



## Articles – Leaving Gaza For Peace

The Israeli disengagement was not an act of peace, The Gaza Strip amounts to slightly more than 2 percent of the landmass of Palestine. This small detail is never mentioned whenever the Strip is in the news, nor was it mentioned in the Western media coverage of the dramatic events in Gaza in the summer of 2014 or in the Israeli aggression in 2021. Indeed, it is such a small part of the country that it has never existed as a separate region in the past. Before the Zionization of Palestine in 1948, Gaza's history was not unique or different from the rest of Palestine, and it had always been connected administratively and politically to the rest of the country. As one of Palestine's principal land and sea gates to the world, it tended to develop a more flexible and cosmopolitan way of life, not dissimilar to other gateway societies in the Eastern Mediterranean in the modern era. Its location on the coast and on the Via Maris from Egypt up to Lebanon brought with it prosperity and stability, until this was disrupted and nearly destroyed by the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948, followed by the ongoing war.

The Strip was created in the last days of the 1948 war. It was a zone into which the Israeli forces pushed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the city of Jaffa and its southern regions down into the town of Bir-Saba (Beersheba of today). Others were expelled to the zone from towns such as Majdal (Ashkelon) as late as 1950, in the final phases of the ethnic cleansing. Thus, a small pastoral part of Palestine became the biggest refugee camp on earth. It still like this today. Between 1948 and 1967, this huge refugee camp was delineated and severely restricted by the respective Israeli and Egyptian policies. Both states disallowed any movement out of the Strip, and as a result, living conditions became ever harsher as the number of inhabitants doubled. On the eve of the Israeli occupation in 1967, the catastrophic nature of this enforced demographic transformation was evident. Within two decades this once pastoral coastal part of southern Palestine became one of the world's

.most densely inhabited areas, without the economic and occupational infrastructure to support it

During the first twenty years of occupation, Israel did allow some movement outside the area, which was cordoned off with a fence. Tens of thousands of Palestinians were permitted to join the Israeli labor market as unskilled and underpaid workers. The price Israel demanded for this was total surrender. When this was not complied with, the free movement for laborers was withdrawn. In the lead up to the Oslo Accord in 1993, Israel attempted to fashion the Strip as an enclave, which the peace camp hoped would become either autonomous or a part of Egypt. Meanwhile the nationalist, right-wing camp wished to include it in the “Eretz Israel” they dreamed of establishing in place of .Palestine

The Oslo agreement enabled the Israelis to reaffirm the Strip’s status as a separate geopolitical entity, not just outside of Palestine as a whole, but also apart from the West Bank. Ostensibly, both were under Palestinian Authority control, but any human movement between them depended on Israel’s good will. This was a rare feature in the circumstances, and one that almost disappeared when Netanyahu came to power in 1996. At the same time, Israel controlled, as it still does today, the water and electricity infrastructure. Since 1993 it has used this control to ensure the well-being of the Jewish settler community on the one hand, and to blackmail the Palestinian population into submission on the other. Over the last fifty years, the people of the Strip have thus had to choose .between being internees, hostages, or prisoners in an impossible human space

It is in this historical context that we should view the violent clashes between Israel and Hamas since 2006. In light of that context, we must reject the description of Israeli actions as part of the “war against terror,” or as a “war of self-defense.” Nor should we accept the depiction of Hamas as an extension of al-Qaeda, as part of the Islamic State network, or as a mere pawn in a seditious Iranian plot to control the region. If there is an ugly side to Hamas’s presence in Gaza, it lies in the group’s

early actions against other Palestinian factions in the years 2005 to 2007. The main clash was with Fatah in the Gaza Strip, and both sides contributed to the friction that eventually erupted into an open civil war. The clash erupted after Hamas won the legislative elections in 2006 and formed the government, which included a Hamas minister responsible for the security forces. In an attempt to weaken Hamas, President Abbas transferred that responsibility to the head of the Palestinian secret service, a Fatah member. Hamas responded by setting up its own security forces in the Strip

