COMMENTARY | ECONOMICS

Israel's Stranglehold on Area C: Development as Resistance

By: Ahmad El-Atrash · September, 2018

Israel's efforts to tighten its grip on the West Bank have been unprecedented since the current Israeli cabinet formed in 2015. Last year, for instance, witnessed the highest number of tenders for Israeli settlement construction, with more than 3,100 government proposals issued for building housing units. Yet such a situation is nothing new. Five decades of Israeli occupation – particularly since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 – have allowed Israel to continue its colonization of Palestinian land while rendering Palestinian development truncated, distorted, and even mythological.[1]

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Area C. This Israel-controlled area according to the Oslo framework makes up more than 60 percent of the West Bank. Israel has developed it in particular for its own purposes, namely through the construction of settlements and military infrastructure.

In the face of Israel's policy of expansion in the West Bank, Palestinians view their own development as a means of resistance. However, they have not been able to realize an effective development program to challenge Israel. And no wonder: Development under occupation is all but impossible. Yet Palestinians can work collaboratively toward meeting their current needs without undermining their rights, including the right to development of a future Palestinian state.

This commentary examines how Palestinians can capitalize on and further

resistance to the present-day geopolitics of development through a focus on Area C. It traces the history of the area, examines ways in which Palestinian development is denied for the benefit of Israeli settlers, and offers ways for Palestinians to advocate for development projects that would serve them for generations to come.

The Story of Area C

As is well known, the Oslo Accords that began to be signed in 1993 created Areas A, B, and C in 1995, with the Palestinian Authority (PA) holding control over Area A, while Israel and the PA split control of Area B. Though the PA is in theory responsible for civil life in Area C, including education and health, Israeli authorities have full control over security and administration, including planning and development.

This situation was meant to be temporary. Under Oslo, all areas were to be fully allocated to the Palestinians by 1998, but this agreement never materialized and the entire West Bank remains occupied by Israel.

International humanitarian law defines the Palestinians as a "protected population" with Israel as an "occupying power" prohibited from making permanent changes and obligated to protect the status quo ante. Yet today the ever-growing settlement blocs are anything but temporary. Area C is currently home to just six percent of West Bank Palestinians, which translates into about 300,000 Palestinians and more than 340,000 Israeli settlers. Over 20,000 of the Palestinians living in Area C are Bedouin and herding communities who live predominantly in tents, sheet-metal shacks, and caves.

Israeli authorities have obstructed Palestinian development of Area C and in much of the rest of the West Bank through military orders. These orders bar Palestinians from registering land, thwart them from building, and forbid local and district

planning committees. As a result, Palestinians are excluded from participating in the processes that steer spatial development, while Israel confiscates land for purported public services such as roads built for Jewish Israeli use.

As such, only 30 percent of Area C land is designated for development by Palestinians. The remaining 70 percent is classified as closed military zones that are off limits to Palestinians unless they obtain special permits from Israeli authorities. These stringent restrictions on Palestinians' spatial development continues to intensify despite the fact that without Area C, a Palestinian state is inconceivable. Indeed, Area C holds valuable natural resources and rich cultural heritage, and it represents the bulk of available area for the spatial development of a future Palestinian state.

Those clinging to the "peace process" that resulted in the Area C designation continue to obfuscate what is occurring on the ground: Israeli policies and practices that create apartheid-like conditions. A critical look at Area C confirms that the Israeli project is not simply as temporary or accidental – that is, military occupation – but a permanent ethno-national and settler colonial system, the result of Zionist ideology and practice that aspires to establish an exclusively Jewish state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

This is evident in Israel's matrix of control, including an identification system, Israeli bypass roads, military checkpoints, the implementation of separate legal systems for Palestinians and Israeli settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Israel's monopoly over Palestinians' natural resources, and the separation wall – all of which continue in violation of international law.

Clearly, as a result, Palestinian development is repressed, including through Israeli demolition, prevention of Palestinian building, and water "cooperation" between Israel and the PA. Moreover, for some international development and aid projects also undermine rather than advance Palestinian interests.

