

Gaza: Destructive Reconstruction

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It looks like an earthquake has struck in the North of the Gaza Strip. [...] 100,000 homeless people are literally sitting and waiting in the rubble of their homes. They are waiting for help from outside and for the borders to open.

Bettina Marx (2009)

This statement seemingly decries the violence unleashed upon Gaza this summer during Operation Protective Edge. It was written in 2009, after Operation Cast Lead, but could also originate from 2006, 2011, or 2014. In all of these years Israel launched operations against Gaza and its people, leaving death and destruction. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, Operation Protective Edge left 1,914 killed and 9,861 injured Palestinians in its wake, among them 549 dead and almost 3,000 injured children (Shaban 2014, Tait 2015). Israel bombed Gaza's largest food factories, bulldozed cultivated land, and destroyed more than 250 economic facilities, turning Gaza into a completely dependent market. Gaza's power plant stopped working rendering the supply of water and electricity almost impossible. Large numbers of Gaza's administrative and governmental institutions, religious endowments and mosques were destroyed. After each war it becomes harder to rebuild, as most of the damage from previous wars remains in place.

Why does it seem impossible to break this cyclical destruction and reconstruction, manifested in almost biannual Israeli atrocities in Gaza and subsequent international assistance? This is precisely what I explore in this paper: by looking at the destructive aspects of reconstruction attempts in Gaza, I demonstrate how they are part of much deeper, structural problems in international aid and emblematic of the overall approach of international actors to the Palestinian struggle for justice and liberation. To do so, I highlight several

manifestations of these structural problems surrounding the Oslo Accords and its subsequent arrangements: the fragmentation of Palestinians, the increasing dependence of Palestinians on Israel, the depoliticised approach to the Palestinian struggle, and, finally, the externalisation of the cost of the occupation, alleviating Israel. The cumulative effect of these manifestations has made reconstruction efforts and international assistance – intentionally or not – facilitator of the Israeli occupation.

Division

The Oslo peace process was initially celebrated as the beginning of Palestinian statehood. Instead it became "an interminable process, without peace and without end" (Tabar 2015). Oslo allowed Israel to further the construction of settlements while pretending to negotiate a settlement. It shifted Palestinian debates from liberation to state-building, and, most devastatingly, Oslo shattered the unifying claim of a return to historic Palestine by reducing this claim to a state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, silencing the rightful claims of Palestinian refugees and Palestinians living inside Israel for justice. Instead of unifying Palestinians within one state, Oslo divided them. Israel drove a barrier between Palestinians under jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Palestinians living in Israel, in the surrounding countries or the Diaspora, but it also actively separated Palestinians in the West Bank from Gazans, Jerusalemites and other Palestinians, as well as reinforced divisions between the PA and other Palestinian organisations such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and leftist groups. It did so by establishing a separation wall around the West Bank, a wall around Gaza, and a ring of settlements around Palestinian enclaves in Jerusalem and, helped by the international community, it undermined Palestinian efforts at unification and reconciliation.

Israel, in short, regards Palestinian unity, and specifically the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, as a threat (Thrall 2014a). Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, Israeli sanctions, international boycotts and the threat to cut Western funding have served to further deepen division between Hamas and Fatah. After they signed a reconciliation agreement in April 2014, Israel increased its efforts to divide Palestinians. International actors tacitly supported reconciliation, only to undermine it with reconstruction plans: Operation Protective Edge ended with the promise to ease the siege, but also the condition of having to allow Fatah back into Gaza in order to turn it into the receiving party of international reconstruction money (international donors are prevented from transferring money to Hamas due to its status as terrorist organisation).

