

# Israeli Occupation and the Palestinian Question

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"Occupation corrupts, and lengthy occupation corrupts absolutely." <1> So says Uri Avneri, an Israeli political "dove," in his characterization of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The occupation has added a new dimension to the violence which has beset the Middle East since before the formation of the Israeli state, casting Israel in the role not of defender, fighting for survival -- not even of aggressor in the limited, first-strike nature of the Six Day War -- but of aggressor, conqueror, and above all, oppressor. For it is the existence of a substantial Arab population under the rule of Israel which has complicated relations among the middle eastern powers almost beyond hope of solution. The complication has particularly affected the question of establishing a Palestinian homeland. Why has *occupation* had such a vexing effect on the already vexed politics of the region? An examination of the problems entailed by occupation, especially co-existence, political rights and confusion of long-term goals on both sides of the conflict, casts new light on the roots of the violence currently dominating the area. The examination will look particularly at the imperfect match between goals and methods, again on both sides, and how this very mismatch reveals the values of the two sides in the conflict.

The Palestinians and the Israelis share a common goal: an independent state with the power of self-determination, in an area of land bounded by Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Before the creation of the Israeli state in 1948, it was a question of coexistence between two elements ruled by the British in the mandate of Palestine: Jews and Arabs. During the period after the Palestinian War (1948-49) but before the Six-day War (1967), the Palestinians were absorbed either into Israel or into one of the Arab states. After the 1967 war, occupation reversed the original situation, elevating the Jews to a position of dominance over the indigenous Arabs. The total population of Palestine was 752,000 in 1922, with Arabs comprising more than 90 percent of the total. By 1967, the total population was 2,777,000 with 393,000 Arabs or 14.2 percent of the population. <2> The percentages have remained constant over the years, but the Israelis have become quite divided over the issues of occupation, borders and the related questions of policy towards the ethnic, religious and political elements of the population.

Each group views the Arabs differently, from tolerated neighbors to dangerous enemies, and from potential oppressor to the oppressed. The division centers around the expansion of the original Zionist dream of a "home in Palestine secured by public law" into the desire for a "Greater Israel" that includes the captured territories. <3> On the political right, Orthodox Jews are part of what has been termed the "creeping annexation" of the occupied territories. By 1986, there were 105 Jewish settlements in the area they call Judea and Samaria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with a population of 46,000 Jews. <4> This minority living among 1.3 million Arabs considers this land home on the basis of

their biblical heritage. One resident in the settlement of Ofra, Mr. Harel, commented that "to live in Judea and Samaria is to return home in the deepest sense. The attachment to the land is almost erotic. <5> Another resident living in Ariel over the past four years, Dina Salit, is determined to remain on the West Bank: "My kids go to a Government school. I have a Government mortgage. I pay taxes to the Government. To me, I am at home." <6> However, this is a typical example of the shortsightedness of some Israelis. First, they move in and set up house as if the question of rights to the land has already been settled in their favor. Such convictions are endorsed by the Likud party, led by Yitzhak Shamir and dominated by the conservative Sephardic emigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. They are willing to tolerate the Palestinians in the occupied territories, but at a distance without understanding them.

Second, these Israelis fail to recognize that the Palestinians have an equally justified right to live on the land in question. The Jews claim the Bible as evidence, and the Palestinians claim historical presence as their evidence. The Palestinian reaction to the settlers in captured territories suffers from the same weakness in vision as the Israeli. The goals are dangerously opposite: the Jews want to settle the land amid the Arabs, while the Arabs want to resist annexation at any cost.

A New York emigrant, Rabbi Meir Kahane, endorses an even more conservative program: he demands the expulsion of the two million Arabs under Israeli rule. He cites the higher Arab birthrate as a prime danger to the 3 million Jews and their country. His premise is correct: the gross reproduction rate of the Jewish population is 1.59 as compared to the 4.05 rate for Muslims. <7> However, his conclusion is false. The mass deportation of Palestinians from their perceived homeland is not feasible, and even if it were, it would destroy all possibilities of a peaceful solution, given the present propensity for violence among the Palestinians suffering under the Israeli thumb of occupation. However, Kahane does not seem to have any substantial support among Israelis. One Israeli youth expressed typical concern: "First he'll get rid of the Arabs and then he'll get rid of anyone who doesn't agree with him." <8> Two years before, Shimon Peres, then Prime Minister, called Kahane a "shame to our people, but not a danger to our country." <9> However, it is a disturbing line of thought for Palestinians and Israelis alike. For example, one young Israeli declared "I want to kill all the Arabs," and only modified his statement to an echo of Kahane after his friends registered uneasiness and disapproval: "We can't kill the Arabs. Think about the Holocaust. We can't do that to someone else." <10> He may lack solid support, but he represents a dangerous intolerance that the Jews know only too well.

