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Black-Palestinian Solidarity: Towards an Intersectionality of Struggles

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Introduction

In October of 2015, more than 60 African American and Palestinian intellectuals and activists launched the “Black Palestinian Solidarity” statement of solidarity with each’s respective struggle, **declaring in a video** “when I see them, I see us”. The Black Palestinian Solidarity movement was born in the context of the July-August 2014 Israeli war on Gaza and the murder of Eric Garner in New York City on July

the 16th 2014 and of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August the 9th 2014, two of the killings largely credited for launching the Black Lives Matter movement. The simultaneity of both events sparked a number of statements of solidarity from both Palestinians and Black Americans to one another. We saw this when Palestinians from the West Bank **tweeted tear gas advice to protesters in Ferguson** under the hashtag “**#Palestine2Ferguson**” and when over 1,100 Black activists, artists, scholars, students and organizations signed the “**2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine**” declaring their “reaffirmed solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and commitment to the liberation of Palestine’s land and people”. In other words, the Black Lives Matter movement launched, or rather relaunched, a discussion of the potentials of solidarity based on resistance to a politics of oppression. But in order to understand the politics of Black-Palestinian Solidarity, it is important to uncover the conditions that have allowed such solidarity to take place in the first place.

The aim of this piece, therefore, is twofold: to trace the historical context of both struggles and to expose the shared components of their respective struggles in order to conclude on their relation within a politics of transnational solidarity framework today.

Tracing Geographies of Liberation in a Historical Context

Paul Gilroy once suggested that a component of African-American identity can be sourced back to what he called the ‘Black Atlantic’ which **he defined** as a “specifically modern cultural-political formation that was induced by the experience and inheritance of the African slave trade and

the plantation system in the Americas, and which transcends both the nation state and ethnicity” (Kaisary, 2014). The Black Atlantic consciousness, **he argues**, could “produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (Barson, 2009). This already gives us one window into the theoretical foundation for a Black-Palestinian joint struggle for equality: transnationalism.

This transnationalism is present in both oppressive and, consequently, resistant forms. The politics of oppression take a transnational form through the framework, and under the logic, of international neoliberal capitalism as corporations and governments work hand in hand to subdue racialized populations. As African-American journalist Kristian Davis Bailey **wrote for Ebony.com** shortly after visiting the West Bank, “our governments literally share resources and tactics with each other that directly harm our respective communities”, referring to the post 9/11 exchange between the Israeli and US governments **in which** “U.S. police are learning from Israel’s military justice system, which controls Palestinians through paramilitary and counterinsurgency tactics”. Consequently, the internationalization of methods of oppression have given birth to the internationalization of methods of resistance. And complimenting the transnationalism of the Black Atlantic is the globalization of the Palestinian struggle as a struggle against the forces of Western settler colonialism. As Israeli historian Ilan Pappé **wrote**, the fact that Zionism could be academically and intellectually assigned the label of settler colonialism has “enabled activists to better see the resemblance between the case of Israel and Palestine with that of South Africa, and to equate the fate of the Palestinians with that of the Native Americans”. Indeed upon visiting the West Bank, Black Lives Matter co-founder

Patrisse Cullors **said**: “This is an apartheid state. We can’t deny that and if we do deny it we are a part of the Zionist violence”.

This phenomenon was described by well-known African-American activist and scholar Angela Davis as practicing an ‘**intersectionality of struggles**’ in her latest book “**Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement**” released in January 2016. In the book, Davis seeks to explain why there is what she called “a political kinship” between African-Americans and Palestinians. This echoes Palestinian-American author and activist Susan Abulhawa’s **declaration** that “the Palestinian struggle is a black struggle” and that Africans and African-Americans were “natural allies” of the Palestinian struggle because they “know, viscerally, what it means to be regarded as vermin by most of the world” (Abulhawa, 2013). This, Davis argues, is why ‘insisting on the connections between struggles and racism in the US and struggles against the Israeli repression of Palestinians is a feminist process’ – in other words, worthy of defending. Such a view was relatively common among African American intellectuals, even as early back as the 1970s and before. In 1972 for example, well-known African American intellectual and author James Baldwin explained in an essay entitled “**take me to the water**” his reasons for not settling in Israel during his exile: “and if I had fled, to Israel, a state created for the purpose of protecting Western interests, I would have been in a yet tighter bind: on which side of Jerusalem would I have decided to live?”. This suggests that some African-American intellectuals were aware of the links between Zionism and Western Settler Colonialism as early as the 1970s or prior.

