

# HOLDING THE GREEN LINE: ISRAELI ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM

by Les Levidow

A specter is haunting Israel — the specter of the *intifada* continuing to spread beyond the limits of the Occupied Territories. A 'Green Line' notionally separates Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel from Jordanian passport holders in the West Bank and the non-citizens of the Gaza Strip. However, Zionist oppression has hardly respected this line, and neither have Palestinian protests.

When Israeli politicians disagree on strategic responses to the *intifada*, they are responding to widespread fears that it will destabilize acceptance of the Zionist state by Palestinian-Arab citizens inside the Green Line, whom Israel relegates to second-class status. This threat to Israeli national identity also informs the diverse strategic responses by Palestinian-Arab political leaders there, most of whom seek to hold the Green Line. Although Palestinian Arabs comprise only 18% of the Israeli citizenry, their disruptive potential can be seen from their economic role in performing the construction and service jobs shunned by most Israelis, though formerly done by many Oriental Jews.

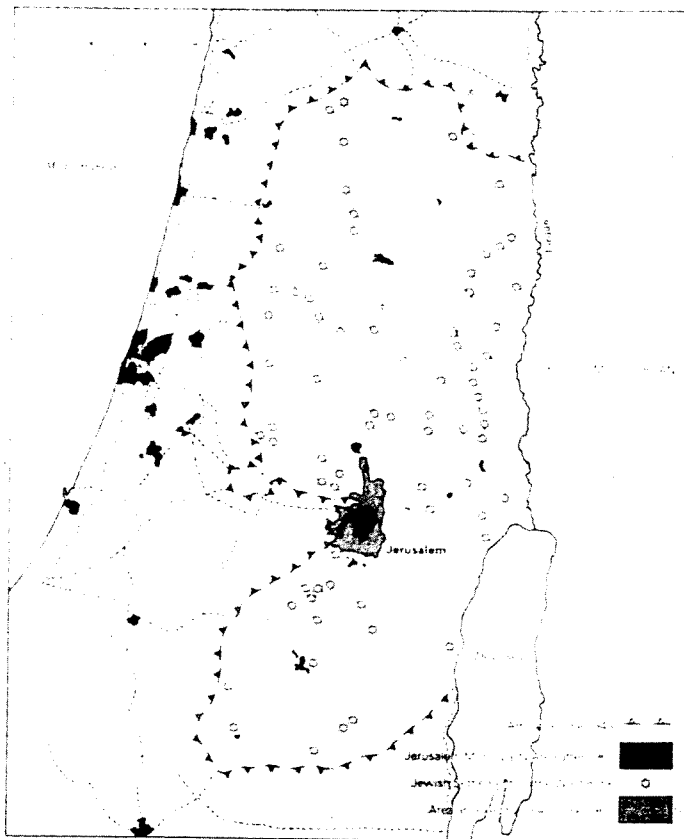
The 'Green Line' took its name from the generic map-color of military armistice lines, but the color can be seen to have an ecological meaning as well. The border mediates a relentless exploitation of land and water, even their potential exhaustion, by an Israeli state determined to usurp these resources from the Palestinian population on both sides of the Green Line. The Israeli government's great resistance to Palestinian demands derives partly from its growing economic reliance upon this systematic theft, an ecological imperialism intended to subordinate or even strangle Arab agriculture.

Through the course of the *intifada*, Israeli oppression of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories has become well known, but its counterpart within Israel is less well known. Since the State of Israel was founded in 1948, its Palestinian-Arab citizens too have had their land confiscated, their water sources diverted and their houses blown up. They have also faced the punishment of 'administrative detention', without trial, for suspicion of political opposition.

The response from Palestinian-Arab citizens within Israel has included annual general strikes in commemoration of March 30, 1976, when the Israeli police and army shot dead several of them who were protesting confiscation of their farmland. The period around Land Day 1989, the second one since the *intifada* started, brought to a head a set of tensions around both economic exploitation and national identity.

