

## Are 40 Years of Occupation Enough?

By Marcia Freedman

Israel celebrated the 59th anniversary of its founding just recently. On June 5 we mark 40 years of occupation of Arab lands captured in the 1967 war. That is, for two-thirds of its 59 years of its existence as a sovereign state, Israel has been an occupying power.

Though Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, it still occupies East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. In Gaza, even without settlements, Israel continues to control all movement in and out of the Strip and is legally the occupying power. In all the other territories, Israel has built neighborhoods, large and ever-expanding settlements and at least one entire city (Ariel, some 10 miles inside the West Bank).

Two of Israel's three post-state generations have grown up with the fact of occupation as a norm, serving in an army of occupation, visiting friends and families living in settlements, and slowly erasing the Green Line, the pre-1967 border, from consciousness. Traveling through Israel today, it is impossible to know where Israel-proper ends and where occupied territory begins.

Yet, for all that, a growing consensus has taken hold that an end of conflict can be achieved only through a land-for-peace formula culminating in the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel; the great majority of Israelis are prepared to withdraw from most of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights in return for an enduring peace.

Since 1967, the Israeli leadership has been caught between these polar opposites, listing for decades between support for the settler movement, even as the politicians profess to seek peace. The resulting paralysis has made it easy for the very determined settler movement to expand its hold, not only over territory but also over the government's bureaucracies, which now routinely feed the movement's endless appetite for more land, more infrastructure, more housing, more subsidies.

And so, while it is true that Israel's neighbors have not always been willing to negotiate, even when they have been, they have not been met – contrary to conventional wisdom – with similar willingness on the Israeli side.

This was certainly true in 1972 when the Egyptians put forth a land-for-peace option, and Golda Meir's government rejected it, leading to the 1973 Yom Kippur War. It was true again in 2000, when Ehud Barak broke off negotiations with Syria over a few disputed miles of the Sea of Galilee's shoreline, and again later that same year, when the Israeli-Palestinian Camp David negotiations broke down – not, as we've been told, because of Palestinian refusal to accept a "generous offer," but as a result of intransigence on both sides. Within months, the Second Intifada had begun.

This aversion to negotiation continued to hold sway in 2004 and 2005, when Ariel Sharon refused to recognize the opportunity presented by Yasser Arafat's death, and subsequent rise to leadership of the moderate leader Mahmoud Abbas; a bloody escalation of violence ensued, Hamas was elected to head the Palestinian Authority, and Israel's south now faces regular rocket attacks. Today, Ehud Olmert refuses to respond positively to clear

and open overtures by Syria and the Arab League, and experts ponder the likelihood of another war with Syria. Active maintenance of the settlement enterprise continues to trump the pursuit of peace.

One major casualty of 40 years of occupation has been the decades-long weakening of Israel's political, military and moral fabric. Last summer's Lebanon War, and Israel's failure either to win or to defend the home front shredded what remained of the public's confidence in its leaders, political, military and moral. The interim report of the Winograd Commission's investigation into the conduct of the war has confirmed, loudly and publicly, that Israel's security has been seriously compromised, that its leadership has failed the country badly, and that none of this can be easily fixed.

But there is one significant change in the political mood as a result of all these grim tidings: The Second Lebanese War finally raised questions in the public's mind about whether Israel can, in fact, rely solely on military might to guarantee its security. There is a sense of vulnerability that never existed before, which may create a more welcoming attitude to the possibility of a negotiated resolution – though such a prospect most definitely would require the kind of willingness for serious territorial compromise that Israel's leadership has chronically lacked. Ironically, a somewhat weaker Israel from the military point of view may mean a stronger Israel as a negotiating partner.

Is Israel ready for peace? Certainly its people are, and have been for quite a long time. Can Israel's political leadership find the courage, the foresight, the vision to move in that direction? One can only hope so. Israel's friends do it no favors by encouraging further intransigence and missed opportunities for a negotiated solution to decades of conflict.

Time is not on Israel's side. The settler population grows, and the settlements and new neighborhoods take up more and more Palestinian land. So, too, does the Palestinian population grow, and thus the space for compromise shrinks from one year to the next. There are many who think that it is already too late for a viable two-state solution; that is not yet the case, but the fact is that the danger grows with each passing year of occupation and settlement expansion.

So, as we celebrate Israel's independence, let us also wish it a speedy end to the occupation.

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