

Exert 5

(pp116-121)

The Occupation : Social Consequences for Israelis and Palestinians

From the Israeli perspective security is a major concern, and their continued presence in the West Bank and Gaza has been justified on these grounds. From the Palestinian perspective a central issue is that they are living under Israeli military control. The effects of the occupation on the everyday life of the Palestinians is substantially absent from media coverage. Phrases such as 'military occupation' or 'military rule' are not normally used. Yet the conditions which the military presence has imposed on the Palestinians are a major factor in the unrest. In December 1998, the *Observer* reported a survey that had been published by B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group. The survey was to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and B'Tselem observed:

Apart perhaps, from the article prohibiting slavery, the State of Israeli violates each and every one of the Declaration's provisions in its behaviour towards the Palestinians in the territories.

B'Tselem found that the killing of Palestinians by Israeli settlers was rarely punished. It also reported that of the 1000 – 1500 Palestinian prisoners interrogated by the Israeli Shin Bet security services each year, 85 per cent were tortured. (1) This was in the period before the intifada and at this time Palestinian security forces were working extensively with Israel to arrest and detain dissidents and militants who were opposed to the agreements which had been reached between the Israelis and Arafat's administration. The *Observer* reported that the thirteen different Palestinian security forces had modelled themselves on Shin Bet and that three-quarters of their detainees had been tortured (13 December 1998). At the same time there were reports that thousands of Palestinians remained in Israeli jails, some from the time of the previous intifada 1987 (*The Guardian*, 7 November 1998).

To live under such rule had profound effects on the everyday lives of Palestinians. From their perspective, the Israelis had used the peace to extend their military and economic dominance. It became more difficult for Palestinians to travel as more

settlements and roads between them were built for the use of Israelis. These involved the bulldozing of large areas of land and the development of extensive systems of checkpoints and military security. One of the journalists we interviewed for this study had been the head of a news agency in Jerusalem in the period before the 2000 intifada. He commented to us:

My Palestinian neighbours could not go to the beach which you could practically see. They carry identity cards which tell everything about them. If an American viewer ever saw the extent to which the apartheid system is applied in the occupied territories – the pass laws make the South African system look benign. The Israelis say that [most] of the Palestinians are now under Palestinian Authority control. What they don't say is that they often can't even leave the town they are in.

He also commented that members of his Arab staff had been arrested and tortured by the Israelis. He made this criticism of TV news coverage of the conflict:

They cover the day to day action but not the human inequities, the essential imbalances of the occupation, the day to day humiliations of the Palestinians.

(Interview 10 June 2002)

Our own analysis of news content showed that the consequences to the Palestinians of living under military occupation were very rarely explored. There were occasional comments in the news that obliquely raised the issue. The BBC for example mentioned in a report that the Palestinians were 'tearing down security cameras' referring to these as 'hated symbols of Israeli authority' (BBC1 main News, 6 October 2000). Another report describes undercover police grabbing a demonstrator noting that 'these officers who never want to be identified, pretend to be Palestinians during a riot but when they spot a suspect they treat him with little mercy' (BBC1 early evening New, 13 October 2000). There are also occasional references to the occupation and occupied territories as for example when a BBC journalist says of young Palestinians that 'they don't trust the Americans and after all, they say it's the occupation to blame' (BBC1 lunchtime News, 2 October 2000). It was clear from our audience studies that many people would not understand such a reference. Because

the Israeli presence is not described as a military occupation and the significance of this is not explained, it was not clear what the word ‘occupation’ actually meant. Some understood it to mean simply that people were on the land (as in a bathroom being ‘occupied’).