## Land Day 1989

On Land Day in East Jerusalem, which Israel annexed after the 1967 Six-Day War, youths raised the Palestinian flag and blocked roads, while schoolgirls erupted into frequent demonstrations chanting "PLO, PLO" in the direct view of soldiers who predictably responded with plastic bullets. Even within Israel's 1948 borders (the Green Line), young Palestinian-Arab citizens in several places displayed the flag, threw petrol bombs at police cars, and cut water pipes to Jewish settlements. An Israeli journalist quoted such youths as saying that they saw little difference in treatment by the Israeli authorities on their side of the Green Line. That is, they saw their Israeli citizenship as no protection from the sort of oppression inflicted upon Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.



*The Occupied West Bank, 1986*

Following clashes with police in Nazareth on Land Day 1988, local leaders decided to move the 1989 Galilee protests out of the city and into villages to the north, with a march from Sakhnin to Deir Hana. As Sakhnin was the site of the 1976 killings being commemorated, certainly this decision had a strong symbolic rationale. Yet the move can also be seen as a pre-emptive move by the Israeli Communist Party (Rakah), the leading electoral force among Palestinian-Arab citizens within Israel: Rakah sought to limit any public confrontation, particularly around display of the Palestinian flag.

Not only is such display illegal, but it challenges Rakah's policy of displaying the *Israeli* flag — and even singing "Hatikvah," the Zionist national anthem. The conflict arises from the party's insistence that Palestinian-Arab citizens within Israel already have a country, Israel. According to Nazareth lawyer Aziz Shehadeh, Rakah tries to stop youths from raising the Palestinian flag as "part of its deal with the Establishment, to gain legitimation in Jewish society." As put more bluntly by

considers the PLO to represent them. They displayed the flag while chanting "This land is Arab land; Israel get out." Far more than a matter of defying Israeli law and defending land rights, such display questioned the Israeli national identity of those who flaunt it.

It is true that Land Day demonstrators more generally shouted, "We want the same rights as Israeli Jews," and "The *intifada* will continue until winning a Palestinian state." Most Palestinian—Arab politicians within Israel portray this latter slogan simply as solidarity with Palestinians of the Occupied Territories. Yet, coming in response to the insatiable Zionist grab for land and water, the wider forms of revolt suggest a potential challenge to the Israeli state itself. That prospect has been broached, in almost comically alarmist terms, by Israeli newspapers which carried such headlines as "Intifada in Haifa" (*Ma'ariv*) or which claimed that the PLO "instructed the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories to drag the Israeli Arabs into the uprising" (*Yediot Achronot* 27 March 1989).



Titus Kramer

*Underground intifada activists spreading leaflets of the united leadership.*

Ali Jedda, of the Alternative Information Centre (Jerusalem), no police were needed at Deir Hana because "Rakah were the border police." His comparison refers, of course, less to physical repression than to an ideological policing of Israeli versus Palestinian national identity.

Shortly before Land Day, many politicians warned demonstrators against displaying the Palestinian flag. "We will not tolerate attempts from any group to incite violence. We have said that there will be no illegal slogans or signs. Anyone acting to the contrary will be stopped", said Abdel Wahab Darousha, Knesset Member for the Arab Democratic Party (*Jerusalem Post* March 29, 1989). Blaming demonstrators in advance for any Israeli retaliation, he assured Israeli Jews that Land Day "is not a day against the state."

As it happened, the policing failed. The flag was carried briefly by the contingent from Ibna al-Balad (Sons of the Village), the only Palestinian-Arab group within Israel who