Repressed Development

Israeli destruction and confinement

More than 12,500 Israeli demolition orders against approximately 13,000 Palestinian structures in Area C are currently looming. As a response to these demolitions, Palestinians have prepared 116 master plans that would serve 132,000 Palestinians in 128 communities. These plans outline the building of houses and needed social services, including schools and clinics. Despite the fact that these plans meet international standards, the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) that administers planning and zoning functions in Area C based on the Oslo framework has approved only five of 102 submitted, and 99 others have lingered for more than 18 months in technical discussions. From 2009 to 2013, only 34 building permits were approved for Palestinians in Area C out of at least 2,000 submissions.

This clearly prevents the development of essential Palestinian community infrastructure. For instance, Area C has a dire shortage of classrooms and community-based primary schools for Palestinians, which impacts children's access to education, particularly girls. Restrictions in Area C also hinder natural expansion of urban cities and towns into rural villages. The international community supported the development agenda within the master plans, and though some vital social infrastructure has been realized, the development gap remains huge.

Relatedly, the Palestinian population density in built-up areas of Area C is 250 percent higher than that of Israeli settlers. This contrast, which reveals a vast difference in access to living space and resources, is even larger when one compares population densities within the areas allocated for development – that is, as outlined in the master plans put forth by Palestinians in light of present-day

Israeli restrictions. The Palestinian population density within these proposed plans is almost 600 percent higher than the density for Israeli settlers in settlements' plans.

Furthermore, this Palestinian population density is much higher than the density approved in master plans for Areas A and B. This high density planned for Area C means there is little space for population increase, the provision of essential services, and agriculture or any other means of economic development. Restricting development of Palestinian communities in Area C forces the migration of Palestinians to urban centers and communities in Areas A and B, part of an Israeli aim to depopulate Palestinians from Area C.

Israeli-Palestinian "cooperation"

Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in Area C is anything but innocuous. For example, in January 2017, the PA and Israel declared that the six-year hiatus on water cooperation between them had ended. The Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee of Oslo had not met since 2010, when the Palestinian Water Authority refused to continue granting approvals for water-related infrastructure projects in Israeli settlements across Area C.

The new agreement approved by both sides gives Palestinians the right to link Palestinian communities in Area C to the water network without asking Israel for approval, but it does not address Palestinian plans for extracting more water from wells, upgrading wells, or drilling new wells. It also allows the Israelis to construct water-based infrastructure and pipelines without the approval of the Palestinian side – a practice they had continued despite the hiatus in water cooperation.

Crucially, the agreement failed to address the deep water inequalities evident since the Oslo Accords. Israeli settlers, for example, consume more than four times what Palestinians consume across the West Bank, including in Area C, and vulnerable Palestinian households spend up to one-fifth of their salary on water.

Moreover, the Israeli authorities do not only deny Palestinians access to their land and water resources, but also destroy Palestinian structures, including water infrastructure.

Water development in Area C thus proves close to impossible for Palestinians. If they want to construct a small-scale water pipeline for a remote and vulnerable Palestinian community, they must do so in the midst of large-scale water pipelines for ever-expanding Israeli settlements.

International complicity

Plans created by the international community for and with Palestinian communities in Area C and in partnership with the PA also demonstrate how spatial development is confined. Israel has used these initiatives as a tool to further its control over the West Bank and Jerusalem and its environs.

For example, Israeli authorities approved a web of regional roads that were rehabilitated or constructed for Palestinians with support from the international community, since they also benefit Israeli settlers in the West Bank. These Palestinian roads complement the Israeli-designated roads that link Israeli settlements in the West Bank to Israel proper, bypassing Palestinian communities. This has severe repercussions not only regarding the Palestinian right to freedom of movement; such infrastructure also undermines other associated rights for Palestinians, such as the right to worship and the right to education, by forcing them to commute using longer, more expensive routes.

Moreover, emergency, relief, and humanitarian programs have overshadowed development interventions in the West Bank, particularly in Area C. Israel's claimed security needs have made Palestinians dependent on international donors, and key decisions have increasingly shifted out of local hands.

