

The Occupation Is Destroying Israel's Democracy Regardless of What Kind of Spin Is Put on It

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It is sad and bewildering, albeit not surprising, how many Israelis completely distort the nature and the ultimate objective of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. The reactions to my article from April 30, "[An Occupying Power Cannot Be a Beacon of Democracy](#)," by many well-versed individuals, reveal how misguided they are and how comfortable they feel about their distorted views about the occupation, which they have embraced for more than five decades. What is extremely disturbing is that these views are prevalent among Jews in and outside Israel, which has allowed successive Israeli governments to maintain the occupation for 56 years with near-impunity on the basis of several groundless arguments.

To demonstrate how absurd some of these arguments are, I selected six comments out of many which illuminate the irrationality and false equivalence they resort to in justifying their positions.

Before I provide counter arguments, I want first to briefly reestablish the premise on which my article was based. First, I argued that an occupying power—Israel—cannot be a beacon of democracy as long as it remains an occupying power. That successive right-wing Israeli governments have systematically been misleading and brainwashing the public to justify the occupation on the grounds of national security. That they have methodically been portraying the Palestinians as an irredeemable foe, while engaging in misleading public narratives to keep the Israeli public minimally informed about the ruthlessness of the occupation. That they are portraying the occupation as central to keeping the Palestinians at bay while stamping out their aspiration to establish an independent state of their own. That they have been promoting the notion that the Palestinians are bent on destroying Israel even if they establish their own state. And finally, that they have been normalizing the occupation of the West Bank as if it were simply an extension of Israel proper.

Given that the concept of democracy plays a significant role in these arguments, it is best to define it. Democracy, literally meaning "rule by the people," empowers individuals to

exercise political control over the form and functions of their government. While democracies may vary in form, they all share certain features in common, including competitive elections, freedom of expression, and protection of individual civil liberties and human rights. Ultimately, democracy is a system of government based on the belief in freedom and equality between people. The concept of democracy derives its moral strength and legitimacy from two key principles. First is individual autonomy, the idea that no one should be subject to rules which have been imposed by others. People should be able to exercise self-determination and control over their own lives. As the philosopher Alain Badiou puts it, democracy is a political system that “does not prohibit or restrain, or not excessively.” The second principle is equality, the idea that everyone should be granted an equal opportunity to influence the decisions that affect people in society.

The following are the six contrarian arguments and my counterarguments, which I believe shed important light at the extent of the absurdities which much of the Israeli public and some diaspora Jews invoke in making their case in favor of continuing the occupation.

“Judaea and Samaria belong to Israel in accordance with the San Remo treaty. Israel is not an occupying power.”

The San Remo Conference, which was held April 19-26, 1920, between Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan, with the United States as a neutral observer, established that Palestine would be placed under British Mandatory rule, specifically stating “The Mandatory will be responsible for.... the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...”

The critic, however conveniently ignored the second part of the sentence, which continues, “...it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine....”

Moreover, the critic also chose to disregard the fact that the UNSC passed Resolution 194 in 1947 (the Partition Plan) that called for the establishment of a Jewish state and a Palestinian state. The legitimacy that was accorded to the establishment of Israel by the UNSC is exactly the same that was accorded to the Palestinians. Dismissing Resolution 194 and selectively citing only a part of the San Remo agreement is gravely misleading and harmful as it does nothing but obscure the truth and help to prolong the conflict at a terrible political, economic, and psychological cost for both sides.

“I think we can all agree that peace will be good for Israeli democracy, but it’s simply not true that an occupying power can’t be a beacon of democracy. It can and often has been. Britain conquered and occupied many countries and not only remained a beacon of democracy. Its empire was instrumental in its spreading of democracy. India and many other countries wouldn’t be democracies today except for this. Same with America’s occupation of Japan and Germany. Same probably with the democracy and empire of classical Athens. As I remember it, Lewis Samuel Feuer gave some solid analysis on this in his book on imperialism.”

An occupying power can indeed be a beacon of democracy, provided that such a power promulgates the principles of democracy in the country it occupies and subsequently leaves it to be governed by its own representative government. Unlike Israel, however, neither Britain nor the US are building settlements, annexing Indian, Japanese, or German territory, or applying two sets of rules—one for the US or British citizens with all the rights and

privileges, and another set of rules akin to marshal laws to govern these countries' respective citizens.

If Britain still occupied India, or if the US similarly still occupied Japan and Germany and treated them the way Israel is treating the Palestinians next door, neither the US nor Britain would be considered democracies. Citing these examples by this critic is a fundamentally false equivalence. Indeed, no country can be a democracy when it continues to occupy other people, especially when these people (the Palestinians) live on a contiguous land mass with Israel and even share the same territory, with hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews living in their midst in the West Bank, enjoying all the rights and privileges of Israeli citizenship while the Palestinians are subjugated to harsh military rules as Israel imposes in the West Bank.

