparingly illustrated the profound inequities that form the structural and philosophical core of occupation policy.¹ My initial focus on the economy stemmed from the profound shock and confusion I felt when I first lived in Gaza. The chasm between what I had been taught and what I actually encountered in Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians stunned me. As an American Jew growing up in the 1960s and 1970s and educated in elite schools I was told – often implicitly – to believe in and never question Israeli beneficence and morality and Arab incompetence and incivility. Although my parents taught me to think critically and often provided some much needed balance, the intellectual and political weight of the times was difficult to cast aside. There was simply no context for speaking critically about Israel or sympathetically about Arabs, who were forbidden—as we were—to use the word “Palestine” or “Palestinian.”

Although I had visited Israel many times during my childhood, my first trip to the West Bank and Gaza occurred in the summer of 1985. I traveled there (against the wishes of my Israeli family) to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation at Harvard, which examined an American program of bilateral economic assistance to the Palestinians. My thesis asked whether economic development was possible under conditions of military occupation and my search for an answer immersed me in a reality, indeed, a world, I was wholly unaware of and unprepared for. As a well-trained graduate student I felt I had an understanding of the political complexities of the area, the actors involved, their histories, and the many arguments and sides of the conflict. I went, I believed, with a critical but open mind, prepared for anything. I was wrong. Those first months in Gaza and the West Bank changed my life.

I distinctly remember the day I first entered Gaza in the summer of 1985. I had been in the West Bank for some time and had acquired some familiarity with the people and the region and felt comfortable living there despite the harshness of the occupation. However, the thought of living in the Gaza Strip made me nervous, even scared. I had heard terrible and frightening stories about Gaza and its people especially from my Israeli friends. I remember one UN official telling me that there were never more than 35 foreign visitors in Gaza at any one time (excluding those who worked for international organizations) because it was so unfriendly a place. I have no idea where he got that information or really, what it meant, but it did not ease my anxiety. Much was weighted against Gaza despite my best efforts to remain open-minded.

¹ Parts of this section are taken from Sara Roy, Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 1-7.
I was taken to the Marna House, which was then one of only two hotels in the area and, I was
told, the best (I read: safest) place for foreigners to stay. It was managed by Alya Shawwa who
belonged to one of Gaza’s oldest and wealthiest families and who would become one of my
dearest friends. Alya welcomed me but clearly viewed me with some suspicion. After all, why
would an American be visiting Gaza? The implicit answer was obvious. And when she learned I
was Jewish her concern (and my anxiety) grew. In those days prior to the first Palestinian
uprising, one of the first questions I was often asked by Gazans was ‘are you a Christian’?I never
lied and told everyone who asked that I was a Jew.

To my surprise, it was not fear or anger I typically encountered when people learned I was
Jewish but shock, suspicion, some confusion and considerable curiosity. I took advantage of their
curiosity and my somewhat unique status to begin a discussion of why I was there,
explaining that I had come to Gaza to learn about its economy, people, society, and history, and about
military occupation and how it affects their lives. I thought it would take a long time to gain their
trust but again I was wrong.

Within one week of arriving in Gaza, I was immersed in local life in a manner I could not possibly
have foreseen, taken from one end of the Strip to the other by people I barely knew but whom
Alya initially vetted. I still remember Alya standing in the driveway of the hotel insisting quite
forcefully that I be returned to Marna House in time to eat dinner! I entered areas seldom (if
ever) seen by foreigners, helped by people whose support and encouragement would have been
unimaginable to me just days before. (Many of those same people would later risk their lives to
help me collect data during the first Palestinian uprising for my book on the political economy of
de-development). I was invited into homes, both rich and poor, where no request was too great
or question too burdensome. Not only did my being a Jew cease to be a source of concern, it
actually became an asset. People could not do enough to help me.

Although I could not possibly have known it at the time, that summer of 1985 set the stage for
the next two and a half decades of my life. The injustice of the occupation and the inability of
Palestinians to defend themselves against it affected me deeply. My research among them was
not only a matter of scholarship – it went to the core of who I was, where I came from, the
meaning of my Judaism, my identity as a child of Holocaust survivors, my relationship with Israel
and the nature and purpose of my work.

One of the most troubling and frightening aspects of the occupation during my initial encounter
with it was its mundane, prosaic nature. For Palestinians, occupation was the ordinary – a way
of life that had to be lived defensively without recourse or appeal, without protection or choice,
largely absent of accountability, predictability, rationality or control. Furthermore, the distortion
of Palestinian life remained unquestioned by those beyond it for whom the realities of
occupation were wholly unknown. What was for Palestinians a narrative of crisis, of territorial
dispossession and displacement, was for others an example of benign and legitimate control. It is this absence of context and its continued mystification that my research has always sought to redress.