### Threat to Israeli survival?

A similar conspiratorial logic had guided the government in 1988 in closing down two Arab-language newspapers, even though their contents were regularly cleared by the official government censors. Both papers were circulating news from the Occupied Territories among Palestinians within the Green Line. Most extraordinary was the official rationale for the closures. The newspaper produced by Ibna al-Balad, *Al-Raya*, was accused of being a front for the PFLP; Jews and Arabs producing the other banned paper, *Tariq al-Sharara*, were arrested for supposed membership in the DFLP and some editors given long prison sentences. In the dominant Zionist demonology, both these sections of the PLO epitomize the bloodthirsty 'terrorist' who wants only to infiltrate Israel to kill Jews. By using such accusations to close the two newspapers operating inside the Green Line, the authorities attributed

survival threatened by the very presence of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories or even within the Green Line. Hence the rise of the 'Homeland' (*Ze'evi Party*) openly proposing wholesale 'transfer' — a euphemism for mass expulsions. While justifying their proposals in terms which strike an observer as paranoid, their designs on *Eretz Israel* (Greater Israel) simply extend the imperialist process that founded the State of Israel and that has guided its expropriation of resources since then. Indeed, when Zionist politicians resist all Palestinian demands as a threat to Israel's survival, a grain of truth lies in the term survival, considered in terms of ecological imperialism.

### Making the Desert Bloom?

Put in statistical terms, it has been estimated that at least one-third of Israel's water supply is pumped from the West Bank. Israeli control of the West Bank's water even predates the 1967 Six-Day War. Long before then, Israel pumped water along the 1949 armistice line by using deep-drilled artesian wells. "After the West Bank was conquered by guns, the looting became much simpler" (ICCP, 1989). That is, Israel dug wells much deeper than the Palestinians' existing wells, which then became exhausted and/or more salty.

Within 1948 Israel (the Green Line), the government had already regulated new well-drilling through licenses, which were usually denied to Palestinians. After 1967 this control was extended to the Occupied Territories. The state imposed fines on anyone who drilled more than a fixed quota of water and expropriated wells belonging to 'absentee landlords' — Palestinians who fled the invading Israeli army even if they subsequently attempted to return. According to Israeli government plans, by 1990 the West Bank's projected 100,000 Israeli settlers would have access to nearly as much water as the area's one million Palestinians (though so far the number of settlers has fallen far short of that figure). In 1982 the West Bank's entire hydrological system was integrated into the Israeli national water company Mekorot. A suppressed report, prepared a few years ago, saw this integration of water systems as an obstacle to Palestinian independence: "... to the extent that the basic public water services in the Occupied Territories have been interwoven with, and made dependent on, Israel's own public water services, the former eventually will find it difficult to manage independently such essential services as water distribution for domestic, municipal, agricultural and industrial uses. It may thus become practically and politically impossible to sever the water administration of the Occupied Territories from those of Israel" (quoted in ICCP, 1989).

Israel further undermines Palestinian agriculture by subsidizing its own agricultural exports to the Occupied Territories and restricting other countries' exports. As a result, the Territories become a literally captive market: for example, Palestinians there can buy Israeli milk and eggs more cheaply than those produced locally. Subsidies also maintain three-quarters of the Jewish settlers in the West Bank as commuters to jobs in Israel — not even as subsidized farmers using the land expropriated from the Palestinians. As Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin declared in 1985, there will be "no permits given for expanding agriculture or industry that may compete with the State of Israel."

