



## What can we learn from Israel?

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This year marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Israel and the dispossession of Palestine. Arguably the most ubiquitous political saga of the post Second World War world,<sup>1</sup> nothing has been raised at the United Nations more frequently than the Palestine issue and Israel's conduct in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).<sup>2</sup> Beyond the halls of politics, the conflict continues to arouse passions around the world, and not just among Jewish and Arab communities. The 2008 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari urged US President-elect Barack Obama to "give priority" to resolving the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Still, there is lingering uncertainty as to why the conflict holds primacy among the world's political issues. Many of Israel's supporters claim that the nation serves as a model for democratic development that other Middle Eastern states should emulate.<sup>4</sup> Others rationalize criticism of the Jewish state's policies as yet further evidence of lingering anti-Semitism.<sup>5</sup> Supporters of Palestinian statehood, on the other hand, often argue that Israel's occupation represents one of the preeminent injustices of modern times.<sup>6</sup> What is often lost in this discussion is the role Israel plays in shaping discourse on conflict between states and non-state actors.

### Western shadow in the East

There is no denying that Israel has achieved a great deal over the past six decades. Israel is a cosmopolitan society with an advanced economy and its Jewish citizens enjoy many freedoms. One of those freedoms is the ability of dissenting voices, although a minority, to shed light on Israel's actions in the Occupied Territories and challenge official denials of them. It is among these dissenting voices that the world finds the finest coverage of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> What confounds is the ease with which Israel can offer such freedoms to some of its citizens while harshly excluding the Palestinian population, particularly in the OPT. "Israel is very democratic," the veteran peace activist Ram Rahat told me during my last visit to Jerusalem earlier this year, "unless you're not Jewish."

While all modern states struggle to balance the responsibilities of pluralism with the right, inherent in every nation state, to exclude some from the citizenry, Israel has largely escaped criticism in the West for its unapologetic exclusion of the Arab population from much of the social, economic and political life of the country. Arabs make up to 20% of the population in Israel itself and although most of this population has citizenship (the remainder, predominantly those living in areas of Jerusalem, only have residency permits), they are both formally and informally treated as second class citizens.<sup>8</sup> Arabs are excluded from most of the land subsidies offered to Jewish citizens living in the occupied West Bank, while Arabs constitute only 3% of Israel's public service and none of its Central Bank employees.<sup>9</sup> Discrimination against Arabs has become so extreme that in November 2008 Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was compelled to note that "for sixty years there has been discrimination against Arabs in Israel. This discrimination is deep-seated and intolerable."<sup>10</sup> Those sentiments were earlier echoed by Justice Theodore Or in his landmark October 2008 report on a series of deadly riots that rocked the nation in October 2000 after 13 Palestinians (12 with Israeli citizenship) were killed by security forces.<sup>11</sup>



## **A bridge to the past**

One of Israel's fundamental tenets is that Jewish identity cannot be divorced from nationality. To appreciate this we must first recognize the long history of anti-Semitism and the marginalization of Jewish communities throughout Europe, the Middle East and North Africa for most of these regions' modern histories. The Nazi Holocaust was not the only genocide committed against Jews in Europe, only the largest and most recent. While it is often noted that Jews were treated with great tolerance under Muslim rulers they were usually second-class citizens confined to ghettos, such as the Jewish *ahl al-dimma* of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Israel is the first modern state created by Jews, for Jews, and of Jews.<sup>13</sup> The urge to maintain this unique characteristic is understandable and it must be acknowledged.

Israel's tragedy, however, is that this notion necessarily comes at the expense of the Palestinian Arab population which had the misfortune of inhabiting lands Israel's founders sought to colonise.<sup>14</sup> The creation of Israel in 1948 required the violent removal of most of the Palestinian population from its recognized borders.<sup>15</sup> Since 1967, when Israel defeated its Arab neighbours in six days of war, the occupied West Bank has been so thoroughly colonised by Jewish settlements that it is impossible to see how a viable, contiguous Palestinian state may ever be constituted there.<sup>16</sup> The largest Israeli settlements in the West Bank are no longer far flung outposts but developed urban sprawls that are constantly expanding. Although there are no longer settlements in the Gaza Strip, Israel has blockaded it from the outside world so utterly that it has become the world's largest ghetto.<sup>17</sup> Locked into the mantra of preserving its Jewish character, Israel refuses to comprehend the extent to which it has forsaken the memory of the oppressed for the fruits of the oppressor. Rather than acknowledge this and seek to understand Palestinian violence within this context, Israel instead has convinced itself this violence is endemic of a broader sociological disjuncture between "Judeo-Christian civilization" and the "Islamic" Middle East.<sup>18</sup>

