

Fifty Years of Israeli Occupation

Written by Raphael Cohen-Almagor

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RAPHAEL COHEN-ALMAGOR, OCT 14 2017

In my previous article, "Donald Trump and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", I briefly touched upon the issue of the Israeli occupation (Cohen-Almagor 2017). In this piece I wish to expand and elaborate. From time to time, President Trump voices his desire to bring peace to Israel and the Palestinian Authority. There is no need to hold our breath with anticipation. I fear that the result would be similar to the gloomy results of many previous rounds of negotiations.

My aim in this article is to suggest that the Trump administration should work together with the Israelis and the Palestinians to reduce the friction between the two sides, relaxing Israeli military rule in the West Bank, transferring responsibilities to the Palestinians, and by this change the course of history for the better, both for the Palestinians and for the Israelis as the occupation is detrimental to the well-being of the Palestinians and is also undermining Israeli democracy.[1]

The Trump administration should work to change the trajectory: Instead of seeing the continuation of Israeli occupation, work with the Israelis and the Palestinians to reduce it. Peace needs to be built on solid foundations which are absent at present. While peace remains the endgame and should be Israel's and the Palestinian Authority's strategy (Peres 1993, 1995, 1998; Beilin 2004; Savir 2008), this desired end cannot be achieved with a big bang. Instead, promoting it should be done piecemeal, stage by stage, building trust, separating the two sides until reaching a two-state solution (Cohen-Almagor 2012, 2015). In the first instance, Israel should transfer some responsibilities to the Palestinians, empowering them, providing them with avenues for increased autonomy and for taking more responsibilities.

50 years of occupation brought many Israelis to believe that the occupation is necessary. Many are accepting this abnormality, the hardships that the occupation generate for the Palestinians, and the violence that hits both sides. I discuss this abnormality and focus on two of the evils of the occupation: the permit regime and the dozens of checkpoints that day in, day out harass Palestinian life.

Reducing Friction, Building Trust

For successful peace negotiations, three factors are absolutely essential:

- An Israeli leader who is committed to bring peace to his people and is willing to pay the necessary price. The price must be perceived acceptable to his people as well as to the Palestinian people;
- A Palestinian leader who is committed to bring peace to his people and is willing to pay the necessary price. The price must be perceived acceptable to his people as well as to the Israeli people;
- Shared belief by both leaders that the time is ripe for peace. By "time is ripe" it is meant that both leaders believe that enough blood was shed, that they need to seize the moment because things might worsen for their people, and that they have the ability to lead their respective people to accept the peace agreement and change reality for the better.[2]

If one (or more) of the factors is missing, peace is most unlikely. Presently, none of the above exist.

Instead of attempting at achieving the momentous peace deal, one that would resolve a deep and entrenched

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conflict, the aspirations should be more modest, still quite ambitious. President Trump can instil a sense of urgency in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. He has the ability to assist in building trust, good will and the most essential security. The United States has the capabilities to consolidate economic conditions for Palestinians, bolstering security on both sides, and insisting on zero tolerance regarding all forms of violence. The USA is able to influence Israel to abstain from enlarging existing settlements and work to dismantle checkpoints so as to make the lives of Palestinian civilians easier. At the same time, together with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the USA should resolve to fight down all forms of terrorism. Acts of terror undermine security and the Israeli will to bring about substantive changes aimed to improve Palestinian lives. The road to peaceful coexistence is long and trying but first thing is to change the present tragic trajectory that inevitably leads to further bloodshed. President Trump should attempt to bring in stages an end to 50 years of Israeli occupation.

A solution can be found to end the occupation piecemeal without undermining Israel's existence. This should be President Trump's immediate goal, on the road to peace between Israel and the PLO. We need to find a balance between aspirations and realpolitik. Israel is unable to simply go out of the occupied territories. Ending the occupation without certain guarantees, consultation and coordination with the Palestinian Authority would be unwise. Every vacuum is filled, and it is in the interest of the Palestinian Authority, Israel and the United States to see that once military presence and martial rule are lifted, Palestinian rule, law and order will prevail.