In December 2006, a violent confrontation in the Rafah crossing between the Presidential Guard and the Hamas security forces triggered a confrontation that would last until the summer of 2007. The Presidential Guard was a Fatah military unit, 3,000 strong, consisting mostly of troops loyal to Abbas. It had been trained by American advisers in Egypt and Jordan (Washington had allocated almost 60 million dollars to its maintenance). The incident was triggered by Israel's refusal to allow the Hamas prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, to enter the Strip, he was carrying cash donations from the Arab world, reported to be tens of millions of dollars. The Hamas forces then stormed the border control, manned by the Presidential Guard, and fighting broke out. (Ibrahim Razzaq, "Reporter's Family was Caught in the Gunfire," Boston Globe, May 17, 2007—one of many eyewitness accounts of those difficult days)

The situation deteriorated quickly thereafter. Haniyeh's car was attacked after he crossed into the Strip. Hamas blamed Fatah for the attacks. Clashes broke out in the Strip and in the West Bank as well. In the same month, the Palestinian Authority decided to remove the Hamas-led government and replace it with an emergency cabinet. This sparked the most serious clashes between the two sides, which lasted until the end of May 2007, leaving dozens of dead and many wounded (it is estimated that 120 people died). The conflict only ended when the government of Palestine was split into two: one in Ramallah and one in Gaza. (Palestine Papers: UK's MI6 'tried to weaken Hamas,'" BBC News, January 25, 2011)

While both sides were responsible for the carnage, there was also (as we have learned from the

Palestine papers, leaked to Al Jazeera in 2007) an external factor that pitted Fatah against Hamas. The idea of preempting a possible Hamas stronghold in the Gaza Strip, once the Israelis withdrew, was suggested to Fatah as early as 2004 by the British intelligence agency MI6, who drew up a security plan that was meant to “encourage and enable the Palestinian Authority to fully meet its security obligations ... by degrading the capabilities of the rejectionists (which later on the document names as the Hamas).” (Ian Black, “Palestine Papers Reveal MI6 Drew up Plan for Crackdown on .(.Hamas,” Guardian, January 25, 2011

The British prime minister at the time, Tony Blair, had taken a special interest in the Palestine question, hoping to have an impact that would vindicate, or absolve, his disastrous adventure in Iraq. The Guardian summarized his involvement as that of encouraging Fatah to crack down on Hamas. (A taste of his views can be found in Yuval Steinitz, “How Palestinian Hate Prevents Peace,” New .(.York Times, October 15, 2013

Similar advice was given to Fatah by Israel and the United States, in a bid to keep Hamas from taking over the Gaza Strip. However, things got scrappy and the preemptive plan backfired in .multiple ways

This was in part a struggle between politicians who were democratically elected and those who still found it hard to accept the verdict of the public. But that was hardly the whole story. What unfolded in Gaza was a battle between the United States’ and Israel’s local proxies: mainly Fatah and PA members, most of whom became proxies unintentionally, but nonetheless danced to Israel’s tune, and those who opposed them. The way Hamas acted against other factions was later reciprocated by the action the PA took against them in the West Bank. One would find it very hard to condone or cheer either action. Nevertheless, one can fully understand why secular Palestinians would oppose the creation of a theocracy, and, as in many other parts of the Middle East, the struggle over the role of religion and tradition in society will also continue in Palestine. However, for the time being, Hamas enjoys the support, and in many ways the admiration, of many secular Palestinians for the vigor of its .struggle against Israel. Indeed, that struggle is the real issue

According to the official Israeli narrative, “ Hamas is a terrorist organization engaging in vicious acts perpetrated against a peaceful Israel that has withdrawn from the Gaza Strip.” But did Israel withdraw .for the sake of peace? The answer is a resounding NO

To get a better understanding of the issue we need to go back to April 18, 2004, the day after the Hamas leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi was assassinated. On that day, Yuval Steinitz, chairman of the foreign affairs and defense committee in the Knesset and a close aide to Benjamin Netanyahu, was interviewed on Israeli radio. Before becoming a politician, he had taught Western philosophy at the University of Haifa. Steinitz claimed that his worldview had been shaped by Descartes, but it seems that as a politician he was more influenced by romantic nationalists such as Gobineau and Fichte, who stressed purity of race as a precondition for national excellence. (Reshet Bet, Israel Broadcast, April 18, 2004.) The translation of these European notions of racial superiority into the Israeli context became evident as soon as the interviewer asked him about the government’s plans for the remaining Palestinian leaders. Interviewer and interviewee giggled as they agreed that the policy should involve the assassination or expulsion of the entire current leadership, that is all the members of the Palestinian Authority, about 40,000 people. “I am so happy,” Steinitz said, “that the Americans have finally come to their senses and are fully supporting our policies.”(Benny Morris, Channel One, April 18, 2004, and see Joel Beinin, “No More Tears: Benny Morris and the Road Back from Liberal Zionism,” MERIP, 230 (Spring 2004).) On the same day, Benny Morris of Ben-Gurion University repeated his support for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, claiming that this was the best way .(of solving the conflict.(Pappe, “Revisiting 1967

