

Separate but unequal in Palestine: The road to apartheid

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On the eve of the meeting intended to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians at Annapolis, Maryland, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced that Israel will build no new West Bank settlements, but will not “strangle” existing Israel settlements. This means that construction in the 149 existing Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank that are strangling Palestinians, including the settlements on our village’s land, will continue unchecked. Olmert’s cynical announcement underlines our fear that Israel, with US support, will insist on retaining most West Bank settlements in the upcoming negotiations, locking Palestinians into a “separate but unequal” position.

When United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s visited the Middle East a few weeks ago, people from our small village of Bil’in joined neighboring villages to send her a message. We protested peacefully against a West Bank highway near us that is reserved for Jewish Israeli settlers, and off-limits to Palestinians, though it was built on Palestinian land. Our banner read: “Condi, What would Rosa Parks do?”

We know that Dr. Rice experienced the bitter taste of discrimination growing up in the South during the US civil rights struggle. In Bil’in, we’ve drawn inspiration from the US civil rights movement as we’ve carried out a three year nonviolent resistance campaign against the discriminatory policies of Israel’s military occupation.

We share Dr. Rice’s admiration for the courage of Rosa Parks who was arrested in Alabama, Rice’s home state, for refusing to give her bus seat to a white man. As Palestinians we aren’t even allowed in buses on many roads in our own country, because 200 miles of the best West Bank roads are reserved for Israeli Jewish settlers. 1 The color of Palestinian license plates is different from the licenses of Israelis. Palestinian plates are not allowed on most of the highways crisscrossing the West Bank, many of which were built with US government funding. Palestinians have been banned for five years now from Highway 443 where we protested.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there are 561 physical obstacles and checkpoints inside the West Bank restricting Palestinian movement within the West Bank 2, in comparison with only eight checkpoints which separate the West Bank from Israel proper. Nearly all the obstacles and checkpoints are located along the West Bank roads reserved for Israelis. This makes getting to the hospital, school and work or visiting relatives painstakingly difficult or impossible for us. This fragmentation of the West Bank has devastated our economy.

For Palestinians, accepting a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on just 22% of our

historic homeland was already a dramatic compromise. But President Bush promised Israel in 2004 that in any negotiated agreement with the Palestinians Israel would retain its “already existing major population centers” in the West Bank.

However, all Israeli settlements are illegal under international law. By annexing to Israel strategically located clusters of settlements, or “settlement blocs”, and their highways which carve Palestinian areas into isolated enclaves, Israel will gain permanent control of our movement, borders, water, and cut us off from Jerusalem.

The Israeli organization Peace Now reported a few weeks ago that the population growth rate in the settlements is three times the growth rate within Israel.³ We’re experiencing such rapid settlement construction around Bil’in and throughout the West Bank that I can’t even find an accurate map of the West Bank for my son.

In 2001, Israeli developers began building settlement homes on land seized from Bil’in, calling them a neighborhood of the Modi’in Illit settlement bloc. Four years later, Israel’s segregation wall separated Bil’in from 50% of our agricultural land under the pretext of protecting this new settlement. In response, we held over 200 nonviolent protests together with Israeli and international supporters. Hundreds of us were injured and arrested. After our protests, Israel’s Supreme Court ruled that the wall’s route in Bil’in must be changed to return around half of our seized land. Though we celebrated this success, Israel continues to build on our land that wasn’t returned and plans to annex it as part of the Modi’in Illit settlement bloc. ⁴

Israel has already de facto annexed the 10.2% of the West Bank that lies between the Green Line and the segregation wall, including the major settlement blocs and 80% of Israel’s 450,000 settlers. The segregation wall, settlements and settlement roads carve Palestinian areas into isolated enclaves.

We pray that our children will not spend their lives under Israeli military occupation. We hope that the Annapolis meeting will bring our dreams of freedom closer to fulfillment. But we are concerned that if Israel is allowed to keep most of its settlements and the roads that connect them, then the existing system of “separate but unequal” will be cemented in place in a Palestinian state.

Mohammed Khatib is a leading member of Bilin’s Popular Committee Against the Wall and the secretary of its village council.

[1] [Forbidden roads: The discriminatory West Bank road regime](#), B’Tselem.

[2] [OCHA Closure Update: October 2007](#), The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

[3] [West Bank settlements ‘expanding’](#) BBC, 7 November 2007.

[4] [One Palestinian Village Struggles Against Israel’s Ever-Expanding “Settlements”](#), Alternet, 26 September 2007.

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