

A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World's Most Intractable Conflict

A review of the book by Gershon Shafir

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Global Research, September 21, 2017

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

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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It is with trepidation that I read books published under the rubric of the social sciences or humanities finding most of them poorly written, often self-serving, and filled with the jargon of the associated field of study (i.e. political science, sociology, et al). However, the significance of the subject and a brief skim read of a random internal page encouraged the review of A Half Century of Occupation.

As it turned out, this is a well written and important study of the subject of its title, the occupation by Israel of the Palestinian “territories”, being the land occupied by Israel during the 1967 six day war. Given its social science heredity, it is clear of jargon, well outlined, well argued with clear presentation of hypotheses and short clear summaries of each section – in essence the best of what I have read from this field and capable of scrutiny under the genres of international law and history.

The work discusses the occupation in relationship to many factors. Most importantly it deals with international law, human rights, military rule of the occupation, and the patterns and differences within the settlement patterns that started after the war. Starting with an examination of the various UN documents, the Geneva conventions, and customary international law, Shafir says.

Israel’s claim that the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza are not occupied, consequently, ignores the clear trend of international law to affirm the rights of peoples and individuals with growing vigor.

Most importantly from the various readings I have made over the past decades is his summation of the ongoing violence, resistance, and offensive wars occurring within Israel/Palestine:

Under occupation, however, violence is more accurately described as occurring on a continuum that runs the gamut from coercive state action to suppression and war. The former almost invariably leads to resistance and thus is the precursor to and cause of the latter. The occupation therefore is best understood as ongoing, day-in and day-out coercion, and its injuries include material, psychological, social, and bodily harm. The coercive techniques of the institutions of occupation deployed to enforce submission produce the occasional eruptions of “military operations” and wars. Violence is omnipresent and found in all facets of the occupation; consequently, the most intense and bloody suppression of uprisings and wars cannot be considered in isolation

from the occupation regime as an everyday occurrence.

I quote this at length due its overwhelming clarity and its accurate summation of the actions and effects of military occupation.

In the second essay of the book, Shafir asks why has the occupation lasted as long as it has. In general three trends are examined. First is occupation itself followed by looking at the early immigration as a settlement action working towards separation of peoples and land. This also includes the always ever present Israeli fear of the demographic balance not working in their favor. Included in this is the idea of colonial-settler patterns as based partly on the British colonial models elsewhere and in the Palestine Mandate. Continuing this trend, following the colonial settler patterns established after the 1967 war, is that of settlements being a religious calling wherein a “secular peace is not our goal.”

The third trend prolonging the occupation according to Shafir, accurately so, is the “special relationship” with the U.S., and the “security” demands of the state. Included within this topic is the idea of a “temporary occupation” which has its impact on Israeli military laws, the application of the Geneva Conventions and humanitarian laws, and the “temporariness” of the deeds provided to the settlement populations. Shafir argues that these frameworks are rooted in European origins (i.e. the nature of various intra-European ‘peace’ agreements that were constantly broken and reconfigured - temporary - without any consent of the local populations) and in the League of Nations mandatory law which allowed for ‘temporary’ actions that extended the European colonial system (Shafir does not present chronological arguments, but thematic ones that skip around in time).

Possible solutions to the occupation and its violence are presented in the third essay. The use of statistical evidence on population, land areas, and costs leads Shafir to believe that a two state solution is technically possible. However he provides contra indicators, essentially political/religious factors, that perhaps would make a two state settlement improbable. The ideas of a bi-national and a unitary state are discussed following this, with many questions as to the actual nature of how each would be arranged, and how two people now well divided would react to a quick change to either of these states.

The final element introduced in the presentation is the boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) movement which he sees as being successful in creating a much larger awareness globally to the plight of the Palestinian people. BDS is criticized as being “overambitious and undertheorized, as well as self contradictory” yet also, “A reformed, more focused BDS movement with Jewish allies appears the best option for the occupation, and improving the circumstances of both the Palestinian refugees and Israel’s Palestinian Arab citizens.”

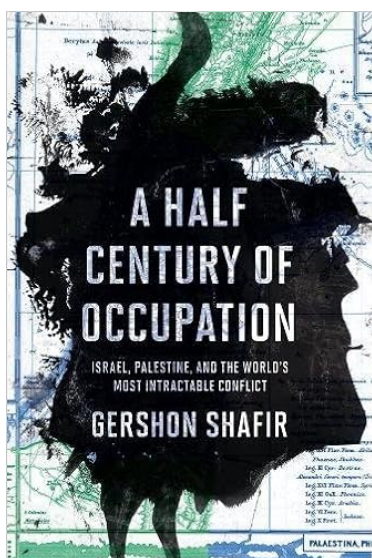
The occupation today receives minimal if any attention in the MSM, only the larger attacks by Israel, supposedly ‘retaliatory’ and for ‘security’ against ‘terrorists’, along with the few Palestinian attacks causing harm are ever presented. Israel/Palestine is not considered an important player on the MSM global scene, overshadowed by U.S. manipulations concerning Russia, North Korea, the ongoing global war on terror, and wherever else the U.S. cries out about. Yet, as Shafir reminds us,

“The Israeli-Palestinian conflict plays out, as it has since the penetration of the great powers into the Middle East in the late Ottoman years as a global conflict.”

The Israel/Palestine conflict is the kernel of cancerous radiation, unseen, but causing not only the ethnic cleansing and apartheid arrangements of Israel's actions, but also being the underlying source of all the neo-imperialist actions of the U.S., the EU, and related allies throughout the Middle East.

A Half Century of Occupation should be a part of any academics bookshelf. It is well grounded in international law, humanitarian law, and history. It is very well written, and while it is essentially an academic book, it should be accessible to those with some knowledge of the themes under discussion.

This article was originally published by Palestine Chronicle.



Title: A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World's Most Intractable Conflict

Author: Gershon Shafir

Publisher: University of California Press (April 25, 2017)

ISBN-10: 0520293509

ISBN-13: 978-0520293502

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