Mai Masri and Jean Chamoun



*War Generation: Beirut*

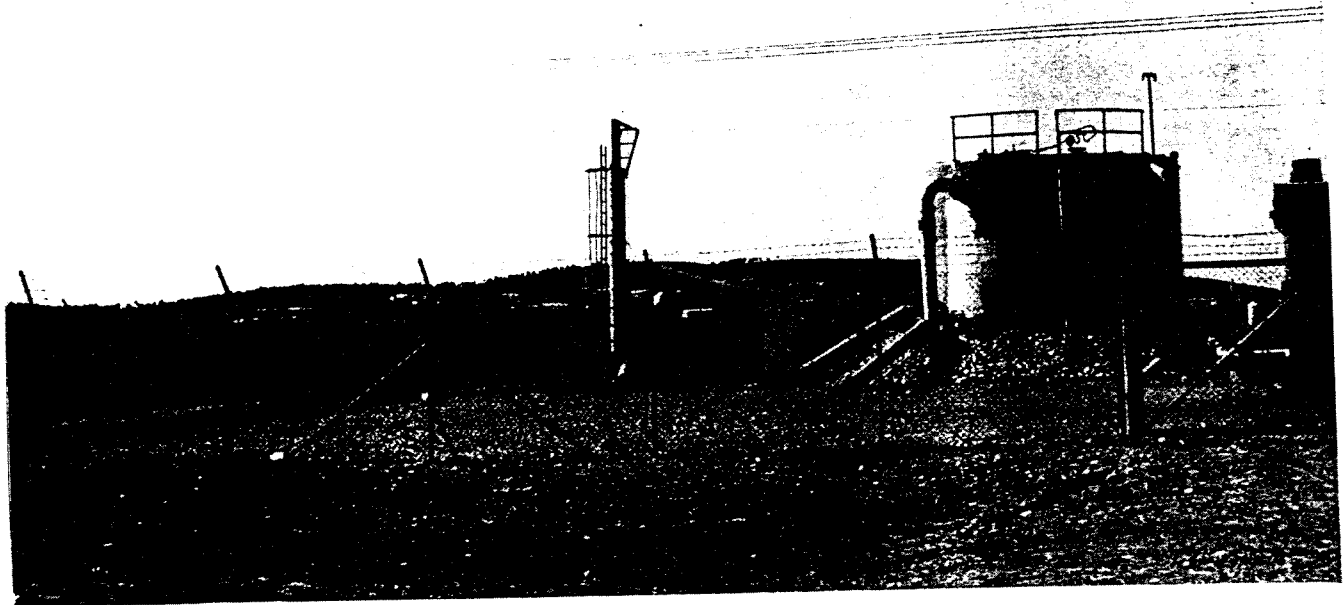
protests there to an external plot, aimed at destroying Israel.

While Zionism thrives on such conspiratorial paranoia, it is not mere paranoia for Israel to perceive a threat to its stability from the *intifada*, given the country's dependence upon expropriated land and water. The Palestinian threat has given rise to two strategic responses: indirect versus direct control. This strategic issue within Zionism parallels a similar one faced by all modern imperial powers, particularly by 19th-century Britain.

Around the time of Land Day 1989, Vice-Premier Shimon Peres expressed willingness to consider some conditional concession of 'land for peace,' in order to resolve the conflict before it further arouses nationalist aspirations among Israel's Arab population. In his view, it is better to get some puppet regime to police the Palestinians for Israel, which of course "does not wish to rule another people" (*Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 1989). After the demise of the 'Jordanian option,' the proposed elections for the Occupied Territories seemed to offer a variant of the same basic strategy.

Foreign Minister Moshe Ahrens took a different strategic view: that any concessions would encourage Palestinian national aspirations and lead to demands for yet more concessions. If Israel were to recognize the PLO, warned Ahrens, the PLO could "impose itself upon the Palestinians in the Territories, subjugate the Palestinians who are citizens of Israel and destabilize Jordan" (*Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 1989).

A more extreme version of Ahrens' logic sees Israel's



*Pumping station carries water from a predominantly Bedouin area of Israel to a Jewish settlement above on the hill.*

If we take into account all Israeli restrictions imposed on formerly Arab land, then by 1987 the extent of land expropriation had exceeded 40% of the Gaza Strip and 50% of the West Bank, including half the Jordan Valley farmland. Not only have the Palestinians suffered reduced access to land and water since 1967, but they have faced punitive measures since the *intifada*: further Israeli restrictions on crop exports, irrigation and new enterprises; higher taxes and fines; curfews even in rural areas, etc. Many have abandoned agriculture for low-wage jobs in Israel. For all the above reasons, at least 10% of the West Bank's farmland has been lost to agriculture since 1967 (ICCP).

As economist Hisham Awartani has argued, the Territories' economy has been "subordinated to that of Israel in a model of dependency that is much worse than typical models commonly reviewed in economic literature." Israeli policy aims at "undermining independent economic development to pre-empt the viability of a future Palestinian state," as well as "drawing surplus cheap Palestinian labor into the Israeli labor market." Having once made the desert bloom, Palestinians find their agriculture strangled by ecological imperialism.

