

# Israel's Politics of Fragmentation

by Richard Falk

## Background

If the *politics of deflection* exhibit the *outward* reach of Israel's grand strategy of territorial expansionism and regional hegemony, the *politics of fragmentation* serves Israel's *inward* moves designed to weaken Palestinian resistance, induce despair, and de facto surrender. In fundamental respects deflection is an unwitting enabler of fragmentation, but it is also its twin or complement.

The British were particularly adept in facilitating their colonial project all over the world by a variety of divide and rule tactics, which almost everywhere haunted anti-colonial movements, frequently producing lethal forms of post-colonial partition as in India, Cyprus, Ireland, Malaya, and of course, Palestine, and deadly ethnic strife elsewhere as in Nigeria, Kenya, Myanmar, Rwanda. Each of these national partitions and post-colonial traumas has produced severe tension and long lasting hostility and struggle, although each takes a distinctive form due to variations from country to country of power, vision, geography, resources, history, geopolitics, leadership.

An additional British colonial practice and legacy was embodied in a series of vicious settler colonial movements that succeeded in effectively eliminating or marginalizing resistance by indigenous populations as in Australia, Canada, the United States, and somewhat less so in New Zealand, and eventually failing politically in South Africa and Namibia, but only after decades of barbarous racism.

In Palestine, the key move was the Balfour Declaration, which was a colonialist gesture of formal approval given to the Zionist Project in 1917 tendered at the end of Ottoman rule over Palestine. This was surely gross interference with the dynamics of Palestinian self-determination (at the time the estimated Arab population of Palestine was 747,685, 92.1% of the total, while the Jewish population was an estimate 58,728, which amounted to 7.9%) and a decisive stimulus for the Zionist undertaking to achieve supremacy over the land embraced by the British mandate to administer Palestine in accordance with a framework agreement with the League of Nation. The agreement repeated the language of the Balfour Declaration in its preamble: "Whereas recognition has thereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people

with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home *in that country*”(emphasis added). To describe this encouragement of Zionism as merely ‘interference’ is a terribly misleading understatement of the British role in creating a situation of enduring tension in Palestine, which was supposedly being administered on the basis of the wellbeing of the existing indigenous population, what was called “a sacred trust of civilization” in Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, established for the “well-being and development” of peoples “not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world.” The relevance of the politics of fragmentation refers to a bundle of practices and overall approach that assumed the form of inter-ethnic and inter-religious strife during the almost three decades that the mandate arrangements were in effect.[1]

At the same time, the British role was not the whole story by any means: the fanatical and effective exploitation of the opportunity to establish a Jewish homeland of unspecified dimensions manifested the dedication, skill, and great ambition of the Zionist movement; the lack of comparable sustained and competent resistance by the indigenous population abetted the transformation of historic Palestine; and then these developments were strongly reinforced by the horrors of the Holocaust and the early complicity of the liberal democracies with Nazism that led the West to lend its support to the settler colonial reality that Zionism had become well before the 1948 War. The result was the tragic combination of statehood and UN membership for Israel and the *nakba* involving massive dispossession creating forced refugee and exile for most Palestinians, and leading after 1967 to occupation, discrimination, and oppression of those Palestinians who remained either in Israel or in the 22% of original Palestine.

It should be recalled that the UN solution of 1947, embodied in General Assembly Resolution 181, after the British gave up their mandatory role was no more in keeping with the ethos of self-determination than the Balfour Declaration, decreeing partition and allocating 55% of Palestine to the Jewish population and 45% to the Palestinians without the slightest effort to assess the wishes of the population resident in Palestine at the time or to allocate the land in proportion to the demographic realities at the time. The UN solution was a new rendition of Western paternalism, opposed at the time by the Islamic and Middle Eastern members of the UN. Such a solution was not as overbearing as the mandates system that was devised to vest quasi-colonial rule in the victorious European powers after World War I, yet it was still an Orientalist

initiative aimed at the control and exploitation of the destiny of an ethnic, political, and economic entity long governed by the Ottoman Empire.

The Palestinians (and their Arab neighbors) are often told in patronizing tones by latter day Zionists and their apologists that the Palestinians had their chance to become a state, squandered their opportunity, thereby forfeiting their rights to a state of their own by rejecting the UN partition plan. In effect, the Israeli contention is that Palestinians effectively relinquished their statehood claims by this refusal to accept what the UN had decreed, while Israel by nominally accepting the UN proposals validated their sovereign status, which was further confirmed by its early admission to full membership in the UN. Ever since, Israel has taken advantage of the fluidity of the legal situation by at once pretending to accept the UN approach of seeking a compromise by way of mutual agreement with the Palestinians while doing everything in its power to prevent such an outcome by projecting its force throughout the entirety of Palestine, by establishing and expanding settlements, the ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem, and by advancing an array of maximalist security claims that have diminished Palestinian prospects. That is, Israel has publicly endorsed conflict-resolving diplomacy but operationally has been constantly moving the goal posts by unlawfully creating facts on the ground, and then successfully insisting on their acceptance as valid points of departure. In effect, and with American help, Israel has seemingly given the Palestinians a hard choice, which is tacitly endorsed by the United States and Europe: accept the Bantustan destiny we offer or remain forever refugees and victims of annexation, exile, discrimination, statelessness.

Israel has used its media leverage and geopolitical clout to create an asymmetric understanding of identity politics as between Jews and Palestinians. Jews being defined as a people without borders who can gain Israeli nationality no matter where they live on the planet, while Palestinians are excluded from Israeli nationality regardless of how deep their indigenous roots in Palestine itself. This distinction between the two peoples exhibits the tangible significance of Israel as a 'Jewish State,' and why such a designation is morally and legally unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century even as it so zealously claimed by recent Israeli leaders, none more than Benyamin Netanyahu.

### **Modalities of Fragmentation**

The logic of fragmentation is to weaken, if not destroy, a political opposition configuration by destroying its unity of purpose and strategy, and fomenting to the extent possible conflicts between different tendencies within the adversary movement. It is an evolving strategy that is interactive, and by its nature becomes an important theme of conflict. The Palestinians in public constantly stress the essential role of unity, along with reconciliation to moderate the relevance of internal differences. In contrast, the Israelis fan the flames of disunity, stigmatizing elements of the Palestinian reality that are relevantly submissive, and accept the agenda and frameworks that are devised by Tel Aviv refusing priorities set by Palestinian leaders. Over the course of the conflict from 1948 to the present, there have been ebbs and flows in the course of Palestinian unity, with maximum unity achieved during the time when Yasser Arafat was the resistance leader and maximum fragmentation evident since Hamas was successful in the 2006 Gaza elections, and managed to seize governmental control from Fatah in Gaza a year later. Another way that Israel has promoted Palestinian disunity is to favor the so-called moderates operating under the governance of the Palestinian Authority while imposing inflicting various punishments on Palestinians adhering to Hamas.

### Zionism, the Jewish State, and the Palestinian Minority

Perhaps, the most fundamental form of fragmentation is between Jews and Palestinians living within the state of Israel. This type of fragmentation has two principal dimensions: pervasive discrimination against the 20% Palestinian minority (about 1.5 million) affecting legal, social, political, cultural, and economic rights, and creating a Palestinian subjectivity of marginality, subordination, vulnerability. Although Palestinians in Israel are citizens, they are excluded from many benefits and opportunities because they do not possess Jewish *nationality*. Israel may be the only state in the world that privileges nationality over citizenship in a series of contexts, including family reunification and access to residence. It is also worth observing that if demographic projections prove to be reliable Palestinians could be a majority in Israel as early as 2035, and would almost certainly outnumber Jews in the country by 2048. Not only does this pose the familiar choice for Israel between remaining an electoral democracy and retaining its self-proclaimed Jewish character, but it also shows how hegemonic it is to insist that the Palestinians and the international community accept Israel as a Jewish state.

This Palestinian entitlement, validated by the international law relating to fundamental human rights prohibiting all forms of discrimination, and especially structural forms embedded in law that discriminate on the basis of race and religion. The government of Israel, reinforced by its Supreme Court, endorses the view that only Jews can possess Israeli nationality that is the basis of a range of crucial rights under Israeli law. What is more, Jews have Israeli nationality even if lacking any link to Israel and wherever they are located, while Palestinians (and other religious and ethnic minorities) are denied Israeli nationality (although given Israeli citizenship) *even if indigenous to historic Palestine and to the territory under the sovereign control of the state of Israel.*

A secondary form of fragmentation is between this minority in Israel and the rest of the Palestinian corpus. The dominant international subjectivity relating to the conflict has so far erased this minority from its imaginary of peace for the two peoples, or from any sense that Palestinian human rights in Israel should be internationally implemented in whatever arrangements are eventually negotiated or emerges via struggle. As matters now stand, the Palestinian minority in Israel is unrepresented at the diplomatic level and lacks any vehicle for the expression of its grievances.

#### Occupied Palestine and the Palestinian Diaspora (refugees and enforced exile)

Among the most debilitating forms of fragmentation is the effort by Israel and its supporters to deny Palestinian refugees and Palestinians living in the diaspora) their right of return as confirmed by General Assembly Resolution 184? There are between 4.5 million and 5.5 million Palestinians who are either refugees or living in the diaspora, as well as about 1.4 million resident in the West Bank and 1.6 million in Gaza.

The diplomatic discourse has been long shaped by reference to the two-state mantra. This includes the reductive belief that the essence of a peaceful future for the two peoples depends on working out the intricacies of 'land for peace.' In other words, the dispute is false categorized as almost exclusively about *territory* and *borders* (along with the future of Jerusalem), and not about *people*. There is a tacit understanding that seems to include the officials of the Palestinian Authority to the effect that Palestinians refugee rights will be 'handled' via compensation and the right of return, not to the place of original dispossession, but to territory eventually placed under Palestinian sovereignty.

Again the same disparity as between the two sides is encoded in the diplomacy of ‘the peace process,’ ever more so during the twenty years shaped by the Oslo framework. The Israel propaganda campaign was designed to make it appear to be a deal breaker for the Palestinians to insist on full rights of repatriation as it would allegedly entail the end of the promise of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Yet such a posture toward refugees and the Palestinian diaspora cruelly consigns several million Palestinians to a permanent limbo, in effect repudiating the idea that the Palestinians are a genuine ‘people’ while absolutizing the Jews as a people of global scope. Such a dismissal of the claims of Palestinian refugees also flies in the face of the right of return specifically affirmed in relation to Palestine by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 194, and more generally supported by Article 13 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### The Two Warring Realms of the Occupation of Palestine: the Palestine Authority versus Hamas

Again, Israel and its supporters have been able to drive an ideological wedge between the Palestinians enduring occupation since 1967. With an initial effort to discredit the Palestine Liberation Organization that had achieved control over a unified and robust Palestine national movement, Israel actually encouraged the initial emergence of Hamas as a radical and fragmenting alternative to the PLO when it was founded in the course of the First Intifada. Israel of course later strongly repudiated Hamas when it began to carry armed struggle to pre-1967 Israel, most notoriously engaging in suicide bombings in Israel that involved indiscriminate attacks on civilians, a tactic repudiated in recent years.

Despite Hamas entering into the political life of occupied Palestine with American, and winning an internationally supervised election in 2006, and taking control of Gaza in 2007, it has continued to be categorized as ‘a terrorist organization’ that is given no international status. This terrorist designation is also relied upon to impose a blockade on Gaza that is a flagrant form of collective punishment in direct violation of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Palestinian Authority centered in Ramallah has also, despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, refused to treat Hamas as a legitimate governing authority or to allow Hamas to operate as a legitimate political presence in the West Bank and Jerusalem or to insist on the inclusion of Hamas in international negotiations addressing the future of the Palestinian people. This refusal has persisted despite the more conciliatory tone of Hamas since 2009 when its leader,

Khaled Meshaal, announced a shift in the organization's goals: an acceptance of Israel as a state beside Palestine as a state provided a full withdrawal to 1967 borders and implementation of the right of return for refugees, and a discontinuation by Hamas of a movement based on armed struggle. Meshaal also gave further reassurances of moderation by an indication that earlier goals of liberating the whole of historic Palestine, as proclaimed in its Charter, were a matter of history that was no longer descriptive of its political program.