Moderates, led by the Labour Party's Shimon Peres, have endorsed the more progressive concept of "territorial compromise" in exchange for peace with the Arabs:

Basically, we wouldn't want to annex by forceful means the Arab population into Israel. We don't want to become a master nation. This is a moral principle and a political commitment. We are looking for a solution. <11>

There is a fundamental flaw with this seemingly enlightened position. Peres claims to be "looking for a solution" and to be willing to negotiate, but he's looking in the wrong place. Peres and the Labour Party members refuse to negotiate with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. A "Jordanian-Palestinian delegation" may hammer out an agreement with Israel, but it would be unacceptable to the majority of Palestinians.

Moving further to the left on the political spectrum, the liberal peace activists believe in a home "where one's own people is in a majority, and where one can live a free and democratic Jewish life, without feeling that one is suppressing another people." <12> This indicated that the liberal goal is a return to pre-1967 Israel, an Israel without the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Similar sentiments were expressed by activists demonstrating in Jerusalem during May of 1987: "We are out of Lebanon, now let's get out of the West Bank." <13>

Would this goal of an unoccupied West Bank and Gaza Strip be acceptable to the Palestinians? No. According to a survey by the *al-Fajr* newspaper (Jerusalem), only 16.9 percent would prefer the establishment of the Palestinian state in this area. The majority (77.9 percent) called for a Palestinian state in all of Palestine. <14> The Israelis are not listening to the demands of the Palestinians because their demands could push Israel out of existence, a hard fact that perhaps many Israelis fear and use as an excuse to avoid direct negotiations with the PLO. After all, if it is discussed, it is a possibility.

Israel's refusal to negotiate with the PLO is one of the most persistent stumbling blocks to the peace process. This leads to an important question: are the goals of the PLO and Arab nations consistent with those of the Palestinians in the occupied territories? A corollary question of equal importance is whether or not these non-organized Palestinians want the PLO to speak for them as they pursue their goal of a national state. Once again, there are no clear answers, only clues.

Do the PLO and the Israeli Arabs share the same goal? The evidence is unclear, perhaps because the participants themselves are not always clear about their own goals. During a camp program at Neve Shalom, an interfaith community on the West Bank designed to improve relations between Arabs and Jews by bringing them together in dialogue, Salman, a Palestinian teenage boy, is confronted with a troublesome situation:

"If a Palestinian state is established, I'm not going to leave my land to go and live in a Palestinian state. But I won't help the Israelis." Taher asks, "[W]ould you remain and go in the army?" <15>

He finds it hard to choose between leaving his land in Israel or becoming a full citizen of that country. After a few minutes, he decides that he would "prefer to go to the Palestinian state."

Another teenager, Diab, provides a clue to the second question, whether the Arabs accept the PLO as their representative on the world stage. Diab claims that he is "with them in his heart and body. My first obligation is to feel close to *them*." <16>

The most extensive answer to the question of the PLO is found in the *al-Fajr* survey of Arabs on the West Bank and Gaza strip. The results indicate that more than 90 percent of the Palestinians believe that the PLO is their sole legitimate representative and that more than 70 percent regard Yasir Arafat as their leader. <17> While these sources are not exhaustive, some of them do indicate that the PLO is recognized by a variety of Palestinians as their representative organ. Perhaps the Israelis should release their preconceptions of and temper their reaction to the PLO in order to facilitate the commencement of negotiations, if they are honestly "looking for a solution."

Palestinian, Israeli-Arab, neighbor, or enemy: the names may differ, but the goal remains constant. The Palestinians demand a homeland in the area formally known as Palestine:

The whole Arab people is unalterably opposed to the . . . Jewish State in Palestine. Its opposition is based primarily upon right. The Arabs of Palestine are descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of the country.... [T]hey form the majority of the population; as such they cannot submit to a policy of immigration which if pursued for long will turn them from a majority into a minority in an alien state . . . <18>

The statement was submitted by the Arab Office in Jerusalem to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946, two years before the creation of Israel. The total population of Palestine was 1,810,000 in 1945, and the Arabs comprised nearly 70 percent of the population. The percentage dropped to 19.4 percent in 1948 as the population decreased to 806,000, a result of the creation of the state of Israel which precipitated the exodus of 700,000 Arabs and the alteration of boundaries during the war. <19, 20>