Opinions that used to be considered at best marginal, at worst lunatic, were now at the heart of the Israeli Jewish consensus, disseminated by establishment academics on prime-time television as the one and only truth. Israel in 2004 was a paranoid society, determined to bring the conflict to an end by force and destruction, whatever the cost to its society or its potential victims. Often this elite was supported only by the US administration and the Western political elites, while the rest of the world’s more conscientious observers watched helpless and bewildered. Israel was like a plane flying on

autopilot; the course was preplanned, the speed predetermined. The destination was the creation of a Greater Israel, which would include half the West Bank and a small part of the Gaza Strip (thus amounting to almost 90% of historical Palestine). A Greater Israel without a Palestinian presence, with high walls separating it from the indigenous population, who were to be crammed into two huge prison camps in Gaza and what was left of the West Bank. In this vision, the Palestinians in Israel could either join the millions of refugees languishing in the camps, or submit to an apartheid system of discrimination and abuse

That same year, 2004, the Americans supervised what they called the “RoadMap” to peace. This was a ludicrous idea initially put forward in the summer of 2002 by President Bush, and even more far-fetched than the Oslo Accord. The idea was that the Palestinians would be offered an economic recovery plan, and a reduction in the Israeli military presence in parts of the occupied territories, for about three years. After that another summit would, somehow, bring the conflict to an end for once and for all

In many parts of the Western world, the media took the Road Map and the Israeli vision of a Greater Israel (including autonomous Palestinian enclaves) to be one and the same, presenting both as offering the only safe route to peace and stability. The mission of making this vision a reality was entrusted to “the Quartet” (aka the Middle East Quartet, or occasionally the Madrid Quartet), set up in 2002 to allow the UN, the United States, Russia, and the EU to work together towards peace in Israel–Palestine. Essentially a coordinating body consisting of the foreign ministers of all four members, the Quartet became more active in 2007 when it appointed Tony Blair as its special envoy to the Middle East. Blair hired the whole new wing of the legendary American Colony hotel in

Jerusalem as his headquarters. This, like Blair's salary, was an expensive operation that produced  
.nothing

The Quartet's spokespersons employed a discourse of peace that included references to a full Israeli withdrawal, the end of Jewish settlements, and a two-states solution. This inspired hope among  
.some observers who still believed that this course made sense

However, on the ground, the Road Map, like the Oslo Accord, allowed Israel to continue to implement its unilateral plan of creating the Greater Israel. The difference was that, this time, it was Ariel Sharon who was the architect, a far more focused and determined politician than Rabin, Peres, or Netanyahu. He had one surprising gambit that very few predicted: offering to evict the Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip. Sharon threw this proposal into the air in 2003, and then pressured his colleagues to adopt it, which they did within a year and half. In 2005, the army was sent in to evict  
?the reluctant settlers by force. What lay behind this decision

Successive Israeli governments had been very clear about the future of the West Bank, while not so sure about what should happen with the Gaza Strip. (Ari Shavit, "PM Aide: Gaza Plan Aims to Freeze the Peace Process," Haaretz, October 6, 2004.) The strategy for the West Bank was to ensure it remained under Israeli rule, direct or indirect. Most governments since 1967, including Sharon's, hoped that this rule would be organized as part of a "peace process." The West Bank

could become a state in this vision, if it remained a Bantustan. This was the old idea of Yigal Alon and Moshe Dayan from 1967; areas densely populated by Palestinians should be controlled from the outside. But things were different when it came to the Gaza Strip. Sharon had agreed with the original decision of the early governments, most of them Labor, to send settlers into the heart of the Gaza Strip, just as he supported the building of settlements in the Sinai Peninsula, which were evicted to the last under the bilateral peace agreement with Egypt. In the twenty-first century, he came to accept the pragmatic views of leading members of both the Likud and Labor parties on the possibility of leaving Gaza for the sake of keeping the West Bank. (Haaretz, April 17, 2004