These policies, developed under the two-state framework, allow Palestinians in

Area C to survive at best. Surviving – that is, simply existing – is essential to safeguard the two-state solution. But while Palestinians find ways to be resilient under immense pressures and uncertainties that characterize the development context in Area C, they are increasingly insecure.

An example is Susiya village, south of Hebron. The 340 residents of Susiya, who mainly make a living from herding sheep, have been resisting Israeli practices on the ground since the Israeli settlement called Susiya was established on their land in 1983. In 1986, the ICA informed Palestinian residents of Susiya that their village was appropriated "for public purposes," and the Israeli military expelled them from their homes. The families moved their shelters nearby. The ICA moved them again in 2001.

Today, Susiya continues to survive, mainly through humanitarian intervention and advocacy measures from international players. Village residents have even developed plans for the future, such as a 2013 master plan. The ICA has declined to approve the plan, which would give residents security and access to the piped water supply. Instead, it has issued tens of demolition orders. Israeli settlers have restricted villagers' access to some of their agricultural land, and Israeli settler violence is often documented.

What Can Palestinians Do?

For Palestinians to secure their land and rights, they must confront development in Area C with interventions that respond to Israeli occupation practices. Such strategies must go beyond relief and small development efforts.

Preservation

First and foremost, Palestinians must preserve what presence is currently in place. Palestinian civil society, the PA, and donors can find ways for Palestinian

communities in Area C, including Bedouin and herding communities, to continue to grow and work on their lands. These groups have codified rights under international humanitarian law to use the land's natural resources without threat to their security and to maintain their ownership and historical ties to the land as well as their cultural values.

The ability to sustain these communities can also be strengthened through intentional maintenance of kinship and economic connections with Palestinians across Areas A, B, and C. For instance, competent Palestinian authorities can ensure that large municipalities in Areas A and B provide vital services to rural Area C.

Palestinian civil society can also support the maintenance of Palestinian presence in the West Bank by creating or supporting the creation of open-source maps that include all Palestinian communities.

Legislation

The PA must jettison archaic laws and regulatory frameworks in order to foster growth among Palestinian communities. Outdated policies must be replaced by frameworks that emphasize human rights and inclusive participation. A new Palestinian building and planning act, for instance, can replace the building and planning laws that have been in effect since the British Mandate (1940s) and the Jordanian administration (1960s). These laws are no longer a meaningful response to challenges faced by Palestinians on the ground. A new law should aim to ensure better public participation processes and hence local ownership of plans and projects, especially in Area C.

The PA should also encourage cooperation and development work across Palestinian communities in Areas A, B, and C in order to boost territorial economic growth. For example, it could support and create larger administrative units that span the areas, such as joint services councils and joint municipalities.

Decolonization

Palestinians must also create decolonization plans for Area C. The European-supported National Spatial Plan for the State of Palestine of 2009 includes a developmental vision for Area C known as "Envisioning Palestine 2025, 2050." The document captures a broad perspective framework for seven main sectors: the economy, urban development, infrastructure, demography, international relations, services, and natural resources. The PA must finalize and adopt the spatial development vision as an official plan that offers specific procedures on how to deal with Israeli settlements in Area C. For instance, a manual on how to deal with Israeli settlements could be collaboratively developed by all Palestinian stakeholders, including refugees in the diaspora. The guidelines would dictate to which sectors settlements would be allocated in the event of a Palestinian state, such as agriculture or industry. These sectors would determine the fate of the settlements – such as demolition or conversion.

Palestinians and their allies must also continue to facilitate the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and work with international organizations to fight for Palestinians' right to develop Area C. Development partners and multilaterals, including the United Nations, should support such development by advancing large-scale construction in Area C in accordance with two-state solution parameters.

The steps proposed above cannot bring about sustainable Palestinian development, but they can help to push back against Israeli military occupation in Area C and beyond. By adopting these and other measures, Palestinian civil society and political leaders must take development into their own hands through plans that respond to the needs of the people and keep them on their land to challenge Israel's colonial plans.

1. To read this piece in Spanish, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for

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