



ISRAEL'S CLOSURE POLICY: AN INEFFECTIVE STRATEGY OF CONTAINMENT AND REPRESSION

AMIRA HASS

This article examines the Israeli policy of closure from its introduction in 1991 through its consolidation under Oslo, when its devastating potential was heightened by an intermeshing with Oslo II's division of the occupied territories into zones of Israeli and Palestinian control. The author argues that closure, first applied as a military-bureaucratic preemptive security measure, crystallized with Oslo into a conscious political goal: demographic separation without meaningful political separation. Despite the absence of an organized Palestinian resistance to closure, the reasons for which are explored here, a spirit of resilience and defiance has enabled the population to bear up under closure's intensification during the present uprising, when virtually all movement is banned and the territories are under siege.

IT WAS LATE OCTOBER 2000. A military checkpoint and a couple of edgy soldiers at the exit of Beitunia, southwest of Ramallah, made for a long queue of Palestinian cars that one by one turned on their lights as the dusk thickened. Those drivers whose nerves were not too frayed by the long wait might have noticed a bizarre new feature to the east of the road: in the vast military area adjacent to the Israeli army camp Ofer, massive though innocuous-looking concrete slabs were stacked and in rows. Beyond the military area and camp, a wide new highway was in the last stages of construction. Its purpose was to connect Israel to its distant outcroppings in the West Bank, such as Ma'ale Adumim settlement and the Jordan Valley outposts. Further on, less than a kilometer south of the military camp and the crawling line of cars, one could see thousands of merrily twinkling lights proclaiming the expansive settlement of Givat Ze'ev.

Within a week, Palestinian cars were no longer allowed through the Beitunia checkpoint, the main access to Ramallah for about a dozen villages in the region. Some laid back soldiers, a moveable barrier, and a row of spikes made sure that only foreign diplomatic cars could get through. A few weeks later, the road was blocked altogether, the makeshift barricade having been replaced by a more permanent artificial sand bank and some of those innoc-

AMIRA HASS, the *Ha'Aretz* correspondent in the occupied territories, is the author of *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land under Siege* (Metropolitan Books, 1999). This article is based on a talk the author gave before the Middle East Studies Association in November 2001.

uous-looking concrete slabs. Now, well over a year later, a new exit on the completed super highway allows Israeli access to Ofer camp. But the Palestinian western road to Ramallah has been permanently closed, as have the feeder roads that used to connect the villages to Ramallah.

Since the eruption of the second Palestinian intifada in the last days of September 2000, towns and villages all over the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been gradually and systematically sealed off in similar fashion. In some areas, deep trenches or barricades of sand and rock prevent any traffic in or out of a given village or region; in many others, simple concrete barriers do the job. The closer the village or town to an Israeli settlement, the more isolated and hermetically sealed it is.

Throughout the variegated landscapes of the West Bank, hundreds of such blockades close off Palestinian communities large and small, sometimes reinforced by huge tanks and other armored vehicles as well as fixed positions from which unseen soldiers keep machine guns and cannons trained on pedestrians. With Palestinian traffic banned from all the main and secondary roads, clusters of yellow group taxis gather at each such barrier, and groups of people trying to get to work, school, clinics, universities, relatives' houses, or markets clamber up and down sand embankments or across ditches to circumvent concrete slabs and soldiers, who sometimes shoot at them. At each cluster, simultaneously the terminal and starting point of yet another segment on the improvised network of dirt and track "roads," people have to change transport, walking several hundred meters in scorching heat or pouring rain, through dust or mud, to get to the cluster of waiting cars at the other side. A journey that would normally take twenty-five minutes has turned into an ordeal of two to three hours or more.

This process has been spreading and intensifying throughout the territories since September 2000, but it is not new: the 1.1 million inhabitants of Gaza have been penned up in the narrow, 360 km² Strip since 1991, unable to leave freely. What is now happening all over the West Bank replicates and multiplies what Gazans have experienced for a decade. In terms of the Israeli policy of "closure," it is a quantitative, not a qualitative, change.

EVOLUTION OF A POLICY

In its simplest definition, "closure" (*seger* in Hebrew, *ighlaq* in Arabic) as it has evolved over the last decade in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) means to deprive the Palestinian inhabitants of their right to free movement. It involves a pass system first introduced in early 1991 and which has been refined and perfected ever since. Needless to say, in the same Palestinian territories where Palestinians need special permits to move around, Israeli citizens circulate freely.