Prior to the Oslo process, the presence of Jewish settlers in the Strip did not complicate things, but once the new idea of a Palestinian Authority emerged, they became a liability to Israel rather than an asset. As a result, many Israeli policy makers, even those who did not immediately take to the idea of eviction, were looking for ways of pushing the Strip out of their minds and hearts. This became clear when, after the Accord was signed, the Strip was encircled with a barbed-wire fence and the movement of Gazan workers into Israel and the West Bank was severely restricted. Strategically, in the new setup, it was easier to control Gaza from the outside, but this was not entirely possible while the settler community remained inside

One solution was to divide the Strip into a Jewish area, with direct access to Israel, and a Palestinian area. This worked well until the outbreak of the Second Intifada. The road connecting the settlements' sprawl, the Gush Qatif block as it was called, was an easy target for the uprising. The vulnerability of the settlers was exposed in full. During this conflict the Israeli army tactics included massive bombardments and destruction of rebellious Palestinian pockets, which in April 2002 led to the massacre of innocent Palestinians in the Jenin refugee camp. These tactics were not easily



.implemented in the dense Gaza Strip due to the presence of the Jewish settlers

It was not surprising, then, that a year after the most brutal military assault on the WestBank, operation “Defensive Shield,” Sharon contemplated the removal of the Gaza settlers so as to facilitate a retaliation policy. In 2004, however, unable to force his political will on the Strip, he called instead for a series of assassinations of Hamas leaders. Sharon hoped to influence the future with the assassinations of the two chief leaders, Abdul al-Rantisi and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (killed on March 17, 2004). Even a sober source such as Haaretz assumed that after these assassinations, Hamas would lose its power base in the Gaza Strip and be reduced to an ineffective presence in Damascus, where, if need be, Israel would attack it too. The newspaper also was impressed by the US support for the assassinations (although both the paper and the Americans would be much less supportive of the policy later on).(Pappe, “Revisiting 1967.”).These killings took place before Hamas won the 2006 elections and took over the Gaza Strip. In other words, the Israeli policy did not undermine Hamas; on the contrary, it enhanced its popularity and power. Sharon wanted the Palestinian Authority to take control of Gaza and treat it like Area A in the West Bank; but this outcome did not materialize. So Sharon had to deal with Gaza in one of two ways: either clear out the settlers so that he could retaliate against Hamas without the risk of hurting Israeli citizens; or depart altogether from the region in order to refocus his efforts on annexing the West Bank, or parts .of it

In order to ensure that the second alternative was understood internationally, Sharon orchestrated a charade that everybody fell for. As he began to make noises about evicting the settlers from the Strip, Gush Emunim compared the action to the Holocaust and staged a real show for the television when they were physically evicted from their homes. It seemed as if there were a civil war in Israel

between those who supported the settlers and those on the left, including formidable foes of Sharon in the past, who supported his plan for a peace initiative. (Ali Abunimah, "Why All the Fuss About the .(Bush–Sharon Meeting," Electronic Intifada, April 14, 2014

Inside Israel this move weakened, and in some cases entirely wiped out, dissenting voices. Sharon proposed that with the withdrawal from Gaza and the ascendance of Hamas therein, there was no point in pushing forward grand ideas such as the Oslo Accord. He suggested, and his successor after his terminal illness in 2007, Ehud Olmert, agreed, that the status quo be maintained for the time being. There was a need to contain Hamas in Gaza, but there was no rush to find a solution to the West Bank. Olmert called this policy unilateralism: since there were be no significant negotiations in the near future with the Palestinians, Israel should unilaterally decide which parts of the West Bank it wanted to annex, and which parts could be run autonomously by the Palestinian Authority. There was a sense among Israeli policy makers that, if not in public declarations, then at least as a reality on the ground, this course of action would be acceptable to both the Quartet and the PA. Until now, it had .seemed to work

