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USA/Middle East

# The Longest Occupation

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV510 - July 2017 -

Publication date: Tuesday 4 July 2017

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**Donald Trump's speech to the regional potentates and dictators assembled for the occasion in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia was generally acclaimed as eminently presidential, and rightly so. That is to say, it was firmly in the tradition of U.S. presidential addresses on Middle East policy: utterly cynical, dripping with deceit, and above all, irreversibly tied to the United States' leading role as the chief arms merchant to some of the world's most brutal regimes.**

Unlike some of his predecessors, of course, Trump paid no lip service to human rights or democracy, both of which he despises – as do his Saudi royal hosts, who understood perfectly that the way to treat him is with limitless pomp and flattery. The audience also included the rulers of Bahrain, perpetrators of brutal violence and repression against human rights and democracy protest, and certainly emboldened by Trump's proclamation of an "anti-terror" alliance targeting Iran.

Trump isn't particularly good at dressing up imperial power politics in flights of rhetoric about universal human values, and to his credit he doesn't make much effort to do so. But underlying the visuals of Trump's performance in the Holy Lands are underreported and longstanding realities of the region. President Barack Obama understood these dynamics, of which Donald Trump knows next to nothing, yet in the end this makes little difference.

In important ways today's Middle East has been shaped by the transformational events of the June 1967 war, six days when Israel smashed the military power – and more important, the image – of its Arab neighbors Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The story that Israel was responding to Arab aggression has long since been refuted by serious historians. In fact, the Israeli leadership deliberately provoked the war with Egypt, confident that it enjoyed military supremacy and would win overwhelmingly.

Still, that myth of Israel's "miraculous defensive victory" remains fixed in much of the popular imagination, especially and crucially in the United States. [\[1\]](#)

Israeli euphoria and Arab humiliation would set the stage for the following 50 years: Israeli military occupation of those parts of historic Palestine that weren't originally conquered by Israel in 1947-48; Israel's emergence as a first-rate military power and strategic imperialist ally; the radicalization and ultimate defeat of Arab nationalism and the left; the emergence of militant Islamic fundamentalism to fill the resulting vacuum, with all its tragic consequences.

Inside Palestine, 1967 was followed by the emergence of a powerful national liberation movement, the rise and ultimate defeat of the Palestine Liberation Organization; two massive Intifadas, followed by an illusory "peace process" and the unending tragedy that the Palestinian people are living today under strangling Israeli occupation and a repressive, corrupt "Palestinian Authority;" Israeli society's own long slide toward self-destruction.

It's impossible to unpack all this within a short space, but researcher and activist Jeff Halper appropriately poses the central question of the post-1967 era:

"How does Israel get away with it? In a decidedly post-colonial age, how is Israel able to sustain a half-century occupation over the Palestinians, a people it violently displaced in 1948, in the face of almost unanimous international opposition? Why, indeed, does the international community tolerate an unnecessary conflict that not only obstructs efforts to bring some stability to the wider Middle East, a pretty important geo-political region in which

the United States and Europe are fighting a number of wars, but one that severely disrupts the international system as a whole?" (Jeff Halper, War Against the People. Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification, 1)

The answer of course has something to do with the supply and global control of oil, the power of the U.S. domestic Israel lobby and particularly its Christian fundamentalist component, which of course also played a big role in the ascendancy to the Oval Office of that well-known moral conscience of the nation, Donald Trump. But Halper uncovers a deeper reason for the persistence of the occupation and its international toleration.

The Occupation...provides a testing ground for the development of weapons, security systems, models of population control and tactics without which Israel would be unable to compete in the arms and security markets...(B)eing a major military power serving other militaries and security services the world over lends Israel and international status among the global hegemony it would not have otherwise. [2]

## Global Matrix of Control

This insight helps explain a number of phenomena that might seem puzzling. How did it happen that Palestinians in the West Bank reached out to Black Lives Matter activists in Ferguson, Missouri, with expressions of solidarity and practical instructions on dealing with the toxic gas attacks the police had unleashed?

Within Trump's inner circle why is Steven Bannon, known for his alt-right connections and anti-semitic view of Jews as whining global cosmopolitans lacking proper nationalist loyalty, entirely sympathetic to the Israeli state and proud of having established a sizeable Breitbart bureau in Jerusalem?

For that matter, how is it that the Saudi kingdom that has exported the extreme Wahhabi fundamentalist ideology to places where it wasn't indigenously rooted (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia among others), a source of seed money for al-Qaeda and ISIS movement, and a sponsor of sermons where Jews are routinely described as descendants of pigs and monkeys, is completely untroubled by Trump's embrace of Israel?

It starts making sense when you understand that "officers in the different police forces dealing with the Ferguson protests, who chose a confrontational approach backed up by heavy military equipment, were trained in Israel" (Halper, 265). This connection explains why the organization Jewish Voice for Peace, a rapidly growing organization that drew a thousand participants to its recent national meeting in Chicago, is launching a campaign to expose and stop this "deadly exchange" of militarized police techniques [3]

It becomes clearer when you recognize that for Bannon and even the notorious Richard Spencer, the model of a world constructed of "ethno-nationalist states" has plenty of room for a "Jewish state" behaving in that manner. Finally, the Saudi rulers understand that \$3.8 billion annual U.S. military aid to Israel "primes the pump" for the arms sales package to Saudi Arabia hailed by Trump in Riyadh. And U.S. military aid to Egypt, where the presidentialist dictatorship has crushed the democratic popular aspirations of 2011, is second only to the subsidy of Israel.