On the eve of the Gulf War in 1991, an Israeli military order canceled an earlier order that granted all Palestinian inhabitants a "general exit permit" to Israel. Issued in the West Bank in the early 1970s, the general exit permit,

which in effect assured Palestinians free movement in Israel, was extended to Gaza only in the mid-1980s, but in practice Gazans had enjoyed a similar freedom of movement almost since the West Bank order. This free movement was not “conferred” in the interests of equality—Jews were allowed and, indeed, encouraged to settle in the 1967 occupied territories, but Palestinians had no reciprocal right in Israel—but was one of Moshe Dayan’s measures for economically integrating the OPT into Israel with the aim of toning down Palestinian national aspirations and undermining the feasibility of an independent Palestinian state. But whatever the motives, freedom of movement meant a great deal for the individual Palestinian, both economically and socially. It also proved extremely valuable to the three hitherto separated Palestinian communities of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel proper, allowing them to reestablish direct contacts and reconsolidate the national and cultural common ground that endured despite the differences that had developed or been accentuated during the years of separation.

It is true that even at the outset there were exceptions to the blanket rule of general exit permit: “security” suspects were prevented from free movement at various times, as were criminals, unless they joined Israel’s army of collaborators. But these were exceptions, and in general the Palestinian right to freedom of movement was respected by the Israeli authorities. Even when there were fierce Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians in Israel, no one demanded that entrances to Israel be sealed off.

Some broader exceptions to the rule were introduced with the first intifada as of 1988. In Gaza, a magnetic card was imposed on anyone wishing to travel to Israel. This second identity card, renewable yearly for a fee to Palestinians presumed not to represent a security threat, tightened control over the Gazan population. Meanwhile, at about the same time in the West Bank, the “green identity card” (as opposed to the ordinary orange one) was introduced for “security cases”—former prisoners and activists—preventing them from crossing the Green Line. But the majority of the population continued to be able to exercise their right to free movement throughout the entire territory, just as Israelis did.

It was the Gulf War that provided the occasion to reverse this situation of free movement for the many and prohibition for the few. From then on, there was a blanket denial of the right for all Palestinians, with exceptions being made for certain explicit categories—including workers, merchants, people in need of medical treatment, collaborators, and important Palestinian personalities—which were granted passes. In principle, this has been the rule since then, though its practice has been modified and tightened with time.

Between the revocation of the general exit permit in 1991 and March 1993, when Israeli police began launching relentless pursuits to capture and arrest “infiltrators” and military courts started imposing heavy fines on those caught without the proper pass, the regulations were still vague. Checkpoints were not systematic and there were no “borders” per se; it was still fairly easy to sneak out, even from the Strip. Moreover, the new rules seemed

to be enforced mainly concerning entry into Israel, with travel between the West Bank and Gaza being more tolerated. Still, during those first two years of closure, the number of Palestinian workers in Israel was slashed, setting off a chain of economic blows to individual Palestinian families and the community. Trips to Israel for shopping or other normal activities were already becoming a thing of the past. Gradually, travel between the West Bank and Gaza also became increasingly difficult and, finally, almost impossible.

A second “novelty” was introduced in March 1993: the entire municipality of East Jerusalem, which Israel greatly expanded and annexed in 1967, was incorporated *de facto* into the no-entry Israeli territory. Ever since that time, the Palestinian cultural, religious, institutional, economic, and commercial capital has been encircled, with ever-expanding bureaucratic measures and regulations forbidding or “thinning” Palestinian entry into the city. At first, only men under forty needed permits, then women as well, and finally everybody of all ages required them.

The Israeli pass system, introduced not long before the Madrid peace conference and at a time when the Palestinian-Israeli negotiating process was already in the planning stages, was consolidated during the Oslo years. Indeed, it was with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 that the special bureaucratic-military machinery of the pass system was developed, with heavy input from Shin Bet. Palestinian officials became the middlemen who either transferred the Israeli-approved permits to their fellow Palestinians or transmitted the rejection.

The pass system turned a universal basic right into a coveted privilege—or portion of a privilege—allotted to a minority on a case-by-case basis. For the privilege was not whole: it had gradations. Some passes permitted an overnight stay in Israel, others required return by dusk, a few were for an entire month. Some restricted means of transport to the special group taxis parked outside the Erez checkpoint in the Gaza Strip; a handful allowed the use of private cars from door to door. The hand that giveth also taketh away: some months as many as 1,000 businessmen might be granted passes, other months only 300; sometimes the passes for Gazans would be for Israel and the West Bank, sometimes only for the West Bank. It was thus that an entire society was stratified and segmented on the basis of whether one had access, and in what portion, to the “privilege” of freedom of movement.