With no strong international pressure and a feeble PA as a neighbor, most Israelis did not feel the strategy towards the West Bank to be an issue of great interest. As the election campaigns since 2005 have shown, Jewish society has preferred to debate socioeconomic issues, the role of religion in society, and the war against Hamas and Hezbollah. The main opposition party, the Labor Party, has more or less shared the vision of the coalition government, hence it has been both inside and outside government since 2005. When it came to the West Bank, or the solution to the Palestine question, Israeli Jewish society appeared to have reached a consensus. What cemented that sense of consensus was the eviction of the Gaza settlers by Sharon's right-wing administration. For those who considered themselves to the left of the Likud, Sharon's move was a peace gesture, and a brave confrontation with the settlers. He became a hero of the left as well of the center and moderate right,

like de Gaulle taking the pied noir out of Algeria for the sake of peace. The Palestinian reaction in the Gaza Strip and criticism from the PA of Israeli policies ever since were seen as a proof of the .absence of any sound or reliable Palestinian partner for peace

Apart from brave journalists such as Gideon Levy and Amira Hass at Haaretz, and some anti-Zionist groups, Jewish society in Israel became effectively silent, giving governments since 2005 carte blanche to pursue any policy towards the Palestinians they deem fit. This was why, in the 2011 protest movement that galvanized half a million Israelis (out of a population of 7 million) against the governments' policies, the occupation and its horrors were not mentioned as part of the agenda. This absence of any public discourse or criticism had already allowed Sharon in his last year in power, 2005, to authorize more killings of unarmed Palestinians and, by way of curfews and long periods of closure, to starve the society under occupation. And when the Palestinians in the occupied territories occasionally rebelled, the government now had a license to react with even greater force and .determination

Previous American governments had supported Israeli policies regardless of how they affected, or were perceived by, the Palestinians. This support, however, used to require negotiation and some give and take. Even after the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000, some in Washington tried to distance the United States from Israel's response to the uprising. For a while, Americans seemed uneasy about the fact that several Palestinians a day were being killed, and that a large number of the victims were children. There was also some discomfort about Israel's use of collective punishments, house demolitions, and arrests without trial. But they got used to all this, and when the Israeli Jewish consensus sanctioned the assault on the West Bank in April 2002, an unprecedented episode of cruelty in the vicious history of the occupation, the US administration objected only to the unilateral acts of annexation and settlement that were expressly forbidden in the EU-American-sponsored Road Map

In 2004, Sharon asked for US and UK support for the colonialization in the West Bank in return for withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, and he got it. His plan, which passed in Israel for a consensual peace plan, was at first rejected by the Americans as unproductive (the rest of the world condemned it in stronger terms). The Israelis, however, hoped that the similarities between the American and British conduct in Iraq and Israel's policies in Palestine would lead the United States to change its position, and they were right. It is noteworthy that, until the very last moment, Washington hesitated before giving Sharon the green light for the withdrawal from Gaza. On April 13, 2004, a bizarre scene unfolded on the tarmac of Ben-Gurion airport. The prime minister's jet remained stationary for a few hours after its scheduled departure. Inside, Sharon had refused to allow it to take off for Washington until he got US approval for his new so-called disengagement plan. President Bush supported the disengagement per se. What his advisors found hard to digest was the letter Sharon had asked Bush to sign as part of the US endorsement. It included an American promise not to pressure Israel in the future about progress in the peace process, and to exclude the right of return from any future negotiations. Sharon convinced Bush's aides that he would not be able to unite the Israeli public behind his disengagement program without American support. (Quoted in Yediot Ahronoth, April 22, 2004).

In the past, it had usually taken a while for US officials to submit to Israeli politicians' need for a consensus. This time, it took only three hours. We now know that there was another reason for Sharon's sense of urgency: he knew that he was being investigated by the police on serious charges of corruption, and he needed to persuade the Israeli public to trust him in the face of a pending court case. "The wider the investigation, the wider the disengagement," said the left-wing member of Knesset Yossi Sarid, referring to the linkage between Sharon's troubles in court and his commitment to the withdrawal. (Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," on the ICJ website) It ought to have taken the US administration much longer than it did to reach a decision. In essence, Sharon was asking President Bush to forgo almost every commitment the Americans had made over Palestine. The plan offered an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the

closure of the handful of settlements there, as well as several others in the West Bank, in return for the annexation of the majority of the West Bank settlements to Israel. The Americans also knew all too well how another crucial piece fitted into this puzzle. For Sharon, the annexation of those parts of the West Bank he coveted could only be executed with the completion of the wall Israel had begun building in 2003, bisecting the Palestinian parts of the West Bank. He had not anticipated the international objection, the wall became the most iconic symbol of the occupation, to the extent that the international court of justice ruled that it constituted a human rights violation. Time will tell whether or not this was a meaningful landmark. (At first, in March 2004, Beilin was against the .disengagement, but from July 2004 he openly supported it (Channel One interview, July 4, 2004