There were two other occasions when news events were reported which could have been used to explain the nature of the occupation. On the 13th October 2000, the Israelis were reported on BBC and ITV, as stopping young Muslims from entering the old city to pray. Also, as we have seen, on the 9th and 10th, ITV discussed how the Israelis had surrounded Palestinian areas to ‘choke the life out of the revolt’ (quoted above). Both of these examples illustrate that the movement of Palestinians is subject to the wishes of the Israelis, but there was no commentary to indicate that movement could be routinely controlled, or discussion of this as a feature of the military occupation. The clearest statement on this issue came in a brief statement from a Palestinian who said that people are ‘penned like chickens, they can’t move freely’ (BBC 1 main News, 10 October 2000), but this comment is not taken up or developed by journalists.

There are two problems with coverage that does not explain the ‘military’ nature of the occupation and the consequences of this for the Palestinians. The first is that it is difficult for viewers to understand why the conflict is so intractable. It can appear simply as two communities who ‘can’t get on’ and who are squabbling over the same areas of land. The second is that such coverage disadvantages the Palestinian perspective, as a key reason for their unrest and anger is left unexplained. Some observers have commented on their own surprise when viewing the conflict at first-hand. They noted how this revealed the limits of their previous understanding and of the accounts that were prevalent in the media. A businessman for example, wrote as follows in the *Guardian*:

I have had business interests in the Middle East for many years, I often travel to Israel and the West Bank and I’m in contact with journalists, aid workers and UN officials there. I can state categorically that all those whom I have met, who have come to work on the West Bank with an open mind, or even, like me, with some prejudice in favour of Israel, leave with disgust and

rage at Israeli brutality, racism and hypocrisy. Some are Jewish. It is experience on the spot that leads them to this perception.

He also commented how even a newspaper such as *The Guardian* 'seems never to address adequately the justice [or the tragedy] of the Palestinian position, or the frightening racism that seems to me to be at the core of Israeli arguments and actions' (Letter, *The Guardian* 29 March 2001). Another correspondent discusses the role of the Israeli settlements in this system of control and also notes the absence of such analysis in media coverage:

A few days ago the BBC showed aerial film of a settlement. I was surprised by how unfamiliar it was to see one. I realised that few if any pictures are normally shown of settlements – their sheer scale, their facilities and their monopoly of the water supply. Nor is there any detailed map of their distribution...nothing prepared me for the shock of the prevalence and scale of the settlements when I visited the occupied territories. It is as though every other hill-top in Devon and Cornwall was taken over by a Milton Keynes-like town and occupied...looking down triumphantly over the indigenous locals corralled in the valleys below.

(Letter, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2001)

The issue that this raises is that the settlements have a key military and strategic function in the occupation. The point of being situated on the top of hills is that this offers a commanding position. At the time of the signing of the Wye Accords (supposedly a land for security agreement), Ariel Sharon who was then the Israeli Foreign Minister urged settlers in the West Bank to 'grab the hill-tops' (*The Guardian*, 8 January 1999). Yet when the BBC went to visit a settlement at the beginning of the intifada, the journalist stresses that it is 'intensely vulnerable, high on a hill'. There are no comments on how it functions in the occupation:

One regular target for Palestinian gunmen is the Jewish settlement of Passagot. It's *intensely vulnerable, high on a hill*, surrounded on all sides by Palestinian territory. Even a children's nursery had a bullet fired through the window. The settlers know they are in mortal danger. A dozen babies have

been evacuated just a few minutes earlier to the settlement's bomb shelter.

Settlers say Palestinians are trying to force them out.

(BBC1 late News, 5 October 2000 – our italics)

The settlers are then interviewed but there are no questions on what the conflict is actually about:

Settler: Well they want us out of here. They're shooting at us hoping that we'll pick up and leave.

Journalist: Do you have any intention of leaving?

Settler: No, no.

Journalist: Some people would say you're crazy staying here with so many bullets flying.

Settler: No, not crazy, we have our ideas and our ideals and we'll stick up for them and it's important to us.