## **Israel's public relations provides a dangerous precedent**

One of the features of the conflict is the Israeli Government's use of public relations strategies to avoid scrutiny of violence perpetrated by the Israeli security and military forces. As Ed O'Loughlin noted in his last column as Middle East Correspondent for the Fairfax newspapers, "the Israeli Defence Force's culture of denial and impunity, repeatedly condemned by Israeli and foreign rights groups, does nothing for your confidence when you have reason to fear that someone you can't see is studying you on a computer screen, or through a gun sight."<sup>19</sup> Israeli authorities use a range of strategies to dilute or avoid criticism of violence perpetrated against the Palestinians: from outright denial to claims that Israeli forces only acted in self-defence or that opposing forces deliberately hide among civilian population thereby bearing responsibility for the resulting casualties. Although Israeli authorities routinely claim that investigations of alleged civilian murders are investigated, such investigations are rarely carried out, and most that are undertaken result in light punishments, if any.<sup>20</sup>

## **Israel's military machine a model for other nations**

The Israeli Defence Force is one of the most advanced military outfits in the world,<sup>21</sup> thanks largely to generous aid from the United States.<sup>22</sup> The IDF has done much to further modern military science and tactics, although most of that knowledge has been gained in operations in dense population centres.<sup>23</sup>



The occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip provides a living laboratory for Israeli troops to test advanced weaponry for the benefit of either Israel or the United States, or for future export to other countries. For example, sales of advanced weaponry to countries as diverse as China, the United Kingdom has been premised on them being battle proven.<sup>24</sup>

Israeli authorities and security companies have also exported their experiences in counterterrorism throughout the world including to the United States, India and the United Kingdom. Last year US President George Bush admitted that Israel's urban warfare skills had played an instrumental role in shaping US military tactics in urban regions of Iraq,<sup>25</sup> such as in Fallujah and Sadr City where the US stands accused of mass atrocities.<sup>26</sup> The US modeled its own separation walls in Baghdad on the one Israel has built in the West Bank.<sup>27</sup> Israeli counterterrorism experts had discussions with Indian officials after the November 2008 Mumbai attack.

Israel has also contributed a great deal to the world's perception of non-state actors as nihilistic terrorists who operate with little rhyme or reason. Long before September 11, 2001 Israeli intellectuals were at the forefront of "terror studies". It was in Israel that the term terrorism was reduced into the more vague and menacing "terror". Yet Israeli terror studies do not focus on rational motivations but cultural and sociological explanations focusing on notions of honour, Islam and patriarchy. This brand of terror studies has been exported to much of the world.<sup>28</sup> Its experts claim to know the mind of the Muslim terrorist and hold Israel's policies in the region as a model on how to successfully combat it. Unfortunately this narrative has replaced political answers with excuses premised in Islam. Namely, that suicide attacks on Israelis are not connected to the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Rather than treating terrorist attacks as serious crimes, it is now suggested that it hints towards an impending invasion from within, a sentiment that has been quickly picked up by some commentators in the West.<sup>29</sup>

Another concept that has been borrowed from Israel with chilling effect is the administrative detention of people ostensibly under suspicion of participation in terrorism. Yet, as with the experience of other countries, administrative detention has enabled the wide scale incarceration of many who are not suspected of any involvement in acts of terrorism and, just like Australia's David Hicks, are never charged. According to Addameer, the Palestinian prisoner rights organisation, 40 per cent of all Palestinian men have spent time in prison.<sup>30</sup> As at 30 November 2008, there were over 8,200 Palestinians in Israeli prisons.<sup>31</sup> Of these 569 are administrative detainees - persons detained on the basis of 'secret evidence' that may or may not exist and which civilian Israeli courts cannot examine. The Israeli Public Committee Against Torture (IPCAT) notes that the use of torture is endemic in the country's security prisons, despite a April 2000 Supreme Court decision prohibiting it.<sup>32</sup> In a recent submission to the UN Committee against Torture, IPCAT noted that