As Sharon waited in his jet, Washington gave its support to a scheme that left most of the West Bank in Israeli hands and all of the refugees in exile, and gave its tacit agreement to the wall. Sharon chose the ideal US president as a potential ally for his new plans. President George W. Bush was heavily influenced by Christian Zionists, and maybe even shared their view that the presence of the Jews in the Holy Land was part of the fulfilment of a doomsday scenario that might inaugurate the Second Coming of Christ. Bush's more secular neocon advisers had been impressed by the war against Hamas, which accompanied Israel's promises of eviction and peace. The seemingly successful Israeli operations, mostly the targeted assassinations in 2004, were a proof by proxy that America's own "war against terror" was bound to triumph. In truth, Israel's "success" was a cynical distortion of the facts on the ground. The relative decline in Palestinian guerrilla and armed resistance activity was achieved by curfews and closures and by confining more than 2 million people in their homes without work or food for protracted periods of time. Even neoconservatives should have been able to grasp that this was not going to provide a long-term solution to the hostility and .violence provoked by an occupying power, whether in Iraq or Palestine

Sharon's plan was approved by Bush's spin doctors, who were able to present it as another step

towards peace and use it as a distraction from the growing debacle in Iraq. It was probably also acceptable to more even-handed advisers, who were so desperate to see some progress that they persuaded themselves that the plan offered a chance for peace and a better future. These people long ago forgot how to distinguish between the mesmerizing power of language and the reality it purports to describe. As long as the plan contained the magic term “withdrawal,” it was seen as essentially a good thing even by some usually cool-headed journalists in the United States, by the leaders of the Israeli Labor party (bent on joining Sharon’s government in the name of the sacred .consensus), and by the newly elected leader of the Israeli left party, Meretz, Yossi Beilin

By the end of 2004, Sharon knew he had no reason to fear outside pressure. The governments of Europe and the United States were unwilling or unable to stop the occupation and prevent the further destruction of the Palestinians. Those Israelis who were willing to take part in anti-occupation movements were outnumbered and demoralized in the face of the new consensus. It is not surprising that, around that time, civil societies in Europe and in the United States woke up to the possibility of playing a major role in the conflict and were galvanized around the idea of the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions movement. Quite a few organizations, unions, and individuals were committed to a new public effort, vowing to do all they could to make the Israelis understand that policies such as .Sharon’s came at a price

Since then, from the academic boycott to economic sanctions, every possible means has been attempted in the West. The message at home was also clear: their governments were no less responsible than Israel for the past, present, and future catastrophes of the Palestinian people. The BDS movement demanded a new policy to counter Sharon’s unilateral strategy, not only for moral or historical reasons, but also for the sake of the West’s security and even survival. As the violence since the events of September 11, 2001 has so painfully shown, the Palestine conflict undermined

the multicultural fabric of Western society, as it pushed the United States and the Muslim world further and further apart and into a nightmarish relationship. Putting pressure on Israel seemed a small price to pay for the sake of global peace, regional stability, and reconciliation in Palestine

Still, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza argument became a favourite talking point among defenders of Israel. They will claim that Israel has always done everything in its power to achieve peace with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors

They will point to supposed “sacrifices” Israel has made for this noble goal. Perhaps the most frequent example given is the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, naturally, this always comes with the addendum claiming that such an approach did not work, and that Palestinians cannot be pleased

Overlooking the fact that complying with international law is not a compromise, there is a major flaw in this argument: The Gaza strip is still occupied

While it is true that Israeli forces and settlers withdrew from within Gaza in 2005, this does not mean that the occupation was ended. How is this possible

There is a general misconception regarding what constitutes a military occupation. Many believe that it takes boots on the ground to consider an area occupied, but today this is no longer the case. For an area to be considered occupied the occupying state must exercise “effective control” over the occupied area. This idea becomes even more clear when we consider Israeli surveillance and monitoring technology that allow for greater control of an area through controlling select key positions

