



PERSPECTIVES

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Occupation Is Not the Problem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The proposition that “occupation” is to blame for Palestinian terrorism defies history, reality, and logic. Israel’s control of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza has been virtually nonexistent for twenty years, ever since the 1995 interim agreement and the 1997 Hebron redeployment. Palestinian terrorism has increased not in response to the “occupation,” but in response to its ending.

As the blood dried at the scene of the latest Tel Aviv massacre, the city’s mayor rushed to empathize with the terrorists’ motives. “We might be the only country in the world where another nation is under occupation without civil rights,” he claimed. “You can’t hold people in a situation of occupation and hope they’ll reach the conclusion everything is all right.”

This prognosis was quickly followed by the usual Israeli “hope” peddlers. “The terror will continue as long as the Palestinian people have no hope on the horizon,” argued a *Haaretz* editorial. “The only way to deal with terrorism is by freeing the Palestinian people from the occupation.”

But this is precisely what Israel did twenty years ago.

The Declaration of Principles (DOP, or Oslo I) signed on the White House lawn in September 1993 by the PLO and the Israeli government provided for Palestinian self-rule in the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip for a transitional period not to exceed five years, during which Israel and the Palestinians would negotiate a permanent peace settlement. By May 1994, Israel had completed its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (apart from a small stretch of territory containing a few Israeli villages that were subsequently evacuated in 2005), as well as the Jericho area of the West Bank.

On July 1, 1994, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat made his triumphant entry into Gaza, and shortly afterward a newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) under his leadership took control of this territory.

On September 28, 1995, despite the PA's abysmal failure to clamp down on terrorist activities in the territories under its control, the two parties signed an interim agreement, and by the end of the year Israeli forces had been withdrawn from the West Bank's populated areas with the exception of Hebron (where redeployment was completed in early 1997). On January 20, 1996, elections to the Palestinian Council were held, and shortly afterward both the Israeli Civil Administration and military government were dissolved.

"As of today there is a Palestinian state," announced Arafat's Arab-Israeli advisor Ahmad Tibi a day after the elections. This upbeat prognosis was echoed by the Israeli minister of the environment Yossi Sarid, while Oslo's chief architect Yossi Beilin proclaimed the elections to have made the political process irreversible, expressing relief at the ending of Israel's occupation of Palestinian populated areas. "We have been freed of a heavy burden," he said. "I never believed in the possibility of an enlightened occupation. It was necessary to lift that burden so as to avoid becoming a target for organizations throughout the world that viewed us as oppressors."

This euphoria was prescient. While the geographical scope of the Israeli withdrawals was relatively limited (the surrendered land amounted to some 30 percent of the West Bank's overall territory), its impact on the Palestinian population was nothing short of revolutionary.

In one fell swoop, Israel relinquished control over virtually all of the West Bank's 1.4 million residents. Since that time, nearly 60% of them have lived entirely under Palestinian jurisdiction (Area A). Another 40% or so live in towns, villages, refugee camps and hamlets where the PA exercises civil authority but where, in line with the Oslo accords, Israel has maintained "overriding responsibility for security" (Area B). Some 2% of the West Bank's population – tens of thousands of Palestinians – continue to live in areas where Israel has complete control, but even there, the PA maintains "functional jurisdiction" (Area C).

In short, since the beginning of 1996, and certainly following the completion of the redeployment from Hebron in January 1997, 99% of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has not lived under Israeli occupation. As the virulent anti-Israel and anti-Jewish media, school system

and unceasing religious incitement can attest, any presence of a foreign occupation has been virtually nonexistent during these years.

This means that the notion of terrorism as a natural response to occupation is not only unfounded but the inverse of the truth.

In the two-and-a-half years between the signing of the DOP and the collapse of the Labor government in May 1996, 210 Israelis were murdered – nearly three times the annual average death toll of the previous 26 years, when only a small fraction of fatalities were caused by West Bank- and/or Gaza-originated attacks. The virtual lack of terrorism emanating from the territories during that period reflected the effectiveness of Israel's counterinsurgency measures, the low level of national consciousness among Palestinians, and the vast improvement in their standard of living while under Israel's control.

Moreover, nearly two-thirds of the 1994-96 victims were murdered in Israeli territory inside the "Green Line" – nearly 10 times the average toll in Israel in the preceding six violent years of the Palestinian uprising (intifada).

In September 1996, Arafat further escalated the conflict by reverting to direct violence. He took advantage of the opening of a new exit to an archaeological tunnel under the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, to unleash widespread riots in which 17 Israelis and some 80 Palestinians were killed. And while the PA quickly dropped the tunnel issue from its agenda once it had outlived its usefulness, Arafat was to repeat this precedent on several occasions. The most notable instance was his launching of the September 2000 terrorist war (euphemized as the "al-Aksa intifada" after the Jerusalem mosque) shortly after being offered Palestinian statehood by then-prime minister of Israel Ehud Barak.

By the time of Arafat's death four years later, his war – the bloodiest and most destructive confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians since 1948 – had exacted 1,028 Israeli lives in some 5,760 attacks: nine times the average death toll of the pre-Oslo era. Of these, about 450 people (or 44% of victims) were killed in suicide bombings, which were a practically unheard-of tactic in the Palestinian-Israeli context prior to Oslo. All in all, more than 1,600 Israelis have been murdered and another 9,000 wounded since the signing of the DOP – nearly three times the average death toll of the preceding 26 years.

To make matters worse, post-Oslo Israel has had to deal with the transformation of the Gaza Strip into an unreconstructed terrorist entity, rather than the peaceful entity it was designed to be. That entity represents a clear and present danger to Israel's population centers – a danger that can be

periodically contained through repeated military campaigns, but not eradicated altogether.

If occupation is indeed the cause of terrorism, why was terrorism so sparse during the years of actual occupation? Why did it increase dramatically with the prospect of the *end* of the occupation, and why did it escalate into open war following Israel's most far-reaching concessions ever?

One might argue far more plausibly that it was the absence of occupation – that is, the withdrawal of close Israeli surveillance – that facilitated the launching of the terrorist war in the first place, just as it was the partial restoration of security measures in the West Bank during the 2002 Operation Defensive Shield and its aftermath (albeit without reassuming control over the daily lives of the Palestinian population there) that brought the Palestinian war of terror to a (temporary) halt.

It is not “occupation” that is responsible for the lack of “hope on the horizon” but the century-long Palestinian rejection of the Jewish right to statehood, which was expressed in the 1922 League of Nations’ Palestine mandate and the 1947 UN Partition Resolution. So long as that this disposition is tolerated, let alone encouraged, the idea of Palestinian-Israeli peace will remain a chimera.

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