

Moshe Zuckermann

## The Building of A Wall

by  
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On June 16, 2002, the Israeli Defense Ministry began building a wall along the so-called “joint areas” between core Israel and the occupied territories in the West Bank. This fact is by no means trivial. The implications of this wall depend entirely on what function one would like to attribute to it. Should it vouchsafe security? Should it effectuate a “separation” from the Palestinians? Indicate a “solution”? Alone the concept of “wall” is debatable. Because while in fact a partial meter high, cement block constructed kilometer-long obstruction is what should be erected, it is euphemistically referred to as a “fence” (*gader*). It is not for nothing that the Israeli journalist Lilli Galili in the daily *Ha’aretz* of June 17, 2002 maintained “months after the concept of separation began to dominate Israeli political discourse, every politician and every political orientation, sought to impart their own content upon it. Those who speak of a fence distinguish themselves from those who call separation a word, a position, and also consider the evacuation of the settlements as a necessary component of the erection of a fence.”

But the concept of the “fence” itself presents numerous meanings: sure enough, while the Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer speaks of the military necessity of a “security fence” and holds himself therefore to be politically safeguarded, the Council of Settlers in the West Bank speaks of a state-political fence, to which it is most expressly opposed, because it functions as an inaccessible border between Israel and a future Palestine. The notion of a “party-political fence” was coined by the former labor party minister, Yossi Beilin. He holds the wall to be a scandalous waste of money, which serves no other purpose other than spurting out inner party capital. This project was largely championed by his fellow party member Haim Ramon, who has profiled himself with this “separation” plan, and has now rendered his aspirations to political party leadership debatable. Yossi Sarid, the opposition leader at the head of the Meretz party, speaks sarcastically of a “Ben Eliezer against Ramon fence.” Beilin, a central figure in the Oslo process of the nineties, holds for his part, only *the* fence, which extends along

the 1967 border as desirable for political peace—a position that corresponds with that of the authorities for Palestinian autonomy.

For the Palestinians on the other hand, the fence represents a factual annulment of all of the agreements made with the Israelis including the Oslo Agreements. According to the Palestinian minister Saeb Erekat, Israel is trying, through the construction of the fence, to take the over 42 percent of the Palestinian soil “intermediate solution, of which Sharon spoke during his takeover. The wall is devised above all to constrict entire Palestinian villages in which viable Palestinian agricultural land has been seized in order to render the construction of the wall possible. The PLO leader Yassir Arafat speaks of a “policy of apartheid.”

The discussion of the wall is paradigmatically excluded, because for one, it in fact distinguishes itself through a definite heterogeneity of positions with regard to the politically determined security problem—a problem to which some have conceived the construction of a stone barrier to be a solution. On the other hand, it is striking how much the conception of the building of the wall between old core Israel and that territory which designated for partitioning, without seeking to abolish the occupation, of course—dominates public discussion and is accepted as self-evident. Naturally, there is also a clear-cut rejection of this seemingly archaic separation measure by declarations by diverse extra-parliamentary opposition groups. Gush Shalom, for example, polemicizes against the “evil fence.” Opposition to the wall is also heard from the parliamentary Meretz Party. Nonetheless, it seems as if the discussion of the wall dominates with all the more urgency among these otherwise faint minorities.

How is one to explain this latent public consensus in spite of seeming political heterogeneity? How is one to understand the stagnation in the so-called “peace process” when there is still many voices on the issue on the Israeli side? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to revisit the peace efforts of the nineties and their multiple failures.

Without a doubt, the Oslo Agreements represented a political event which offered new possibilities for a peace-oriented management of the Middle East conflict. Whether these real possibilities were already achievable should not be questioned after the fact. Rightly so, one spoke unswervingly of peace in Israel as well as Palestine. Yet, along the way, neither side seems to have really taken into account, at what price this peace must undeniably come. As

long as the future negotiations are allowed to persist in uncertainty, it will be more or less possible to defer these terms to the “future”. Rabin’s murder already indicated that the future peace prospects for many Israelis were in no way bound up with positive visions but instead with an ideologically underfed trauma of a downright “betrayal of Zionism” or at the very least with (as always undetermined) fears for the future. On the Palestinian side, the acknowledgement of the state of Israel on November 15, 1988, signaled a definitive abandonment of a serious heritage of national myths that had been upheld for decades and awaited a tangible compensation for those who have remained. As one turned to the central points of contention of the conflict with Camp David as a point of culmination, it became clear that a definitive resolution of the conflict circled around a sore point on both sides, which had been avoided for years. This fact is partially to blame for driving Israelis to regression and numerous Palestinians in desperate acts of violence.

