

Israel in Peril

By [David Shulman](#)

Global Research, May 20, 2012
[nybooks.com](#) 7 May 2012

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

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Even apart from the disastrous political consequences of current Israeli policy, it is critical to recognize that what goes on in the territories is not a matter of episodic abuse of basic human rights, something that could be corrected by relatively minor, ad hoc actions of protest and redress. Nothing could be further from the truth. The occupation is systemic in every sense of the word.

On April 15 of this year I was returning to Israel on an Alitalia flight from Rome. About forty minutes before landing in Tel Aviv, the captain informed us that Israel had announced extraordinary security measures, constricting its air space in response to an unusual threat, and that from that moment on—we were still high above the Mediterranean—until we would be allowed to leave the terminal, all photography was strictly forbidden; beyond that, we were to follow the instructions of Israeli security personnel on the ground.

My first thought was that Benjamin Netanyahu had decided to attack Iran, despite, or maybe actually because of, the seeming movement in the preceding days toward an effective and acceptable peaceful solution to the problem of the Iranian nuclear project. On second thought I decided that such an attack was still somewhat unlikely. So what was going on?

Upon landing we were diverted to the old, by now outmoded Terminal 1, then, after passport control, taken by buses to the new Terminal 3. There were police and border police everywhere, in large numbers, and we soon saw them arresting a demonstrator and forcing him into a police van. At this point it dawned on me that the extraordinary menace from the skies had to do with the arrival in Israel of a few dozen peace activists from Europe. They were, we later learned, trying to reach Bethlehem in the Palestinian territories in order to protest against human rights abuses by Israel.

These protesters clearly provided reason enough to call out the armed forces, as if a violent invasion were taking place. Some fifty or so were arrested; two managed to slip through the cordon and reach Bethlehem. Government spokesmen that evening proudly spoke of having warded off a threat of almost existential proportions. Their satisfaction was marred only by the fact that the TV news that day was full of one of those incidents that reveal in a flash the violent reality of the occupation.

Shalom Eisner, deputy commander of the army brigade stationed in the Jordan Valley and a settler himself, was filmed while brutally, and without provocation, smashing a Danish peace activist in the face with his rifle. The ugly, indeed horrifying, scene was broadcast dozens of times. I'm sorry to say that I've seen the likes of it rather often in demonstrations in East Jerusalem (Sheikh Jarrah, Ras al-Amud, Silwan) and in peace actions in the territories. Eisner has since been temporarily relieved of his command; if earlier cases are any indication, he

will probably be reinstated after some two years in another post. Interviewed after the incident, he gave an honest statement of his moral stature: “Maybe it was a professional mistake to use the gun when there were cameras around.”¹

Why should a handful of harmless demonstrators elicit so severe a reaction? Netanyahu, in his official announcement, said that if these people were so concerned with human rights, they should check out the situation in Syria, Gaza, or Iran—as if such sites of egregious abuse relieved Israel of any responsibility for what is going on day by day in the occupied territories. The same logic—that of the endless war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness—underlies Netanyahu’s constant dwelling on the Holocaust in relation to Iran. Like many Israelis, he inhabits a world where evil forces are always just about to annihilate the Jews, who must strike back in daring and heroic ways in order to snatch life from the jaws of death. I think that, like many other Israelis, he is in love with such a world and would reinvent it even if there were no serious threat from outside.

Buried somewhere inside all this is a bad Israeli conscience about the treatment of Palestinians since 1948—a conscience repressed but still somehow alive (not, perhaps, in Netanyahu). The rationalizing vision pasted over that bad conscience, a vision simple-minded, self-righteous, dangerous, and immoral, underlies the dilemma that Peter Beinart has eloquently and bravely stated in *The Crisis of Zionism*. He articulates it as a conflict, very familiar by now, between liberal, democratic values and a proto-racist, atavistic nationalism. This conflict has created two Jewish states in the Middle East. As Beinart says, “To the west [of the Green Line, the pre-1967 border], Israel is a flawed but genuine democracy. To the east, it is an ethnocracy.”

By “ethnocracy” he means “a place where Jews enjoy citizenship and Palestinians do not”; it is a mini-state run by settlers, some of them violent and fanatical, that disenfranchises a huge Palestinian population and continually appropriates Palestinian land in the interests of expanding and further entrenching the colonial project of the settlements. Inevitably, the ethos of the occupation, now in its forty-fifth year, spills westward over the Green Line: “Illiberal Zionism beyond the green line destroys the possibility of liberal Zionism inside it.”

