

Netanyahu Is Out but Nothing Has Changed

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One month after the end of the last hostilities between Israel and Hamas, events on the ground demonstrate that little has changed. And once again the US media is ignoring Israel's creeping annexation of Palestinian lands and their brutally aggressive behaviors toward the Palestinian people.

There appeared to be an awakening of the press last month, especially the extensive coverage given to Israel's effort to evict Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah and the Israeli military's brutal assault on Palestinians at Al Aqsa, signalling greater sensitivity to the Palestinian plight. Although these Israeli actions and the mass uprisings of Palestinian youth they precipitated were drowned out by the more familiar storyline of Israeli bombardments of Gaza in response to Hamas rocket fire, after the ceasefire, positive coverage of Palestinian suffering continued, but only for a time.

Attention was soon diverted by the drama of Netanyahu's defeat and the formation of the new Israeli government. At this point, the Israeli hasbara industry kicked into full gear. Newly inaugurated Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, a notorious hardliner, we are told, has become a pragmatist who wants to restore frayed relations with Democrats. In an appeal to the Biden administration, a senior member of the Bennett-Lapid government said that their future “rests in Biden's hands...we hope that they will understand the constraints under which we are operating...” In other words, “Don't look at what we do or place demands on us; what should count is that we're not Netanyahu.”

But, as a leading Israeli peace activist noted, US attitudes toward Israel “ought to be framed by Israeli policies, not Israeli politicians, and as long as the policies continue, there is no reason to cut Israel slack for the simple fact that Israel's not being led by Netanyahu”.

As for the policies, nothing has changed. In the aftermath of the unrest that rocked Israeli cities last month, Israeli police arrested 2,100 citizens, 91 per cent of whom were Palestinian citizens of Israel. Shortly after being inaugurated, the new government issued a permit for flag-waving extremists to march through Arab neighbourhoods chanting “Death to Arabs”, “Your villages will burn,” and other incendiary taunts. Once again, Israeli police arrested Arab counter-protesters.

In an ominous development, Israeli police set up barricades around the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood and established a checkpoint for residents. They have also established guard posts near the Damascus Gate that the Israeli press notes are frequently being used to harass and beat young Palestinians who gather at the Gate's plaza. As I had feared, with each passing day, it appears that the Israelis are intent on repeating in Jerusalem what they did in Hebron. The Israeli press also reports that police have used brutal "crowd dispersal even when not necessary" and deployed skunk water hoses, spraying the plaza, the Old City walls, and homes in Silwan with a liquid that has a long-lasting "unbearable stench".

Meanwhile, in the rest of the occupied lands, settlement expansion and creeping annexation continue. Just this week, the new government gave the green light to 31 new projects in settlements across the West Bank. And in Hebron, the Israelis have seized land adjacent to al Ibrahim Mosque to complete their takeover of this UNESCO-protected site.

South of Hebron, the fertile lands of Khirbet al Aida, owned by Palestinians have been subjected to settler raids, demolition activity, and expropriation. The Israeli government's intent is to connect settlements around Hebron, cutting it off from the rest of the West Bank.

Equally ominous are the activities of settlers, protected by the Israeli military, who have established an "outpost", Evyatar, on a hilltop to the south of Nablus, Jabal Sabih. While the military has declared this outpost "flagrantly illegal", 60 homes have already been constructed, and soldiers have been seen assisting the settlers moving construction materials up the hill. The government has provided the outpost with water, electricity, and roads.

Palestinians, on whose land this "outpost" is being erected, have been protesting this blatant land grab. In the last six weeks, Israelis have shot and killed five young Palestinian protesters.

Like the development in Hebron, Palestinians understand that what is illegal today becomes legal tomorrow. Once completed, Evyatar will connect with other once-illegal outposts and will cut Nablus off from the rest of the West Bank.

One month after the end of the last "Gaza war", Israeli settlers participated in 14 marches throughout the West Bank, protected by the Israeli military, demanding that the government expropriate Palestinian lands for settlement construction.

Meanwhile in Gaza, despite Hamas' hollow boasts of victory, tens of thousands of Palestinians in that impoverished strip remain homeless, many more without water and electricity, and the entire population without hope for the future.

In the Israeli Knesset, the new government is seeking renewal of a law to ban Palestinian "family unification" (forbidding Palestinian citizens of Israel and residents of Jerusalem from bringing spouses from the West Bank, Gaza, or outside to live with them) with Defense Minister Benny Gantz arguing that passage of this law "is necessary to maintain the security of the state and its Jewish democratic character".

The bottom line: Netanyahu may be out, but creeping annexation and oppression continue. For Palestinians, nothing has changed.

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