The process of institutionalized racism and dehumanization against African Americans in the USA and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine has been extensively documented and has helped facilitate a belief in a common struggle against oppression. To give one example for each, we will focus on mass incarceration of (mostly young) black men in the US and the mass incarceration of Palestinians in Israel/Palestine. In her 2010 book “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness”, Michelle Alexander **detailed** how “many of the gains of the civil rights movement have been undermined by the mass incarceration of black Americans in the war on drugs”. Effectively, she **demonstrated** that “although Jim Crow laws are now off the books, millions of blacks arrested for minor crimes remain marginalized and disfranchised, trapped by a criminal justice system that has forever branded them as felons and denied them basic rights and opportunities that would allow them to become productive, law-abiding citizens”. When one realizes that “today there are more African-Americans under correctional control — in prison or jail, on probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began” it seems clear that institutionalized racism is a reality in the USA. This study **proved that** “racial targeting was not just the outcome of this project [of mass incarceration] but integral to its design”. Indeed, in April of 2016, one of Richard Nixon’s top advisors, John Ehrlichman, **revealed** that arresting black people (and anti-war activists) was the whole point of the so-called war on drugs: “We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities”.

As for the institutionalized discrimination against Palestinians in Israel/Palestine, the evidence is quite clear. In 'Apartheid Israel: The politics of an analogy' released in 2015, twenty scholars of Africa and its diaspora reflected on whether the Apartheid South Africa/Israel analogy held water and the conclusion of every scholar was a resounding yes. "The parallels are unmistakable" wrote Jean Soske and Sean Jacobs, the book's editors. "Apartheid South Africa and Israel both originated through a process of conquest and settlement justified largely on the grounds of religion and ethnic nationalism. Both pursued a legalized, large-scale program of displacing the earlier inhabitants from their land. Both instituted a variety of discriminatory laws based on racial or ethnic grounds" adding that "in South Africa itself, the comparison is so widely accepted that it is generally uncontroversial". Indeed, if there's anything that the book tried to determine, it was whether Israel's version of apartheid was 'worse' than pre-1994 South Africa's. In a review of that book, Ahmed Kathrada, who was himself a former Robben Island political prisoner alongside Nelson Mandela, wrote that "a South African who is not white does not need more than one day's stay in Palestine to be thrown back to pre-1994 and realize that apartheid is very much alive under Israel as a colonial power".

The mass incarceration of Palestinians has been an inherent design of Zionism's political apparatus of control. After all, how could Israel maintain its "discriminatory and demographics-obsessed" vision of a 'Jewish and Democratic State' without making sure that most Palestinians are under some form of control? Statistics provided by the Jerusalem-based NGO 'Addameer' speak for themselves: "Since the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory in 1967, more than 800,000 Palestinians have been detained under Israeli

military orders in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). This number constitutes approximately 20 percent of the total Palestinian population in the oPt and as much as 40 percent of the total male Palestinian population... 8,000 Palestinian children have been arrested since 2000". The **numbers** for October 2015 alone are damning enough: "there were 6,700 Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons and detention centers, including 450 administrative detainees, 41 women, and 320 children". And this excludes the years between the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, known to Palestinians as the 'Nakba' or Catastrophe, **during which over 700,000 Palestinians** - 80% of the population of the land which became Israel - were forced out of their homes, and 1967.

That being said, tracing back to a single common political link between African Americans and Palestinians may prove to be an impossible task. Indeed, the attitudes of African American intellectuals towards Israel/Palestine do not seem to have been consistently leaning towards any one side but have changed over time. However, it is true that most African American intellectuals, including many of those who placed themselves on the political Far Left, seem to have been sympathetic towards Zionism until at least the 60s. This, **Alex Lubin explains**, is largely due to the 'strong bond within the U.S. civil rights movements uniting African Americans and Jews" which came at a time **where** "African-Americans increasingly turned their political activities away from the pan-Africanist projects of black internationalism to nation-bound movements for civil rights within the framework of the liberal state". One could understand the rationale behind this. After all, the state of Israel was founded just a few years after the Nazi Genocide ended which made it easier for African-American activists to view

Zionism as an emancipatory political movement and an answer to European anti-semitism. The 'Zionism as an answer to anti-semitism' view was reflected as early on as the 1920s, even before the Holocaust, by Jamaican intellectual and proponent of Pan-Africanism Marcus Garvey who wrote in 1920 that "other races were engaged in seeing their cause through—the Jews through their Zionist movement and the Irish through their Irish movement—and I decided that, cost what it might, I would make this a favorable time to see the Negro's interest through", emphasizing on the idea that the formation of nation states was the only salvation available for oppressed peoples of the world.

