

a launchpad to fire rockets and missiles into Israel. This, in turn, led to a heated debate in Israel regarding the merits of unilateral disengagements and whether, after all, it was in Israel's interests to evacuate occupied lands without leaving the keys to someone else.

## *Into a Fifth Decade of Occupation*

The chronicle, thus far, of Israel's occupation of the lands it gained in its stunning victory in the Six Day War of 1967 is as follows: in the first decade after 1967, Israel found it difficult to decide what to do with the vast tracts of land it had unexpectedly captured from Egypt, Jordan and Syria. It had no organized plan and could not make up its mind as to which parts of the occupied territories to keep and which to return, but its instinct was to sit and wait, generally preferring to keep the land and forgo peace with her neighbours. Any consideration there was of returning some of the occupied lands – mainly the Sinai to Egypt and the Golan to Syria – emerged only as a tactical device to enable Israel to cling to the West Bank, the cradle of Jewish history, and to the Gaza Strip, which, for strategic reasons, Israel sought to keep. But, in the absence of any serious international pressure, even these peripheral thoughts disappeared. Ministers did not heed warnings that time was short and the opportunity to strike a deal, particularly with the Palestinians, could be lost for a generation or more if they did not act swiftly: in hindsight, it seems safe to argue that Israel missed a unique opportunity to strike peace deals with its neighbours during this first decade of occupation.

In the second decade, from 1977 to 1987, Israel, at last, decided what it wanted to do: after the 1977 electoral upheaval which saw the right-wing Likud Party come to power for the first time in Israel's history, the new prime minister, Menachem Begin, embarked on a grand plan to make the occupation irreversible, at the heart of which was the construction of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, particularly on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. The Begin-led government did, after some international pressure, sparked by President Sadat's

bold and public offer to conclude a deal, and with an unprecedented promise of economic and security aid from America, end the occupation of the Sinai. But Begin was determined to keep the Palestinian occupied territories – the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – for good, and the Golan Heights, which Israel officially annexed, for the time being at least. Oblivious to history and reality, Israel tried to consolidate its control over these occupied lands by employing anachronistic and illegitimate colonialist methods, notably the building of settlements in defiance of international law.

In the next two decades of the occupation, from 1987 to 2007, Israel finally began to sober up, not least in the face of the first *intifada* in 1987, which compelled a growing number of Israelis to realize that the occupation project was doomed. In 1991, a new peace initiative got underway with the Madrid Conference, aimed at bringing peace in return for land and an end to occupation. But this peace process was not rigorous enough and Israel failed to show magnanimity. The Palestinians, who by recognizing Israel's right to exist, in 1988, effectively gave up on their claim to 78 per cent of old Palestine, were determined not to allow the Israelis to eat into the remaining 22 per cent, and were, therefore, reluctant to compromise further during the peace negotiations. And in their frustration, on the ground, they fought against the occupation, as was their legitimate right, and perhaps the logical course given the lesson of history that Israel only gives in when under pressure.

Gradually, during the peace process, the Israelis came to realize that the price for peace would be high: that Syria would insist on a full withdrawal from the occupied Golan Heights and that the Palestinians would want an equitable deal. Unwilling to pay this price, the Israelis, in a process that would reach its climax during Sharon's tenure as prime minister, from 2001 to 2006, put peace with Syria on hold and unilaterally pulled out from the Gaza Strip, in truth a thorn in Israel's side, which let them cling on to the West Bank and its resources while avoiding the bigger issues of the occupation. However, Israel's short love affair with unilateralism came to an end after it was seen to lead to the ascent of Hamas in Gaza, which went on to attack Israel with rockets from the Strip.

Growing competition and divisions between Hamas in the Gaza

Strip and the more secular Palestinian regime on the West Bank over recent years play straight into Israel's hands, as the Israeli government justifies its reluctance to move ahead with the peace process by the fact that the Palestinians are just too divided and Hamas fails to recognize Israel's right to exist. And the so-called Arab Spring, and the disintegration of the Bashar Assad regime, removes, at least for now, any chance of talks between Israel and Syria to end the Golan occupation.

So where does this leave us and what is in store for the fifth decade of Israeli occupation, already well underway?

Clearly, the option of the first decade – sticking to the status quo – is no longer available, and the alternative of the second – building settlements in an attempt physically to swallow the occupied territories into Israel – was never realistic. The strategy of the fourth decade – unilateralism – has lost all support within Israel, which brings us back to the strategy of the early 1990s, namely an attempt to end the occupation through peace negotiations with Palestinians and Arabs. But for peace negotiations to resume in a meaningful way the international community, and particularly the US, will have to be tough with Israel and when necessary bribe it into compromise. If the past four decades have proved anything, it is that the Israelis will not give up the occupied territories easily.

