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Position Paper



The New Occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories

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Israel's concept for the "day after" in Gaza is becoming clearer as its war on the Strip continues into its second year. In fact, the features of this plan began to appear in the first months of the war and have crystallized through Israeli audacity enabled by international, regional, and Arab complicity in the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe and genocide.

The concept: Israel aims to impose a new occupation of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 that seeks to return to the pre-Oslo Accords status quo. The plan includes the expulsion of Palestinians from some areas and the establishment of a new local Palestinian authority to manage the civil affairs of the population, in order to free Israel of the burden of serving as an occupying power. Such a Palestinian authority would remain under Israeli military and security control, and would not be a political-national liberationist administration. This is the envisioned colonial project of further settlement that ends with the annexation of large areas of the West Bank. Such a gradual buildup of the Israeli perception of the Gaza Strip—while the assault on it continues—is not only the result of international and regional complicity and silence over Israeli practices, but also reflects the absence of any effective opposition to the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe and genocide.

A New Occupation in the Gaza Strip

Much writing has appeared from Israeli, Arab, and international analysts on Israel's scheme for post-war Gaza. Israel's rejection of ceasefire proposals did not arise from Israeli demands that Hamas rejected. Nor did the addition of conditions to Israeli mediators' proposals stem from a desire to improve the conditions for negotiating a ceasefire deal and freeing Israeli prisoners and hostages. Instead, Israeli rejectionism arose from its desire to implement its political and ideological vision for Gaza and to acquire more time to make that possible.

In December 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu published an article in the Wall Street Journal outlining his vision for the Gaza Strip. He laid out parameters for stopping the war, namely, demilitarizing the Strip, deradicalizing the population by changing the education curriculum, preventing Gaza from being a future threat to Israel, creating local governance, and safeguarding Israel's freedom to conduct military and security operations.¹

All Zionist projects, including those before the Nakba of 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel, begin with the imposition of facts on the ground under military pretexts, and quickly become a reality that paves the way for colonial and settler political schemes. The situation in Gaza will not be different. After the failure in the first months of the war of Israel's undeclared goal of displacing the Palestinian population to Sinai, Israel began to impose military realities to achieve this objective. The most important was gaining control of the Netzarim corridor, which runs from east to west in the middle

of Gaza, and of the Salah al-Din (Philadelphi) corridor in Rafah, in addition to expelling Palestinians from the northern part of the Strip.

Controlling the Netzarim corridor was part of Israel's military operations to separate the north from the south, to prevent the return of displaced persons to the north, and to cut off Hamas's military supply line between the two areas. Indeed, Netanyahu set the condition of Israeli control over Netzarim as a requirement for a ceasefire proposal, and justified this position by saying that he wanted to prevent the return of militants to the northern part of the Strip.

The Israeli Army widened the Netzarim corridor by between two and four kilometers. To do so, it demolished hundreds of Palestinian homes and buildings and uprooted trees three to four kilometers inside the border of the Strip.² The army also built eight military positions on the corridor, four in the north and four in the south. Thousands of reservists secure Netzarim by conducting raids nearby and by setting up observation posts alongside it. It is clear that the corridor is not only for security and military reasons but is also part of the Israeli vision of displacing the population in the north of the Strip and isolating it from the south.

Then came the military operation in Rafah in May 2024, which Netanyahu considered the last episode of achieving "overwhelming victory" in Gaza, marketing it as necessary to achieve the goals of the war by eliminating Hamas and freeing Israeli hostages. Israel then occupied the Rafah crossing and the Philadelphi corridor. Netanyahu quickly made Israeli control over Philadelphi a condition for any ceasefire agreement, despite the Israeli Army's position that it is not important for security and that the priority should be on freeing the hostages.

Aluf Benn, editor-in-chief of Haaretz, believes that Netanyahu's goal of maintaining Israeli control over Philadelphi and Netzarim goes beyond the goal of blocking a ceasefire deal. He considers Netanyahu's motives mainly ideological and focused on fragmenting Gaza into two areas, north and south, by enforcing Netzarim and besieging the Strip through the control of Philadelphi so that the north is under full Israeli rule, while the south is drowning in its problems. This strategy would negate the possibility of arming militants in the south via the Egyptian border while turning the north into an Israeli area almost completely empty of Palestinian residents and being prepared for settlement. Northern Gaza is a coastal plain that could constitute an important housing and economic zone for Israel.³

