

Why segregation is the single most important issue in Israel, and practical ways to confront it

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JEWISH

SETTLEMENT OF HARMOUN HANATSAVE NEAR THE ARAB NEIGHBOURHOOD OF RAS AL-AMUD IN JERUSALEM ON OCT. 30, 2012. (PHOTO: MAHFOUZ ABU TURK/APA IMAGES)

Segregation is a state whereby people are separated and isolated by race or ethnicity. When separation is the outcome of decades of systematic policies and practices, segregation can surely be considered involuntary. In Israel, segregation determines the Zionist class system. The question at the forefront of civil rights is how to rewrite Israel's racial space divisions as something other than a foregone conclusion.

The underlying premise that Israel is hyper-segregated does not require defense. Deniers of Israel's institutional and foundational hyper-segregation can consult a robust literature on the State's policies and practices whereby Haifa, [Akka](#), [Yaffa](#), [Ramla](#) and Lydd (as well as [Upper Nazareth](#) and [Carmiel](#)) have become what is known as 'mixed' (i.e., not pure) cities. 'Mixed' cities are those spaces in the State where the analysis of segregation gets down to the neighborhood level. Understanding the terms in which Israel's hyper-segregation is discussed is crucial in the way forward to a more egalitarian society.

There is an outcry every time the mainstream media reports on a case of overt Israeli spatial discrimination. This outcry paradoxically helps quell any potential discourse questioning the underlying logic of residential segregation, which is naturalized, and downplayed, as an unavoidable and desirable default. It is easier to talk about the crimes of displacement,

explicit racism, and unequal resource allocation than about the fact of residential separation itself. Moreover, there has been a greater historical resistance to Israel's segregated systems of justice, labor, education and even housing than to residential segregation per se. This raises the question of how well the civil rights project has fared by maintaining the positions it has towards residential hyper-segregation.

Various formal and informal policies in Israel are used to divide groups by place of residence, and to actively prevent the rise of racially mixed neighborhoods. Even when viewed at the most superficial, everyday economic level, it is apparent that the result is a systematic residential divide that devalues property in Palestinian areas, creates differential mortgage risks, and gives rise to parallel economies. This is how the Zionist class system is reproduced. This holds true even before weighing in such policy outcomes as the overcrowding of Palestinian areas due to the preferential treatment the Zionist class allows itself (access to land, financial incentives and easy access to building permits). One ramification of this is that it becomes difficult for Palestinian citizens of Israel to compete with Jewish Israelis and move to 'Jewish spaces' that have the higher investor ratings.

Speaking theoretically, corrective policies, financial incentives and reparations for historical wrongdoings might be implemented to adjust for gaps caused by the legacies of forced displacement, military rule, and property expropriations. To date, it has been an exclusive group of ‘Olim Hadashim’ – Jewish immigrants – who have received free housing bonuses and government freebies (sometimes including the lands and properties of displaced Palestinians). The continuance of hyper-segregation precludes any kind of egalitarian society. One problem is the perception of segregation as predetermined, or as necessarily desirable, so that corrective spatial policies become some pie in the sky insanity, rather than a technically feasible matter. After all, it has been technically feasible to implement spatial policies when these were to the exclusive advantage of the Zionist class. Once the right over space crystallizes as the focal point of civil rights, there will be a backlash, but the fear of violent reaction in response to the abolition of long-standing privileges is never an alibi for continued privilege. The practical fact to be focused on is that there are concrete actions that could potentially be utilized to enable large numbers of Palestinian citizens of Israel to move into the currently predominantly Jewish Spaces – if they so wished. For this to happen, though, Israeli segregation would have to be called out unambiguously.

It should be underlined that contesting default segregation and preaching assimilation, or even integration, are two different things. Anti-segregation is a basic civil rights principle, based on a direct correlation between segregation and power inequality. Assimilation, on the other hand, entails willingness on the part of the social majority to grant the minority some inclusion in state institutions as long as the minority consents to accept the reigning language, style, culture and norms. When placed under pressure, the ruling class may proffer discourses of assimilation or integration, permitting enough political participation and upward mobility for some sections of the minority, to preserve the class system itself. Integration requires an integrative act on the part of the social minority; it does not require an equal integrative act on the part of the social majority. Contrary to that, anti-segregation is a long term economic and political calculus, if not a civil rights principle. It is not about the racialized social minority desiring to be neighbors with the privileged social majority, let alone desiring to adopt the former's identity. It is about producing and discussing space on one's own terms, in the interests of building a more democratic society.