The evidence for this observation is overwhelming; Beinart discusses recent research that shows a dangerous erosion in the commitment by ordinary Israelis to basic democratic values and the concomitant rise of hypernationalist, racist, and totalitarian tendencies, some of them well represented in the ultra-right parties in the Knesset and in the current Israeli cabinet. In the last year or so, we’ve seen a spate of antidemocratic, “ethnocratic” legislation all too reminiscent of dark precedents in the history of the last century.

We could also describe what is happening, more simply, as a takeover by the settler mini-state of the central institutions of the Israeli state system as a whole. By now, Israeli policy is almost entirely mortgaged to the settler enterprise; almost every day brings some new, inventive scheme to legalize existing “illegal outposts” in the territories and to facilitate the appropriation of more and more Palestinian land.² The inevitable result of such policies is the imminent demise of the so-called “two-state solution,” which would put a Palestinian state by the side of pre-1967 Israel (with whatever minor revisions of the old boundary the two sides would agree upon in negotiations). By now, a huge portion of the West Bank has, in effect, been annexed, perhaps irreversibly, to Israel. No state can be constituted on the little that remains. I will return to this question.

Even apart from the disastrous political consequences of current Israeli policy, it is critical to recognize that what goes on in the territories is not a matter of episodic abuse of basic human rights, something that could be corrected by relatively minor, ad hoc actions of protest and redress. Nothing could be further from the truth. The occupation is systemic in every sense of the word. The various agencies involved—government bureaucrats and their ministries and budgets, the army, the blue-uniformed civilian police, the border police, the civil administration (that is, the official Occupation Authority), the courts (in particular, the military courts in the territories, but also Israeli civil courts inside the Green Line), the host of media commentators who toe the government line and perpetuate its regnant mythologies, and so on—are all inextricably woven into a system whose logic is apparent to anyone with firsthand experience of it. That logic is one of protecting the settlement project and taking the land. The security aspect of the occupation is, in my view, close to trivial; were it a primary goal, the situation on the ground would look very different.

Take a few routine, typical examples, drawn at random from an endless series. In mid-January the civil administration sent its bulldozers, accompanied, of course, by soldiers, to demolish the ramshackle hut of Halima Ahmad al-Hadhalin, a Palestinian widow with nine orphaned children living in the deeply impoverished site of Umm al-Kheir, adjacent to the large and constantly expanding settlement of Carmel in the south Hebron hills. The bureaucrats claimed that the shack was built without a permit, which is no doubt true; Palestinians living in the West Bank “Area C,” i.e., under full Israeli control, only very rarely receive a permit to build from the committee, largely composed of settlers, that oversees such requests.

I saw Halima on January 28, a freezing, rainy day; she was standing barefoot, still shocked and traumatized, in a neighbor’s tent. Such demolitions happen regularly at Umm al-Kheir and have nothing whatever to do with the rule of law; they are part of a malevolent campaign to make life as miserable as possible for the Palestinians there (who, incidentally, claim credibly to own the land on which Carmel sits today) in the hope that they will go away.

Precisely the same line of reasoning applies to a wave of demolition orders issued in February of this year against the project of electrification and the building of energy infrastructures in a set of some sixteen tiny Palestinian khirbehs spread over the south Hebron hills. The shepherds and small-scale farmers in this region live in caves, tents, or shacks, in abject poverty. Volunteers and peace activists with technical know-how such as Noam Dotan and El’ad Orian, from the organization known as Comet-Me, have painstakingly built wind turbines and basic electric grids in many of these villages to serve a population of some 1,500 people.

The immediate change in the quality of life in this harsh region was dramatic; my friend Ali Awwad from Tuba, proudly turning on a light bulb in the cave he inhabits, said to me, “For the first time in my life, I feel like a complete human being.”³ Can these minimal infrastructures, entirely benevolent in intention and effect, funded mainly by European donors at the level of hundreds of thousands of euros,⁴ constitute a threat of any sort to Israel?

Apparently, they can. The civil administration is keen on destroying them, once again on the flimsy excuse that they were put in place without permits—as if a request for a permit would have been forthcoming.⁵ Several electric pylons have already been destroyed and electric

wires, undoubtedly worthy targets for the Israeli army, have been cut in some six villages. Pressure from European governments, especially Germany, has stayed the new demolition orders for the moment, but the danger that the bulldozers will turn up when opportunity arises remains very real.

