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DECOLONIZING PALESTINIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY
De-development and Beyond

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Decolonizing Palestinian Political Economy

De-development and Beyond

Edited by

Mandy Turner

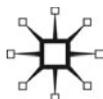
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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i> Sara Roy	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvi
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xviii

Introduction: Decolonizing the Study of the Political Economy of the Palestinian People <i>Mandy Turner and Omar Shweiki</i>	1
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Part I De-development Explored

1 The Economic Strategies of Occupation: Confining Development and Buying-off Peace <i>Sahar Taghdisi-Rad</i>	13
2 The Political Economy of Western Aid in the Occupied Palestinian Territory Since 1993 <i>Mandy Turner</i>	32
3 Hydro-Apartheid and Water Access in Israel-Palestine: Challenging the Myths of Cooperation and Scarcity <i>Clemens Messerschmid</i>	53
4 (En)gendering De-development in East Jerusalem: Thinking through the 'Everyday' <i>Nadera Shalhoub-Kerkovian and Rachel Busbridge</i>	77

Part II De-development Applied

5 Palestinian Refugees: From 'Spoilers' to Agents of Development <i>Ingrid Jaradat Gassner</i>	97
6 Impeded Development: The Political Economy of the Palestinian Arabs inside Israel <i>Mtanes Shehadeh and Raja Khalidi</i>	115

7	State-Directed 'Development' as a Tool for Dispossessing the Indigenous Palestinian Bedouin–Arabs in the Naqab <i>Ismael Abu-Saad</i>	138
8	Planning the Divide: Israel's 2020 Master Plan and its Impact on East Jerusalem <i>Rami Nasrallah</i>	158
Part III De-development Resisted		
9	Neoliberalism and the Contradictions of the Palestinian Authority's State-building Programme <i>Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour</i>	179
10	The Role of the Tunnel Economy in Redeveloping Gaza <i>Nicolas Pelham</i>	200
11	Before and Beyond Neoliberalism: The Political Economy of National Liberation, the PLO and ' <i>amal ijtima'i</i> ' <i>Omar Shweiki</i>	220
12	Learning the Lessons of Oslo: State-building and Freedoms in Palestine <i>Mushtaq H. Khan</i>	238
	<i>Index</i>	257

List of Illustrations

Figures

1.1	Pattern of convergence/divergence between Israeli and Palestinian real GDP per capita	24
2.1	OECD DAC ODA official disbursements, 1993–2012	35
2.2	All donors and multilateral aid agencies ODA disbursement, 1993–2012	36
2.3	Aid management structure in the occupied Palestinian territory	37
3.1	Per capita and absolute blue water consumption before and after the Nakba	55
3.2	Water allocations from shared West Bank mountain aquifers	57
3.3	Licensing systems – before and after Oslo-II	59
3.4	Domestic consumption figures for neighbouring Palestinian and Israeli settler communities in the Jordan Valley	60
3.5	Long-term annual rainfall in Jerusalem 1846/1847–2006/2007	61
3.6	Three slightly different periods at the same rainfall station (Jerusalem)	63
3.7	Climate change and water rights scenarios	64
3.8	Adaptation options in the water sector	69
7.1	Rates of drop-out in age cohort among Jews, Arabs and Naqab Bedouin, 1990–2012	150
7.2	Percentage of students from age cohort who pass the matriculation exam among Jews, Arabs and Naqab Bedouin, 1990–2012	151
7.3	Rate of matriculation certificates which meet minimal requirements for admission to university among Jews, Arabs and Naqab Bedouin, 2001–2010	152
12.1	In ‘larger freedom’ and an alternative Palestinian agenda	247

Map

3.1	Groundwater basins in Historic Palestine (Israel and the OPT)	65
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Tables

3.1	Comparative supply, consumption and availability figures	66
7.1	Population and socio-economic ranking of Bedouin government-planned towns and the Regional Council of Abu Basma in the Naqab	142

Foreword

The income men derive from producing things of slight consequence is of great consequence.

John Kenneth Galbraith*

It was the summer of 1985 – exactly 28 years ago – that I made my first research trip to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although, as a Harvard graduate student, I thought I was well prepared to carry out the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on American economic assistance to the Palestinians, I encountered a reality for which I was largely unprepared and about which I knew too little. My knowledge deficits were jarring and upsetting and I was determined to address them; I did so by immersing myself in the micro and macro reality of Palestinian life at the time, a journey that continues. It was during that first summer in the West Bank and Gaza that I encountered Israel's occupation and the ways in which it delimited peoples' lives, determining not what they could do but what they could not. Possibility was defined by denial and the degree to which it was imposed. Many things shocked me – the institutionalization and normalization of discrimination and the gross inequities between Arab and Jew – but none so forcefully as the powerlessness of people over their own lives, their almost complete lack of defence or recourse against accusation or transgression, and the unrelenting ambiguities with which they were forced to live each and every day.

I was there to research the US assistance programme – then a small, NGO-led programme of just several million dollars annually – asking whether economic development was possible under conditions of military occupation. My analysis demanded, by way of context, a thorough understanding of how Israeli policies impacted the Palestinian economy and the relationship between those two economies. I spent a good deal of time with Israeli government officials all of whom made one point clear almost immediately (some more explicitly than others): there would be no economic development in the Palestinian territories. There were two reasons for this I was told: the first (and relatively less important) was the need to eliminate any source of competition with the Israeli economy. The second and far more crucial reason was to preclude the establishment, in any form, of a Palestinian state. I have never forgotten what one highly placed official in the Ministry of Defense told me almost

30 years ago (and here I am paraphrasing): ‘Real economic development in the West Bank and Gaza could produce a viable economic infrastructure that in turn could provide the foundation for the establishment of a Palestinian state. This will never be allowed to happen.’

The policies imposed to thwart meaningful economic (and political) development (despite some periods of limited growth) compelled the concept of de-development, a process I defined as one that forestalls development by ‘depriving or ridding the economy of its capacity and potential for rational structural transformation [that is natural patterns of growth and development] and preventing the emergence of any self-correcting measures.’¹ De-development, furthermore, occurs when normal economic relations are impaired or abandoned, preventing any logical or rational arrangement of the economy or its constituent parts, diminishing productive capacity and precluding sustainable growth. This reality is directly and deeply tied to the political context and is acutely characteristic of Gaza’s economy at present, which has been disabled by years of closure and blockade. Over time, de-development represents nothing less than the denial of economic potential. This is fundamentally why, despite billions of dollars in aid since the beginning of the 1993 Oslo peace process, the Palestinian economy in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is failing.

There should be no doubt that Israel’s policies of preclusion have continued with great success since my interview with the Ministry of Defense official nearly three decades ago whose words were tragically prescient. More alarmingly these policies have grown extremely damaging and destructive of Palestinian society and economy not only in the occupied territories but, as this book further argues, wherever Palestinians live, including in Israel and beyond. Indeed, although Israeli policy always prioritized the acquisition of land over the exploitation of the economic potential contained within it, that potential was substantively exploited. Today, however, that potential is being systematically shattered. In this regard, de-development has arguably reached its logical conclusion with the current, increasingly distorted reconfiguration of economic activity where foreign aid (including humanitarian assistance) – combined with smuggling in the case of Gaza – rather than production is a principal source of economic sustenance and growth. This aid-dependent growth is unsustainable and, inarguably, unviable.

Some analysts have argued that a new approach to preclusion has been articulated in recent years, one that attempts to substitute an economic peace for a political settlement (an approach favoured by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu). A recent expression of this policy was

revealed at the World Economic Forum in Jordan in May 2013 with US Secretary of State John Kerry's economic plan calling for US\$4 billion in private investment in the West Bank economy over three years, which he termed 'a new model of development'.² Such investment, he argued, will create a climate conducive to restarting Israeli–Palestinian negotiations and 'provide the basis for sustainable peace.'³

Kerry's proposal, by design, does not address Palestinians' core concerns, among them freedom: ending the occupation and their subjugation, the reunification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and establishing some form of political and national sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, the US initiative does not confront the intransigence of the Netanyahu government, which is vehemently opposed to Palestinian statehood – or the disarray of the Palestinian Authority, which is incapable of advancing it. At its core, the US programme fails to return genuine control to Palestinians over their own lives and future; instead, this control remains with Israel. Hence, for this reason alone Kerry's programme, like the many that preceded it, will fail.

The policy of 'economic peace' is not really new as some observers have claimed but a repackaged formulation of those Israeli policies first articulated in the early years of occupation and implemented in different forms over the past, almost five decades. Those policies, like their current expressions, aimed to pacify and ultimately extinguish Palestinian political demands and aspirations through limited economic gains under a deepening occupation that continued to extract Palestinian resources (for example, land and water for widespread settlement expansion), denying Palestinians their political, economic, and human rights, and solidifying Israeli control. The first Palestinian uprising was a clear rejection of this approach. The subsequent Oslo agreements did nothing to expose or change this fundamental policy deception but, to the contrary, embraced it in a more sophisticated form. This is seen in projects such as industrial estates, infrastructural improvement, and institutional building – which promised and periodically delivered limited change and ephemeral periods of growth, but within a structural context that was decidedly unchanged and committed, as it always had been, to preventing meaningful economic development through increasingly oppressive Israeli control and restriction, as the chapters in this book make clear.