The societal segmentation resulting from the pass system accompanied the territorial segmentation Israel initiated immediately after the 1967 war when it began colonizing the occupied territories. And like the curtailment of Palestinian movement, the process of territorial fragmentation intensified during the “decade of peace.” Not only did the settlements continue to grow, but a huge and ever-expanding network of high-quality bypass roads was built in the OPT linking Israeli settlements to each other and to Israel proper, while circumventing Palestinian communities and cutting Palestinian villages off from each other, from the larger towns, and even from their own fields and orchards.

With the Oslo II (Taba) agreement of September 1995, the final stage of the segmentation was achieved with the division of the West Bank, like the Gaza Strip before it, into a confusing mosaic of pieces of territory with differing status depending on the nature of the security control over them. Area A enclaves were to have “full” (in fact, limited) Palestinian security and civil control, area B had Israeli security and Palestinian civil control, and area C, the great mass of the land, was under full Israeli control. As the Palestinians understood it, the area under “full” Palestinian control, initially limited to the main towns, was gradually to be increased so that by the end of the interim period (originally set for May 1999) it would cover “most” of the West Bank apart from the built-up areas of the settlements and the military installations (as stipulated vaguely in the accords). But as the transfer of territory was contingent upon the PA’s good behavior and delivery of security goods (fighting terror and preventing anti-Israeli violence), Israel alone could decide the land transfers. By September 2000, then, the area A enclaves totaled 18 percent, whereas area C—the agricultural and development land reservoir—covered a full 60 percent. In Gaza, meanwhile, 20 percent of the narrow Strip was set aside for the Israeli army and the settlers, representing 0.5 percent of the population.

In retrospect, the most significant feature of the zoning was not its delineation according to security control, which the PA had seen as the primary achievement. The second intifada demonstrates daily how the A zoning is no buffer against Israeli attacks and incursions. Indeed, it was only with the outbreak of the current uprising that the extraordinary ingenuity of the “zoning” system, backed by the network of bypass roads, could be fully appreciated: with most of the population living in the scattered islands of A and B, separated from each other by the vast ocean of C lands, hundreds of villages and half a dozen towns could be totally paralyzed by strategically placed barricades and ditches, tanks, and IDF sharpshooters, thereby devastating an entire economy and disrupting all social life. At the same time, the fact that the great majority of the Palestinians live under ostensible PA civil responsibility enables Israel to disclaim its obligations toward the civilian population (even though legally it remains the occupier). With astonishing success, Israel, both before and during the current uprising, has managed to portray the dire economic and other civil repercussions of the closure-induced fragmentation, its own invention as the occupying power, as none of its concern.

SPACE AND TIME: CLOSURE AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Space and time together make “room” in one’s world—not only materially to accomplish one’s tasks and activities, but at the level of the spirit, enabling both the individual and the community to breathe, to develop, to prosper, to create. Space in the occupied territories has been gradually but relentlessly encroached upon for more than thirty years, as more and more land has been expropriated. Palestinian groups have doggedly tracked this theft.

Strangely, however, little or no attention has been paid to another kind of theft, which especially in the last decade has also reached massive proportions: the theft of time as a byproduct of closure.

Already with the “normal” closure policy introduced in 1991, which affected mainly Gazans, the theft of time was significant. Leaving the Strip for whatever reason—to pursue studies in West Bank universities, visit a new grandchild, take part in a meeting, look for a job, attend a wedding, see a dermatologist or medical specialist—required getting a permit (never guaranteed). Time was wasted filling out forms and obtaining supporting documents, standing in line in PA offices that acted as conduits for the Israelis, making desperate phone calls ten times a day to check whether the permit had arrived, casting around for people who might know someone with some pull with the Israelis, and so on.

There is another consequence of the closure policy. Beginning in 1991, and especially since the Gaza-Jericho agreement of 1994, almost all Gazans—and later on most West Bankers—found that they could no longer make any plans: it was impossible to know until the very last minute

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whether one would get the necessary permit. While not being able to plan ahead, they also lost the ability to act spontaneously—and spontaneity is no less a human right than travel and food. For ten years people have not been able to decide on the spur of the moment to go, say, to see a sunrise in the desert or visit a new bookstore in Ramallah or spend an evening with old friends. With the ability to plan or be

spontaneous lost, many have lost the energy and determination required even to try to exercise their right to free movement and escape from the cage. The temptation is great to let the externally imposed shrinking horizons dictate one’s social, spiritual, and cultural life.