In this context, an Israeli right-wing movement calling itself "Justice for the Envelope" has recently become active. The movement consists of residents of the Gaza envelope (Israeli areas near the Gaza border) who are demanding Israeli control over the northern part of the Strip, in order to turn it into a commercial, tourist, and agricultural area as well as a buffer zone. The movement coordinates with the right-wing settlers who organized

the January 2024 conference calling for the displacement of the Palestinian population from Gaza and the return of the settlement movement. The conference was attended by ministers and Knesset members from the government coalition.⁴ This movement has much in common with ministers' persistent statements calling for settlement in the Gaza Strip, as well as with calls for the displacement of Palestinians by "Justice for the Envelope" as well as by the radical Nachala and Amana movements. Other settler movements are also active and have begun to prepare for settlement in the northern Strip, even making lists of those who wish to settle there.⁵

In addition, the generals' plan⁶ has recently appeared. It is presented as a means of pressuring Hamas to free Israeli hostages, but in fact it is part of the Israeli scheme for control over Gaza. The plan starts with the displacement of the residents of northern Gaza toward the south and the imposition of a siege on the north to pressure Hamas fighters in the area. Following the displacement, the plan envisions, Israel will declare the north a closed military zone and prohibit humanitarian aid from entering until Hamas surrenders.⁷ Israel has already begun to displace people from the north to the south and to lay siege to the Jabalia refugee camp. Israeli sources indicate that the goal of the military operation in the north ongoing since October 10 is the creeping annexation of areas of the Strip.⁸

New Occupation of the West Bank

The current Israeli government included in its policy program plans to expand the settlement enterprise in the West Bank, to increase the number of settlers there, and to prioritize its annexation. It entrusted the civil administration there to Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich in his dual capacity as a deputy minister of defense. This has been noted in the series of regulations issued consistent with the government's program, such as recognizing settlements, approving the building of tens of thousands of new units, and expanding the demolition of Palestinian homes. In practice and in law, the Israeli government has brought about a profound change in its system of control and occupation in the West Bank, even before the Al-Aqsa Flood operation.⁹

Israel's military campaigns against the West Bank did not begin because of the Al-Aqsa Flood attack. Israel tried before that to subjugate the West Bank militarily, but its campaigns escalated in violence and intensity after October 7, 2023, with the aim of striking the Palestinian camps that still maintain a resistance spirit against occupation and settlements. Israel believes that eliminating—or even scattering—Palestinian camps serves the goal of achieving tight security and military control over the West Bank to facilitate the expansion of the settlement enterprise, increasing both the territory used for and the density of settlement units. Israel has practically eliminated the lines drawn

by the Oslo Accords between the various areas of the West Bank. In fact, Israel has directly re-occupied the West Bank and maintains a weak Palestinian Authority (PA) that performs the minimal role of administering Palestinians' civil affairs. Israel pressures the PA to empty it of any political content and considers its diplomatic work "diplomatic terrorism." It punishes the PA for every step, even symbolic, that expresses the political-national aspect of its role.

Israel aims to restore the status quo that prevailed in the West Bank in the pre-Oslo era while keeping a Palestinian authority to manage local affairs. This was demonstrated even before the war on Gaza when the Knesset repealed, in March 2023, the 2004 law on disengagement from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank. That law had led to Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the dismantling of four settlements in the northern West Bank.¹⁰

Conclusion

Israel aims to impose a new kind of occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, not just to re-occupy these territories. Its new occupation begins with a return to the status quo ante before Oslo, with Israel being an occupying power but abandoning the administration of Palestinian civil affairs. Its dilemma remains the installation of a new Palestinian civil administration in Gaza that is in line with the new occupation. Israel also aims to unify the West Bank and Gaza, not in the sense of establishing a single administration and authority for the two territories, but in terms of establishing a unified system of occupation. In practice, this would involve transferring the status of the West Bank to the Gaza Strip, so that the two areas are under Israeli military control with two separate authorities, each of which is tasked with dealing with civilian issues without working toward any political or national action for liberation and independence.

The October 16 killing of Hamas head Yahya Sinwar marked the beginning of the Israeli link between a ceasefire "deal" and the "day after" in the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu will try to stall again until his project in the northern Strip is completed, imposing new realities on the plans for the day after. He is expected to link the issue of the hostages with Israel's concept for the day after. Doing so will help Netanyahu decide the future of Gaza so that a deal or ceasefire agreement will inaugurate a political phase there in line with the Israeli vision.

Endnotes

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