The use of techniques of torture, officially referred to as "special measures", is officially sanctioned and justified by the claim of "necessity". Complaints of torture victims are invariably closed by the State Attorney's Office or the Attorney General without taking any criminal steps against the interrogators or their superiors.<sup>33</sup>



## Time for reflection

Israel, like all societies, is complex. It would be a mistake to conclude that its vices, such as those listed above, represent everything that it has to offer. But for too long the darker side of the Israel project has been taboo. In such an environment ordinary Israelis lose the opportunity to challenge the militarism that has dominated their society, and ordinary Palestinians have no way to measure the causal links between that militarism and the violence perpetrated against them. For ordinary Palestinians, the only interaction with Israelis is literally through the barrel of a gun at one of the hundreds of checkpoints manned by Israeli soldiers or raids conducted in the West Bank, or the less impersonal tanks and aircraft that routinely invade the Gaza Strip. "We were supposed to be a light onto the nations," said Avraham Burg, the former Knesset member and speaker, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper five years ago. "The Jewish people did not survive for two millennia in order to pioneer new weaponry, computer security programs or anti-missile systems."<sup>34</sup> Sadly, sixty years after its creation, the nation created by the children of the Holocaust, the greatest human catastrophe of the 20th century, has become synonymous with ruthless military prowess.

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You can see more of his work at [mustafaqadri.net](http://mustafaqadri.net).

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<sup>1</sup> A good summary of the conflict and its origins is available in Pappé, Ilan, "A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples" Cambridge University Press (2003).

<sup>2</sup> A full list of relevant United Nations resolutions is available online at <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/UN%20resolutions!OpenPage>. Accessed on 10 December 2008.

<sup>3</sup> "Nobel winner in Obama Mideast plea" *Al Jazeera English* December 10, 2008. Available online at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/europe/2008/12/20081210134732193470.html>. Accessed on 11 December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dershowitz, Alan "The Case for Israel" Wiley (2003).

<sup>5</sup> For a good analysis of this see Cockburn, Alexander and St. Clair, Jeffery (ed.s) "The Politics of Anti-Semitism" Counterpunch and AK Press, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Said, Edward "The Question of Palestine" Vintage (1992).

<sup>7</sup> A good example of this is the *Haaretz* newspaper, particularly its Ramallah correspondent Amira Hass. Another is the excellent *B'tselem* human rights information and advocacy organisation which meticulously documents violations by both Israelis and Palestinians in the OPT. Website: <http://www.btselem.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> See "Institutionalized Discrimination Adalah's Report to the World Conference Against Racism" *Adalah*, Aug/Sept 2001. Adalah's website is also an excellent resource on this topic: <http://www.adalah.org/eng/>.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics available online from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics <http://www.cbs.gov.il/ts/>.

<sup>10</sup> Leshem, Elie "PM slams 'discrimination' against Arab Israelis" *Jerusalem Post* November 12, 2008. Available online at: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1226404714904&pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull>. Accessed 10 December 2008.

<sup>11</sup> A summary of the report is available online at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=335594>. Accessed on 9 December 2008. The full Or Commission report, in Hebrew, is available at [http://elyon1.court.gov.il/heb/veadot/or/inside\\_index.htm](http://elyon1.court.gov.il/heb/veadot/or/inside_index.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Greene, Molly (ed.) "Minorities in the Ottoman Empire" Markus Wiener Publishers (2004).



<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that many states, particularly those created after the Second World War, privilege certain ethnic, religious or racial groups over others. In Malaysia, for example, ethnic Malays have a protected quota in the public service, scholarships, and positions in universities. Under Malaysia's Internal Security Act 1960 it is unlawful to discuss the provisions of Malaysia's constitution that "positively" discriminate in favour of Malaysians, even in Parliament. For a good summary of the situation in Malaysia see Harding, Andrew "Constitutional landmarks in Malaysia: the first 50 years, 1957-2007" *Malayan Law Journal* 2007.

<sup>14</sup> See Pappe, Ilan "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine" *Oneworld Oxford* (2006).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> According to the United Nations, Israel directly or indirectly occupies ??% of the West Bank.

<sup>17</sup> A damning account of Israel's treatment of Gaza's population and the international community's complicity in it is available in the leaked report for former United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Alvaro de Soto – "End of Mission Report". Available online at <<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2007/06/12/DeSotoReport.pdf>>. Accessed on 5 May 2008.

<sup>18</sup> See Lewis, Bernard "The Roots of Muslim Rage" *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1990. Available online at <<http://www.cis.org.au/Policy/summer01-02/polsumm01-3.pdf>>. Accessed on 10 December 2008. See also Huntington, Samuel "The Class of Civilizations: and the Remaking of World Order" Simon and Schuster (1996).

<sup>19</sup> O'Loughlin, Ed "Wars between worlds" *The Age* May 10, 2008. Available online at <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/strongworldstrong-ed-oloughlin-on-five-years-as-middle-east-reporter/2008/05/09/1210131264621.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>>. Accessed on 7 December 2008.

<sup>20</sup> "Rights group: Few Israeli soldiers prosecuted" *International Herald Tribune* November 26, 2008.

<sup>21</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Mearsheimer, John and Walt, Stephen "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy" Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2007.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, this moving account of an Israeli Defence Force attack on the West Bank city of Nablus – Rothchild, Alice "Returning to Nablus: Collateral damage" *Electronic Intifada* April 2, 2008. Available online at: <<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9429.shtml>>. Accessed on 11 December 2008.

<sup>24</sup> For more information see the excellent "Israel: arming the Occupation" *Committee Against the Arms-Trade* 2002. Available online at <<http://www.caat.org.uk/publications/countries/israel-1002.pdf>>. Accessed on 11 December 2008.

<sup>25</sup> See "Israel model for Iraq says Bush" *BBC News* June 28, 2007. Available online at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6251982.stm>>. Accessed on 31 October 2008.

<sup>26</sup> See for example the following report by the Centre for Research on Globalisation which includes video evidence of possible war crimes perpetrated by US forces during the 2004 invasion of the Iraqi city of Fallujah. "War Crimes: Massacre of Civilians in Fallujah" September 28, 2004. Available online at: <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/FAL409A.html>>. Accessed on 11 December 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Niva, Steve "Surging Towards Gaza: How the U.S. is Reproducing Israel's Flawed Occupation Strategies in Iraq" *Foreign Policy in Focus* April 23, 2008. Available online at <<http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/83169/>>. Accessed on 1 December 2008.

<sup>28</sup> A good example of this is Melvin E. Lee's "The Fallacy of Grievance-based Terrorism" *Middle East Quarterly* Winter 2008. Available online at: <<http://www.meforum.org/article/1830>>. Accessed on 9 December 2008.

<sup>29</sup> A classic example of this kind of scaremongering is Melanie Phillips' "Londonistan: how Britain is creating a terror state within" *Gibson Square* (2006).

<sup>30</sup> "The Infinite Violation of Human Rights" *ADDAMEER* available online at <<http://www.addameer.org/detention/background.html>>. Accessed on 3 June 2008.

<sup>31</sup> "Statistics on Palestinians in the custody of the Israeli security forces" *B'tselem* available online at <[http://www.btselem.org/English/Statistics/Detainees\\_and\\_Prisoners.asp](http://www.btselem.org/English/Statistics/Detainees_and_Prisoners.asp)>. Accessed on 3 June 2008.

<sup>32</sup> The Israeli Supreme Court left open the possibility that in a situation where a suspect is holding information necessary to prevent an imminent attack torture was permissible. This scenario, known as a "ticking time bomb" situation, has been widely discredited. See "Ticking Time Bombs – Testimonies of Torture Victims in Israel" *Israeli*



*Public Committee Against Torture* 5 May 2007. Available online at <http://www.stoptorture.org.il/files/140%5B1%5D.pdf>. Accessed on 9 December 2008.

<sup>33</sup> "List of concerns for UN Committee Against Torture Jerusalem, September 2008" *Israeli Public Committee Against Torture* September 2008. Available online at: <[http://www.stoptorture.org.il/files/PCATI\\_List-of-concerns%20\\_CATIsrael\\_0.pdf](http://www.stoptorture.org.il/files/PCATI_List-of-concerns%20_CATIsrael_0.pdf)>. Accessed on 11 December 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Burg, Avraham "The end of Zionism" *The Guardian* September 15, 2003. Available online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/sep/15/comment>>. Accessed on 6 May 2008.