At work is a Zionist class system. A class system is a system in which social status is largely determined by the group into which a person is born. In other terms, the Zionist class permanently owns the means of institutional production in Israel. Segregation is its most important institutional tool,

because it divides knowledge, power and space and reproduces institutional haves (Zionists) and have-nots (non-Zionists). True, Jewish-Israelis who are not members of the Zionist class may also have unequal access to institutional power, despite the fact that they enjoy vast historical benefits and privilege. However, they can hide and camouflage their non-Zionism, whereas Palestinian citizens cannot, since they belong, through the accident of birth, to a Non-Zionist status.

Members of the Zionist class cannot be expected to perceive segregation, not only because class interests buttresses denial, but also because the Palestinian areas inside the State are often perceived as another body, inside another place. Since the Palestinian town is seen as located 'elsewhere,' it is not being segregated. This is not a vague state of denial but rather the operative logic of extreme racial population division. The Zionist class likes to believe that Israeli separation results from voluntary agreement or preference by Palestinian citizens. This is distortive; the real cause of segregation is ongoing formal and informal state policies and practices, from the foundational-constitutional level to military levels.

The Zionist class monopolizes the legitimate use of force (military and police), and uses it to perpetuate the class system. The monopoly of force is directed at concentrating those permanently without control over state

institutions within small peripheral spaces and keeping them distanced from public resources. Schools, work, health, transportation, businesses, cultural events and services are all determined by residential status. Whether the target population ‘acquiesces’ to segregation or not is irrelevant to the fact that segregation is an inherently unequal division of society, created and reinforced by the Zionist class through policies which include military displacement, exclusion and expropriation. The Palestinian ghetto — ‘a part of a city, especially a slum area, occupied by a minority group’— did not exist prior to the Zionist class system. The Palestinian ghetto came into existence only when Palestinians were forcibly turned into a minority, and when those remaining after the Nakba, the systematic displacement (ethnic cleansing) of 1948, were consistently relocated from the social center of Palestine to the social periphery of present day Israel. Israeli segregation is neither an absolutely repressive state apparatus nor completely an ideological apparatus, but hovers in between both of these by creating an ideological-material-space. The Zionist class uses segregation firstly to shield itself from the hazardous rays of the other’s knowledge.

In conceding that power relations in Israel are waged in terms of a class struggle between the permanent Zionist and Non-Zionist classes, it then becomes apparent that the fundamental aim of those who are not part of the

ruling class is to seize the means of institutional production, by effectively dismantling segregation and abolishing the Zionist class system.

To oppose the Zionist class system, the minority of Non-Zionists, presently at least a fifth of Israel's citizens, sometimes seeks ways to establish institutions independent of the state apparatus. This minority forms opposition parties; it wages alliances; and it organizes its own labor and educational organizations. But it generally refrains from confronting residential segregation as a focal issue. Palestinian groups outside Israel have also dealt ambivalently with divided residential space. The definitions and applicability of such legal terms as 'genocide,' 'crimes against humanity,' 'racist discrimination,' 'ethnic cleansing,' and 'apartheid' have become almost commonplace in international human rights forums, while the institution of residential segregation, the principal foundational institution of the Zionist class system, remains in the margins of the discourse. The dismissal of residential segregation as a core civil rights issue continues, despite the fact that segregation lends itself to a straightforward structural analysis, and despite the fact that it is theoretically reversible by policy directives.

The Zionist class generates two doctrines pertaining to residential space –“separate and not equal” (at the utmost right) and “separate but equal” (at

the liberal left). From the beginning, Palestinian and non-Zionist intellectuals were calling out institutional racial segregation, seeking international recognition of Israel's systematic labor, educational, and land discrimination. But residential anti-segregation per se was harder to tackle. Anxieties tend to surface among a growing middle class of Palestinian citizens whose immediate interests may be perceived as threatened by both the potential influx of Palestinian refugees, and the loss of the economic and cultural Palestinian enclave. However, focusing on the logic of these anxieties is misleading. The underlying reason for the lack of organized opposition to Israeli residential segregation is simply the lack of a space within which the non-Zionist class can build such organized opposition. The Zionist class, owning the means of institutional production, has so far managed to avert, block, and obstruct the development of efforts that could potentially be conducive to an anti-segregation movement on the ground. The Zionist class has even blocked legal marriages from taking place in Israel between Jewish citizens and Palestinian citizens.

