

Is Israel's Occupation of the West Bank Behind The Current Violence?

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Global Research, October 31, 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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The Netanyahu government has conveniently and consistently separated the occupation of the West Bank from the repeated eruption of violence, insisting that the Palestinians' unrest is a result of incitement by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, when in fact he has been attempting to reduce the tension.

Not once has any Israeli official suggested that nearly 50 years of occupation might have brought the Palestinians to a boiling point. Any incident could have ignited a new violent flare-up, and the conflict over the Temple Mount/Haram el-Sharif provided the spark that led to the current fire, regardless of whose side was at fault.

The most troubling issue is that successive Israeli governments remained blind and refused to connect much of the Palestinian violence to the occupation; what is worst is that the Israeli public has largely bought into the fallacy of this argument.

They are persuaded by the pervasive and misleading official narrative that even if Israel were to evacuate the West Bank, the Palestinians will not end their violent resistance to Israel's very existence.

They insist that the Palestinians are determined to take over all of Mandatory Palestine rather than establishing a Palestinian state limited to the West Bank and Gaza, to live side-by-side Israel in peace.

Ironically, whereas this charge against the Palestinians is deeply ingrained among right-wing Israelis, they cheer the fact that many members of the Israeli government categorically reject the establishment of a Palestinian state on any part of the Jews' 'biblical homeland.'

To make the case against the withdrawal from the West Bank, Israeli officials point to Israel's evacuation of Gaza in 2005, its subsequent takeover by Hamas, and the violence emanating from it.

Netanyahu and his ultra-conservative cohorts argue that Israel must learn from this experience and thus should not withdraw from the West Bank, which is far closer than Gaza to Israel's urban centers.

They further argue that should Israel evacuate the West Bank, Hamas will certainly take over and turn it into another staging ground from which to launch rocket attacks, cut Israel in half, and inflict incalculable losses in lives and property.

Ironically, this suggests that Palestinian radicalism can be contained under occupation when

in fact the occupation itself is the prime cause behind the intensified Palestinian extremism.

Brigadier General Guy Goldstein, Deputy Director of Government Activities in the Territories no less, stated only yesterday: "It's a rebellion of...terror that comes from pain and frustration." But then leave it to the hypocrites in Netanyahu's government to justify continuing the occupation, presumably to stem the rise of violent extremism.

Indeed, if Israel were to precipitately and unilaterally withdraw from the West Bank, as it did from Gaza, a similar result could theoretically reoccur. As such, the withdrawal from Gaza offers a different kind of lesson from which Israel must learn.

Unlike the conditions that existed in Gaza, the PA has begun in earnest to build the foundations of a state with schools, clinics, a network of roads, and private and government institutions. They were even praised by Israel's top security officials for their full cooperation with Israel on all security matters, even in times of increased tension between the two sides, as is currently the case.

What is most worrisome, however, is that neither Netanyahu nor any of his coalition partners know where Israel will be if the occupation continues for another five to ten years, how many more Palestinian uprisings will occur, and what will be the death toll and destruction both sides sustain?

I believe that the Israelis who have been traumatized by the violent events of the past few weeks should ask themselves a simple question:

If a handful of Palestinians have managed to cause such havoc with the entire Israeli security apparatus in place and thousands of Israeli troops stationed throughout the West Bank, by what logic can any honest person say that the occupation bolsters Israel's national security?

If anything, the occupation has been and will continue to be the very evil that Israel needs to rid itself from, and they must do so for their own sake rather than the Palestinians', as the occupation poses the greatest threat to Israel's future well-being.

To remove this perpetual threat, Israelis must examine this disastrous state of affairs and demand the withdrawal from the West Bank under terms and conditions consistent with Israel's requirements to ensure the safety of its citizens.

The Gaza experience in a way was positive and instructive in that it has shown the mistakes that the late Prime Minister Sharon made, and how to avoid similar mistakes in any future disengagement from territories in the West Bank.

The Palestinians, with the support of the Arab states and the international community, will never give up their aspiration to establish a state of their own.

Israel should sooner than later accept this fact, particularly because of its unchallenged military prowess and that it is in a perfect position to withdraw from the West Bank, with some land swaps, without risking any aspect of its legitimate national security concerns.

The Israeli withdrawal should be based on a number of agreed-upon phases to be implemented over a period of ten years or more, and entail well-defined reciprocal

measures by both sides to be executed on a schedule with monitoring mechanisms to ensure full compliance.

In fact, a withdrawal based on preconceived security plans and collaborative economic developments will prompt the Palestinians to develop vested interests and give them the incentive to preserve it and in return, it would dramatically enhance rather than undermine Israel's security.

More importantly, the Palestinians know only too well that should they threaten Israel by violating such an agreement, Israel is and will remain in a position to reoccupy the land almost at will, except this time Israel will have a solid moral and tangible ground to stand on that potentially engenders the support of the international community.

Is this a risk worth taking by any Israeli government? I believe the answer is clear. The occupation is not sustainable; it is costly both in blood and treasure, Israel's national security will remain at risk, and the country will become ever more internationally isolated while risking its very identity as a Jewish state.

I am not naïve enough to suggest that the current Netanyahu government will ever be willing to end the occupation. It is now up to the Israelis to seek new leaders who will, because it is they who will pay the ultimate price that the evil of occupation will exact.

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