

# **Palestine-Israel and the Neoliberal Ideal: Comments**

*Dwight Haase*

When I was asked to review this piece for AJISS, I was excited to see scholarly work relating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to neoliberalism. Reading the paper only heightened my enthusiasm; by invoking neoliberalism the author adds new insights into the nature of this conflict and why it persists.

More often than not, we try to understand this conflict in terms of nationalism or religion. Thus framing it as a clash of intractable ideologies, which allows us to blame it on some uncompromising Islamic extremists and Zionist settlers, has become convenient – although neither is representative of the majority of either the Palestinians or the Israelis.

Given this approach, we in the West have a tendency to look upon Israelis and/or Palestinians as the cause of their own problem. We scratch our heads when they do not come to an agreement, throw up our hands when the next president's peace plan fails, and figure that those people are just that way – always have been and always will be. Not only is this viewpoint intellectually weak, but it is politically damaging because it ignores the true causes of the conflict and justifies indifference to violations of human rights.

If neoliberalism is a driving force in the conflict today, we can understand that we in the West – the ones who elect the governments that promote neoliberalism worldwide – all are part of this conflict, part of the problem, instead of merely neutral bystanders. In fact, nowhere in the world is this more true than in Israel and Palestine, where the US government has been spending over \$3 billion each year to support Israel, as well as about \$5 billion in the West Bank and Gaza for the last twenty years. If the con-

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flict persists after decades of such funding, it is only rational to ask if maybe we are not solving the problem, but rather perpetuating the problem.

This is not to deny the influence of religion or nationalism. But those motives play out within a broader global context of neoliberalism in which people's daily lives may feel increasingly precarious. That some people express their frustrations and anxieties through religious or nationalist narratives is hardly surprising.

If it is true that neoliberalism is the broader political landscape upon which religious and nationalist forces play out, then this raises new questions about how these phenomena relate to each other. The common approach might be to think of neoliberalism, nationalism, and religion as separate ideologies. But if this were the case, they would be mostly incongruous, and there does not appear to be much to be said about how they relate to each other. But as David Harvey notes in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), we need to think of neoliberalism not only as an ideology, but also as an agenda. As such, its proponents can employ rhetoric and promote policies that garner the support of certain religious groups and nationalists while still promoting an overall neoliberal agenda.

In this sense, there is no incongruence among these phenomena, but rather symbiosis – a symbiosis that we are watching right now in the US with a president who is aggressively pushing neoliberal policies while at the same time rallying anti-immigrant sentiment and positioning himself as the unlikely champion of evangelical values.

At this point, it might feel like I am digressing into domestic politics while I should be talking about Palestine and Israel. But this brings me back to my earlier point: We really cannot talk about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict without including American politics. And awareness of that fact might beget some sense of responsibility among Americans, as well as some reflection on how we might change our own polity before we continue asking Palestinians and Israelis to change theirs.