Since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in October 2000, the theft of time and of any semblance of normal activity has reached undreamed of proportions: students do not reach universities, ailing people and pregnant women are held at checkpoints, and some even die or deliver on the road; municipality technicians cannot get an Israeli permit to repair a broken pipe at the outskirts of their own town; offices are half staffed; water tank trucks are not allowed into villages. Travel costs have tripled because one must change transport every 20 kilometers; people spend hours at a stretch waiting or detained at roadblocks. Raw materials travel faster between China and the Ashdod seaport than between Ashdod and Nablus. The areas most dramatically affected by this theft of space and time are the villages and neighborhoods that happen to be near Jewish settlements, where even before the intifada people needed all kinds of permits and special arrangements to reach their own fields and orchards, with added inducements not to do so: a ferocious dog, a merciless security officer employed by the settlement, a blocked agricultural road, an olive grove put to fire. Today, such places are

under months-long curfews, the most notorious example being Hebron, where 20,000 Palestinians have been under house arrest almost from the first day of the uprising for the convenience of 500 Jewish settlers.

For the last seventeen months, hundreds of thousands of people have been almost wholly occupied with the task of getting somewhere on time: through mud and rain and under the burning sun up and down the mountain, breathing hard, legs aching. Time is running, the tank's cannon is taking aim, an infant has started crying, an old lady needs assistance, the dust is blinding. *What is that soldier saying in Hebrew, shouting, waving his hands? Is someone shooting? Yes! The soldier is shooting! Where can I hide? No place to hide . . . isn't it here that someone got killed just last week?*

What is now given visual form in the hundreds of roadblocks all over the West Bank was less obvious during the Oslo years, but it nevertheless existed: the need to plead, to beg, the prospect of being turned down, the anger, the repeated trips to the Palestinian liaison office, where one finds hundreds of people with incredible stories to which no one listens, the visit to an Israeli official who suggests, "If you help us, we'll help you"—meaning, "Become a collaborator, and you'll get your permit." The best minds in Palestinian offices, private and public, are taken up day and night with the simple task of retrieving a travel permit.

Unlike land, which can be restored and replaced and rehabilitated, time lost—through the policy of closure—is lost forever. The personal and collective benefits of having "space" are erased forever if not enjoyed and exercised in "time."

RESILIENCE VERSUS RESISTANCE

19 February 2002. Ramallah is hermetically sealed after six Israeli soldiers were killed by Palestinian militants at a checkpoint west of the city. At a main checkpoint south of the city, hundreds of people near the Qalandia refugee camp watch the approaches on both sides for cars and pedestrians. A child had just been shot at, but a determined woman carrying a bag strides toward the well-armed and protected soldiers, undeterred by shots fired in the air. She continues walking. More shots are fired; people are jumpy. She hesitates, but walks on until she is about 50 yards from the soldiers. A bullet hits the ground beside her, sending up a cloud of dust, and she stops. But her determination has gotten a soldier out of his jeep. He shouts something at her; she shouts back. He approaches, she leaves her bag on the ground and gets closer, there is an exchange of words and finally she is let through.

Countless such examples every day testify to the magnitude of the phenomenon of defiance. In the last ten years, and certainly since the outbreak of the latest uprising, Palestinians have found ways to defy the closure policy with an arsenal of inventions to circumvent fences and roadblocks, despite the soldiers, to reach work and home, school and family. In Gaza during the Oslo years, work permits were purchased, identity cards and other papers forged. People attached themselves to the bottoms of vans or hid in pickup trucks full of potatoes or cabbages to smuggle themselves into Israel to look for work. They traveled overland to Cairo and from there flew to Amman to reach universities in the West Bank (until Israel restricted entry of Gazans through the Allenby Bridge)—all this before suicide bombers used the same tricks to sneak out and Israel tightened its grip. And finally, when people were unable to leave at all, they resorted to university outreach programs for education and to the Internet for social life in their narrow pale of settlement.

In these intifada days, people in Gaza walk miles along the beaches when the roads are blocked to Palestinians. In the West Bank, they ride donkeys or trek on foot on rocky paths across hills and mountains under the permanent danger of being shot at with stun grenades or live bullets. Closure in the Oslo years meant suffocation, but closure since the uprising also means physical fear and overcoming it.

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Throughout the closure years, and especially since the second intifada, Palestinians have given proof of an amazing resilience, an almost limitless capacity to endure hardship. The only reason it cannot be termed “resistance” is that it is not organized. It is an individual, personal decision and behavior adopted by an entire collective, but it is not part of a centralized, calculated strategy to challenge Israeli orders and policies and to force change. The collective nature of this personal defiance is more visible today than it was during Oslo because closure all over the territories has become far more visible. Closure is no longer the abstract, bureaucratic procedure of asking for a permit and being rejected. Closure has become part of Palestinian human and natural topography.

