COMMENTARY | POLITICS

# Beyond the Apartheid Analogy: Time to Reframe Our Palestinian Struggle

By: Irene Calis · January, 2015

*What happens to a dream deferred?*
*Does it dry up*
*like a raisin in the sun?*
*Or fester like a sore–*
*And then run?*
*Does it stink like rotten meat?*
*Or crust and sugar over–*
*like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags*
*like a heavy load.*

*Or does it explode?*

–Langston Hughes

An act of survivance is more than a reactionary struggle for existence. The term survivance, coined in Native American Studies, speaks to the active presence and continued dignity of native peoples, despite the ethnocidal policies of a settler colonial state.[1] The survivance of Palestinians, like other native peoples within a settler colonial state, is not a given. On the contrary, it continues to be subverted

at the most fundamental levels, as Palestinians have in the 21st century yet to be recognized and treated as fully human.

Although this ideological erasure is part of a wider Orientalist denigration of people from the Arab and Muslim world, the treatment of Palestinians is also intrinsic to the Zionist narrative on which the Israeli state was founded and continues to be administered. In concrete political terms this means that Israeli state policies and resources are systemically organized around who is a Jew and who a non-Jew. It is here that the ideological erasure of Palestinians is put into practice through policies of dispossession and denial, formalizing and reinforcing the dehumanization of an entire social group.

And yet, Palestinians stubbornly persist, within the borders of historic Palestine and beyond. Our active persistence in spite of the immense measures to contain and remove us from our land is embodied in popular political slogans such as "to exist is to resist." There is more to such slogans than their wider role in an anti-colonial struggle, or their aim to politicize life under Israeli authority. What also demands attention here is the nature of Palestinian existence, which is rapidly being reduced to the status of bare life under the tightening security architecture of a settler state.

The scale of dehumanization is now increasingly compared to conditions under Apartheid South Africa. Zionist supporters unsurprisingly reject the political link between the Palestinian condition and apartheid on the grounds that an analogy between the Israeli state and Apartheid South Africa is indefensible.

Yet, more troubling is some of the analysis, among Palestinians and our supporters, that reduces an apartheid system to particular features that can be checked off a list. An apartheid system, however it is manifested, is framed by a broader worldview. It is here that we can draw some meaningful assessments of the overlaps between Apartheid South Africa and Israel today.

In South Africa, apartheid was preceded by settler colonialism, a form of colonialism in which white settlement and supremacy relied upon the mass displacement of native black populations from their land and their ongoing exploitation as a cheap labor force. Displaced black native populations were incorporated into the settler-colonial economy. The legal system of Apartheid, which came much later, formalized the underlying ideologies through which settler colonialism occurred, but both rested on the dehumanization of the subjugated population. Furthermore, in both cases, one's humanity, or lack thereof, was vetted within a spectrum of whiteness.

Under Israeli rule, as in Apartheid South Africa, there is a bureaucracy that routinizes the subordination of an entire social group so that a population stigmatized as potential and likely criminals must systematically produce the required "official" documents, permits, identity cards, and paperwork. Similar to other settler-colonial contexts, such bureaucratic technicalities are the everyday mechanisms of violence and subjugation through which Palestinians are dispossessed of their land and denied freedom of movement and control over their time.

The dehumanization of native populations within a supremacist social order is not in itself sufficient to maintain an apartheid and settler-colonial regime. Such a regime also involves their criminalization for simply *existing* – for continuing to be present in the coveted land. This means that resistance, in any form, to the status quo is treated as a criminal offence. For Palestinians under Israeli military rule, the ability to go about mundane daily activities is dependent upon proving that one is not a criminal at the specific time that one needs to pass through the military checkpoints that determine whether or not individuals may go about their daily activities.

Does it matter if we call this apartheid? After all, Apartheid was only one attempt to institutionalize settler colonialism, and there is ample knowledge of what settler

colonialism looks like.

In fact, there are limits to the overlaps between Apartheid South Africa and Israel: The intentions of the Zionist movement were, and remain, fundamentally different. As stated clearly in the words of early Zionist leaders such as Theodor Herzl and current Israeli officials such as Benjamin Netanyahu, the containment and domination of Palestinians was never the aim. This is merely a by-product of actualizing a Jewish state with a Jewish majority.

The focal point of the Zionist movement has always been land without the inconvenient natives and not their incorporation into the settler economy as was the case in Apartheid South Africa. The Israeli Law of Return, which extends citizenship to Jews anywhere in the world, is an open-ended invitation for Jewish immigration to the land of historic Palestine. In 2013, over 16,000 new settlers were "welcomed" into Israel. The Zionist project is a global assault on a local population.

But what do you do when the inconvenient natives won't leave? What is the final solution?

## Drawing the Needed Lessons from South Africa

Rather than getting sidelined in a debate about what does and does not qualify as apartheid, from my vantage point here in South Africa it seems necessary to reframe our focus to one that is more substantively beneficial for Palestinians. This concerns not the nature of the apartheid state, but instead, the nature of our preferred future. That is, what we need is not to prove whether Israel is the new apartheid, but instead to draw lessons from the post-Apartheid human condition in South Africa.

Reframing the link in this manner emphatically underlines that the heart of the shared struggle between South Africa and Palestinians is located in people, their

ongoing dispossession from their land, and in their substantive exclusion from nationhood, rather than in the bureaucratic details of an oppressive state system. The link is visible in the nature of everyday life for the majority of Black South Africans today, who remain, as the late Edward Said once remarked of Palestinians, confined to "rarefied forms of existence."[2] Palestinian conditions have since become more dire.