I have little doubt that the occupation will come to an end at some point in the future, as all wars and conflicts do. In 1967, no one would have thought that Israel, Egypt and Jordan would have signed full peace treaties and, now, it is safe to expect similar agreements to be signed, at some point, between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and Syria and Lebanon. But given the depth of the bad blood between the parties, particularly the Israelis and Palestinians, and the current revolutions in the Middle East, which distract from the conflict with Israel, it could take many generations before a true reconciliation takes hold. What is clear is that Israel's attempt to swallow the occupied territories over the last four decades of occupation has failed.

I believe that the verdict of history will regard the four decades of occupation described in this book as a black mark in Israeli and,

indeed, Jewish history. This was a period in which Israel, helped by the Jewish diaspora, particularly in America, proved that even nations which have suffered unspeakable tragedies of their own can act in similarly cruel ways when in power themselves. Back in 1967, the defence minister at the time, Moshe Dayan, observed that if he had to choose to be occupied by any force from among the nations of the world, he doubted he would choose Israel. He was right; looking back it is clear that Israel was – and in the time of writing is still – a heavy-handed and brutal occupier. While other colonialists, like the British in India and others, learnt the value of co-opting local elites, of building schools, universities and other public amenities for the colonized, Israel, by contrast, never really thought it had any duty to help or protect the people under its control or to improve the quality of their lives, regarding them, at most, as a captive market and ready source of cheap labour. But by forcing them to live in squalor and without hope, Israel hardened those under its power, making them more determined to put an end to the occupation, by violent means if necessary, and live a life of dignity and freedom.

## *Afterword to the paperback edition*

Shortly after the release of *Cursed Victory* in the UK, in the summer of 2014, an all-out war broke out between Israel and the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The roots of this fierce clash, which came to be known in Israel and elsewhere as ‘Operation Protective Edge’, were to be found in Israel’s continuing occupation and the brutal pressure from its army, especially on the Gaza Strip, where nearly two million Palestinians live in appalling conditions.

Israel, as we have seen, officially evacuated the Gaza Strip in 2005 under Prime Minister Sharon, declaring that it was no longer an occupied land and that Israel had no obligations under international human rights law towards Gaza’s population. However the majority of the international community, including the UN, did not accept that this was a legitimate evacuation, since Israel, even after the departure of its troops and settlements, effectively continued to control the Gaza Strip from the outside through various methods. It did so from the sky by using electronic devices such as surveillance balloons, floating as high as 300 metres above the Strip, to collect data about every corner of the Strip and its people. This intelligence was then used by pilots to assassinate Palestinian activists that Israel deemed ‘terrorists’ by firing missiles at them from helicopters and dropping bombs on them from aeroplanes.

Gazans, over the years, became accustomed to the constant overhead buzzing of helicopters, planes and particularly the notorious drones – unpiloted air vehicles, used by the Israelis for surveillance and attacks. A Gazan named Yamin explains in an interview that: ‘when we hear an Apache [helicopter] or an Israeli F16 [jet] we know that it will only be there for a while and we can go into our houses for

safety. Drones, however, are in the air 24 hours a day so the people don't hide from them. We can't hide 24 hours a day'.<sup>1</sup>

Israel also continued to maintain control of the Strip from the sea where its navy, which constantly patrolled the Mediterranean water along Gaza's coast, effectively sealed off the Strip, preventing anyone from approaching the area by sea. When on one occasion a Turkish flotilla attempted to pass through the Israeli navy to bring food and supplies to aid the Gazans, the Israelis attacked them, killing several people on board and seizing their ship. Above all, Israeli control of the Gazans manifested itself in the monitoring of the entries into and the exits from the Gaza Strip, through which Palestinians could – depending on changing Israeli moods – travel to the West Bank. Often, Gazans asking for exit permits to visit family and friends on the West Bank or to go there on business trips had to 'pay back' by providing Israeli officials with intelligence on life in the Gaza Strip and on specific people there, thus effectively becoming collaborators with Israel's remote control occupation.

### IMPOSING A BLOCKADE

The rise to power of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic movement, in 2007, turned out to be a turning point for Gaza, leading to even harsher Israeli treatment of its people. Regarding Hamas as a sworn enemy, successive Israeli governments attempted to topple its leadership by turning to a tactic which had proved effective in Lebanon in 1982.