Since long before the *intifada*, one Palestinian response has been the 'unauthorized' planting of olive trees. This can have only symbolic effects in a situation where the Israeli Army regularly blows up Palestinians' houses, obstructs access to their fields, burns their crops and uproots trees. On several occasions it has justified such uprooting by claiming that orchards were being used as hiding places for throwing petrol bombs at Israeli

Army vehicles (Ashkar, 1989). That pretext exemplifies the paranoid logic that regards the Palestinian agriculture, and the Palestinian presence itself, as a security threat.

Land expropriation has proceeded as well inside the Green Line: since the 1948 War of Independence, Israel has taken away roughly 80% of Arab land, including much of the most fertile land. As in the Occupied Territories, Arab farmers inside the Green Line face severe restrictions on well-drilling. These policies have blocked the expansion of Arab villages, during a period when the Palestinian-Arab citizenry within Israel has increased roughly five-fold to 750,000. In the case of Sakhniin, site of the 1976 massacre commemorated on Land Day, most local people were once farmers but now commute to city jobs as wage-laborers.

According to Mansour Kardosh, of the Nazareth-based Human Rights Association, many second-generation Palestinian-Arab citizens within Israel already earn more money than they could earn from agriculture, yet they have "absorbed their parents' dream of returning to the land." Even those without such aspirations feel strongly that the Israeli government should compensate the farmers for the true commercial value of the land already expropriated, allow more housebuilding, irrigation, etc. And there remains the continual threat of further expropriations in the name of 'nature reserves' or military use.

Some observers suggest that the *intifada* has led the Israeli government to hold back on further anti-Arab measures inside the Green Line, for fear that the revolt would spread to Palestin-

ian-Arab citizens there. This may have lent some credibility to the attempt by the Palestinian-Arab parties there to restrict the struggle to one for democratic rights within the Zionist state. Yet many openly doubt that the struggle can or should respect such boundaries.

Ali Jemma criticizes those politicians who promote the illusion that Palestinian-Arab citizens within Israel can achieve full citizenship rights there. "Many of us are coming to understand that the problem is the nature of the Israeli state — not just the occupation." For him, as for many Ibna al-Balad supporters, only the collapse of that state can overcome the Palestinians' oppression on both sides of the Green Line. Indeed, given the engineered economic underdevelopment of the Occupied Territories, a two-state solution may create a Palestinian bantustan, while reinforcing the second-class status of Palestinian-Arab citizens within Israel.

When they express solidarity with the *intifada*, their actions tend to merge with demands on their own behalf, and this link carries the potential for extending Palestinian national aspirations across the Green Line. The two-state solution, currently promoted by the PLO leadership, may falter not just because of Israeli intransigence but also because of that extended revolt. Will the Zionist counter-insurgency, along with 'soft policing' by some Arab politicians within Israel, succeed in holding the Green Line? Or will Zionist ecological imperialism provoke a response that destabilizes the Israeli state itself?

## References

- ICCP (1989) *Land and Water*. Prepared by Iolandad Jaquemet and Stephane Jaquemet for the International Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine. Available from ICCP, PO Box 2100, 1121 Geneva 2, Switzerland.
- Ahmad Ashkar (1989) "Agriculture and the Intifada," typescript dated 9 January, distributed by the Human Rights Association, P.O.B. 215, Nazareth.
- Awartani, H. (1989) "The Territories' economic collapse — more than intifada at work." *Jerusalem Post* 29 March.

## Author's Notes

When quotations from Palestinian Arabs are not attributed to any published source, they are taken from interviews conducted by the author in spring 1989.

I would like to thank Uri Davis, and the staff of the Damascus-based magazine *Democratic Palestine*, for their helpful comments towards improving this article, though the final version remains my responsibility alone.

The author is a Jewish unAmerican who has signed the 'Return' petition, which opposes the Israeli Law of Return and supports the Palestinian right of return. He currently works as a researcher in the Technology Faculty, Open University, Milton Keynes, and as an editor at Free Association Books, London.



*Deir Hanna, Land Day, March 30, 1989*