Could the courts stand as a bulwark against such arbitrary acts by the authorities or the more severe instances of outright theft or violent attack by settlers? Occasionally, they do. In general, however, no Palestinian has the slightest chance of finding justice in an Israeli military court, and very few indeed have been justly treated in the civil courts over the last forty years. Any case having to do with an attempt to establish or maintain Palestinian ownership over lands taken for settlement is, ipso facto, unlikely to end in a decision that goes against the settlers or the government, although there have been some exceptions to this gloomy conclusion. Palestinians who protest against the occupation and the loss of village lands are treated harshly, sometimes imprisoned for long periods, sometimes killed in the course of the demonstrations.⁶

It is such matters that make Beinart's deliberately understated description of the occupation seem, from a local perspective in Israel-Palestine, far too mild. His book is clearly addressed in the first instance to an American audience, one perhaps not fully aware of the real situation inside the Palestinian territories. The tone is polemical, as one might expect; inevitably, Beinart has been bitterly attacked as naive—the worst, also the cheapest insult in the lexicon of those who defend Israeli policies—and as oblivious to the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁷ He is, in fact, all too aware of those complexities, far more so than many who claim to speak to or for American Jews (most of whom, as Beinart points out, have probably never met a living Palestinian). He mainly focuses on the situation as it is today, under this particular American president and this particular Israeli government. Possibly the most revealing part of the book is the detailed and persuasive description of the political maneuvers that allowed Netanyahu to humiliate Obama repeatedly, first over the issue of a freeze on settlements, and later in Congress, in 2010–2011.

The settlement freeze, in which the Obama administration had invested considerable effort, pressure, and prestige, was never more than a sham; according to the reliable count by Peace Now, construction of new housing units in the territories in 2010, the year of the “freeze,” was only slightly lower than in 2009 (1,712 units as opposed to 1,920). In March 2010, on the day that Vice President Biden arrived in Jerusalem, the Israeli government announced that it was nearly doubling construction in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo—an obvious and probably calculated insult to the administration.

Even more outrageous was Netanyahu's arrogant response to a key speech of Obama's on May 19, 2011, in which the president stated clearly that “the dream of a Jewish and democratic state cannot be fulfilled with permanent occupation.” Netanyahu announced that he “expects to hear a reaffirmation from President Obama of US commitments made to Israel in 2004”—including acceptance by America of the annexation by Israel of huge chunks of Palestinian land in the so-called “settlement blocs.” Note the word “expects,” as if Netanyahu were dictating to a submissive president what the latter should or should not say. Netanyahu's speech to Congress on May 24, 2011, a pastiche of myth and demagogic rhetoric of the extreme right, remained faithful to this tone, which Congress shamefully applauded.

Sadly, Beinart shows how Obama has consistently given in to pressure from the American

Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby and other American Jewish establishment voices. He gives a withering critique of the leadership of central American Jewish institutions, by now blindly and rather crudely identified with the Israeli right and the Netanyahu line; he quotes Keith Weissman, formerly on the AIPAC staff, as saying that already in the mid-1990s dominant figures there “were sucking at the teat of Likud.” Beinart shows that this orientation, with its visceral aversion to the very idea of a free Palestinian state and its enthusiasm for the occupation, now largely dominates the Anti-Defamation League, the Zionist Organization of America, the Presidents’ Conference, and a large part of the Orthodox rabbinical establishment as well.

Orthodox hypernationalism and its sometimes violently antidemocratic, even racist voices partly account for Beinart’s pessimistic prognosis for mainstream American Judaism and its relation to Israel.⁸ “American Zionism,” he fears, “will become the province of people indifferent to liberal democratic ideals, and the American Jews most committed to those ideals will become indifferent, at best, to the Jewish state.”⁹ He cites studies showing that younger non-Orthodox American Jews, conspicuously liberal in their values and politics, are less and less attached to Israel. Here is the American Jewish version of the conflict I have described in Israel between democratic ideals and tribal nationalism. Both my grandfathers, like most American Jews of their generation, at once Rooseveltian Democrats committed to strong notions of social justice and ardent Zionists, would have been horrified by what has happened in Israel and by the consequent need for American Jews to make such a choice.

The original source of this article is nybooks.com
Copyright © David Shulman, nybooks.com, 2012

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [David Shulman](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca