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FROM BALTIMORE TO PALESTINE

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As I witness the increasingly militarized attacks on the rebellious neighborhoods in the “leading democracy” of the world, they seem more and more like the massive armed force brought to bear on Palestinians in the “only democracy in the Middle East”. Not unexpected, as both societies are built on the systematic promotion of racism, without which they could not endure, and armed repression against those who resist its consequences.

Both societies attempt to hide and distort their histories of displacement and discrimination. In the US the destruction and vilification of the Native Americans as murderous savages is lost in the sea of time and whitewash of history texts. As the survivors’ descendants languish on reservations, the victims are blamed for their fate as non-industrious and alcoholic. The days of open mass lynching of African-Americans have ended since the 1940s and were always confined to the deep south. Many liberals believe that era to be long over and to have been an aberration confined to a small area. They are proud of their support for the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which is said to have ended most racist practices, although housing and school segregation and wage and life expectancy differentials are no better today.(1)

In Israel, the history of the forced displacement of 750,000 Palestinians and the killing of an unknown number in 1948 is not even in the history books. Israelis are taught to fear and despise Arabs from earliest childhood. In the Occupied Territories, the Israeli armed forces and police, the Palestinian police trained by Americans and in collusion with the Israelis, and even civilians can kill Palestinians without fear of consequences. Governmental mass murder of women and children can proceed in Gaza as most Jewish Israelis applaud the slaughter.

Justice for Palestinians in the West Bank is meted out in military courts with their own set of rules entirely different than those for Jewish Israeli citizens. Those arrested can be held for months without trial or over two weeks without access to lawyers, their only crimes being suspicion of involvement in resistance, violent or not. In the US, there is only one court system, but the rates of arrests and convictions and severity of punishments are so different for Blacks and Whites that it may as well be two separate systems. 40% of Palestinian men have spent time in prison, where over 6700 currently languish. Although the mechanisms differ, the percentages of Black American men in jails or under judicial control is about the same. The so-called crimes are different. Drug offenses account for most of the imprisonment of Black males on the U.S., although Whites use drugs with similar frequency. Arrests for minor offenses like jay-walking or carrying an open beer account for thousands of arrests of African-Americans and nary any Whites in the U.S. Among Palestinians, it is mostly any offense, real or imagined, violent or peaceful, against the omnipotent military occupation that lands one in jail.

In both societies periodic rebellions against these injustices occur, and it is heartening to witness the resistance of the last year sparked by the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray in particular. This is against the background of over \$6 million paid out by Baltimore for over 100 episodes of police brutality over the last 4 years (2) and the estimated 3-4 police killings of minorities every day in the U.S.(3). In Palestine there have been two large intifadas, in 1987 and 2000, and bursts of rebellion around last summer's Gaza massacre. It is notable that the massive force that Israel brings to bear against Palestinians is enabled by the \$3.15 annual military aid that the U.S gives to that government. The Israelis then modify and perfect weapons for use against civilian populations, like automatic guns that fire around corners, which they then peddle around the world. Israel is now the 4th biggest arms exporter. For the past decade, American police forces, largely stimulated by now-NYC Police Commissioner Bratton, have traveled to Israel regularly to be trained in urban crown control.

Despite these periodic militant fight backs, no ongoing mass organized resistance movement exists in either country. In the U.S., as soon as rebellions begin, the local and national politicians, especially the Black ones, begin their campaigns to rely on the ballot box and the courts; local clergy and national "civil rights leaders" like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, show up to urge calm and restraint. Fifty years ago, after the widespread urban riots, citizens put their faith in the Kerner Commission, a federal body which condemned inequality and police tactics, but led to no change. Even with a Black president and Black Mayor and Police Chief in Baltimore, nothing has changed for the better. In Baltimore's poor Black neighborhoods, poverty is 30%, unemployment 20% (up to 50% in some areas), and schools are rotten(4). Obama calls those who militantly resist "thugs" while urging that murderous cops be dealt with through the system, which always exonerates them. Six Baltimore cops have been charged with serious crimes, including one with murder, in response to the large scale Baltimore rebellion, but it is doubtful if any will be convicted of a serious crime. In the past 20 years, 17 police officers have been charged with murder in the US and none has been convicted. (5).