From my earliest time in Gaza the underlying impulse of my work has always been toward society – women, children, families, neighborhoods, and communities. I focused not only on the occupation’s destructive impact on people but on how they – whether as individuals or communities – were able to resist it; the resilience of Gaza’s people amazed me and still does, a topic that has received far too little attention in the literature on the conflict. My most powerful experiences in Gaza and the most poignant memories I have are not of violence or despair but of kindness and generosity, the qualities that drew me to the people of Gaza from the very beginning. I shall never forget one visit I made to a refugee camp during the first Intifada. On this particular day and for one or two days before, all water to the camp had been shut off as a form of collective punishment, which was a punitive measure used with some regularity at the time. My friend Abeer had arranged for me to meet with a family and when we arrived we were escorted into a large room where several women spanning at least three generations were already seated. Clearly, they were expecting us. What followed was an animated discussion about life in the camp, the importance of the Intifada and the difficulties it imposed, the growing Islamist movement and so forth.

At some point during our discussion the mother of the family whom I shall call Um Ali entered with a large pot of tea, which she placed in front of me. She poured a cup for me and then for the others. I remember how good it tasted and how warmed it made me feel. I thanked her and drank my cup of tea, which she kept refilling as I continued with my interview, Abeer at my side. When the time came to leave I thanked the family for speaking with me and for their gracious hospitality. As Abeer and I walked away, I suddenly remembered that the water supply to the camp had been cut off. I immediately turned to my friend and asked her how had Um Ali gotten the water to make us the tea. Abeer told me that when she had asked if I might visit some time before, Um Ali began collecting water from a slow drip in her kitchen faucet to make certain that I would have enough tea to drink while I was in her home. It took her one 24-hour day to collect the water for my pot of tea.

Then, as now, people struggled to remain whole and humane despite the terrible pressures imposed upon them. Yet people in Gaza today struggle with something far more damaging that did not exist during the first intifada: an inability to visualize a future for their children that departs from the damaging reality they must currently endure. In so many conversations with friends and colleagues in Gaza their fears are absolutely consistent. These fears no longer center on the wasting of Gaza but on the deepening unwillingness to repair it, on a complacency and complicity among many actors – Israeli, American, European and Arab – to relegate Gaza to the
status of a dustbin, unworthy of redress and rehabilitation. One friend, a trusted observer, expressed it this way: “We are not charity cases; we are an animal farm where all kinds of products are dumped on us whether we want them or not. We are not asked what we need or want. We are not allowed to participate in our own lives but must accept our decay. Our horizon is vague. There is no vision, no debate, no critique. The critique that does exist is for the benefit of the individual not society. We are not allowed to plan, even to think of planning and we are rejected if we try. We are denied the right to live as normal people and there is a growing feeling among people. Here - despite the fact that some still resist – that this will not change. If there is a plan, we believe it is to insure that our abandonment is total.”

From the time I started researching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over two decades ago, I have consistently encountered two recurring themes regarding Gaza. The first theme concerns Israel's desire to rid itself of any responsibility for the territory while maintaining absolute control of it. As Tanya Reinhart argued long ago, this is because Israel cannot free Gaza if it wants to control the West Bank—its main objective—since such freedom would enable Gaza to establish direct ties to the Western and Arab world, and become a center of resistance to Israeli occupation, Avigdor Lieberman’s recent proposal of turning Gaza into a European enclave notwithstanding. The second theme is Israel's desire to "exchange" Gaza as it were for full and internationally i.e., American sanctioned control of the West Bank, thereby precluding the creation of a Palestinian state and safeguarding a Jewish demographic majority in an enlarged Israel. Israel has now achieved both these ends. This points to Gaza's defining centrality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the conflict's resolution and in the future configuration of the area.

In November 2003, just before the announcement of the Gaza disengagement, Ehud Olmert – then Ariel Sharon’s deputy – in a Ha'aretz interview, described what he considered to be Israel’s most serious problem. He stated that as Palestinians become the majority in the region, Israel must prevent them from engaging in a struggle similar to the one against South African apartheid especially if that struggle turns out to be nonviolent, “popular,” “cleaner,” and ultimately more “powerful.” Israel's response, therefore, must be unilateral: “to maximize the number of Jews; to minimize the number of Palestinians...; [the] division of the land, with the goal of insuring a Jewish majority, is Zionism's lifeline.”

Severing and isolating Gaza from the

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2 Phone conversation, September 2010.
Forced Migration and Refugee Unit

West Bank and maintaining that separation was a critical part of the Israeli response. Indeed, as Amira Hass has argued, Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza represented the end of a 10-year project designed to sever the Gaza Strip from the West Bank begun during Oslo, destroying, finally, the Palestinian national body.