However, this dispersal did not silence the demand for a Palestinian homeland, as evidenced by the 1963 Draft Constitution of the Palestinian Liberation Organization: the purpose of the PLO is to aid the Palestinian people in the "*liberation of their country*." <21> The 1963 document *The Palestinian National Charter: Resolutions of the Palestine National Council* expressed the goals of the Palestinian people, as perceived by the PLO:

1. Palestine is the homeland of the Arab Palestinian people. . . .
2. Palestine, with the boundaries it had during the British Mandate, is an indivisible territorial unity.
3. The Palestinian people possess the legal right to determine their destiny after achieving the *liberation of their country*. . . . <22>

The Arab Palestinians maintained their position over the years, even as their numbers dwindled in the country called Israel. <23> The population of Israel in 1967 was 2,777,000, with Arabs comprising only 14.2 percent of that figure. By 1975, the percentage had not altered radically, increasing to 15.3 percent; they remained a minority in the land they call home.

The Twelfth Arab Summit Conference which convened in Morocco in the fall of 1982, saluted the "steadfastness of the Palestinian revolutionary forces," reiterating its support for their goals by adopting the following principles:

1. Israel's withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied in 1967.
2. The removal of settlements set up by Israel in the Arab territories after 1967.
3. The creation of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. <24>

This statement echoed United Nations Resolution 242 of 1967:

Emphasizing the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every State in the area can live in security . . .

- (i) Calling for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;
- (ii) Termination of all claims of states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force. . . . <25>

The variety of voices purporting to speak for the Palestinians is not exhausted by the above samples. However, after twenty-one years of occupation and forty years of coexistence, the common goal remains unchanged. Nothing less than an independent state of Palestine in the area of the former British mandate is acceptable.

An investigation of the methods used by both the Israelis and the Palestinians in the pursuit of their goals reveals a basic connection between what each side will do to achieve its goal and why they are able to do what is necessary. One fundamental flaw is shared by the Israelis and the Palestinians: both sides use methods that are appropriate for the control of short term problems but are ineffective tools for concluding the conflict. The Israeli methods address the need to control demonstrations, street violence and terrorism; they are simply soothing the symptoms without correctly diagnosing the disease. Similarly, the Palestinians cannot see beyond their hatred to the heart of the problem: they are facing an established nation with legitimate nationalistic desires, but they continually approach this state as an invading force. The connection between ambitions and values is quite clear on both sides: the proclaimed goal appears to be non-negotiable and the methods are ill-conceived and naive attempts to intimidate the opposition. For it is the continued reliance on increasing random acts of violence which has perpetuated misconceptions and increased intolerance among the Israelis and the Palestinians; this is unfortunate, as decades of violence have done little to improve the situation. What has caused this reliance on violence instead of diplomacy or negotiation? Does this indicate an erosion of basic humanitarian values, i.e., basic respect for human life? The as yet unknown answers to these questions would provide a substantial clue to the Palestinian Question. However, a close analysis of the methods used by each side in their struggle and the reflection of the values motivating (justifying?) the actions of both

the Palestinians and the Israelis may provide a glimmer of understanding, something both sides seem to lack.

Violence is a primary method used by the Arabs as they try to achieve the goal of a Palestinian state. According to the *al-Fajr* survey, over 78 percent of those polled felt that "acts of force are justified in the pursuit of the Palestinian cause," and 60.7 percent considered "armed struggle" to be the most effective tactic. <26> Why are these percentages so high? Because it is a war waged on the streets by mechanics, students and housewives. One resident describes it as a "twilight war," a war without boundaries and rules. <27> The odd nature of the struggle is reflected in the specific acts of violence that were considered by those surveyed: 87.6 percent approved of the hijacking of an Israeli bus in 1979; 60.5 percent approved of placing a bomb on an El Al airplane; and 20.7 percent approved of bombing civilian planes in general. <28> Distinctions between civilian and soldier are unusual in this war without rules. For example, Ofra Moses was driving with her family when a (presumed) Palestinian threw a bomb into her car, burning her alive. A West Bank Palestinian lawyer described her as "a settler, the root of all evil." At her funeral, she was described as a "soldier" and compared to fallen Israeli fighters in Lebanon. <29>

