

It's the Occupation

By Sam Bahour and Michael Dahan

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In the wake of the horrific suicide bombings in Israel over the past 48 hours, hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made his address to the nation as he simultaneously increased, by yet another step, Israel's part of the violence in the ensuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Sadly, no end is in sight and it is likely to get worse, much worse. If this statement sounds like a broken record, it's because it is.

The suicide attacks, brought on by the deplorable Israeli policy of yet another state-sanctioned extra-judicial assassination of a Hamas member last week, have brought Israelis and the Palestinians to the brink of total war. Unfortunately, neither Israel nor the U.S. administration has come to their senses to realize that, after 34 years of military Israeli occupation, the burning question is not why was there was another suicide bomb attack, but rather, why there are not more?

Some things in life are either right or wrong. Slavery and Apartheid were wrong. Not wrong until African Americans proved their worthiness of freedom. Not wrong until South Africans reached the brink of annihilation. No. These historical flaws were not partially wrong; not debatably wrong, they were outright outcasts to humanity, each worthy of abrupt termination. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem joins these ranks, albeit this historic wrong comes during an era of media clips, political spin, and satellite TV. Nevertheless, the time has come for the world community to bring Israeli occupa-

tion tumbling down, and with its fall will be the start of the end of the breeding grounds that suicide bombers feed upon.

More and more voices are being heard within the Israeli leadership to either kill Arafat or to remove him from the area, and to "topple" the Palestinian Authority. Most Israelis are now firmly convinced that there is absolutely "no partner" for peace, nor is peace possible. Naively, the Israeli public is taking security refuge in the graphic missile attacks on Palestinian cities while forgetting that for each missile fired into Palestinian neighborhoods, more and more potential suicide bombers make the decision to take innocent lives while taking their own. Destroying Arafat's helicopters will not bring hope to the growing number of Palestinians who have equated life under occupation to death.

The Israeli side must realize that the solution for the occupation is not, nor can it ever be, more occupation, more bombings, and more state assassinations. It is the occupation itself and the closures and the resultant levels of poverty, unemployment, and utter despair that provide a fertile ground for the recruitment, deployment, and support of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks. It is the senseless deaths of children and adults that are feeding the flames of hatred on both sides.

As the legitimate, elected representative of the Palestinian people, Arafat must make sure that his voice and intentions are clear, and that there is a national, not only personal, strategy for working toward a negotiated agreement. It is up

to Arafat and the Palestinian Authority to convince the Palestinian and Israeli public that there is indeed hope for an agreement, that there is indeed a future neighbor on the Palestinian side. Most of the actions needed to make this conviction a reality are the same issues that are being called for by Palestinians themselves, the establishment of rule of law, accountability of decisionmaking, and collective leadership—in other words, concrete progress toward the competency to establish a viable state. Occupation being 100% wrong does not give credence to chaotic, non-

transparent development and solo leadership.

The only way to break the brutal circle of violence is to end the occupation immediately, unilaterally if need be, institute a peacekeeping force in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and to begin to dismantle the settlements. The only solution that we can see is the establishment of an independent Palestinian state along the lines of the 1967 borders, with a capital in East Jerusalem, and to work toward a just, fair, and creative solution for the right of return for the Palestinian refugees. The occupation,

as such, is evil. Further occupation as being proposed now by senior decisionmakers on the Israeli side would only increase that evil, raise the stakes on both sides, and the past 48 hours will repeat endlessly.

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