

Israel's Glass Wall

By Oren Ben Dor

"Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State" by Jonathan Cook (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 222 pages. Hardback: UK £45, US \$85. Paperback: UK £14.99, US \$24.95

By now it is conventional wisdom that the iron and concrete wall that Israel has built in the occupied territories -- the wall that tears Palestinian villages apart -- is at the heart of the immorality of Israel's unilateralist policy of both drawing its borders and maintaining the security of its citizens. A key aspect of the argument seems to be that the border demarcated by this wall is in the wrong place. States need borders, so the argument implies, and it is the absolute right of a state to defend itself by sealing its borders provided they are determined justly so as not to cause harm.

Jonathan Cook's impressive and highly important book challenges that view. Cook, a British journalist who lives in the Israeli-Arab city of Nazareth, cleverly shifts the moral enquiry to what is happening in Israel itself. His gripping documentary and sharp analysis of Israel's public mentality shows that the conventional wisdom of talk about the "1967 border" is entirely dominated by Zionist discursive hegemony. He maintains that talking about a concrete wall leaves beyond moral enquiry -- that is, behind another, more primordial, "wall" -- the question of "what is Israel?".

Uncritically accepted wisdom, then, does not yet confront the specific challenges that the Jewish nature of the Israeli state poses concerning both the fate of its Arab citizens and its rejection of the right of return for the descendants of those who were ethnically cleansed in 1948. This failing cannot be attributed to Cook, who early states:

My general argument ... is that Israel is beginning a long, slow process of ethnic cleansing both of Palestinian non-citizens from parts of the occupied territories it has long coveted for its expanded Jewish state and of Palestinian citizens from inside its internationally recognised borders. (pp. xii–xiii)

By looking at what goes on inside Israel, Cook unearths the dark reality, and thus immorality, of what is entrenched by the conventional moral talk of a “two-state solution” or “the immorality of the iron and concrete wall”.

Cook redirects attention towards how virtually all Israeli Jews, secular and orthodox alike, and regardless of political persuasion, do everything to preserve some consensual discourse that enshrines the Jewishness of their state. “Their”, of course, refers to all potential Israeli citizens as of right -- all the Jewish people in the world. This Israeli Jews do by systematically fostering separation, an invisible “glass wall”, between themselves and the Arab non-Jewish citizens of Israel.

The metaphor of a glass wall signifies not just Israel’s separation of its Palestinian citizens from their Jewish counterparts, but also its success in persuading the world that a self-proclaimed “state of the Jews” (and not of all its citizens) nevertheless remains a democracy. “The glass wall,” Cook writes,

is designed to intimidate and silence its captive Palestinian population; but unlike the iron wall it conceals the nature of the subjugation in such a way that it is seen as necessary, even benevolent. By understanding the glass wall, we can know what really matters to Israel: not just the use of unrelenting force to guarantee its control of the region and its Palestinian inhabitants, but also the protection of its image as an island of enlightened democracy in the Middle East. (p. 5)

The metaphor is drawn from fact, the real glass barrier that was used during the Or Commission hearings that investigated the deaths of thirteen unarmed Palestinians (twelve Israeli Arabs, one Gazan) killed by Israeli police in October 2000 at the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada. Justice Theodor Or

demanded that a glass partition be built between the public gallery, where the Palestinian families sat, and the rest of the courtroom. It was a very Israeli solution ... the judges, inquiry officials and state witnesses were to be found on one side of the

wall and the families on the other. On the TV news and in newspaper photographs, however, it looked as if all the participants to the inquiry were sitting in the same room. The inquiry appeared to be treating all the parties equally when in reality its Arab participants were outsiders, excluded and largely ignored. (p. 6)

Cook relentlessly exposes the internal conspiracy of Israeli Jews to generate hostility against their Arab fellow citizens. Displays of commendable solidarity by Palestinian citizens of Israel with their brothers and sisters in the occupied territories are cleverly exploited to portray Israeli Arabs as a “second front”, a “fifth column”, an “enemy within”, and a “ticking demographic bomb” -- long staples of Israeli public discourse. Such images are deployed in order to justify policies that will keep Israeli Arabs separate, even though on the face of it they are equal citizens entitled to vote and protected by minority rights. Separation and discrimination against the Arab citizens of Israel -- keeping them behind an invisible wall -- are represented by Cook as vital for maintaining the Jewishness of the state. The idea that Israeli governments have seriously canvassed peace and security under a two-state arrangement ignores the deep Israeli craving for the legitimisation of future conditions to maintain security against the Arabisation of the would-be once-and-for-all “recognised” Jewish state.