Essentially, we can discern two tendencies among black intellectuals working within the confines of the so-called Black Atlantic. The first, nation-oriented, tended to sympathize with Zionism as a form of 'national' liberation, despite the fact that Zionism was fundamentally different from other forms of nationalisms because, in the words of Tony Judt, "it arrived too late" in world history - indeed Zionism has more in common with "the practices of post-Habsburg Romania" with its "ethno-religious self-definition" than it does with 20th century forms of nationalisms that Pan-Africanists and others sympathizes with because it is a "characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law". The second, internationalist in nature, empathized with, and sometimes actively supported, the Palestinian struggle. We saw the latter especially taking place in the 1960s, in the era of radical anti-war movements in the USA. The timing could have been coincidental, but it certainly helped forge a link between the two most well-known radical liberation

movements to come from the African American and Palestinian struggle respectively: the Black Panthers Party (BPP), founded in 1966, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), founded in 1964. A year after the BPP was founded, the 1967 war between Israel and 5 arab countries – Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – ended in just 6 days with an Israeli victory and its capture of the Egyptian Sinai (later returned in 1982), the Syrian Golan Heights as well as, notably for our purposes, the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza. This reinforced the idea among Arabs, the Global South and the ‘Black Atlantic people’ that Israel was, to quote Baldwin again, there for the purpose of “protecting Western interests”.

As a response to the nation-bound view supported by Garvey and many other black leaders, an alternative internationalist position was put forward by, among others, the BPP. Indeed, the BPP established links with the PLO in the aftermath of the 1967 war during which Israel’s ascendancy as a colonial state and an occupying power was contrasted sharply with the anti-colonial sentiment that prevailed at the time. By 1966, most African nations had declared independence while the years following 1967 saw Palestine’s predicament consolidating into a situation of Settler Colonial Occupation and Apartheid, which Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe **described** as recently as 2015 as “the biggest moral scandal of our times, one of the most dehumanizing ordeals of the century we have just entered, and the biggest act of cowardice of the last half-century”, echoing Israeli scholar Yeshayahu Leibowitz who, in 1968, **warned** that Zionism would reproduce “the corruption characteristic of every colonial regime”.

This should encourage a further investigation of the alliance

between the BPP and PLO as it reveals striking evidence of what BPP co-founder Huey P. Newton called intercommunalism **which was** “the Panthers’ understanding of how local communities were sutured together by global processes of imperialism and racial capitalism”. The key takeaway here is the link between the local and the global for it represents a shift from looking at peoples as belonging to a single nation to attempting to deconstruct the oppressive forces that have created nation states and, in the process, oppressed racialized bodies. It should be noted that this did not start with the BPP-PLO partnership but with the American Popular Front and the Palestinian Communist Party in the 1930s. Back then it was the fact of the Popular Front endorsing radicalism and the Palestinian Communist Party endorsing ‘binationalist politics’ that allowed the two **to overlap** and support one another. The intercommunalism, therefore, of the BPP **was** “a political imaginary that recognized the shared conditions of racial capitalism and possibilities for anti-imperialism among local communities across the world” and their Ten-Point Program manifesto “**recapitulated nineteenth-century abolitionist agendas**” which opened up a space for empowering all disenfranchised groups. In the words of Keith P. Feldman writing in **Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America**: “Black Power’s Palestine enunciated an epistemic imperative to clarify and contest the saturation of racial violence endemic to U.S. imperial culture and intensified by the fierce state repression of anticolonial movements in the United States and abroad. In exceeding a domestic civil rights framework, it engaged the Palestine problem to reveal racial and colonial violence’s spatial dispensation”.

The link between the oppression of African-Americans in the

USA and that of Palestinians in Palestine-Israel was made all the more evident by the declaration of a 'special relationship' between the State of Israel and the USA, a declaration which has since become part of mainstream political language in the USA. This special relationship takes the form of the "\$124.3 billion (current, or non-inflation-adjusted, dollars) in bilateral assistance" since WWII as of 2015, the 42 times the US has used its veto power in the United Nations Security Council in defense of Israel out of a total of 79 times, the very close military cooperation between the two nations and the significant power pro-Israel lobbying groups have in the USA. The declaration, according to Feldman, came at a "conjuncture, roughly 1960 to 1985, when struggles over hegemony in the United States became entangled with transformed relations of rule in Israel and Palestine, that is, when U.S. civil rights and antiwar struggles, Zionist settler colonization and Israeli military and administrative occupation, and Palestinian narratives of dispossession, dispersion, and resistance were forged, felt, and thought together". This is why Palestinian-American legal scholar Noura Erakat argued that the two groups of people were "dealing with completely different historical trajectories, but both which resulted in a process of dehumanization that criminalized them and that subject their bodies as expendable".

