

## Frequently Asked Questions – 40 Years of Occupation

### **I. When and why did the occupation begin?**

In June 1967, under enormous threat from all sides, Israel launched a preemptive attack against Egypt, initiating the Six-Day War; Jordan and Syria joined the fighting almost immediately. Much to everyone's surprise, Israel was overwhelmingly victorious and seized control of the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Then, insisting the Arab nations recognize Israel's "statehood, sovereignty, and international rights," Israel refused to withdraw to pre-war lines without direct negotiations. The Arab League responded with "the three nos:" no peace, no recognition, and no negotiations. Israel quickly established its control over the territories, initially establishing military outposts followed by civilian settlements.

### **2. When did the settlement project begin and why has it continued to expand? Who are the settlers today?**

Messianic notions and religious claims to Biblical lands motivated the first settlers. Happy for help in establishing control over land with strategic advantage, the Israeli government frequently encouraged or directly authorized new settlements. The settler movement developed into a powerful political force, and many Labor leaders, including Yitzchak Rabin, gladly appeased the growing constituency for settlement expansion, both to strengthen Israel's hand in the territories, and to protect fragile government coalitions. With the 1977 victory of Likud and Menachem Begin, however, the settler movement found a leader dedicated to the Greater Israel ideology, insisting that far from being "occupied," the territories belonged to the Jewish people. The settlement project became an openly acknowledged national priority.

Expansion has continued, however, regardless of government make-up and often directly contradicting international agreements to which Israel is committed (Oslo Accords, Road Map to Peace). Every Israeli government, regardless of its position on negotiations, has viewed the creation of a Palestinian state with great suspicion, and has been eager to limit such a state's potential independence. Thus, the settlement project has served to establish "facts on the ground" in order to render difficult the creation of a territorially contiguous Palestinian state.

Some 268,000 Israelis live in the West Bank, 184,000 in East Jerusalem and 17,000 on the Golan Heights. A minority of "ideological settlers" justify their presence in occupied territory in religious and nationalist terms. The majority of settlers are not ideologically motivated, however, having moved to the territories out of quality of life considerations, such as affordable housing and government benefits. Others feel that by living on the West Bank or Golan Heights, they are effectively enlarging the size of Israel, providing the country with greater protection against attack. All tend to identify politically with the Israeli right but "quality of life" settlers have shown a willingness to relocate to Israel in return for financial compensation.

### **3. Why is Jerusalem such a contentious issue in terms of the occupation?**

Since Israel conquered the eastern, Palestinian sections of the city, each government has made a concerted effort to move in Jews, and with deliberate discrimination, “to encourage” Palestinians to leave. The city’s municipal boundaries have expanded into the West Bank, and in 1980, the Knesset declared the entire city the “eternal capital” of the Jewish state. Today, many Israelis don’t see the newly Jewish neighborhoods as settlements, and are often deeply offended when it’s suggested that this, too, is occupation. Successive Israeli governments have counted on the emotional resonance Jerusalem has among Jews to create a new reality, deepening the country’s hold on occupied land under the guise of protecting Jewish holy places. Jerusalem has served as the cultural and political center of the Palestinian population for centuries, however, and Palestinians see the city as the capital of their future state. Several model peace plans, such as the Geneva Accord, have advocated for a compromise on Jerusalem, essentially sharing sovereignty.

### **4. What role does the separation barrier have in the occupation?**

The separation barrier has been represented as a means to prevent infiltration from the West Bank; some believe Israel is using it to establish what could become its permanent border. At many points along its route, the wall cuts well into Palestinian-owned land, dividing villages and rendering local farmlands inaccessible. The barrier also encircles large Israeli settlements located in the heart of the West Bank, essentially annexing to Israel lands internationally recognized as Palestinian.

### **5. What does the Gaza withdrawal teach us about any future West Bank evacuation?**

Based on Israel’s experience in South Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005, it is now widely recognized that unilateral withdrawal emboldens militant extremists seeking to gain public prestige through a perceived Israeli retreat. Any future withdrawal from the West Bank, therefore, must be coordinated with Palestinian leaders in order to pre-arrange appropriate security measures to avoid handing extremists a perceived victory. On the other hand, the Gaza disengagement demonstrated that ideologically driven religious settlers could be relocated to Israel proper with a minimum of violence or threat of domestic conflict.

### **6. Why is ending the occupation important? Why should American Jews care?**

Israelis face daily threat from Palestinians fighting a battle to end the occupation of their lands. Negotiating a withdrawal to the 1967 borders with adjustments agreeable to both parties would both end the immediate reason for anti-Israeli violence, and create a Palestinian government with the authority to rein in the extremist minority who might not accept the plan. Moreover, the occupation continues to serve as an excuse for bordering nations not to recognize Israel and can lead to situations such as the 2006 war in Lebanon, where an extra-governmental movement was able to spark a full-scale war, further endangering Israelis.

Most American Jews support the notion of a two-state solution, but many believe that it is impossible without strong US government leadership to facilitate the essential resumption of talks. American Jews, through home district and Washington-based advocacy, can play a significant role in encouraging our government to lead the way to ending the occupation, leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state. The occupation endangers Jews worldwide by buttressing anti-Israeli sentiment, which in many instances becomes anti-Semitic sentiment.

## **7. What is the position of the US government towards settlements?**

No US administration has ever approved of the settlements, viewing their construction as an effort to determine the outcome of final status talks. However, with the exception of the first President Bush, no American president has ever confronted Israel on the issue. In April 2004, however, George W. Bush suggested that future negotiations would need to take into account “realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers,” (i.e., settlements), asserting “it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949.”

## **8. What can American Jews do to end the occupation?**

American Jews are critically important in bringing the message of US diplomatic engagement to both the Administration and Congress. Brit Tzedek activities such as letter writing, home-district meetings with elected officials, house parties and speaking tours in the Jewish community focus on seeking a two-state resolution. Our activists also convey the message that discussions shared among friends and family can change the perceptions of our decision-makers. Conventional wisdom may say the American Jewish community is of one mind regarding Israel, lining up unquestionably behind every Israeli policy. Brit Tzedek’s pro-Israel, pro-peace advocacy against the occupation changes this perception, and ensures that our alternative voice will be counted.