The nineties were distinguished by recognizable structures of rapprochement in different areas of current and future coexistence. Anyhow, the question remains to what extent a political policy was created that was set up to solve concrete problems and adjust historical distortions. In this context, one need only allude to how much the Jewish settlement of the West Bank especially in the years of the Oslo Agreements (and in all Israeli governments) expanded, in order to understand that the resulting trust was, objectively speaking, abused and down right betrayed. Not without reason, there were voices both in Israel and Palestine who spoke of a “perpetuation of the occupation with peaceful means.” The power relation between Israel and the Palestinian authorities is asymmetrical. For many Palestinians, the said abuse of the gradually-developing trust was not only a robust breach of trust but a cynical continuation of an Israeli hegemony, in need of being fought. Whether the expectations were too great or too inadequate can be measured by the intentions and the applied practices of the negotiating parties.

Whatever internal social function the continuation of the conflict might fulfill on the Palestinian side, on the Israeli side, a causal relationship between the domestic condition, with its society deeply torn and the (even if it had been practiced premeditatively) conflict situation against its enemy is at least feasible. One almost seeks to dismiss the “security problem” by ideologizing about the military challenges (sure enough, real) posed by the interior conflicts. The escalation of the military cannot save anything. At best it can temporarily postpone the discussion with the potential internal conflict. This is because as soon as the “external pressure” is applied, these subliminally

free-floating conflicts will come to the surface again to dominate the political-social Israel agenda with vehemence. Therefore, it's not just about confrontation with the now decades-long practice of discrimination against Arabic citizens, land and the "integration" of newly migrated citizens from the former Soviet Union. It's also largely about the long due confrontation with the immense social tensions and consequently with Israeli "class problems, with its sharpening ethnic conflicts, which are not limited to cultural questions raised tensions between Ashkenazi and Eastern Jews. This is also attributed to the sharpening conflict between religious and secular Jews and its subsequent basic clarification of the relationship between state and religion. All of this has not become obsolete with the bellicose confrontation with the Palestinians; rather has only shifted to the background temporarily. It's only waiting for the opportunity in which it can fully erupt again.

For the time being things are looking grim in the Middle East. The peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians as it unfolded in the beginning of the nineties as a result of the Oslo Agreements has now definitively fallen by the wayside. After the failure of Camp David and the Taba Negotiations and the ensuing escalation of violence in the second Palestinian Intifada, peace faces more than ever a dead-end, one which one can at best surmise as to what lies behind it, and most importantly, how to come out of it. An Israeli society shaken from the horrors of Palestinian suicide bombings has experienced a considerable (and socio-psychological) tendency to the right. Many, very many of them "want the war" and demand a rigorous and systematic defeat of "the Palestinians." They also want the brutal recapture of Palestinian cities in the West Bank under the pretext of "shattering terror" which has almost completely *de facto* eliminated, or at least debilitated, the power apparatus of the Palestinian authorities and consequently Arafat's ability to act.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon emerges from this predicament as a one-time "victor." For one, he has brutally modeled himself against his rival Benjamin Netanyahu, who is trying to dispute his political and party leadership. On the other hand, he is able at last to do something he has wanted to do for decades (and the last time of course under completely different circumstances in the catastrophe that led to the Lebanon war in 1982) and that is to suppress the Palestinians, to crush their leadership and to guarantee the continuation of the occupied regimes; and this by means of executing a massive population transfer of the Palestinians if need be. Seen

under this light, “shattering terror” is nothing other than a perfidious ideology as long as the actual causes of terror, and the now decade-old Israeli occupation and systematic oppression of the Palestinian people, are not abolished. But it is precisely this which Sharon is not inclined to do. In the logic of his politics of violence, terror will be accepted only if the West Bank settlements remain untouched because Sharon would otherwise immediately lose his power. Sharon’s most loyal political hinterland is located in the settlement movements.

