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THE NOT SO TEMPORARY OCCUPATION

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The No-Longer Temporary Occupation



Getty Images

Separation: A young Palestinian boy rides his bicycle along a dirt road adjacent to the concrete separation barrier built by Israel in the West Bank town of Qalqilya.

By Joseph Dana

One particular success of Israel's 44-year control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been the government's ability to convince the Israeli population of the temporary nature of the occupation. Every sector of Israeli society, except religious settlers and the military establishment, understand the occupation to be an ephemeral security measure necessary only in the absence of a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Ask any Israeli on the streets of Tel Aviv whether they think that Israel will permanently control the Occupied Territories and the immediate answer will be no, it is all about immediate security. This charade is exploited by successive Israeli governments as they proclaim a desire for peace while simultaneously creating permanent facts on ground like Jewish settler roads, checkpoints for Palestinians and new settlements.

Despite the proximity of the Occupied Territories to major Israeli population centers, few Israelis other than soldiers and settlers visit the Territories. Since the creation of Israel's controversial separation barrier and the denial of thousands of Palestinian work permits to Israel, Israeli society has all but disengaged from Palestinian society. This allows the occupation to feel distant and outside the everyday lives of Israelis. Palestinians, of course, are still confronted with the daily presence of Israeli military power and mechanisms of control.

Some Israeli scholars, such as Bar Ilan University lecturer Ariella Azoulay, and Tel Aviv University professor Adi Ophir, have proposed that without this perceived temporariness and external character of the occupation, Israel would have a hard time maintaining its mandatory military conscription. A greater number of citizens would question the long-term objectives.

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Years of international pressure have actually engendered a climate in which many Israelis have become reticent about the entrenchment of the occupation. And yet, every Israeli government since 1967 has increased settlement activity. The only way to explain this paradox is by understanding that Israelis perceive the occupation as a necessary, but temporary, evil. The growing settlements do not present a problem then, but are rather simply a solution to security concerns.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his recent defiant but well received speech to the United States Congress, made it clear that he doesn't see things this way. He argued instead that Israel "will not return to the indefensible lines of 1967." Netanyahu also noted that Jerusalem — a fundamental issue in the conflict — will remain undivided under full Israeli control. Effectively, he was saying, Israel is unwilling to part with the West Bank according to the internationally accepted two-state solution framework.

Advancing his argument for permanent control of the West Bank regardless of security concerns, Netanyahu made the case that the West Bank is a necessary part of Israel's cultural and religious composition, based on Jewish history. He also dispelled the myth that the Occupied Territories are somehow external from Israeli society, arguing that Jewish settlements are basically "neighborhoods and suburbs of Jerusalem and greater Tel Aviv."

Netanyahu's speech has left the peace process dead in the water and presents Israelis with a harsh reality they had been ignoring: Permanent occupation which can only be maintained through a form of apartheid governance. His theoretical framework

sent a clear message that Israel not only requires permanent occupation for its continued existence, but also, in fact, desires it because of religious, cultural and security concerns.

Israeli society is now forced to confront the implications of endless occupation and possible annexation. Quite simply, Netanyahu's rejection of the two-state solution as defined by the 1967 lines reflects a shift in the way most Israelis have come to understand the occupation, forcing them to see it not as a temporary measure but as a permanent fixture of Israeli reality — a reality that might cost Israel its standing in the international community.

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