Without its disengagement from, and isolation of, Gaza, Israel would not have been able to complete, in effect, the implementation of Oslo's 1994 Gaza and Jericho First plan, which similarly aimed to create a separate, marginalized entity in the Gaza Strip, freeing Israel to pursue, in one form or another, the de facto annexation of the West Bank, which it did with stunning success during the seven years of the "peace" process. In fact it was the physical changes to the West Bank imposed by the Oslo agreements – another albeit more shielded expression of Israeli unilateralism – notably its division and segmentation into areas a, b, and c, that facilitated Sharon's usurpation of Palestinian lands and their steady incorporation into Israel.

Having "relinquished" responsibility for (but not control over) volatile Gaza, Sharon strengthened his argument for maintaining direct control over those areas of the West Bank deemed essential for security or settlement purposes including the strategic Jordan Valley – thereby eliminating any prospect of a Palestinian state that would include the entire West Bank. Hence, the disengagement from Gaza, while technically a reversal of some of Sharon's annexationalist policies, should be understood as part of the same political continuum created by the Oslo process (and indeed by Israeli policies since 1967 beginning with the Allon Plan). The disengagement plan should also be understood as serving the same goals: to maintain Israel's full control – both direct and indirect – over Palestinian lands and resources; and consolidate and institutionalize direct and permanent (military and political) control over a majority of the West Bank and over East Jerusalem, among other objectives. Moreover, after the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, Israeli policy abandoned diplomacy in favor of military attack, a shift also reflected at the economic level with the almost total destruction of Gaza's private sector after 2006 – well before the 2008 assault - transforming Gaza's already fragile economy from one driven in large part by private sector productivity to one dependent on public sector salaries and humanitarian assistance. Today, approximately 80 percent of Gaza's once productive (and overwhelmingly young) population, who want to work, has been made dependent on aid to survive. (Gaza's marginalization, which has been facilitated by the establishment of an Islamic regime, has also produced damaging internal fragmentation as seen in increasing levels of violence between and within political factions and in growing economic and class divisions.) The change in Israeli (and international) policy away from diplomacy was designed, among other things, to undermine and debilitate Gaza and further remove it from any political equation that might produce a Palestinian state.
Gaza as defining: more recent illustrations

Gaza's defining role has more recent and tragic illustrations, notably Israel's December 2008 assault on Gaza that killed between 1300 and 1400 Palestinians – the overwhelming majority civilians. The immediate pretext for Israel's attack was Hamas rocket fire into Israel and Israel's right to defend itself but this does not explain the disproportionality of the Israeli attack.\(^6\)

The devastating assault on Gaza was not only about destroying Hamas as a political force; in fact, Hamas rockets had very little if anything to do with Israel's attack. Furthermore, various human rights reports and IDF soldier testimonies make it clear that Israeli forces encountered little if any resistance by Hamas fighters. In fact, not a single battle was fought either in densely or sparsely populated areas for the 22 days of the war. According to Amnesty International, many of the Palestinians killed were not caught in crossfire but were killed in their homes while they slept or going about their daily routine.\(^7\) And these reports were clear to point out that although Hamas, like Israel, was guilty of war crimes, it was on a far smaller scale.

The attack on Gaza was an attack against the Palestinian people and their continued resistance – be it by Hamas or by the people of Gaza – and their consistent refusal to accede to Israeli demands and conditions. The Israeli government argued that since all Palestinians in Gaza supported Hamas, there were no true civilians in Gaza and all attacks against them were therefore justified, including the reduction and denial of humanitarian supplies, military incursions and invasions, and the continued assassination of the Hamas leadership.

Unlike the West Bank, which has effectively been subdued by Israeli policies of land expropriation, settler expansion, territorial cantonization and other forms of military control (now supported by a cooperative PNA security structure), Gaza has continued to resist and defy. This is a characteristic feature of Israel's relationship with Gaza and has been since 1967. Israel's attack, which aimed to wreck Gaza's economy, destroyed or partially destroyed 6,300 Palestinian homes (compared with the near destruction of one Israeli home) schools and 30 mosques; destroyed or damaged 280 schools and kindergartens, nearly half of Gaza's 122 health facilities including 15 hospitals and 1500 factories and workshops.\(^8\) (And here it should be noted that between June 2005 and September 2008 the number of operating factories in the Gaza

\(^6\) Parts of this section are taken from the postscript to my forthcoming book, Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector, Princeton University Press.

\(^7\) Norman G. Finkelstein, This Time We Went Too Far : Truth & Consequences of the Gaza Invasion (New York: OR Books, 2010), 87.

\(^8\) Ibid, 60-61, 63, 70.
Strip had already declined from 3,900 to 23 due to Israel's siege). The attack against Gaza was also about pacification and sending a clear message to Palestinians in the West Bank that says Israel will not withdraw from settlements or return any lands already taken. This linkage, illustrating yet again, Gaza's crucial role in securing Israeli control of the West Bank, is critically important, yet seldom acknowledged.