Cook’s analysis enables the reader to witness the conspiracy to fortify this invisible wall. The conspiracy is shown to embrace leading Israeli politicians, the Supreme Court (including enquiries headed by its judges), the police, the Israeli media, leading academics, and above all, the conscripted consciousness of Israeli-Jewish citizens. The reader sees how the Jewish identity of the state imposes policies of apartheid that continuously nourish, and are nourished by, the separatist mentality of all those who can be considered Jewish by criteria of ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

All state functionaries are united in one mission: to promote and to preserve Jewish hegemony while maintaining a facade of democracy and equality. Cook’s metaphor of a glass wall brilliantly captures this self-concealing apartheid. The strategy of denial underlying state policy fortifies the wall while ensuring it remains a glass one. The remarkable achievement of this book is that it succeeds in making the glass wall visible. Cloaking devices

deployed by the Israeli state are ruthlessly exposed. Further, by making the wall visible, Cook succeeds in putting the very notion of the statehood of Israel under the spotlight of ethical debate.

The book is packed with examples of Israel's well-disguised separation policies. The collapse of the negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in 2000, together with Ariel Sharon's high-profile visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount, provoked the second Palestinian intifada. Cook reminds readers of the central role Israel's insincerity played in breaking the negotiations. However, his main aim is not to provide just another account of the failure of the so-called peace process. Rather, he shows how both the political crisis and the intifada were in fact quite useful tools in nourishing the segregation of Israeli Arabs in the consciousness of the Israeli-Jewish public.

Many pages are devoted to the cover-up, in the form of the exclusion and marginalisation of vital evidence, perpetrated by the Or Commission. Clear evidence of in-built racism in the Israeli armed forces and the police was given little or no weight in the commission's final report. Arguments of "internal security threats" shut the commissioners' hearts and minds with unbearable ease. During the al-Aqsa intifada, Israeli media commentators walked hand-in-hand with internal-security barons and sang the song of the "second front within" -- sung also by the then-prime minister, Ehud Barak. Cook tells us how Israeli statisticians constantly provide apocalyptic demographic prophecies for the Zionist dream. The Arab birth rate, they say, can be as big an enemy as real armies, and is the silent killer of Zionism. Desperate attempts are made to lure Jews to settle the "worryingly Arab" Galilee. Cook unearths evidence of a well-concealed birth-control programme in the Arab sector.

The glass wall also has implications for the distribution of funds, resources and rights. Israel's Arab sector is always under-resourced, denied the government investments its size would warrant. Israeli-Arab citizens are discriminated against in terms of immigration and naturalisation entitlements. Many benefits are denied to Arab citizens by being tied to military service, from which they are legally barred. Arab representatives in the Knesset have absolutely no chance of being part of a government coalition, and are thus denied the possibility of having any impact on Israel's key

policies. Consequently, the Arab vote does little but remind the Jewish public of the “enemy within”.

The glass wall ensures that many Arab citizens of Israel who have been internally displaced for “security reasons” cannot return to their villages. Israel’s rejection of the right of return of Palestinian refugees finds its conceptual root in, and connection to, the demographic threat. Thus, the sudden visibility of the glass wall highlights the deepest cause for solidarity among all Palestinians, namely, resistance against Zionism, the ideology that constitutes the origin and preservation of Palestinian suffering, on both sides of the Green Line.

Cook, in effect, shows that the concrete walls of the Jewish ghettos of old have now been transformed into the huge glass ghetto of the Jewish state. A state that was supposed to free Jews necessitates the mentality of constantly self-imposing a glass ghetto. The world is urged to love Israel for its “democratic nature” while turning a blind eye to a political structure that finds devious ways of putting Jewishness before democracy. Being a Jew, it seems, can be accepted as a more important source of moral commitment to Israel than equality of citizenship.