(BBC1 late News 5 October 2000)

The journalist then comments without explanation that 'This place looks more like a fortress than a settlement' – which seems to miss the key argument that this is indeed what many settlements are. It is of course the case that some settlements are more exposed than others, but as Avi Shlaim notes (see above) their overall impact is to exert a strategic and military control as well as to command land and water resources. It is this analysis which is missing from news which focuses on vulnerability and the 'threat' to settlers, and in reports which present the Palestinians and Israelis as simply two warring communities. The key issue that remains unexplained is the structural division of society – one group is effectively controlling the lives of the other [with some resistance]. This point of view is not put to the settlers and they are not asked if they think it is right that Palestinians have lost their land so that settlements can be developed. In the following example from ITV the initial emphasis is again on Israel 'defending' and 'protecting' the 'small Jewish enclaves', while the Arabs are referred

to as ‘continuing their onslaught’. The reporter does note that the Palestinians regard the settlements as a ‘symbol of the Israeli occupation’. But without an explanation of what this occupation is and what it signifies for the Palestinians there is no clear rationale for their action other than that they are ‘driven by hatred’. The report begins with a studio introduction that contrasts the peace talks with the ongoing violence:

News caster: And even while those talks were on, the violence between Palestinians and Israeli security forces continued for the seventh day in a row. Among six Palestinians reported killed today was a boy of nine.

Line Journalist: The cycle of violence is unbroken, the trouble spots are the same each day. The Israeli army has again been defending the small Jewish enclaves on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – pockets in the midst of Palestinian towns and villages...here four hundred people are protected by around a thousand soldiers. Some Israelis believe such little Alamos should be defended at all costs. The Arabs of course feel very differently and today *driven on by hatred* continued their onslaught and there’s not much sign of conciliation here. These Palestinians regard the Jewish settlement here in Hebron as an affront, a symbol of the Israeli occupation that has not been brought to an end by the political process.

(ITV main News, 4 October 2000 – our italics)

The official Israeli view is that the settlements are simply Jewish communities under threat from ‘terrorists’ and ‘mobs’, as in this report:

Israeli soldiers are accused of using excessive force in response to the violence but insist they’re only defending their communities from the stone-throwing mobs.

(ITV lunchtime News, 4 October 2000)

This view of the settlements as essentially vulnerable and under 'threat' is clearly developed in other news accounts where journalists spend time following the lives and concerns of the settlers.

Endnotes

1. The use of torture by Israeli forces was outlawed by the Israeli high court in 1999. But after the start of the intifada in October 2000 there were reports that it was again being widely used.

(The Guardian, 13 June 2002)

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The Nature of the Occupation and Limits to Understanding

In our questions we had asked, who is occupying the occupied territories and what nationality were the settlers? In our main samples of British students only nine per cent in 2001 and 11 per cent in 2002 knew that the Israelis were occupying and that the settlers were Israeli. In the first of these samples there were actually more people who believed that the Palestinians were occupying the territories and that the settlers were Palestinian. In the German and US groups there were more people who knew the correct answer to both questions (26 per cent of the German students and 29 per cent of the US students). In the focus groups the figure was 39 per cent. The figures for the US students probably overstates the level of knowledge amongst young Americans since these were journalism and media students and some had done projects on the Israeli/Palestinian issue. Even so, there was a good deal of confusion amongst them. For example, over half of those who had written that the Palestinians became refugees on the formation of Israel or were 'forced from their homes by Israel' also thought that the Palestinians occupied the occupied territories. We found similar confusion in the British focus groups over who was occupying and what this signified. One woman from a London group commented on her reply as follows:

I put 'not sure', then I thought it was the Jews, then I thought maybe it was the Palestinians moving into Jewish occupied territory.