There were other reasons for the war on Gaza. One was to enhance Israel's deterrence capacity, particularly after its defeat in Lebanon in July 2006, and to rehabilitate Israel's image as an effective ally in the American-led war against terror. Furthermore, during the 6-month period of the truce (June-December 2008) consensus was beginning to emerge, both among the international community and within certain sectors in Israel, for restarting a political process; engaging Hamas directly or indirectly, particularly given a clear indication by its leadership both in Damascus and in Gaza, that it was seeking a settlement of the conflict along June 4, 1967 borders; freezing Israeli settlement expansion; and boycotting Israel settlement products. There were also efforts, albeit troubled, by the Egyptian government to mediate internal divisions between Hamas and Fatah and reunify the Palestinian government, a critical prerequisite to achieving any kind of workable political agreement. In fact, Israel's attack occurred just before a scheduled meeting between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo that had been aimed at political reconciliation and unification.

Furthermore, it should be noted that a rocket has never been fired at Israel from the West Bank. Yet, during the period of the 2008 truce, Israel continued and indeed intensified its policies of extrajudicial killings, settler expansion, territorial cantonization, movement restrictions, home demolitions, and other measures against Palestinians in the West Bank, the control of which remains uppermost on Israel's political agenda.

It is difficult to imagine that these measures, among others, are about peace or security. This leads to my second main point, the subjection of Gaza (and the West Bank) is not a discrete event without history or context, despite the fact that it has been portrayed that way. The December 2008 attack did not emerge in a vacuum but is a tragic though inevitable part of a far larger context of prolonged Israeli military occupation and colonization that preceded Hamas by several decades and would undeniably continue should Hamas disappear from the map.

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tomorrow. This occupation, which is the fundamental reason underlying Palestinian resistance, has been all but forgotten but whose impact is felt daily. In fact, the word “occupation” has largely disappeared from the lexicon.

Gaza’s central status in Israel’s West Bank policy was again seen in August 2010 when Israel’s foreign minister Lieberman surprisingly proposed that Israel end its status as an occupying power in Gaza and allow Hamas to establish an independent Palestinian state on the territory. He called for establishing a border regime that would end Israel’s effective control over Gaza’s economy as a way to address Israel’s security needs. With this proposal Lieberman expected Hamas to end its resistance in exchange for an arrangement that would allow Israel to deepen its colonization of the West Bank.¹²

Henry Siegman further states, “Lieberman has advanced this proposal because he favors any measure he believes would relieve U.S. and international pressure on Israel to withdraw from much more than about half of the West Bank, the rest of which he and Netanyahu want to annex to the Jewish state—and for all practical purposes have already done so. He and Netanyahu are desperately in search of strategies that would distract the outside world long enough to enable them to anchor the settlement enterprise even more deeply and more irreversibly than they already have; and what better way of doing that than by getting the international community (i.e., George Mitchell, Denis Ross, the Quartet) to busy itself for the next five years with arrangements for Gaza’s independence and statehood that satisfy “Israel’s legitimate security requirements”—as Israel completes its “Judaization” of East Jerusalem and of much, if not all, of the West Bank.”¹³

A concluding thought

In the continued absence of a political resolution to the conflict, why must occupation be the default position? Why must Gaza be pauperized and the West Bank cantonized and annexed, and Palestinians treated as a humanitarian problem rather than as a people with political and national rights entitled to self-determination? Why should Palestinians be forced to accept their own decay as my friend said? And why must they be punished for resisting?

We are living through one of the most severe periods of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The challenges are formidable and are not restricted to re-defining and addressing Palestine’s relationship with Israel but to overcoming and healing intra-Palestinian divisions, which is

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¹³ Ibid.
absolutely crucial, perhaps most crucial of all to a sustainable resolution of the conflict. As I have argued, the isolation and diminution of Gaza has been a key factor facilitating Israel’s dismemberment and deepened control of the West Bank and preclusion of a Palestinian state. If Gaza is to be brought back from the margins into the center – a center I define as a politically and economically coherent Palestine - Gaza’s diplomatic, political, and economic isolation must end and its future must be seen as part of, and central to, Palestine’s own. For this to happen political reconciliation and unification among Palestinians must proceed and all attempts by external and internal actors to thwart such unity will consign Palestinians and Israelis both to continued and worsening conflict.

The imperative as I see it is not only to reclaim Gaza as part of a future Palestinian state – whatever form it may assume – but to reclaim the West Bank as well, which arguably also exists in the margin. And one cannot be reclaimed without the other. In much the same way that Israelis and Palestinians cannot truly be separated nor can Gazans and West Bankers. Of course, the task is enormous and fraught with difficulty but if recent history is any indication, the alternative, in the form of a deteriorating status quo, will prove far worse.
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