What enabled the Ferguson rebellion to continue, grow, and inspire national support despite massive militaristic police repression, was that the local protesting youth refused to listen to the misleaders urging calm and sent them packing. Another significant change in the last year has been the multiracial nature of the protests around the country. For the preceding several decades, protests against police killings had been almost exclusively Black, accompanied by only a few White leftists. It remains to be seen whether Baltimore will remain quelled by the surge of clergy and politicians urging reliance on the legal system.

In the West Bank, nearly the entire population looks with disgust on the sell-out leadership of Fatah, which spends 25% of its budget on police to repress the population(6). Nonetheless, a very large percentage of Palestinians are dependent on Fatah for jobs, benefits, and/or are in debt to the controlling financial institutions, which may decrease the risk of mass dissent. Regular oppositions does take place in villages like B'ilin and around Nablus, but it is of a weekly character and has not sparked a more widespread movement. At some point, the tipping point will be reached and more mass rebellion will occur. That is not in doubt.

However, in both the US and Palestine, what will insure that these periodic uprisings become the basis for broad and lasting social change? If they do not, the citizenry may end up discouraged and cynical rather than energized. What must be recognized is that US, Israel and Palestine, too, are controlled by very small wealthy elites organized on a capitalist basis. It may be less apparent, but despite being occupied, the Palestinian economy is controlled by a small group of rich families who have ties to Israeli and international capital, which is discussed at length by Ali Abunimah(7). The Palestinian Development and Investment Company, which these families control, owns 78% of the Palestinian Stock Exchange. Palestine ranks second to the worst in the world in the ratio of management to unskilled labor incomes(8).

Capitalism cannot survive unless profits are maximized, and this can only occur by minimizing wages and benefits to the lowest point, countermanded only by the demands of organized workers. Moreover, profits can be and are maximized by paying even less in wages and social services to special oppressed groups (\$600 billion in the U.S.), such as Arabs, Blacks, Latinos or recent immigrants. These divisions not only save money, but increase divisions that keep groups of workers from uniting with each other. Add to that segregation in neighborhoods, schools and racist and nationalist indoctrination, which separates people physically and ideologically.

In both the Occupied Territories, Israel and the U.S., the struggle must be made to recognize capitalism as the root cause of the problem and to overcome racism, the primary tool used to weaken workers. In Israel, over 30% of the population participated in protests in 2011 over poor and worsening living conditions, but no mention was made of the occupation and racism which drains the Israeli budget and divides its citizens. In Palestine most residents are taught to despise Zionism but not Jews, and a growing number hope for a single multi-ethnic state. However, such an end-game, if it does not see the need to dispense with the current Palestinian political and economic leadership, will not win much. The Jewish and Arab elites will be all too happy to continue the super-oppression of the Palestinians no matter in one or two nations.

In the US, the dilemma is the same. Calling for electing Black politicians has already been shown to be a useless measure, as is calling for reliance on the courts or commissions of inquiry. Crocodile tears are shed and all remains the same. In both societies, the need is for a long-range perspective which sees the necessity to eventually change the economic structure of society, a change which will ultimately not be peaceful. To that end, which may not be possible to attain for decades, we must build movements that are multiracial, Arab and Jew, Black and White, native and immigrant, in membership and leadership. We must build leaders and militancy and rely only on ourselves and not politicians and other misleaders, like most clergy and trade union heads. Then we can engage in short term resistance and expect that victories will be temporary, without losing heart. We will count our successes by the growth of our forces for the long haul and their understanding and ability to lead. We must also build our international ties in the recognition that our

problems are fundamentally the same and our enemies more united against us than separated by their nationalities. It is heartening that this has begun to occur.

Footnotes

1. African Americans: From Sage to Modern Institutional Discrimination and Modern Racism, http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/54133_Chapter_5.pdf (accessed 5/5/15)
2. Ezra Klein, <http://www.vox.com/2015/4/28/8508125/baltimore-police-brutality> (accessed 4/29/15)
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5. Demain Bulwa, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/What-happens-to-police-officers-accused-of-murder-5840318.php> (accessed 5/5/15)
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7. Ali Abuminah, *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL, 2014, pp. 76-115
8. Ola Naguib, *Palestinian Authority Second Worst for Wealth Disparity*, 10/26/13 <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-24673789> (accessed 1/20/15)