ABSENCE OF AN ORGANIZED STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE

Throughout the occupation, joint efforts—however ultimately ineffective—have been mounted by Palestinian, Israeli, and international NGOs to protest Israel’s settlement policy. Campaigns have also been launched, with somewhat greater success, against Israel’s revocation of Palestinian residency rights and IDs in Jerusalem, as well as against its policy of house demolitions. This being the case, the question must be asked: Why has the closure policy received so little attention? Why was this policy almost completely ignored (apart from reference to economic repercussions) by all concerned parties—Palestinian elites, academics, political parties and leaders,

Israeli peace activists, international pro-Palestinian groups, and Palestinian activists in the diaspora—at the time it was taking deep root in Gaza? And why has no strategized, organized, nonviolent defiance developed since, as its devastating consequences became clear?

A number of possible explanations can be advanced for the failure to address the issue, shedding light on the sociology of the Palestinian struggle against occupation, on the one hand, and the sociology of Israeli policies, on the other hand.

Since closure was introduced in 1991, Israel has succeeded in portraying it as an ad hoc security measure, a preemptive move against or reaction to terrorist attacks. (Most observers have failed to recall that the cancellation of Palestinians' exit permit to Israel in January 1991 occurred long before Hamas initiated suicide bombings inside Israeli towns and buses.) This perception was strengthened in later years as closure regulations were tightened following a lethal attack or the (alleged?) exposure of a would-be attack. Even the Palestinians themselves internalized Israel's security pretext: how often have I heard friends ask in genuine surprise when denied a travel permit: "But I haven't done anything!" or "But it was years ago that I was detained!" Thus, in Israel, Palestine, and abroad, the overall impression has been that closure is a temporary measure that will soon be removed, and this understanding has obscured closure's true nature and greatly reduced the urgency of protest.

Given the focus on its economic effects, closure throughout the Oslo years was said to be "lifted" whenever Palestinian workers and businessmen were given permits to cross into Israel. If the labor flow was not totally severed and people were seen crossing Gaza's massive northern checkpoint at Erez, foreign and Palestinian proponents of the "building of peace and the economy of peace" expressed satisfaction, even gratitude and optimism. The great majority of the population, who could not leave because they had no work in Israel or business with Israelis, fell into the blind spot of the writers of reality's "official version"—most journalists and the officials and diplomats who talk to the press. Lost from sight was the fact that even when the closure was lifted, the vast majority of the population still couldn't go anywhere.

With time, free movement for reasons other than work or medical treatment (and even that often curtailed by ad hoc restrictions) was no longer seen as a *right* but as a "luxury" for which it was somehow shameful to struggle. Exemplifying the kind of attitude that was internalized by many Palestinians is the response by an Israeli officer to my suggestion in the early stages of the "peace process" in 1994 that a good "confidence-building step" would be to give women and old people a one-year "open permit" to leave the Gaza Strip. "They don't have any reason to get out," she had said. With many people having given up the hope of travel beyond a perimeter of a few dozen kilometers, closure from the public point of view became an abstract phenomenon.



A Palestinian woman pleads with an IDF soldier to allow her and her children to cross a checkpoint in Hebron, 31 October 2001. (Reuters/Nati Shohat)

Closure in its pre-intifada forms, though experienced by a huge collective of individuals, was experienced as a separate ordeal. Requesting a permit, waiting for it, being refused, getting a two-day permit when the course you needed to attend lasts the whole semester, longing in vain to see the sea, missing your relatives—all these were common experiences shared by an entire people, but everyone went through it on their own: the individual versus the Restriction, the individual versus the Occupation, as if it were a personal matter, a stroke of personal bad luck. Occupation in its form of a restrictive pass system was splintered to three million parts, and the blanket prohibition was somehow overlooked.

Individuals developed their own ways to cope. When “infiltration” became harder after the “electronic wall” went up around Gaza in 1994, and after changes in the coded IDs in 1995 made the fabrication and falsification of documents more difficult, many resorted to *wasta* (connections), especially with high officials in one or another of the Palestinian security agencies notorious for cozy relations with their Israeli counterparts. Some had the luck to have connections with international organizations that could help get permits for travel abroad. A few had contacts with Israeli organizations or personalities willing to help secure a pass into Israel. Some found the right contact person to whom to pay a bribe.

Just as the effects of closure were experienced as a private ordeal, getting a permit was experienced as a personal lucky strike, rendering the idea of a collective protest absurd. The “privileged” individual whose entire livelihood and the welfare of his family depends on a permit was deterred from joining

others in a public protest that could risk his portion of income opportunity. An organized political protest carried no guarantee of success and could result in punishment—unlike good contacts with a security officer.

