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The Palestine-Israel Conflict and Peace Process through 1948 to the present

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Barbed Wire: Redefining Borders in Israel & Palestine 1948-1970

Since its invention, barbed wire has been a symbol of containment and control. In *The Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire* by Alan Krell, the author explores the history of barbed wire and its symbolic meanings through cultural and artistic objects. Krell writes that “Barbed wire’s simplicity of concept and ease of realization belies the critical role it has played in the modern experience: territorial expansion and settlement, regional and international conflicts, incarceration and extermination” (Krell 7). By analysing three different photographs of barbed wire which relate to Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian identity, I will explore the concept of shifting borders in Israel/Palestine and the surrounding regions from 1948-1970.

In 1949, soon after the establishment of the state of Israel, a ‘Seam’ zone or no man’s land was established, which divided the city of Jerusalem for almost twenty years. The photograph below by Josef Koudelka is featured in the documentary *Koudelka: Shooting Holy Land* and it depicts East Jerusalem from behind barbed wire atop the Wall in 2010.



Although Koudelka joins the conversation nearly 50 years after what Israelis refer to as ‘the

reunification of Jerusalem' (When Israel gained full control of Jerusalem), the photograph frames barbed wire as a dominating force over the city, highlighting the future goals of the state of Israel and a physical reminder of its violent past (a theme supported by the choice to render it in grayscale). The angle of the wires draws the viewer's eyes upwards with a 'bursting' effect, almost mimicking a mushroom cloud, explosion, or natural growth that envelops both sides of the Wall. Krell wrote that barbed wire was "...Intimately associated with westward expansion and white settlement" adding that "...The device, after all, is about control and possession, and that much, certainly, was recognized by its early advocates" (11). The 'bursting' effect of the barbed wire illustrates the continued goal of Israeli territorial expansion through ethnic cleansing, land theft, and occupation.

David Ben-Gurion was transparent about the fact that territorial expansion and ethnic cleansing were immediate goals of the early state of Israel. In February of 1948, he responded to an audience member during a Mapai Party Council meeting who argued that "we have no land there" by saying: "The war will give us the land. The concepts of "ours" and "not ours" are peace concepts, only, and in war they lose their whole meaning" (Ben-Gurion, Vol. 1, entry dated 6 February 1948. p. 211). The creation of the seam zone was an early realization of Ben-Gurion's claim. The war rewrote the borders of Israel and Palestine, and the creation of the Wall and the barbed-wire-fortified Mandelbaum Gate checkpoint solidified the new borders after the war ended. However, for many Jewish people, barbed wire as a symbol retained the dark memory of Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust.

The Devil's Rope includes many examples of artistic/cultural objects featuring barbed wire which concern the Holocaust. While Palestine is only mentioned briefly, the words "Holocaust" and "Second World War" appear 14 and 20 times, respectively, indicating the

perceived significance of these events for the history of barbed wire. The photograph below depicts Holocaust survivors celebrating their liberation by ‘snapping’ the barbed wire which represented their imprisonment.



**3 Geste symbol-
ique. . . ‘Snapping
the barbed wire: a
symbolic gesture
of concentration
camp prisoners
after their libera-
tion,’ 1949.**

A powerful aspect of this image, Krell observes, is the intimacy of the survivors’ interaction with the barbed wire. The mens’ choice to make physical contact with an object designed to repel touch and tear flesh allowed them to express their newfound freedom in a subversive way. They reclaimed control over their bodies by refusing to let the barbed wire control or contain them, and instead opted to ‘snap’ it with their own hands. However, the defeat of the Nazi regime was not the end of the story for barbed wire in Jewish or Israeli memory. While some associated it with deportation and occupation by the British during the days of Mandatory Palestine, some Zionists adapted to barbed wire as a tool towards realizing their visions of a Jewish State.

In contrast to Koudelka's depiction of barbed wire as a dominating and unignorable force, barbed wire in Micha Bar Am's *Israel: A Photobiography* is nearly invisible— only discernible against the backdrop of detained Palestinians' bodies.



Micha Bar Am | Israel: A Photobiography After a shooting incident in the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces surrounded and detained Palestinian suspects and arms. Gaza Strip 1969

By focusing on the human subjects within the frame, Micha Bar Am de-emphasizes the barbed wire in the foreground as if it is a mundane detail. The contrast of the barbed wire against the dark fabrics speaks to the fact that, for many Palestinian Arabs, the Nakba is an integral part of the fabric of their identity and national narrative. This imagery also speaks to the necessity of Palestinian voices to reveal truths about the occupation. If there were no detainees in the photo, the barbed wire would blend into the background. Instead, the viewer is forced to contend with the reality of violent displacement and arbitrary imprisonment within Israeli history. The

helicopter, car, and armed soldier looming above the seated detainees sets up a clear power dynamic of Israeli control over Palestinian bodies. After the Six Day War, “Territory under Israeli control grew threefold, including the rest of former British Mandatory Palestine” (Weizman 17). Which nation or governing body should have sovereignty over Jerusalem (and other territories) has remained a topic of debate in the decades since the reunification, and is disputed internationally.

Barbed wire can symbolize a diverse set of ideas and experiences. For the Holocaust survivors, the wire itself represented imprisonment in a concentration camp, and *breaking* it symbolized their survival in the face of extreme oppression. For Zionists, barbed wire became an unquestioned tool for achieving sovereignty and redefining land borders. For Palestinian Arabs, barbed wire was a symbol of the occupation, and the shared struggle for freedom from it. Despite the differences in how these groups related to the concept of barbed wire, to summarize in words of Krell, “...the wire’s original purposes – defence and demarcation, keeping out and keeping in – remained largely unchanged” (Krell 48) and will continue to serve these same purposes in the region far past the 1970s.

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