However, it is the young generation of Palestinians, those who have grown up under Israeli occupation, who are endorsing the random acts of violence. Palestinian youths express their resistance by throwing rocks and a few homemade bombs. Incidents of rock throwing, assaults with homemade weapons and violent demonstrations are increasing to more than 3,000 per year. <30> But this is more than a list of statistics; it is an indication of the desperation felt by those who have only heard of freedom in "their land." The 25-year-old refugee, Nasser, expresses this sense of alienation: "I see where my father lived and the land we owned, but I cannot pluck a single flower." <31> A five-year-old girl named Nisrin is too young to understand the complex elements in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but she feels the same pain, and it is revealed in her answer to the question of her future occupation: "Either a lawyer or a *fedayi* (guerilla)." <32> Her father explains his daughter's answer as a result of the violence that surrounds her life. Is it a case of environmental conditioning? Hanna Siniora, the editor of the daily Arabic paper *al-Fajr*, offers an insight:

[Young Palestinians have]... lived with Israel, and they know its limitations, and they aren't impressed by the superpower image of Israel. And one result is that they are more uncompromising, more disposed to a military response. <33>

A 24-year-old Palestinian, Ahmed, supports this thesis. He claims that he and his friends are not afraid of the Israelis, emphasizing the discrepancy between the sophistication of the weapons and the cowardliness of the soldiers: "How else can you explain the fact that when a boy of 10 throws a stone at a soldier, the soldier's response is to shoot him with a machine-gun?" <34> The violent methods endorsed by the Palestinians are more than a manifestation of their survival in a hostile environment. Rather, they are a gauge of their frustration with occupation, of desperation to achieve their goal -- at any price.

Non-violent methods are not as popular with the Palestinians due to feelings of desperation and helplessness after their numerous years under the thumb of military occupation. According to the *al-Fajr* Poll, 20.2 percent believed in the value of "steadfastness," remaining in the area and resisting assimilation into Israeli society; 7.3 percent responded favorably to "diplomatic initiative"; and only 1.2 percent endorsed "civil disobedience" as an effective method. <35> The Palestinians are afraid of listening to the Israelis, according to one resident named Ahmed: "Sooner or later the Israelis would try to explain the situation from their point of view, and that would be very dangerous to us." <36> The Palestinians fear that negotiations with Israel would be less productive than attempting to force a solution through the use of violence.

However, a portion of the small Israeli-Arab middle class is opposed to the use of violence. One young woman, Abu-Saud, was warned by the Palestinian businessmen who own *a-Rawda*, the community college she attends, after writing poetry expressing nationalist feelings: "They also accused me of inciting the other students, and they warned me that if I made trouble it would harm the reputation of the college." <37> However, this opposition to violence by the Palestinians seems more like the typical co-optation by the Israelis of the potential enemy into the established power structure. An analogy can be made to the Chinese gentry class of the Ming dynasty (1368-1662). They performed a role similar to that of the modern businessman; they had influence and received official encouragement for their civic duties but were neither appointed to official positions nor recipients of government salaries. They were denied official positions because they were not born into the established class, but they were sufficiently intelligent or ambitious to challenge the structure of the Ming dynasty's Confucian bureaucracy. In order to avoid possible attempts to overthrow the government, they were given a modest amount of local power -- outside of the exclusive Confucian class of bureaucrats and scholars. Similarly, these Palestinian businessmen have become more comfortable within the system and are a part of the Israeli structure blocking the Palestinian state.

The Israelis use a variety of methods in their attempt to maintain the protective structure against the advances of the Palestinians. The spotlight has been on the use of violence by the Israelis, but they also rely on harassment and discrimination to control the Arabs under their rule. According to Israeli military government regulations, a "suspect" can be held for up to 18 days without an appearance before a judge and for six months before a trial. In 1983, the West Bank human rights group, Law in the Service of Man, accused the Israelis of rounding up young Palestinians immediately before the *tawejjhi*, the university entrance exam held twice a year. This tactic effectively halts the education process for many Arabs. <38> Even the basic need for security from criminals is manipulated by the Israelis. The sign on the police station in the Arab town of Ramallah is in English and Hebrew, not Arabic. <39> One Gaza psychiatrist, Eyad el-Sarra, apprehended an intruder himself, without even thinking of calling the Israeli officials. He feels that they would have exhibited little concern for his safety. <40> Palestinians are subjected to more subtle forms of discrimination, ranging from arbitrary spot checks of Arab-owned cars, to deliberately small Arabic letters on highway signs. Arab license plates differ in color from those of the Jews: blue instead of yellow. Is this racism, revenge for the forced wearing of

yellow badges during World War II? Perhaps the logic is strained, but the comparison illustrates the dangerous intolerance of the Israelis in their methods.

What is the motivating force behind these physically non-violent methods of controlling Palestinians? If the goal of an independent Jewish state, run by Jews for Jews, is recalled, then the values fall into place. The Israelis feel that the land belongs to them by biblical right; they argue that the Palestinians have no right to live there as an independent nation that would displace their state. They feel that they are securing Israel for the Israelis; Arabs must assimilate to be tolerated. The majority of Palestinians refuse to do so and the result is harassment bred from ignorance, intolerance and fear. A 1984 survey by Dahaf Research Institute found that 60 percent of Jewish teenagers thought that Israeli-Arabs were not entitled to the same rights as Jews, 47 percent that present Arab rights should be reduced, and 42 percent that democracy should be restructured to deny Arabs their civil rights. <41> This same intolerance and fear of the Palestinians is reflected in the Israeli refusal to negotiate with the PLO, the recognized organ of the Palestinian people. Such a stand illustrates the shortsightedness of the non-violent Israeli methods of operation with the Palestinians; it reflects the warped values espoused by the vocal majority of Israelis who fear negotiations with the enemy.

The violent methods used by the Israelis are even more shortsighted and inappropriate for the conflict. A 22-year-old student at Hebrew University sums up the problem: "I'm afraid of what occupation has done to our society. Only bad things. Our moral standards have become almost inhuman." <42> The United Nations has condemned the methods used by the occupation forces of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Chairman of the Special Committee on the subject said that the status of the human rights of those in the occupied territories was "at its worst in comparison with other years," and that the "level of violence and brutality of repression is unprecedented." <43> According to the report, a plethora of military orders have effectively established a new legal system that violates the Fourth Geneva Convention. The *al-Fajr* survey reveals that 47.5 percent of those West Bank and Gaza Strip residents polled had experienced "political arrest;" 50.7 percent had been subjected to "beatings, physical abuse or threats by the Israeli occupation authorities;" 55.7 percent had been exposed to "harassment or direct insults at Israel military checkpoints;" but only 6.3 percent had not had such experiences as these or with property/land confiscation, a ban on travel abroad, a curfew, the demolition of homes, deportation or fines. <44> What does this reveal about the values of the Israelis? These are attempts to control a group of people who are starved for the taste of their homeland; it is a complex problem with a myriad of factors to be weighed, not shot. The shortsightedness of the Israelis is a manifestation of the deadly combination: fear, intolerance and ignorance that comes with being occupiers for decades.

The phrase "occupation corrupts, and lengthy occupation corrupts absolutely," is a variation on Lord Acton's 1887 comment on power; however, an earlier version [1770] by William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, may be more apt in the case of the Israeli occupation of the territories: "*Unlimited* power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it." <45> The Israelis wield unlimited power in the occupied territories; they can search, seize, close, arrest and shoot at will. They refuse to negotiate with the PLO, the group

endorsed by the Palestinians and the United Nations as *the* representative organ for the Arabs under occupation. The *Geneva Declaration on Palestine*, drawn up in 1983, recognizes "[t]he right of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the representative of the Palestinian people, to participate on an equal footing with other parties in all efforts, deliberations and conferences on the Middle East." <46> The Israelis are misreading the situation. In theory, the PLO uses violence as a means, not an end. However, this is not to exonerate this organization. The PLO and the unorganized Palestinians are equally guilty of misreading the motives behind the Israeli actions. In fact, if "unlimited power" is corrupting the Israeli occupation force, then a combination of limited freedom and myopic nationalism is corrupting the Palestinians. Ahmed, a young Palestinian, observed that the residents are "suffering a kind of slow death, and throwing stones is the only way they can resist." <47> The Israelis and the Palestinians do not understand the motives, the values behind the actions; consequently, each side sees the symptoms but fails to read the disease.

An analogy to the Old English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides an insight into this combination of fear, ignorance and intolerance. The scene is King Arthur's Court at Christmas: a Green Knight enters the feast hall with a challenge for an exchange of "blows." Gawain misreads the challenge, seeing only the sharp axe carried by the mysterious knight. Gawain is too afraid to look with open eyes at the stranger in his home, equating a pause with cowardice. He lashes out with the axe when he could have tapped the Green Knight's shoulder or even kissed him on the cheek. Gawain dies from an ignorance of the full meaning of the challenge, reacting in fear with violence; his actions were rooted in his intolerance for the green man's disruption of the court's festivities, for his position as an outsider. Gawain should have been brave enough to listen to the Green Knight and to think rationally before swinging the axe at the stranger. Similarly, the Israelis and the Palestinians need to listen to one another, to marshal the courage to put down their guns, bombs and rocks in order to sit at the negotiating table.

### Notes

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