Finally, closure during the Oslo years took on definite class overtones: the political, economic, social, and intellectual elites always found ways to get permits and get out, sparing them the constant pressures of being locked up and feeling suffocated. This class phenomenon found its fullest expression in the VIP system institutionalized under Oslo: from the time the PA was established, PLO and PA officials were granted the privilege of free movement in and out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to Jordan and Egypt, respectively. It was at the request of the PA (according to an Israeli official) that the privilege was soon extended to entering Israel and traveling between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. There were three categories of VIP, with progressively diminishing privileges. VIP-Is could travel by car without prior arrangement, were not searched, and could be accompanied by family and other escorts. VIP-IIs had fewer privileges, and VIP-IIIs still fewer. The desire to get out of the Gaza Strip and to travel freely to the West Bank was so great that even former grass-roots militants who were elected to the Palestinian Council (PC) accepted VIP categorization without protest rather than try to secure their freedom of movement on a less patronizing and colonialist basis. Even so, these privileges eroded over time as Israeli officials claimed that they were being abused—and indeed, it is known that PC members (VIP-IIs) often gave rides to Gazans studying in the West Bank. Still, up to the current intifada, PA and some PLO officials enjoyed almost “normal” freedom of movement.

THE MISSING VANGUARD

Organizing serious protest is not possible without the participation of a political and intellectual vanguard. Yet for the reasons mentioned, during the Oslo years those who could have made up this vanguard either did not fully grasp the underlying purpose of closure as a means of control and political leverage or were unable to participate in fighting it. This applies, for differing reasons, to the various groups that might have been capable of playing significant roles: the PA, Fatah, Islamist groups, Palestinian leftists, and the Israeli peace camp.

The PA: With the transfer of powers to the new authority in Gaza in May 1994, the fact that the area was already virtually sealed off in a sense served the leadership's political and economic needs and corresponded to their previous experiences. Politically, it is easier to mold and control a population closed in a small territorial unit, where movements can be closely monitored. Moreover, closure and loss of jobs in Israel made a large segment of the population directly dependent on official (poorly paid) jobs, increasing personal indebtedness to the PA. Recruitment into the inflated security agencies and civilian ministries became the greatest job-creation project in the Strip (however redundant these jobs were from an economic and managerial

standpoint) and took the place of a state welfare system. Economically, closure eased and speeded up the creation of the PA trade monopolies, with established local businessmen being forced to give up their share of the market and join the monopolies: if a “merger offer” was rejected, the PA could make certain that the recalcitrant businessman would not get travel permits.

PA senior officials and security officers never complained about closure when they met with their Israeli counterparts. Some Israeli members of the Knesset from the Communist Party told me that when they raised the issue of closure with Yitzhak Rabin, he had told them that since Arafat never raised the issue there was no need to change it. And by the time the devastating repercussions of closure became clear to the Palestinians, it was too late to develop a response.

Fatab: As the dominant party in the PA and with the largest mass following and network in the territories, Fatah was the first organization to cash in on the benefits of power—benefits closely dependent not only on the PA’s system of patronage and nepotism but also on Israeli goodwill. One of the main such benefits was freedom of movement, a privilege to which the PA “newcomers” from Tunis, being closer to power, had greater access, accentuating the dichotomy between themselves and the local Fatah leadership. For the local leaders, freedom of movement and other “privileges” anesthetized whatever contesting spirit may have survived Oslo and soon alienated them from the base. This gave rise to a bitterness and even self-disgust that expressed itself in ever-greater indulgence in such benefits of free movement as economic initiatives, recreational evenings out of the cage, and so on.

In 1997, I asked some rank-and-file Fatah members who were complaining about being sealed in the Strip why they did not initiate activities that would draw world attention to their reality. For example, it had been suggested that Fatah organize a march of tens of thousands toward the northern “border” of the Gaza Strip in exercise of their basic human right to free movement, and that one way of not getting fired at was to have the demonstration led by some of Arafat’s top aides. But the young men had an immediate answer: the big shots will never join.

The Islamist groups: The only organization in Palestine capable of getting tens of thousands of people into the streets for a march or demonstration was Hamas; in January 1996, more than 100,000 people had turned out for the funeral of Yahya Ayyash, assassinated by Israel for numerous lethal attacks. But the Islamist groups would never sponsor demonstrations against settlements or closure or even the occupation per se, since this would imply acceptance of the two-state solution and of the “Oslo” reality, to which they were ideologically opposed. More generally, the Islamist organizations engage both in charity and mass social activities and in armed actions, but civil disobedience is not part of their agenda. In the nonviolent demonstrations sometimes organized by the NGOs and seculars in the West Bank to reach Israeli checkpoints, participation by Hamas sympathizers is low.