The achievement of a democratic South Africa in principle has not translated into a substantive emancipatory victory in practice. The social and economic implications of Apartheid's structural legacies have yet to be reckoned with, and "whiteness" still lives on the back of "blackness." South Africa's celebrated constitution may affirm the value of all lives in principles, but, as Achille Mbembe has argued in a recent public lecture at Rhodes University, people who are poor and black in South Africa continue to be treated as waste. They continue to be policed as if they are an external threat to society and not part of society.

The post-Apartheid human condition in South Africa requires us to ask qualitatively different kinds of questions. Specifically, what would our emancipated future look like in Palestine, and perhaps, more importantly, what must be incorporated into that framework *now* in order to meet these future terms?

It is clear that these answers cannot be found in the current political institutions or leaders. The Palestinian leadership holds no emancipatory potential for Palestinians: As products and beneficiaries of settler-colonial relations of power they cannot dismantle the conditions of our dispossession. Nor does international law: It continues to operate within a state-centered system whereby the state is the final legal arbiter through which human rights are interpolated and enforced. The way in which Israel defines the nation is, therefore, key to understanding who falls within the protection of human rights law and how "a state committed to managing life produce[s] a category of people who are deemed killable."[3]

Although international law and its various unimplemented United Nations resolutions has categorically failed Palestinians, we continue to wait for the proverbial Godot.

When the South African transition from Apartheid is held up as a model for Palestinians, it is worth heeding the warning offered by the current state of the African National Congress (ANC) government. Like many Palestinian leaders after the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, ANC leaders, as part of the political elite, have long risen above the struggle, although they claim to be speaking as part of it. The PA has not only become incorporated into the colonial status quo but is an important mechanism in sustaining it.

One lesson that Palestinians have to draw from the fate of the ANC is that the anti-colonial revolutionaries have an essential role to play, but that their leadership and pre-revolutionary structures may need to be dispensed with in the post-colonial moment, especially when elitist power perverts commitment to the demands of ordinary life. Further, there must always be readiness to give way to new visionaries.

## Re-Imagining the Nature of Our Freedom

And so, for Palestinians and black South Africans, what of our dream deferred? After more than 60 years of struggle, the Palestinian dream of emancipation must find a new face. The type of freedom and future we imagine must redefine the terms of our path forward, while not forcing a normative face on this dream such as a one-state or two-state solution.

For Palestinians and our supporters, it is the post-Apartheid moment that should alert us to take stock and reframe, not only the form of our campaigns but the terms of any proposed resolution to this seemingly unending contemporary colonial tragedy. Whether we call the form of the imagined resolution the one-

state, two-state, or rainbow nation solution is immaterial: Statehood, without radical structural and social changes, will simply formalize the current social hierarchy within an "open" neoliberal system. It will ensure that those privileged in the previous order of things are simply free to continue to live on the backs of those historically subordinated. We see in South Africa that the structural privilege of whiteness continues and that white privilege has not, in fact, had to give up much for the post-colonial moment. This is perhaps the most important lesson Palestinians can take from South Africa. It cautions us to qualify the nature of freedom imagined.

We may wish to approach our future selves in what came before us – not in a memorialized past but as an anchor for collective renewal as dreams transform. To do so, we can re-remember the rich heritage that exists in us all, in our intellectuals, poets, and writers, in our musical and artisanal traditions, in the vibrant social spaces of our pre-1948 urban centers such as Jerusalem, in the seasoned knowledge of our agriculturalists, and in the people-land bond.

This heritage has been largely lost to our youth, even forgotten, in the day-to-day workings of a settler colonial order that keeps Palestinians locked in a narrow present, a vicious system that attempts to splinter identities and beat self-esteem to a pulp. This heritage is a resource that can help our future "born free" generations, as those born after 1994 are referred to in South Africa, to stand tall, connected to the deep roots that support them. This is true of those children today who are part of the Palestinian folk music groups in Palestine. Their eyes carry pride and strength rather than the otherwise ubiquitous sense of emptiness and feeling lost. They feel and know that they are part of something bigger and older, which precedes the degraded state of the present.

It is this living heritage that we must cultivate. This should not be in some nationalist effort to excavate and restore an imagined past but rather to re-inscribe the terms of our future. For this reformulation to bear fruit, it is essential

that our youth experience their identity beyond oppression and beyond political slogans.

The possibility of a thriving Palestinian humanity also requires the international delegitimization of the recurring insistence that Israel, in its current Zionist framework as the Jewish state, has a *right* to exist. The idea of Israel's right to exist is not a given: It is generated through and dependent upon a structural amnesia rooted in a form of silencing that renders the ethnocide that occurred in the creation of Israel invisible. This everyday social amnesia is articulated and institutionalized in a number of ways including through laws, educational curricula and rubric, official historiography, in everyday acts of banal nationalism, military training, media, and popular culture. It does not only function to silence the ethnocide that enabled the birth of the Israeli state; it also cloaks the ongoing ethnocide that continues today.

It is thus no small feat that Palestinians continue to exist. But we certainly deserve more than a debased humanity. As Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor reminds us, the term survivance entails an active renewal, beyond mere survival.[4] The lesson that we must keep in mind from the South African experience is that the denial of the full and equal humanity of the majority of black people preceded Apartheid and has continued after Apartheid. Victories on paper are not the same thing as victories in practice. What kind of existence will we collectively accept and how will we build what is needed to support our preferred futures?

1. *Gerald Vizenor, Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1999), p. vii.*
2. *Edward Said, _The Question of Palestine_ (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p.19.*
3. *Veena Das and Deborah Poole, Anthropology in the Margins of the State (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press), p.25.*
4. *Op Cit.*

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

Al-Shabaka materials may be circulated with due attribution to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. The opinion of individual members of Al-Shabaka's policy network do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization as a whole.