Mapping Black Palestinian Solidarity Today: "When I See Them, I See Us"

Much more could be written about the socio-political contexts that have given birth to this transnational solidarity between African Americans and Palestinians, but fastforwarding to the present, we are left with wondering if Black-Palestinian solidarity developed beyond the (albeit

important) symbolic rhetoric and moved into the realm of concrete activism and struggle within the framework of resistance to the politics of oppression.

On the 23rd of September 2012, the “Freedom Bus” collective released a statement from Occupied Jenin in the West Bank launching a “ground-breaking West Bank ride”, notable because of the source of their inspiration: “Inspired by the Freedom Rides of the Civil Rights era in the USA, the Freedom Bus promotes cultural resistance, and will use concerts, university seminars, Playback theatre performances, community visits, hip hop, and giant puppet shows to give voice to life under occupation”. The Freedom Rides of course were the civil rights activists, African Americans and supporters, who rode interstate buses in the Southern United States for 7 months in 1961. They rode to protest the fact that buses were still being segregated despite a court finding it illegal nearly 2 decades prior. In the Palestine of 2012, roads were being segregated in the Occupied West Bank, whether formally or informally, under Israel’s Apartheid policies. But the Freedom Bus was just one of many such African American-inspired initiatives happening in Palestine and many have been created since. Increasing solidarity between the two groups have included messages of solidarity, mentioned above, as well as tours organized by African Americans in the Occupied West Bank which often end in condemnations of Israeli practices. These tours consolidate the narrative of ‘when I see them, I see us’ as declared by the Black-Palestinian Solidarity group since it shows some of the similarities between, say, life in Ferguson and life in a city such as Hebron in the West Bank.

It’s worth noting that ‘spontaneous’ pro-Palestine protests in the USA have especially accelerated during and following

the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, which **was seen** as being **particularly brutal** even compared to previous wars. Bill Mullen, **writing for SocialistWorker.org**, gave an example from Indiana: “In response to the Israeli massacre in Gaza in summer 2014, we had hundreds of people out in the streets protesting. Since then, we have three brand new Students for Justice in Palestine chapters in Indiana, and a Jewish Voice for Peace chapter”. The rate of new pro-Palestine groups, notably Jewish ones, being formed in the wake of the 2014 war has been quite impressive – indeed, **there are now over 45 chapters** of Jewish Voice for Peace in the USA. Given the importance of the African American-Jewish bond during the civil rights movements mentioned above, the rise of anti-Zionist or non-Zionist American Jewish groups helps create a greater emphasis on the Palestinians’ oppressed status. If we also include the 1,100 Black activists, artists, scholars, students and organizations who signed the “2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine” under the hashtag #Palestine2Ferguson to everything mentioned to far, we start to form a concrete picture of Black-Palestinian solidarity. It is, perhaps, therefore fit to conclude this section with the story of the ‘Dream Defenders’.

Following the 2012 murder of 12 year old African-American Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman, a group of mostly black students formed the ‘Dream Defenders’ in the hope to pressure the judge to indict Zimmerman. When Zimmerman was acquitted of his crime, the group decided to occupy the Tallahassee state capitol. They made national headlines and were joined by many prominent African-American personalities. But while they have helped lead the Black Lives Matter movement, they have also broadened their scope of solidarity and have

been calling for an end to Israel's oppression of the Palestinians. A delegation of Dream Defenders even joined the Black Youth Project in Palestine to go on a walking tour of the occupied territories. Their experience there led them to endorse the Palestinian-lead Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement following months of discussions with the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) group. Here we see the BPP's intercommunalism at work with a representative saying following the walking tour that "we thought the connections between the African American leadership of the movement in the U.S. and those on the ground in Palestine needed to be reestablished and fortified". It is no coincidence that among the credited intellectual inspirations behind the Black Lives Matters movement is Angela Davis who is on the advisory board of Dream Defenders and a former member of the Black Panthers Party, has been an active supporter of BDS and the Palestinian struggle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems clear that a more expansive Black-Palestinian solidarity framework is likely to happen in the near future given the rich historical and contemporary context that has produced an undeniable pattern of transnational and internationalist political philosophy among African American and Palestinian intellectuals and activists. The increasingly strong Black-Palestinian bond may prove to open up spaces for joint struggles against oppression in both the USA and Israel/Palestine, and even beyond. Whether this will impact realms of power is yet to be seen, but given the increased participation of African Americans (as well as American Jews) in the Palestinian struggle, it seems like the dominance of Zionism in

American discourse regarding Israel/Palestine may be coming to an end.