While the two-state idea has reached its end-of-life phase, single-state 'technologies' are in perpetual pre-Alpha form, always in the analytic phase, never in actual development. Even the 'binational state' discourse is used, many times, to preempt robust anti-segregation discourses, by presenting autonomy as the alternative to a cultural annihilation that would assumedly

ensue in a democratic state with equal rights. Given that the Zionist class is doing everything in its power to distract the world's attention from civil rights, it makes sense to go ahead and begin field-testing — initially by testing the extent to which the Zionist class is willing and capable of clamping down on peaceful anti-segregation efforts.

Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine two main arguments that attack anti-segregation from a non-Zionist position. One is that Palestinian communities in Israel are 'better off' in the cultural enclave than they would be by integrating with the racist colonial occupier. The other discourse centers on a supposed powerlessness to abolish the Zionist class system through struggle from within. The latent assumption here is that the dust of segregation and inequality will settle of its own accord in a future post-colonialism and post-oppression era, or when external pressures trigger such fundamental changes to the system as the return of Palestinian refugees. However, these two discourses are each based on potentially fallacious sets of assumptions.

As stated, the first premise is false. Standing for anti-segregation does not necessarily make for a project of integration and assimilation. It is actually possible to build the strength of the ghetto and to maintain its cultural autonomy while, at the same time, disturbing 'pure' Jewish spaces, working

to regain property and land in currently restrictive 'pure' Jewish areas, and pushing for land reform. Unsettling the reliability and predictability of Israeli segregationism is a straightforward objective, achievable through such means as rights advocacy strategies, cooperative purchasing power strategies, civil action strategies and social strategies geared towards institutional reform.

The anti-segregation movement is situated within a set of basic ontological questions: What is this space? And what I am in it? An either/or dichotomy such as segregation/integration is alien to true anti-segregation efforts. The real question would be: How can the non-Zionist class use the segregation line on its own terms, as a means to real institutional power? How can collective non-Zionist techniques penetrate through the immense blockages of knowledge represented by the racial cartographies of kibbutzim, moshavim, gated communities, 'Zionist' beaches, so-called 'mixed' cities, housing projects protected by Jewish-only restrictive committees, and other extreme practices of demographic control?

The second false assumption is that resolving the refugee problem must precede an effective civil rights struggle. The evidence potentially points in the opposite direction as well, that the Zionist class system may not be able to monopolize institutional production absent reliable and consistent

residential geographies. The reliability of Israel's segregation model is multifold. It predictably produces a mutually reinforcing relationship between spatial separation and racial stereotyping. It allows the Zionist class to erect segregated neighborhood schools wherein that class dispenses its own entitlements and its own mythologies. As segregation becomes the only known spatial arrangement, it ensures that the vicious cycle continues between segregation and political suppression. Most importantly, it recreates a permanent Zionist class system which has an economic basis, perpetuating a condition wherein the non-Zionist class has no ability of self-determination. As a result, the non-Zionist class is categorically unable to attain the means to legitimately defend itself or to institute policy changes, even when such changes are in keeping with internationally recognized human rights principles, such as the return of the Palestinian refugees.

Any civil rights debate must proceed from these observable facts. There must not be attempts to portray that which is inherently abnormal as if it were normal. A democratic and inclusive non-Zionist political space must be expanded, with its objective being unity around civil rights (rather than discord because of religion, race, education, or politics). Segregation within Israel does not exist in a vacuum, but is the direct result of racial discrimination, forced population displacements, historical massacres,

present-absentee laws, and ongoing demographic engineering. Thus, in talking about segregation we are not talking about merely one wrong among many other and equal wrongs. Segregation is the foundational structural logic of the Zionist class system. As a necessary step towards a more egalitarian society, the non-Zionist class will seek to deconstruct 'The Jewish Space,' the definite unit of measurement from which 'The Jewish State' idea is derived.