The leftist groups: The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) devoted their flagging energies to attacking Oslo and the PA's conduct but failed to develop strategies of opposition. Aware of their weakness within society and vis-à-vis the PA (on which many of them depended for their salaries and budgets), they were further disadvantaged by an antiquated system of "centralized democracy." Policies were dictated from headquarters abroad, where different realities prevailed. Of the various leftist organizations, the People's Party (former Communists) has been the most engaged in the grassroots anti-occupation activities that demanded cooperation with Israeli activists, though such activities addressed mostly settlements and land confiscations. The larger PFLP refrained from joint actions with Israelis on the grounds that such cooperation represented "normalization."

The Israeli peace camp: In 1991, the peace camp mistakenly interpreted closure as a return to the Green Line, which it welcomed as a kind of proof that the solution to the conflict lays in ultimately giving up the territories. What the peace camp failed to see was that the Green Line was a border for Palestinians only and that Israelis could cross it to settle and move about freely. This misperception persisted deep into the Oslo years. Moreover, from the start of the Oslo process, the great majority of Israeli peace supporters believed that their intervention was no longer needed in the march toward a Palestinian state. The peace camp preferred not to notice such "trifles" as the draconian restrictions on Palestinian movement, settlement expansion, the construction of bypass roads, and the splintering of the Palestinian territories into small enclaves, perceiving all these developments as temporary, accidental, and amendable.

ISRAEL'S STRATEGY: PREMEDITATED OR IMPROVISED?

Besides the question of why there was no strategized, organized Palestinian response to closure, a second question must be asked. This is the extent to which the Israeli decision makers foresaw the debilitating side effects of closure when they began introducing it as of the late 1980s and devised the policy accordingly. Judging from the piecemeal way in which closure was applied in the early years, my own reading is that the concept of the system and its colonialist "advantages" were realized and elaborated with time. The lack of international, Israeli, and Palestinian attention to the phenomenon allowed the Israeli policies of domination to take root and develop.

Yet even in its embryonic form, prior to Madrid, the pass system illuminated some basics about Israeli concepts that gradually shaped what was to become an apartheid rule. Restricting Palestinian entry into Israel proper was seen as an answer to growing Israeli concerns that the still-continuing intifada would "spill over into Israel," especially if Palestinian national demands were not met. A scattering of deadly individual attacks against Israelis (though not at all on the scale known later) reinforced such fears. And with-

out any pressure from the Israeli population to get to the root of the problem by addressing Palestinian demands—on the contrary, the overwhelming desire was “not to have Arabs in our midst”—there was certainly no governmental inclination to address the issue politically. Moreover, the “security” concerns dovetailed nicely with developments in the labor market and concerns about reducing dependence on Palestinian labor. Jobs hitherto performed by Palestinians came to be seen as possible employment outlets for the influx of new immigrants from the Soviet Union, and the long curfews of the previous three years of intifada had already accustomed Israeli employers, especially in industry, to replacing Palestinian workers with Israelis. (Ariel Sharon, as housing minister in the 1980s, was one of the first to encourage the import of foreign workers.) The first full-fledged imposition of closure, then, responded to both these concerns.

But what had begun as a military-bureaucratic measure aimed primarily at containing and suppressing unrest soon developed into something more far-reaching. A pass system on such a scale cannot but acquire its own bureaucratic logic, and within a few years had become entrenched in such a way that reversing it would have required a determined effort. At the same time,

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changes in the international environment in the wake of the Gulf War and the end of the bipolar world made it clear that Israel could not continue its direct occupation undisturbed—occupation, after all, does not necessarily require a direct military presence if the military power is able to dictate and control the development and future of the nonvoting community. The result of this new approach was Oslo, into which the by-now well entrenched pass system was

seamlessly incorporated.

Closure also had very clear immediate advantages in the negotiating process underway. Particularly under Rabin and Peres, the use of closure as an instrument of economic leverage over the PA was blatant. “You arrest this one or that one, and we’ll give you 500 more work permits” and “If you behave yourselves and agree to our (slow) implementation timetables, we’ll allow you to export more vegetables and release from Israeli customs the heavy machinery you imported” were the unexpressed but widely understood premises underlying negotiations.

With time, what had originally been an ad hoc military-bureaucratic measure crystallized into a fully conscious Israeli strategy with a clear political goal: separation between the two peoples with an *appearance* of political separation, but with only one government—Israel—having any effective power to shape the destinies of both. The hopes vested in Oslo as a peace process by the international community and the Palestinians, coupled with the debilitating side effects of closure described above and the stunted nature of Palestinian politics, blurred this overriding vision and paralyzed the Palestinians’ ability to combat closure as an instrument of control.