“An Occupying Power Cannot Be a Beacon of Democracy”? Nonsense. How about US occupying a hunk of Germany? US occupying Japan? US occupying Afghanistan? US occupying Iraq? In each of those cases, US was a beacon of democracy. In some places it was followed by the occupied, in others it wasn't — but the fact remains that what you say makes no sense... Sorry...”

To equate the American military presence in Germany, which is an integral part of NATO's military installations in Europe, to Israel's occupation of the West Bank, is baffling. Moreover, American troops in Germany are welcome in the country, and while the German people are split over the presence of US military bases, successive German governments want them to stay. The critic obviously did not do his homework. There are military bases and American troops ranging from tens to tens of thousands in approximately 80 countries. Thus, according to the logic of this critic, the US currently occupies 80 different countries, which is of course the height of absurdity.

Furthermore, the US is not incarcerating thousands of foreign citizens in the countries where it maintains military bases. It is not conducting night raids, it is not restricting the movement of people in their own land, and it is not settling civilian communities throughout their territories, all of which Israel practices routinely in the West Bank. If, for example South Korea or Japan had a contiguous land mass with the US and if their people lived side-by-side with US citizens but did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as US citizens, then the US would be considered undemocratic, an apartheid state at that. Simply put, no country can call itself a democracy while it simultaneously exercises authoritarianism over other countries and people that share the same land mass.

“How can a nation be an occupier of its own ancestral land? Or maybe you mean New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona? So, which is the occupier?”

I wonder if this critic will be willing to apply the same postulate to other people anywhere else in the world. If every indigenous peoples came back to reclaim the land of their ancestors from 2,000 years ago, the world's map would not even remotely resemble the current borders that delineate nearly 200 countries. Moreover, I wonder how this critic will respond to the following hypothesis: suppose the Jews were living in Palestine for hundreds of years, yet the Palestinians occupied the same land more than 2,000 years before, and now have come back to reclaim it. Should the Israeli Jews concede that the land indeed belongs to the Palestinians, because it was their ancestral land two millennia ago? Indeed, for how many centuries do people need to live on any land to claim it as their own?

Instead of finding a formula whereby both people, Israelis and Palestinians, can coexist peacefully and negotiate a two-state solution, if for no other reason other than the fact that Israel simply cannot evict all three million Palestinians from the West Bank, instead, Israel is opting to maintain the occupation and conveniently claim that a nation cannot be an occupier of its own ancestral land, despite the passage of thousands of years and the peoples who have lived on the land in the intervening millennia. If this is not twisted logic, I don't know what is.

“You are delusional. Either the IDF controls Judea/Samaria or Iran controls Judea/Samaria. Pick one. I guess you pick Iran. So, tell your readers that!”

Can this or any other critic tell us how and by what means Iran will be able to control Judea and Samaria, the West Bank? Any talk of a two-state solution that will put an end to the occupation will have to be based on categorical and unshakable security arrangements between Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. This has been discussed time and again in the past, and the Palestinians want such security arrangements for their own sake just the same. Even at the present, Israel and the Palestinian Authority collaborate on all security matters.

The PA knows full well that Israel will not relinquish a single inch of territory unless there is an iron clad security arrangement in place to ensure its national security. Moreover, no country, including Iran, will ever be in a position to control the West Bank given Israel's formidable military prowess that will crush any foreign power that challenges Israel's military dominance now or at any time in the future, even if an independent Palestinian state has been established.

“I agree with every word you write. However, I think that before talking about a Palestinian state, Israel must improve the situation of its own Arab population. The Israeli Arabs can and must become the bridge between the Jewish Israelis and the Palestinians.”

There should be no doubt that Israel must address the discrimination against its own Arab citizens; however, it cannot ignore the urgent need to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The two are not mutually exclusive and must be tackled simultaneously, as indeed one can complement the other.

In last week's demonstration in Tel Aviv against the so-called judicial reforms, demonstrators also carried banners proclaiming that the occupation is incompatible with democracy. As they see it, the judicial reforms if enacted and the continuing occupation would destroy Israel's democracy, and the public must now relentlessly fight against these two menaces to save Israel's democracy.

To be sure, the Israeli occupation has no logical, political, or biblical justification or even national security implications. It not only adversely affects the Palestinians, instigating militancy and endless violence as we are witnessing day in and day out; the occupation is dangerously eroding Israel's social fabric and moral standing, regardless of what kind of spins are put on it.

Admitting the truth about the occupation is the one bitter pill that none of its supporters wants to swallow. Should we now leave it to the demagogues who concoct utterly illogical scenarios to mislead the public about the true nature of the occupation, to which only fools would subscribe?

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