But the situation for Gazans has not improved an inch: electricity is still out, the border to Egypt is closed, Israel still blocks the import of construction materials, salaries remain unpaid, and relations between Fatah and Hamas are hostile with both parties blaming each other for the reconstruction failure. Even worse, Hamas' status as a terrorist organization causes international – more specifically Western – donors to reject dealing with Hamas until they agree to nonviolence, accept previous agreements, and recognise Israel. Since 2006 these principles served as a tool to further divide Fatah and Hamas, as well as to undermine the latter. After Operation Protective Edge, this implicit division and exclusion of Hamas intensified, shutting Hamas out of reconstruction efforts, even though Protective Edge renewed its legitimacy (Tartir 2014a). Also other Gaza-based representatives were excluded, despite their requisite knowledge of what Gaza needs. Then again this is nothing new, already in 2009 the official plan for reconstructing Gaza was published first in

English and only months later in Arabic, proving that the needs of donors matter more than Gaza's.

Dependence

The „Palestinian economy remains captive to the Israeli market.“

Sansour and Tartir (2014b)

While Palestinian organisations have always been dependent on their host countries and supporters, after Oslo Palestinians started to depend directly on their occupier and its biggest allies. Palestine's integration into the Israeli economy was laid down in the Paris Protocol, which obligates the PA to implement the Israeli trade and tariff policy without being able to influence it. It regulates trade policy, taxation and stipulated that foreign aid had to go through Israel. Furthermore, Israel is in charge of Palestinian water resources, energy supplies, air space, and external borders. It confiscated large areas of land for the construction of settlements and gave settlers control over 87% of the irrigated land in the entire West Bank. Furthermore, the agreement rendered the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) thoroughly dependent on imported goods (70 to 80 per cent of GDP), paid for by either indirect taxes – collected by Israel and then transferred to the PA – or external aid. The OPT have subsequently become the highest per capita recipients of aid worldwide (Wildeman and Tartir 2013).

In light of Israel's comprehensive control over the OPT, the ability to engage in economic activities came with the price of surrendering to the occupation (Hanieh Issue 10). The economic set-up under Oslo aligned the interests of the Palestinian business elite, the PA bureaucracy, and parts of the PLO with those of the occupation. Hanieh (Issue 10) states, *Oslo has produced a social class that draws significant benefits from its position atop the negotiation process and its linkages with the structures of occupation.*

This development has been especially

drastic in the field of agriculture where sustainable independent agriculture is gradually replaced by service industry, exemplified by John Kerry's Palestine Economic Initiative (PEI), which envisions special economic zones (SEZs) in order to create industrial parks. To make space for these parks, the PA displaced farmers by buying their land at enforced low prices or confiscating it – an absurd situation in which Palestinians are displaced not only by Israel but also their own representatives. The farmers are mostly supposed to work in the industrial parks, turning them from productive self-sustaining farmers into labourers. Worse, they fear the envisioned park will become a packaging facility for the produce coming from the agribusiness of the settlements. The zones rely on Israel for transfer, movement, and access of tax revenues and threaten to put Palestinian companies out of business (Sansour and Tartir 2014b). They produce nothing, while the OPT are in turn forced to buy more agricultural products from Israeli settlements. The PEI thus benefits Israeli companies, especially in illegal settlements, but undermines Palestinian aspirations for independence and sovereignty, as it erodes their ties to the land, one of their few remaining sources of power and autonomy. Profits will go to the business elite close to the PA and Israeli settlers. This way the PEI ensures the complicity of large sections of the Palestinian economic elite as their financial success becomes ever more dependent on Israeli good will and cooperation.

A much more complete dependence has been created in Gaza by Israel and through reconstruction efforts. Gaza depends on Israel for food, electricity, water, construction material, medicine and every thing else. In addition during the almost biannual military operations in Gaza, Israel destroys the barely existing infrastructure, only to increase dependence. This is the biggest obstacle for reconstruction: the illegal Israeli siege prevents the import of the necessary goods – a situation worsened since the closure of Rafah and the destruction of tunnels into Sinai (Shaban 2014). Further, reconstruction efforts only

focus on rebuilding houses – arguably the most dire and urgent need – but in doing so, the allocation of funds helps Gazans survive but ignores the deeper problem at hand: dependence on Israeli benevolence. Even worse, Israel stands to profit financially from the reconstruction, as it is free to tax the money pledged to rebuild Gaza (Abunimah 2014).

To conclude, international efforts to rebuild and develop Palestine create more dependency on Israel and make Palestinians reliant on money flowing in from the outside to sustain this current model. The PA therefore puts the needs of the international community ahead of its own people. Thereby the international community creates dependence and imposes its model of development on Palestinians, an approach skirting the political aspect of the Israeli occupation at the heart of the Palestinian ailment.

Depoliticizing

Gaza is not a natural disaster. It is man-made, the result of deliberate political choices.
Chris Gunnes (2015)

Ignoring the underlying structural political inequalities is generally one of the fundamental flaws in development aid. In the case of Palestine, the international community spends billions of dollars on state building, institution building and economic development. Best example are the aforementioned SEZs, which are supposed to boost the economy but ultimately fall short because their success depends on the cooperation of the occupier who is not interested in flourishing Palestinian businesses. This approach favours economic solutions for political problems. Without addressing the occupation as one of the reason behind most economic, social and developmental problems, every attempt to impact Palestinian lives for the better is doomed from the onset (El-Haddad 2009). To address Palestinian grievances is to address the injustice inflicted on them by Israel. Ignoring the political aspect will again and again lead to situations in which Israel destroys what has been build

with aid money. Sara Roy (2006) aptly states, that in “the continued absence of a political settlement [...], international aid can only help Palestinians survive and nothing else.” The occupation is obviously not the only challenge for Palestinians, but this issue frustrates the solution to any other problem.

This holds true for the OPT in general but even more so for Gaza where the biggest problem is the Israeli siege, condemning the small land strip to destitution. But the international community treats Gaza as if it was struck by natural disaster and spends large sums of money (though still not enough) on rebuilding houses, delivering medical supplies, and food. At the same time Israel's culpability and responsibility is politely ignored. Gaza is no humanitarian crisis. Framing Gaza's persisting oppression as humanitarian problem, strips Palestinians of their political rights and turns them into “beggars who have no political identity and therefore can have no political claims” (Cook 2009). Failure to hold Israel accountable for its actions has dire consequences: firstly, international aid, especially in its aspiration to go beyond helping Gazans survive, cannot achieve its goals with the occupation in place (Roy 2006); secondly, it renders international assistance to Gaza a substitute for Israeli accountability (Murphy 2014). Thus, with the international community paying for rebuilding Gaza, aid eventually alleviates part of the cost of the occupation.

Funding the occupation

The beginning of this development was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, established in 1949 to provide for the Palestinians displaced by Israel during the 1948 war. With the Oslo Accords this logic was extended to the PA itself and today even the politics of reconstructing Gaza are subject to it.

The Oslo Accords were supposed to be the beginning of an independent Palestinian

state. A semi-autonomous Palestinian authority, intended to become a full-fledged state, replaced the Israeli occupation in (parts of) the OPT. Instead this interim setup became permanent, with the PA standing between the vision of achieving independence and the reality of cooperating with Israel. For Israel, Oslo symbolized the possibility to portray itself as generous partner in negotiations, while it consolidated and deepened its control of Palestinian lives by ‘subcontracting’ the occupation to the PA (Hanieh Issue 10). This is most clearly visible in the way Palestinian armed resistance forces – created under Oslo out of the existing armed groups and envisioned to protect Palestinians (as they did during the second Intifada) – have become focused on eradicating internal resistance against the occupation. The 2003 road map is a turning point in this development: bowing to EU and US pressure the PA agreed to arrest Palestinians engaged in armed resistance against Israel (Amrov and Tartir 2014). With the help of Western security consultants, Mahmoud Abbas profoundly restructured security forces focusing them on counter-terrorism and policing, but not on fighting off external threats (Dana 2014).