Meanwhile, settlement expansion, aimed at establishing the would-be inner borders of Palestinian enclaves, was accelerating during the Oslo years. The PA's promise to fight terror and violence while continuing to negotiate despite the ongoing settlement activity gave Israelis the impression that peace with settlements was possible. Thus settlement expansion was not an innocent mistake, as Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of Oslo, tries to portray it now. It consolidated the creation of "one state in one country." With an occupying power's free access to land, water, and space, Israel was able to send its settlement offshoots into the West Bank, along the Jordan Valley and the Green Line and adjacent to the big Palestinian towns and refugee camps. The State of Israel and its sovereignty were extended *de facto* from the river to the sea: Israeli infrastructure, Israeli laws, Israeli taxation and tax-exemptions, Israeli electricity grids and water and telephone networks, Israeli subsidies and ministries and schools. And wedged in between these offshoots, hemmed in by the vast, supermodern, carefully planned network of connecting bypass roads, a second "state" was allowed to exist: a chain of mini-entities and disconnected enclaves where another people lives under a different set of laws (a combination of Israeli military orders and Palestinian crippled rule of law overruled by arbitrariness). But this second "state," deprived of elementary access to land, water, and space, is likewise deprived of any chance of free development for individuals or community.

The Palestinian leadership, having underestimated the effects of Israeli policies and having been blinded by the personal benefits Oslo offered, failed to challenge the creation of the One State and the *de facto* demographic separation (closure) by a planned strategy of civil disobedience that might have drawn world attention to the combined implications of closure and settlements in time.

Closure during the Oslo years succeeded in totally severing relations between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, creating a *de facto* Palestinian ministate in Gaza. The Labor government in 1995 had calculated that Arafat would eventually accept this ministate and agree to postpone indefinitely the creation of a Palestinian state in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But here, the PA stood its ground, and closure as an instrument of pressure did not achieve its ultimate political goal: Palestinian legitimization of demographic separation termed "statehood," but without any of its true attributes or meaningful sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the Oslo years, Israel could not have ignored (as it does now) its obligations as an occupying power to the occupied population: the hope of "containing" the deep discontent in the territories could not yet go too far beyond the constraints of international conventions. In those times, Israel could not have resorted in the OPT to the Grapes of Wrath-type offensives it unleashed in Lebanon or tried to "uproot terror" by shelling refugee camps

from the air and land, using tanks and helicopters to massively target civilians in the hopes of killing gunmen and potential suiciders, bulldozing hundreds of houses, wantonly smashing private property, and razing vast green agricultural areas. Also, Israeli direct military control of Palestinian-inhabited areas naturally limited Palestinian access to arms, ammunition, and the ability to develop homemade bombs and rockets, which became possible during the years of limited self-rule. This has facilitated Israel's public relations task, enabling it to present its war against an entire population as symmetrical warfare between two political entities: the PA as aggressor and Israel compelled to defend itself.

Attempts to challenge closure nonviolently have proven risky, even deadly. The Israeli army—which does not hesitate to fire on civilians, even international solidarity activists who occasionally visit the OPT to protest the siege—has made clear that it will not tolerate any mass demonstration approaching its well-protected tanks and armored cars and positions. From the very first days, the al-Aqsa intifada devolved into a situation where armed men engaging in “macho” shooting into the air next to unarmed demonstrators gave Israel the pretext to “shoot back,” killing and injuring hundreds of people. Guerrilla attacks on the roads of the occupied territories and terrorist attacks against civilians in Israel resulted, *inter alia*, in expanding the practice of internal closure at the junctions between “Israeli” (area C) and Palestinian territory, as defined under Oslo II.

There is no intifada now in the real sense of the word. There is no mass civilian participation in anti-occupation activities. There is, however, a *spirit* of intifada, which is now expressed in the individual but massive resilience in the face of a relentless siege. The intifada, then, is now reduced to the resilience of three million people under the weight of Israel's brutal suppression of a nonexistent intifada. Just as was the case in the Oslo years, three million individuals are drawing on immense personal reserves to bear the hardships of siege without surrender. What they lack is a vanguard central power that could consciously work at transforming this vast individual capacity into a collective strategy of nonviolent—and thus far more effective—resistance.

During the Oslo years, it seemed that the Israelis were hoping that the leverage of closure, with its overall debilitating effects, would eventually produce Palestinian consent to the final status deal envisaged. The fiasco of Camp David proved how wrong they were. The current intensification of the closure policy was imposed with the intention of containing the latest Palestinian uprising. Instead, it is developing into a ruthless war between one of the strongest and best equipped armies in the world and a battalion of volunteering suiciders. Closure, far from helping to crush the defiance, is now adding fuel to the fire of the frustration and wrath. Palestinians increasingly are resorting to individual acts of killing and suicide attacks, backed by the great majority of an embittered, caged population.