At that time, much before the birth of Hamas, Israel's leading Palestinian enemy was Yasser Arafat, who would dispatch his guerrillas to strike at Israel from his then headquarters in Beirut. Keen to disrupt Arafat's activities, Israel invaded Lebanon and, in the summer of 1982 it imposed a blockade on its capital; as an artillery officer I was part of the IDF machine which operated this blockade.

Surrounding Beirut from all sides and controlling it from the air and sea too, the Israeli military cut off electricity and water supplies, and restricted the amount and types of foods, particularly flour, entering the city; at the same time, artillery, aeroplanes and war ships kept bombing

large sections of Beirut. The Israelis hoped that the pressure on the capital – the fire, restrictions on food, water and electricity – would break the morale of the Beirutis and they would then turn their backs on Arafat. It worked well: in August 1982, the Lebanese government – exhausted by the continuing Israeli tactics and the destruction of their capital – demanded that Arafat and his guerrillas leave Beirut, at which point the Palestinian leader relocated to Tunisia.

Since Hamas has come to power in Gaza, the military has implemented the same tactics it did in Lebanon. Taking advantage of its air, sea and land control of the Strip, Israel has imposed a strict blockade on the Gazans in order to make their lives hell and break their spirit in the hope that they turn their backs on Hamas.

The most visible aspect of the Israeli blockade on Gaza was the restrictions it imposed on the imports of foods; the aim was to allow the Gazans just enough food and no more. The Israelis developed mathematical formulas to measure the number of days it would take the Gazans to run out of each particular product, what the Israelis called 'the length of breath'. Lower and upper lines were set up to give the army 'advance warnings' of 'shortages' and 'surpluses'. If, and when, the 'upper line' for a given food item was reached its import was blocked, only to be topped up when an advance warning was issued, based on the mathematical formula, that the 'lower line' was reached. For the Gazans, this heartless system produced food insecurity and total dependence on the goodwill of the Israelis. At the same time, food items regarded by the Israelis as 'luxuries' such as tinned fruit, disappeared altogether from shop shelves.

Building materials were also restricted under the Israeli blockade: cement, gravel and steel bars were all banned, which, in turn, triggered a severe housing shortage as only a fraction of the 40,000 housing units needed to meet natural population growth and the loss of homes destroyed during previous Israeli attacks could be built. The housing crisis, which was directly caused by the Israeli blockade, had devastating humanitarian consequences as many Gazans had to live in increasingly cramped living quarters. Gazan Mihdad Abu Ghneimeh, who lived in a house in eastern Gaza City that was partially destroyed in an Israeli attack with twenty-six extended family

members and his wife and seven children all in the same 30 square metre-bedroom, described the dire conditions:

I am tired of this situation. None of us has any privacy. My wife is obliged to cover her head all day since my extended family also lives with us. All children study in the same room where we all sleep; it has no windows and its door cannot be locked. As my children range from a few months to 14 years old, and they are boys and girls, it is not appropriate for them to live side-by-side. This often results also in fights and tension.<sup>2</sup>

Gaza's farmers were also targeted by the Israeli blockade, as they were totally or partially prevented from accessing land located up to 1,000–1,500 metres from the perimeter fence surrounding Gaza and separating it from Israel; altogether the army restricted farmers' access to 17 per cent of the total land mass of the Gaza Strip which is 35 per cent of its agricultural land. To stop Palestinian farmers from getting into the banned areas, the Israeli Air Force dropped warning leaflets, and bulldozers would cross the perimeter fence into Gaza to raze to the ground greenhouses and uproot fruit trees; troops would often open fire against farmers trying to access their own lands, thus turning the forbidden areas into killing fields.<sup>3</sup> Farmers lucky enough to be able to access their fields would see much of the fruits and vegetables rot on trees as restrictions on the export of goods out of the Strip were also imposed without any advance warning.

At sea, as of 2007, restrictions on fishing became harsher as the Navy banned fishermen from accessing fishing areas beyond three nautical miles from the shore, which meant that they were banned from fishing in what was 85 per cent of the maritime areas they were entitled to according to the Oslo Agreements they signed with Israel back in the early 1990s. While the Israeli blockade failed to convince the Gazans to turn their backs on Hamas, it did cause profound misery and widespread unemployment as many – at certain times up to 40 per cent – were out of work.