If Sharon and large parts of his coalition government have a big interest in the perpetuation of violence, what moves the greater part of the Jewish-Israeli population to support him? Surely, it must be clear to most Israelis that there can be no military solution to eradicate terror. And that shattering the Palestinian infrastructure will only nourish greater despair and massive terror on the side of the Palestinians. How does one explain that the acceptance of Sharon’s politics of violence—and in many places support it enthusiastically? The answers to these questions vary. There is talk about a greater coherence in view of outside threats and from a deformed consciousness as a result of unhealed historical traumas as well as from a rising Israeli military mentality and increasing regressive de-politicization of the public sphere and the like. Undoubtedly, all of these factors have a certain effect on the said phenomenon. This article will address an aspect of this, which has up until now remained under-examined, even though its essence is a matter of foreknowledge.

Israel (that is the Jewish-Israeli population and Zionism) has come to an historical crossroads which places it in a dilemma and presents itself as a choice between Scylla and Charybdis.

Israel can decide to definitively evacuate the occupied territories within the parameters of the peace regulations and to abolish the settlements. One can also assume that the greatest part of the settlers would comply with the evacuation decision prescribed by the government. It would, however, already suffice if a minority of several hundred or even thousand hardliners would consistently oppose the evacuation, to which the state would be expected to execute its monopoly on violence vis-à-vis these radical settlers; if this action came to a bloody conflict in which “Jews shoot against Jews” (a thought that can barely be endured for many in Israel), it could come to a possible Civil War.

Israel, on the other hand, can decide to not want to evacuate the territories under any circumstances—be it because a settlement infrastructure has already been set and is viewed as a seemingly irreversible condition, as the leftist liberal critical observer, Meron Benvenisti has already been asserting for years, or be it because the demands on the territories have taken on military, security-political or religious-theological connotations—which combined can be declared as an axiomatic postulate. This situation that the left has diagnosed, namely the demand of keeping the conditions of occupation on the part of the right and Israel's continued presence in the West Bank ultimately implies the objective creation of a bi-national structure. It could be rejected as such by the Palestinians, which would probably lead to an escalation of the continued conflict in the norms of coexistence (as well as the ensuing risk for the Israeli civil society). This bi-national state could be accepted by the Palestinians, who have held long term hopes of seeing a shift in the population majority in the foreseeable future that would appear in their favor, but may also require a readiness on their part to accept Israeli citizenship.

If one excludes the most extreme possibility of a massive population transfer, a scenario that thanks to its inner logic will inevitably lead to a regional war with parties involved. In the final analysis, both diametrically-opposed plans of action here imply either an interior or “from the outside” produced dissolution of the Zionist project. It is doubtful as to whether many Israelis see this clearly; as it is also doubtful whether the greater part of the Israeli population has ever taken into account what price it is ready to pay for real peace. Without being clear about this historic turnaround and the possibilities of decision, one persists in a paralysis of what was a foreknown warning—which sets off an inability to act in a politically responsible fashion and to be therefore psychically even more susceptible to the empty promises of a “strong man.” There is a striking resemblance to lemmings.

The building of the wall is paradigmatically excluded from this point of view. This is essentially, because the wall doesn't only promise “security,” without also seriously indicating that with it, one could not only achieve security in the fight against Palestinian terror but also because it allows for the perpetuation of an illusion: to be rid of the Palestinians without having ceded the occupation of their territories. With “having their cake and eating it too” as the Americans tend to name such a disposition, megalomania and manifest inability to decide only increase. Even if attitudes and positions with regard to this structure may vary, there is no question that the majority of the Israeli

people involved in the wall debate really yearn for a “separation” from the Palestinians. This may be characterized as an apparently infantile wish, in which the responsibility for a real and possible solution of this bloody and tragic conflict and a practical creation of structures for future coexistence are projected onto a conviction that is hopelessly fatalist (“The world is against us,” and “We must carry the sword into perpetuity”) and delegated on the material reification of hope in the form of a wall.

Journalist Lilli Galili write that “the Peace Now movement has not committed to any position up until now. A part of its members interpret the construction of the fence in the vicinity of the green line as an act that de-facto marks the 1967 border and that also contributes to security. Others see in the unilateral separation a continuation of the disregard of the Palestinian partners and their needs. And yet many in the peace camps interpret the construction of the fence as victory in the fight for the recognition of the 1967 borders; precisely that victory that is feared in the national religious party and the West Bank Settlers Council.” There are arguments that speak for this description. Significant is Galili’s casual thematization of the inability of the most powerful Israeli peace movements to decide. Of course, there is much room for numerous and heterogeneous interpretations but the construction of the wall is accepted as a reality, without the extra-parliamentary opposition taking any effective political action. There were times in which the opposition wished for a government totally different from that of Sharon. It remains to be seen if these times, as with those of the peace process are gone for good.

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