In effect, the territorial fragmentation of occupied Palestine is reinforced by ideological fragmentation, seeking to somewhat authenticate and privilege the secular and accommodating leadership provided by the PA while repudiating the Islamic orientation of Hamas. In this regard, the polarization in such countries as Turkey and Egypt is cynically reproduced in Palestine as part of Israel's overall occupation strategy. This includes a concerted effort by Israel to make it appear that material living conditions for Palestinians are much better if the Palestinian leadership cooperates with the Israeli occupiers than if it continues to rely on a national movement of liberation and refuses to play the Oslo game.

The Israeli propaganda position on Hamas has emphasized the rocket attacks on Israel launched from within Gaza. There is much ambiguity and manipulation of the timeline relating to the rockets in interaction with various forms of Israeli violent intrusion. We do know that the casualties during the period of Hamas control of Gaza have been exceedingly one-sided, with Israel doing most of the killing, and Palestinians almost all of the dying. We also know that when ceasefires have been established between Israel and Gaza, there was a good record of compliance on the Hamas side, and that it was Israel that provocatively broke the truce, and then launched major military operations in 2008-09 and 2012 on a defenseless and completely vulnerable population.

### Cantonization and the Separation Wall: Fragmenting the West Bank

A further Israeli tactic of fragmentation is to make it difficult for Palestinians to sustain a normal and coherent life. The several hundred check points throughout the West Bank seriously disrupt mobility for the Palestinians, and make it far easier for Palestinians to avoid delay and humiliation. It is better for them to remain contained within their villages, a restrictive life reinforced by periodic closures and curfews that are extremely disruptive. Vulnerability is accentuated by nighttime arrests, especially of

young male Palestinians, 60% of whom have been detained in prisons before they reach the age of 25, and the sense that Israeli violence, whether issuing from the IDF or the settlers enjoys impunity, and often is jointly carried out.

The Oslo framework not only delegated to the PA the role of maintaining 'security' in Palestinian towns and cities, but bisected the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C, with Israeli retaining a residual security right throughout occupied Palestine. Area C, where most of the settlements are located, is over 60% of the West Bank, and is under exclusive control of Israel.

This fragmentation at the core of the Oslo framework has been a key element in perpetuating Palestinian misery.

The fragmentation in administration is rigid and discriminatory, allowing Israeli settlers the benefits of Israel's rule of law, while subjecting Palestinians to military administration with extremely limited rights, and even the denial of a right to enjoy the benefit of rights. Israel also insists that since it views the West Bank as disputed territory rather than 'occupied', it is not legally obliged to respect international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. This fragmentation between Israeli settlers and Palestinian residents is so severe that it has been increasingly understood in international circles as a form of apartheid, which the Rome Statute governing the International Criminal Court denominates as one type of 'crime against humanity.'

The Separation Wall is an obvious means of separating Palestinians from each other and from their land. It was declared in 2004 to be a violation of international law by a super majority of 14-1 in the International Court of Justice, but to no avail, as Israel has defied this near unanimous reading of international law by the highest judicial body in the UN, and yet suffered no adverse consequences. In some West Bank communities, Palestinians are surrounded by the wall, and in others Palestinian farmers can only gain access to and from their land at appointed times when wall gates are opened.

### Fragmentation and Self-Determination

The pervasiveness of fragmentation is one reason why there is so little belief that the recently revived peace process is anything more than one more turn of the wheel, allowing Israel to proceed with its policies designed to take as much of what remains

of Palestine as it wants so as to realize its own conception of Jewish self-determination. Just as Israel refuses to restrict the Jewish right of return, so it also refuses to delimit its boundaries. When it negotiates internationally, it insists on even more prerogatives under the banner of security and anti-terrorism. Israel approaches such negotiations as a zero-sum dynamic of gain for itself, loss for Palestine, a process hidden from view by the politics of deflection and undermining the Palestinian capacity for coherent resistance by the politics of fragmentation.

## **Note**

[1] There are two issues posed, beyond the scope of this post, that bear on Palestinian self-determination emanating from the Balfour Declaration and the ensuing British mandatory role in Palestine: (1) To what extent does “a national home for the Jewish people” imply a valid right of self-determination, as implemented by the establishment of the state of Israel? Does the idea of ‘a national home’ encompass statehood? (2) To what extent does the colonialist nature of the Balfour Declaration and the League mandate system invalidate any actions taken?