Tragically, the broad pattern that emerges from the book is that the suffering of the Israeli Arabs serves to entrench the invisibility of the glass wall. From a Zionist perspective, lack of security is not a “failure” to be deplored. Rather, insecurity enables the unleashing of all the corruption, lies and prejudices that make democratic chatter the very material -- glass -- from which the wall is constructed. Cook exposes the fallacy that Israel merely debates the question of democracy versus security like any other moderate polity. Insecurity, in fact, facilitates Israel’s putting of fundamental human rights behind a glass wall that protects the ghetto of the Jews. Failure of security is a lifeline for Zionism. Demonstrations and protests by Israeli-Arab citizens are a blessing in disguise for the Jewish state.

My sole, tiny, reservation about the book is that it does not state loudly and clearly the implications of what it so brilliantly documents. These implications are so important that in my view it should not be left to the wisdom of the reader to draw them. Within the book’s many pages of eye-opening documentary lurks a loud

anti-Zionist declaration: that Israel's very statehood nourishes an apartheid mentality which must now be challenged.

What Cook shows most forcefully is that any internal divisions in Israel, be they "Left-Right" or "religious-secular", are overridden by the imperative of maintaining a glass wall between Jews and non-Jews. The glass wall around some form of Jewish identity has to be preserved by constantly reinventing itself as a dynamic consensus. In the Israeli consciousness, internal divisions between Jews, when looked at through the glass wall, seem to be mere family disagreements. All internal divisions between Jews are put to one side by the call to unite against the non-Jewish threat. The banner of "no choice" (*ein brera* in Hebrew) unites everybody. Circumstances of violence and crisis are essential fuel for the creative impetus to preserve such unity.

In the last section of the book Cook hints, perhaps again not saying it explicitly enough, that the glass wall operates to diminish genuine political disagreement, and hence debate, in Israel. The glass wall both depoliticises the Arabs and unites the Jews. It creates the impression that there is real political debate in Israel between Left and Right and between Jews and Arabs, while in fact there never has been. The glass wall ensures that the rift between the right-wing leader of the Moledet Party, Benny Elon, and the left-wing author-cum-humanist-messiah, David Grossman, is more apparent than real. Unzip the mask of Grossman and you reveal Elon. Both unite behind the assertions of "no choice", "security" and "separation". With right-wing politicians there is at least less pretence -- you know where you stand. But in the case of Grossman and all his Zionist-Left followers, their lip service to universal human rights makes their own glass wall particularly misleading and nauseating. While right-wing politicians toy explicitly with "transfer" -- the forcible expulsion of Israel's Arab citizens -- the Zionist Left would not feel uncomfortable with mildly coaxing the "voluntary" removal of Arabs once two states are established.

The glass wall around the Jewishness of the state has been built in fear of one central proposition, which can now, as a result of brave books like this, be reasserted in a clear ethical voice: Israel has no right to exist as a Jewish state. More precisely, Israel has no right to occupy, to expel and to discriminate. It has no right to conceal its oppressive apartheid behind a facade of democracy. In

accepting the mantra of Israel's moral right to exist, the whole world becomes party to the crimes that are constantly carried out by the Jewish state. The cleaner the glass wall, the dirtier and more degraded are all those who maintain it. The silencing effect of the glass wall is a source of violence in historic Palestine. Israeli Jews should note that they will be unable to profit from violence for ever as victory is impossible over those who, because of silencing and oppression, have nothing to lose.

This book is an important nail in the coffin in the myth of a Jewish and democratic state. In order to achieve peace and justice in Israel/Palestine, different thinking is urgently needed. In apartheid South Africa, racism was visible. In Israel, the state has so far managed to deceive the whole world by the apartheid glass wall that maintains its statehood. This book helps to expose a wall that nobody wants to see. It is an important contribution to the eventual shattering of this glass wall using the only hammer we have at our disposal: our humanity.

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