Hence, Kerry's claim that his economic programme is not meant to substitute for a political process is unpersuasive, to say the least, given a long history of economic policies that were designed to achieve just that, thereby concealing America's continued lack of resolve if not

outright obstruction, protecting Israel from any need to compromise politically or economically, and consigning Palestinians to more pernicious forms of dispossession and loss. In a recent statement, Netanyahu heightened the bar for Kerry by saying that achieving peace with the Palestinians would not 'eliminate the wild defamation of the state of the Jews', emphasizing that 'Israeli security was the critical piece of any potential agreement.'⁴ Israel's Deputy Defence Minister, Danny Danon, went even further, stating: 'Whether the US Secretary of State John Kerry has come up with a new peace initiative or not, there will never be an independent Palestinian state,'⁵ a sentiment echoed by Naftali Bennett, Israel's Economy Minister, when he said that the 'idea that a Palestinian state will be formed in the land of Israel has come to a dead end... Never in the annals of Israel have so many people expended so much energy on something so futile'.⁶

Netanyahu's recent appointment of Ron Dermer as Israel's ambassador to the US is yet another indication of official attitudes toward a two-state solution. According to the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, 'Dermer's positions on policy are far more extreme than Netanyahu's. European and American officials have expressed shock by his positions on the settlement issue, on peace talks with the Palestinians, and on the principle of an independent Palestinian state.'⁷ Dermer has stated that 'the principle of two states for two peoples is a childish solution to a complicated problem,' and, according to a US State Department diplomatic cable revealed by Wikileaks, Dermer is also convinced that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is not a viable partner for peace.⁸

It also should not be forgotten that the entrenchment of the occupation and the denial of Palestinian self-determination has long been facilitated by a weak, compliant and increasingly mismanaged and corrupt Palestinian Authority, and has rarely been challenged (and often actively supported) by the US, the European Union and key Arab states – the accepted and legitimate default position in the continued absence of a political settlement.

The constraints now facing the Palestinian people are formidable, among them: a fragmented geography characterized by the separation and isolation of Gaza from the West Bank and Israel; an internally cantonized and discontinuous West Bank; the continued expansion of Israeli settlements and their infrastructure, which further splinter and truncate Palestinian localities; an isolated East Jerusalem, which remains inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of Palestinians both inside and outside the occupied territories; no control over territorial borders; the existence of two internally opposed governing authorities,

each incapable of ending the occupation; the continued loss of crucial economic resources, particularly land, water and a skilled labour force; the virtual destruction of normal – let alone free – trade, especially in Gaza; diminishing quality of, and access to, education and healthcare services; deepening restrictions on the movement of people; and an unresolved and worsening refugee issue, especially in light of the Syrian crisis.

In this environment it is difficult to conceive of any meaningful two-state reality despite many official yet hollow pronouncements to the contrary. At the G8 Summit in Northern Ireland in June 2013, for example, the leaders of the leading eight industrialized countries issued a communiqué reaffirming their commitment to a two-state solution but failed to indicate how it should be realized. Shamefully, Israel's 46-year-long occupation was not mentioned.⁹

However, on 16 July 2013, in a move that shocked the Israeli government, the EU issued a 'binding directive to all 28 member states forbidding any funding, cooperation, awarding of scholarships, research funds or prizes to anyone residing in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem'.¹⁰ This means that any contract signed between an EU member state and Israel must include a clause 'stating that the settlements are not part of the State of Israel and therefore are not part of the agreement'.¹¹ The significance of this new directive is largely political rather than practical since it does not affect Israel's lucrative trade relations with the EU, although there is a strengthening demand for labelling products originating in the settlements. Yet, with this directive the EU is enforcing, in a real and practical manner, its longstanding position on the illegality of Israeli settlements under international law and the fact that it does not recognize Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights, and 'does not consider them to be part of Israel's territory, irrespective of their legal status under domestic Israeli law'.¹²

While the EU mandate is a long overdue step in the right direction, the situation remains adverse and is likely to become more so, particularly as the Israeli government continues to press forward with settlement expansion in the West Bank.¹³ Given this state of affairs, what can be done? The answer lies in the continued delegitimization of Israeli occupation and colonization, which the EU has clearly affirmed, and the articulation of a different vision that would allow both peoples to live peaceably with each other in a political arrangement to which they both agree, a theme that underlies this important collection of works.

The late Palestinian economist, Yusif Sayigh, argued long ago that economic development is an inherent right of Palestinians but it can never be a solution to long-term occupation. The only solution to occupation is liberation and with liberation comes actual possibility.¹⁴

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Notes

- * J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, New York, Houghton Miffler, 1998, p. 217.
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Mandy Turner and Omar Shweiki

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