Regarded as collaborating with Israel by Palestinians, Abbas called security cooperation with Israel “sacred” (Abunimah 2015). Superficially contradictory, the statement reveals the extent to which security forces have become essential for the PA to protect their interests, safety and wealth (Dana 2014). PA security forces routinely torture prisoners, arrest protestors, activists, and journalists, and assist the Israeli military in arrests – all funded by Europe and the US. With more than a quarter of the PA budget allocated to security and about 45% of its employees in the security sector, the PA depends on US and EU funds to continue the program. This money directly subsidizes the PA's continued security cooperation and the oppression of their own people. It also directly reduces the price Israel should have to pay for its continued illegal occupation.

The same happens with money raised for reconstructing Gaza: external actors carry the cost of reconstruction, while Israel profits. This is exemplified in the way the UN has become part of a system of control and surveillance in Gaza: to control the import of “dual-use” materials - things that can also be used to build tunnels – Israel persuaded the UN to set up a broad system of oversight monitoring every item of dual-use from the factory to the building it is intended for. To this end a database of suppliers – few factories are chosen and most are Israeli – and consumers – information about the damage of a building, ID numbers of the inhabitants, GPS coordinates and further personal information – is planned. For materials to reach either a family rebuilding their house or the PA an official building, Israel needs to give its approval (Abunimah 2014b). The UN would be heavily involved in monitoring and inspecting the entire process and provide information to the PA, to be shared with Israel (Beaumont 2014). In its attempt to ‘help’ Palestinians, the UN is willing to accommodate Israeli demands to such an extent that is becoming an enabling part of the occupation's infrastructure, rendering it ‘better’ and easier for Israel to sustain. Israel also stands to actively profit from this way of rebuilding: Palestinians are forced to buy most cement from Israeli companies, such as Neshet Israel Cement Enterprises, which is profiting from the construction of illegal settlements (Palestinian BDS National Committee 2014).

With the international community paying for reconstruction, allowing Israel to benefit financially and entrench its control and surveillance of the lives of Palestinians, international actors fail to hold Israel accountable for its actions rendering them complicit in the injustice inflicted upon Palestinians. In order to avoid this absurdity, Israel needs to be held responsible for its actions; otherwise the circle of destruction and reconstruction will continue with international funds paying for the damages and Israel receiving the benefits.

Conclusion

[A]id is being used to sustain a failed peace process as well as the Israeli occupation itself.

Wildeman and Tartir (2013)

This quote epitomizes my argument in this paper. I delineated the attitudes informing the approach to Palestine, leading to a situation where the UN has become part of the occupation of Palestine. This is the result of shutting out Gazans and Hamas, of promoting policies leaving Palestinians more dependent on the goodwill of their occupier, of treating Palestine as apolitical humanitarian catastrophe, and of not holding Israel accountable. Consequently, international assistance can only help Palestinians to survive. Rather than actually improving the situation, aid divides Palestinians, renders them more dependent, depoliticizes the conflict and exempts Israel from all responsibility.

Worldwide acceptance of this despicable process of continued destruction of Palestinian lives and homes is decreasing rapidly. Several Latin American countries recognized Palestine as a state and parliaments in EU member states passed resolutions calling for the recognition of an independent sovereign Palestinian state. The Boycott, Divest and Sanctions Movement is gaining ground, and a joint Arab list is pushing for Palestinian rights – exactly the sites of agency from which change and pressure on Israel can be expected.

This begs the question of what can be done on the part of international actors. International actors – states, international organisations, and international civil society organisations – need to stop undermining Palestinian unity at every step of the way. This also makes sense in light of the fact that no agreement on the future of Palestine can be made without including Hamas. The political nature underlying developmental, social, and economic challenges – meaning the occupation – in Palestine needs to be addressed by inter-

national actors and not ignored: instead of working with the occupier, the occupation itself needs to be challenged. Finally, it is paramount for international actors to hold Israel accountable for its actions.

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