The issue is the trajectory: Where does Israel head to? What is its endgame? Do its leaders recognize the evil of occupation? Do they wish to end it? Or do they accept it as a necessary part of life, that is here to stay? Judging from the actions of the present Israeli government, its leaders have no inclination to end the occupation. The government is expanding settlements all the time. No attempts are made to help the Palestinians in creating a sustainable economy. Israel blocks Palestinian efforts to develop themselves. Some Israeli leaders openly speak about annexing part of the occupied territories (Newman 2015). This exploitative path is gloomy and depressing. This view is short-sighted and would inevitably lead to further violence. As long as the occupation continues, tranquillity and peace remain a distant dream.

Accepting Abnormality

Many Israelis travel to Jerusalem but a significantly smaller number of Israelis travel to the West Bank. Most Israelis have no business there. For the major part, Israelis have little knowledge of the reality that the occupation creates. They do not know, and they do not wish to know. Long years of Likud government made the word "occupation" a four-letter-word in the Israeli discourse. The occupation is hardly in the public eye. When it is discussed and analysed, it is within the confines of politicians, scholars, security, military and human rights experts. The Israeli regime desensitized the Israeli public, making them accept the occupation as part of Israeli existence, convincing them that this abnormality is acceptable.

Well, it is not. Israel is the only democracy in the world that occupies another people, subjecting them to a military rule. This is unjustified.

A recent poll shows that 49% of Israeli-Jews perceive the West Bank as "Liberated Territories". One thus assumes that for almost half of the Israeli Jews, the occupation can continue. 19% regard the West Bank as "held" or "administered territory"; 11% do not know. Only 21% of Israeli-Jews perceive the West Bank as "Occupied Territories". Israeli governments under Prime Minister Netanyahu have been successful in legitimizing the occupation ("When did you visit the Bank?" 2017).

Israelis in the West Bank generally belong to four groups:

- Settlers
- Soldiers
- Ideologically and religiously-motivated people who visit the Holy sites
- NGOs, human rights organisations, peace activists, few business people.

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Of these groups, the only people who do not have clear agenda are the soldiers, and they are there to do policing rather than military job. Most of these soldiers are young, and they need to obey orders. Their service in the occupied territories have a lasting impression on them. Young normal men and women are put in an abnormal situation. On a daily basis, they need to find a balance between their worldview and the orders they receive. Sometimes, finding the balance is a significant challenge. The gap between their worldview and the order is too wide.

Two of the Evil Faces of Occupation

The occupation has many evil faces. Let me discuss in brief only two: the permit industry and checkpoints.[3]

Permits

During one of my visits to the occupied territories, an elderly Palestinian approached my guide and me as we were standing at one of the many checkpoints. The man was in his 70s, using a cane to walk. He explained that he needs to go to the hospital in West Jerusalem as he suffers from a chronic condition and does not feel well. I asked the young Israeli soldier whether it is possible to let him in, following of course the required security check. The guard said "No". I asked "Why?" The guard replied: "He does not have a permit". I asked the elderly man: "Why don't you have a permit?" The man responded with great emotion, explaining that it takes a long time to issue a permit. Bureaucracy. Long waits. Money. He does not feel well. He needs to see a doctor now. I asked the soldier whether there is anything he can do. The soldier replied in the negative. I inquired whether there is any point in contacting his superior. I was told that the reply would remain the same.

The Israeli guards are put every day in impossible situations where their orders demand of them to behave crudely and in a cruel way. These young soldiers are not to be blamed. The blame is on the military rule and the abnormal reality it imposes.

Since October 2003, Israel has implemented a permit system in the enclaves it created between the separation barrier and the Green Line. Obtaining permits has become a bureaucratic nightmare for Palestinians since it is a complicated and long procedure that has to be completed with the Israeli Civil Administration. Permits are required to cross the Green Line for any issue, whether significant or trivial (The Permit Regime in the "Seam Zone" 2017; The "Permit Regime" 2013).

As a result, Palestinians without a permit are denied freedom of movement. Farmers are denied the right to work their lands to the west of the security barrier. The permit system has also imposed obstacles on basic religious freedom to worship in the Holy sites inside the Green Line (Hamze 2016). Religious freedom is a highly sensitive and volatile issue that cannot be dealt via the crude system of permits.