As long as the regime in Egypt was friendly to Hamas, particularly under Mohamed Morsi, who ruled Egypt from 30 June 2012 to July 2013, food and other supplies still trickled into the Gaza Strip through a system of underground-dug-tunnels connecting the Sinai desert and

the Gaza Strip. But in June 2014, Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil el-Sisi took power in Egypt and, regarding Hamas as too close an ally of the Muslim Brotherhood movement (the opposition in Egypt) quickly distanced himself from Hamas and ordered the military to shut down the tunnels between the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Thus, Israel's strict blockade and the closing down of the Sinai–Gaza tunnels combined to turn the Gaza Strip into a powder keg waiting to blow. What eventually ignited it were events that took place on the occupied West Bank.

### THE POWDER KEG EXPLODES

There, in June 2014, three young Israeli settlers were abducted by Palestinian activists associated with Hamas, but not on the instructions of the organization. This event was regarded by the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu as a serious attack on Israel, but also as an opportunity to weaken Hamas on the West Bank, where it was particularly strong in the southern town of Hebron. Subsequently, the government dispatched hundreds of troops into the occupied West Bank to search for the abducted settlers – who were eventually found dead – and also to take advantage of the crisis to strike Hamas.

The measures the army unleashed against Hamas on the West Bank were particularly harsh and indeed humiliating: hundreds of activists, many of whom had nothing to do with the abduction of the three settlers, were arrested and thrown into jails without even standing trial, Hamas centres and institutions were closed down and their computers seized for intelligence purposes. Humiliated and upset by the Israeli clampdown in the West Bank, Hamas in Gaza and other militants, such as Islamic Jihad, started firing rockets against Israeli villages from inside the Strip, also in an attempt to break – once and for all – the eight-year blockade which had becoming especially unbearable since the closure of the tunnels connecting to the Sinai.

For forty-five days Israel and Hamas traded blows. Hamas used rockets and missiles that reached as far as Tel Aviv; at one point a missile landing close to Israel's international airport led to the suspension of international flights. At the same time, Hamas's infantry fighters

tried to penetrate Israeli settlements by using a web of underground tunnels which they had dug under the Israeli nose during the years preceding the war.

The damage Hamas inflicted on Israel was minimal as Israel's effective anti-missile system, the Iron Dome, managed to intercept most of the incoming missiles and the ground and underground attacks Hamas initiated were easily repelled by the better trained and equipped Israeli army which had the technologies to spot the Hamas fighters the moment they emerged out of the tunnels on the Israeli side. The Israelis, on the other hand, inflicted an enormous amount of damage on the Gaza Strip: jets and artillery were used indiscriminately to raze to the ground whole Palestinian neighbourhoods, leaving behind scenes of utter devastation. At the end of the war some neighbourhoods of the Strip resembled Dresden during the Second World War, with many of the 2,200 Palestinians killed – mostly innocent civilians – still under the rubble.

#### AS FOR THE FUTURE

Along with its Gaza blockade, which at the time of writing is still underway, the Israeli government is taking advantage of the wave of revolutions in the Arab world and the fact that world attention is focused particularly on Syria and Iraq to consolidate its hold on the occupied West Bank by building more settlements there. If Israel is not stopped from taking over Palestinian lands and building more settlements then the prospect of a viable Palestinian state on the West Bank linked to the Gaza Strip diminishes, as the physical separation between Israel and the future Palestine which is necessary in order to create two states will be just too difficult to implement. So what *could* persuade the Israelis to end their remote-control occupation of Gaza, and particularly their direct occupation and attempts to swallow up the West Bank?

As I put it in the last chapter of this book, the most viable option to end the occupation is through direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, whereby the parties agree to establish a Palestinian state to live side by side in peace with Israel. But, by now, it is exceedingly clear that the Israelis – the stronger party which is also holding

almost all of the assets – will not move unless it is compelled to do so. It is only pressure that will persuade the Israelis to end the occupation; indeed, the lesson of history is that Israel only relinquishes occupied lands and compromises with its enemies when under pressure. Pressure should come from two sources: from the Palestinians themselves who, given the Israeli reluctance to compromise, are left with no other option but to embark on a non-violent-Ghandi-style third intifada against the occupation – at the time of writing I can clearly detect growing Palestinian resistance to the occupation. The other source of pressure on the Israelis must come from the international community; this must also include boycotts on products and services emanating from Jewish settlements on the occupied territories. Boycotts were effective in ending South Africa's apartheid regime and there is no reason why they should not have an impact on Israel too.

It is reasonable to believe that like other occupations before it, the Israeli occupation will, at some point in the future, collapse, and a Palestinian state will emerge on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But states are not given to people on silver platters and the Palestinians will have to keep fighting for one; more importantly, they must be helped in their struggle by the international community which must not stand idly by as the Israeli occupation – one of the cruellest and brutal in modern history – continues.