(Low income female group, London)

Given that so many did not know that there was a military occupation, it is not surprising that the consequences of it for the Palestinians were little understood. Even in groups that were comparatively well informed, such as middle-class males in Glasgow, there was little knowledge of economic consequences such as those caused

by the Israeli control of water. In the focus group sample as a whole only 9 per cent were aware of this issue. There was little understanding of areas such as human rights – only two people in all the focus groups raised these as an issue. Even in groups that tended to be sympathetic with the Palestinians (such as low income males in London) there was some surprise when they heard that there were pass laws and identity cards which restricted movement. There was almost no knowledge of the large number of UN resolutions which have been passed, either those relating to the legality of the occupation or to human rights abuses in the territories. These absences in public knowledge very closely parallel the absence of such information on the TV news. The issue of what people were not told was sometimes raised in the groups. In this exchange, Brian Hanrahan from the BBC asks whether reporters are seen to be taking sides in the conflict:

Brian Hanrahan: Do you think the reporter is telling you to believe one side rather than the other?

Female Speaker: I don't think it is always just the reporters telling you what side to believe. There's information that you get and also a lot of information that you don't get, so in that sense I feel what I'm being given is quite limited or selective.

This participant then speaks about the limited coverage of dissent within Israel. She describes how she had seen a very small article about this issue and compares it with very large headlines on other subjects:

I remember seeing in the newspaper a tiny little article and it was about some young students in the Jewish army who refused to fight: "this isn't fair" [they said] and they refused. They were supposed to be forcing some Palestinians out of some territory and they refused to do it and they put down their arms...but it was only like a tiny little piece of information, so in that way, when you get a small piece of information, a tiny article and it's further down the newspaper it's very, very easy to miss. I feel as though in other [subjects] you get big headlines and even those are choosing.

(Low income female group, London)

The perception which audiences had of Israeli settlers in the occupied territories was also significant. On the news as we have seen, the settlers were presented as vulnerable and under attack. Yet as we noted above, the settlements have a key role in the occupation. As the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim put it, they were part of a policy of exerting strategic and military control. Many were built on hilltops to give them a commanding position with the explicit encouragement of Ariel Sharon. Established settlements were strongly fortified and their occupants were often heavily armed. One of the very few people in the focus groups who knew this actually wrote that: ‘the word settler is a euphemism’ (male teacher, Paisley). But it was more common to see the issue in the terms adopted by the news. The ‘occupied territories’ were not seen as having been subject to military occupation and the settlements were not understood as being part of this. The army was there simply to keep the Palestinians back:

Moderator: Do you get the impression watching the news that it is a military occupation by Israel?

Male Speaker: A military occupation? No, it’s to give the Israelis land to work on, to live on and the army backs them up and keeps back the Palestinians in my opinion.

(Middle-class male group, Glasgow)

Another participant described his impression of TV news:

I think you sometimes get the impression from the news that these are people who happen to want to live there...and the military backup is in pursuit of their peaceful wish to just go and live there, and I think that’s the impression I get from the news, rather than that it is a military occupation.

(Teachers’ group, Paisley)

With this perception of the conflict it is not hard to see how the Palestinians appear as the aggressors. As a Glasgow student put it:

I had no idea why they were fighting, I just thought it was the Palestinians trying to claim more land. I didn't know it was kind of like back [had a history]. I knew it was disputed but I didn't know the Israelis had taken land.

Two other students from Glasgow described the influence on their beliefs of seeing a documentary by John Pilger, which showed the power and reach of the settlements (1) :

First Speaker (Male): The all-Jewish roads, I'd not seen that before.

Second Speaker (Female): It made it look much more like an invasion and not just a bunch of poor benighted people trying to find somewhere to live.

Even people who were sympathetic to the Palestinians had absorbed the message of the settlers as small embattled communities. A middle-class male from Glasgow described his surprise when he heard that the settlements controlled over 40 per cent of the West Bank:

I had absolutely no idea it was that percentage – I was gob-smacked when I heard it. I saw them as small, embattled and surrounded by hostile Palestinians – that's entirely thanks to watching the television news.

There were other areas where the absence of explanation made it difficult to understand the motives of those involved.

Endnotes

1. *Palestine is Still the Issue* - transmitted ITV 16 September 2002