Checkpoints

The West Bank is dotted with checkpoints. As of 31 January 2017 there were 98 fixed checkpoints in the West Bank, including 59 internal checkpoints, located well within the West Bank. The figure for internal checkpoints includes 18 in Area H2 in Hebron, where there are small Israeli settlement enclaves (B'Tselem 8 Feb 2017). This place is a permanent source of friction between settlers and Palestinians. Palestinian travel is restricted or entirely prohibited on 41 roads and sections of roads throughout the West Bank, including many of the main traffic arteries. Israelis can travel freely on these roads (B'Tselem 1 Jan 2017). Roads for Jews only in the West Bank is a recipe for tragedy.

Changing the Trajectory

I have mentioned only two main causes of hostility. With these policies in place, Israel does not make friends in the West Bank, Gaza and abroad. Abroad, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement will continue to grow, gather strength, working to make Israel the world pariah as South Africa was during the dark days of apartheid. In the West Bank and Gaza, the animosity, anger and frustration are growing until they will reach, yet again, a boiling point. Then we will witness another round of violence, possibly a third Intifada. Israel, clearly the stronger side, will crash it

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with a price. And then what?

To break the cycle of violence, a new vision, new trajectory has to be adopted.

What Israel Needs to Do?

- Recognise that peace is the key to ensure Israel's security and therefore peace is Israel's strategy;
- Implement this strategy in stages rather than opting immediately to achieve end-of-conflict resolution;
- Avoid unilateral steps;
- Acknowledge the evil inflicted on the Palestinians by the occupation.
- Declare openly and explicitly that it is its aim to bring the occupation to a close.
- Open discussions with Palestinian leaders and the American administration as to how to do this.
- Devise a concrete plan, with the Palestinian Authority (PA), how to reduce military presence in stages.
- Slowly dismantle checkpoints by shifting security responsibilities to the PA.
- Expand the PA autonomy and self-government.
- Reduce friction between Palestinians and settlers.

What the Palestinians Need to Do?

- Recognise that peace is the key to ensure Palestinian security and therefore peace is the Palestinian Authority's strategy;
- Implement this strategy in stages;
- Avoid unilateral steps;
- Show that the PA is able to take upon itself the sensitive issue of security. Terrorism is the fuel that sustains the occupation. Terrorism justifies the continuation of military rule.
- Declare openly and explicitly that a zero sum game exists between Palestinian aspiration and terrorism; that terrorism undermines Palestinian national aspirations for independence.
- Open discussions with Israeli and the American administration as to how to fight spoilers.
- Devise a concrete plan, with the Israeli and American administration, how to reduce Israeli military presence in stages.
- Accept shifting security responsibilities.
- Expand the PA autonomy and self-government in a transparent and accountable fashion.

The United States has a great role to play. It is time to reflect on the successful peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt during the late 1970s, learn from the positive American experience, and study carefully the principles of the autonomy plan agreed by Prime Minister and former Likud leader, Menachem Begin (Quandt 2015; "Israel's Autonomy Plan" 1980; Laqueur and Rubin 2001) and also learn from the American mistakes in Camp David 2000 and other recent peace junctions (Kurtzer 2008, 2013; Miller 2012; Thrall 2014; Mitchell and Sachar 2016).[4] At the very least, implement the autonomy plan and improve conditions on the ground piecemeal, step by step. In need are trust-building initiatives that would reduce frictions and tensions, and pave the way to a more equitable co-existence.

No Israeli would have liked to live even one single day under occupation. Silence is evil's great facilitator. If we do not stand up against evil, it will continue to prevail. Therefore, we must speak up, protest against it and see that the occupation will come to a close.

Notes

[1] For further discussion, see Bar-Tal and Schnell 2013; Cohen-Almagor 2005.

[2] For further discussion on the concept of ripeness, see Zartman 2008. See also Zartman 1978; Kelman 1987, 1992; Pruitt 1997.

[3] For further discussion, see Hamze 2016; Amnesty International n/d.

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[4] For further discussion, see Princen 1992; Aggestam 2002.

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