.without the necessity of a full occupation force in the territory

It is without a doubt that Israel holds effective control over the Gaza strip, Israeli law experts would naturally beg to differ, but these same experts argued that Gaza was unoccupied even before Israel withdrew its forces and settlers anyway. Israel controls virtually every aspect of life in Gaza. Israel maintains control of Gaza's airspace, its territorial waters, no-go zones within the strip and even the population registry, meaning Israel even gets to determine who is a Palestinian and who isn't inside the Gaza strip. What kind of sovereign, non-occupied entity can't even determine who its citizens  
?are

This is not conjecture, but the opinion of the United Nations, Amnesty International, the International Red Cross and countless other international organizations specialized in human rights and  
.international humanitarian law

However, we must situate the Israeli claims that Gaza is not occupied within its correct historical context. As mentioned above, even prior to 2005, Israel always argued that the Gaza strip was unoccupied, even with its troops and settlements and military bases. As a matter of fact, Israel even claims the same about the West Bank to this day. The argument being that for an occupation to exist, a territory must be part of a sovereign state, which the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were not, even though they were controlled by other sovereign states. This same justification is used to argue that the Geneva conventions, and international and humanitarian law in general, don't apply to Palestinians. Of course, this argument was never accepted by the world community which still  
.maintains that these areas are occupied

The lesson here is that Israeli legal claims have never been in good faith. If Israel could legally claim



that an area with thousands of soldiers and dozens of bases and settlements is not occupied, then of course it would argue the same for Gaza today

:Formaldehyde for the political process

But this claim that Gaza is unoccupied has been very useful for Israel, as it plays into the propaganda that Israel has sacrificed immensely for peace, a talking point unsubstantiated by actual history, and also erases the valiant efforts of Palestinian resistance fighters in the Gaza Strip who played a critical role in making the maintenance of a physical military presence inside the strip very costly to Israel

As noble as Israelis make it sound, there were other less altruistic intentions regarding the withdrawal from Gaza, articulated by Dov Weisglas, top aide to Ariel Sharon who was Prime Minister at the time

The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process, and when you “freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda. And all this with authority and permission. All with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress”.

:He continued

The disengagement is actually formaldehyde, it supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is “necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians

And he was right. For example, whenever the Palestinian Authority criticized Israel for its intransigence or its new settlement and colonization projects in the West bank, Israel would retort

that they gave up Gaza and sacrificed immensely for peace. This was an effective way for Israel to circumvent criticism of its violations of international law and shift the onus of compromise onto Palestinians. In this context, “compromise” came to mean acquiescence to the brazen colonization of :the vast majority of the West Bank. Weisglas bragged that

That is exactly what happened, you know, the term ‘peace process’ is a bundle of concepts and“ commitments. The peace process is the establishment of a Palestinian state with all the security risks that entails. The peace process is the evacuation of settlements, it’s the return of refugees, it’s the partition of Jerusalem. And all that has now been frozen.... what I effectively agreed to with the Americans was that part of the settlements would not be dealt with at all, and the rest will not be dealt ”.with until the Palestinians turn into Finns. That is the significance of what we did

Furthermore, Israel knew it was not really relinquishing control of the Gaza strip, but rather reconfiguring how the occupation looked and functioned. They knew that the occupation, despite being in a new form, would still illicit resistance from those inside the strip. Israel could then use this resistance as proof that “relinquishing” land in return for peace with the Palestinians was an impossible task, because Palestinians would continue to attack it no matter what. This has served as .a major argument for why Israel should not withdraw from any inch of the West Bank to this very day

So the withdrawal from Gaza did not really end the occupation, and it certainly was not a compromise out of a desire for peace with the Palestinians. This is not speculation, this is not a conspiratorial .reading or analysis of the policy

Gaza today remains as a staunch reminder of Israel’s birth: A small strip of land filled to the brim with

refugees whose houses have been seized by foreign colonists. Israel can occupy, besiege and bomb the strip, but it will never break the spirit of those yearning for freedom and a return to their stolen homes. It is our duty to help them in any way we can, even if by simply not allowing Israel to create its own false narrative and pass it off as the indisputable truth

