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The Shortest Distance Between Palestine and Ferguson *Under Occupation*

by JAIME OMAR YASSIN

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The superficially coincidental images coming from both Gaza and Ferguson this month have created some surprising and sudden currents of solidarity. Many have looked on with amazement, for example, as Gazans offer tips via twitter to those who have been involved in the uprising and faced the absurd and excessively militarized response to it by Ferguson police. And participants in “peaceful” vigils and more militant confrontations in Ferguson have invoked Gaza by now a dozens times.

Few have looked at images coming out of Ferguson and not been tempted to draw the same allusions between the 2/3 Black suburb policed by a nearly all-white police force, and Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. It would be difficult not to draw that comparison at the moment given the spectacle of the massive armory gifted to the FPD by the federal government in the name of stopping “terror”—which has so often been given a Palestinian face in the US—and the revelation that the former police chief of Ferguson studied “counter-terror” measures in Israel in 2011. Ironically, it seems Black Americans are now the target of anti-terror funding and training, which was ostensibly meant to target those from the Muslim and Arab world.

While there is nothing happening within the US anything like the now-cyclical Israeli slaughter of thousands of Gazans, the reality is that life for Black Americans in places like Ferguson does

not vary in much from blockaded Gaza, and West Bank Bantustans in off-attack times . The similarities are not just coincidental in terms of the timing of the events—they are in fact, concurrent and historical.

Ferguson is a majority Black, segregated community, run almost entirely by white people. Almost all of its political representatives, and all but 3 of it's 53 person police force, are white. Such areas, populated by the disenfranchised, are growing throughout the US, as the white and associated enfranchised classes move back to the cities and to ex-urbs or new white suburbs, leaving geographically isolated and service-poor communities behind. The result has been, as is on display in Ferguson, an easy to lock-down community full of people the mainstream has forgotten—policed by an authority trained from birth to distrust and marginalize Black people with the full backing of the Federal government. Unbelievably, the FAA declared a no-fly zone over Ferguson and FPD mounted roadblocks at its city limits as it began its peace-keeping operation of its own citizens—chillingly reminiscent of the media-blockade conducted during Cast Lead and during other Israeli operations.

While the struggle in Palestine is often painted in ideological, ethnic and religious terms, it too is becoming not so different than those in the US, wedded as much to economic concerns as white supremacist structures. As Haaretz recently reported, the larger settlements of the West Bank—which have grown astronomically since the signing of the Oslo Agreement with the Palestinian Authority—are now in the midst of a housing bubble that is outstripping prices in Tel Aviv and its suburbs. Young urban professionals, with no interest in ideology or perhaps even in Zionism, flock to these well-financed and subsidized cities, where the attendant express highways spirit them quickly back and forth from Tel Aviv. Israel's military industrial complex gives them security from the tenants of the land they've stolen.

As these suburbs, grow, perhaps, and as the twisted “peace process” between the compliant Palestinian Authority and Israel evolves, we may in decades to come see a Palestine—or what is left of it—not unlike the US's black underclass cities and towns. Perhaps it may yet become a broken and discontiguous economic-ethnic series of hamlets—segregated underemployed communities of service workers kept under lock and key by a less visible series of cages and walls, no less violent than military occupation. Given the current state of negotiations, with Israel shaping a Palestinian Authority take-over of the rubble of Gaza, perhaps one tiny wall separating these two territories will be lifted, and Gaza allowed to enjoy the slightly less onerous open-air prison system of the West Bank.

Perhaps then people will also wonder what the Palestinian's problem is. Why they can't keep out of trouble with the authorities. Why their men line the halls of the entity's prisons. Why they cannot simply learn to stop being racists and love their oppressor. Why they are rioting. This is, in fact, the reality that Israel is striving for in the West Bank, institutional apartheid that becomes so well-camouflaged and accepted over time that it begins to look like the US's honed version of it—an “unfortunate” remnant of the past that is always explainable, always the victim's fault, and is always in the midst of being fixed, with, not surprisingly, little success. Between the decimation of Gaza and the continued madcap pace of colonization in the West Bank and Jerusalem, they are closer than ever to this goal.

Which brings us to a final, and perhaps most alarming, similarity between Ferguson and Palestine. Both places nominally have a president who superficially represents them, from a similar ethnic and economic background, the product of a historic and unprecedented process. It was an event that overturned years of conventional wisdom that claimed the disenfranchised would never know representative state leaders.

The last dispiriting likeness is the betrayal of that hope—that leader who works for the very structure oppressing the people he seems to most represent, who is revealed to be only the latest trick for a white supremacist system of violence and dispossession that can superficially change, but will not budge. The leader that arms the enemy, kills for them, lies for them, and prevents racial and economic justice for his own ostensible people. For the people of Palestine, it is Abbas. For the people of Ferguson, Sanford, Oakland and other cities, this is Obama—whose bloodless and offensive commentary on the murder of Mike Brown shocked a nation of angry people perhaps as much as the FPD response did. They couldn't seem any more different superficially, of course, but more and more, we see they have the same white supremacist, capitalist boss.