Behind the scenes, the Saudi and Israeli governments have seen their interests converging in the campaign against Iranian influence. That's why, with weaponry and refueling support supplied by the United States, the Saudi air force is continuing its intervention in Yemen's civil war. In the destruction of that country, millions are facing starvation and the United Nations fears that 150,000 cases of cholera will develop in the next six months.

In short, post-1967 Israel has not just developed a fiendish "Matrix of Control" (Jeff Halper's term) over the Occupied

Palestinian Territories. It has become a central player in the global generalization of that method to an overall securitocratic “war against the people” wherever there are potential or actual threats to power and privilege. Compared to the United States, of course, Israel remains a junior partner in this global war, but it’s a highly consequential one.

This course hasn’t been cost-free, of course. Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982-2000 took a significant military toll and ended with its first strategic defeat, at the hands of the resistance led by the Hezbollah militia. Two subsequent invasions and repeated Israeli bombings and assassination raids have failed to prevent Hezbollah’s growing power in Lebanese politics or to curb its apparently sophisticated arsenal of missiles in the south.

Most importantly, Israeli society itself has been transformed since 1967, from a relatively egalitarian one “for its Jewish citizens, not the 20% Arab minority” to the second most unequal among the world’s wealthy nations. (One guess as to which is number one: U-S-A!) Israel has had its own three decades of neoliberal restructuring, creating a concentration of wealth at the top in high-tech and among a few plutocratic families. Meanwhile large pools of poverty persist especially among Mizrahi Jews (of Arab and north African origin).

Its politics today are dominated by nationalist, extreme rightwing and religious parties, a configuration in which the execrable prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu faces greater threats from his right flank than from the remnants of the once-dominant Zionist “left.”

Netanyahu’s demand that the Palestinian leadership (and the world) “recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people” is not only a deal-breaker for peace, but a huge threat to what remains of Israeli democracy. In the Knesset (Israeli parliament) today, the one actual meaningful democratic force is the “Joint List” of Arab-dominated parties, Communist, Palestinian nationalist and Islamic, demanding equal right for Palestinians in Israel as “a state of its citizens” rather than a Jewish-supremacist religio-ethnostate claiming to represent the Jews of the world.

## Trump and Resistance

Let’s return briefly to Trump’s performance in Riyadh “leaving for a separate discussion his giving the political and literal finger to the United States’ European allies, and walking away from the climate agreement when humanity faces a civilizational crisis of environmental collapse. It was in some ways as breathtaking as it was presidential.

He assured the assembled rulers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain etc. that “we are not here to lecture you,” and declaimed the absence of democracy “in Iran. In fact, Iran just held an election. The population didn’t get to choose the candidates, who were vetted by the theocratic mullahs who control the state and the judiciary. But given the choices presented to them, Iranians voted overwhelmingly for the “moderate” president Hassan Rouhani who promised openness and social relaxation.

Responding to Rouhani’s re-election, Trump and his Secretary of State from Exxon, Rex Tillerson, wasted no time in issuing pronouncements of snarling menace that can only undercut him in the face of Iran’s militarist hardliners. And the congressional Democrats, true to their own nature, hopped on board a piece of legislation to impose new sanctions on Iran (although not blocking Boeing’s lucrative airplane sales already in the pipeline).

Whatever happens to Trump’s presidency won’t be decided by his antics in Riyadh, Jerusalem or Brussels. It will end if, and at whatever point, he becomes a liability rather than an enabler of the savage rightwing Republican political

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agenda. But it's important that the resistance to the Trump regime – which has only intensified after his withdrawal from the international climate agreement – take up the issues of war in the Middle East, and Palestine in particular.

Fifty years after the 1967 war that transformed the Middle East, tragically, even minimal justice for the Palestinian people – self-determination, equal rights inside the Israeli state, and the 1948 and 1967 refugees' right of return – is not presently in sight. It is illusory to imagine the situation turning around in the short term. But not so long ago, much of the progressive and even the peace movement were afraid to touch the issue of Palestine. That's no longer the case, and in these horrendous times it's an important positive sign.

In April and May, more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners heroically waged a 40-day hunger strike that forced important concessions from Israeli authorities on issues of family visits and prison conditions, including education for children in detention. The international outcry in support of the prisoners' demands played a significant role.

The Movement for Black Lives has come out forthrightly for Palestine, even when foundation funds were cut off. Students for Justice in Palestine, the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights, Jewish Voice for Peace and other forces are continuing BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) actions in the face of threats and state-level legislative campaigns to discredit and even criminalize them. And the popular outpouring after the murderous stabbing by a white supremacist in Portland, Oregon shows that decent people recognize Islamophobic attacks as a threat to us all.

In the current maelstrom of imperialism and regional wars, Israeli military supremacy, Islamic fundamentalism and the destruction of whole societies and even civilizations in Iraq and Syria, the very possibility of any positive outcome sometimes seems remote. But in today's popular struggles and international solidarity lie the seeds of hope and revolutionary transformation. [4]

### [Against the Current](#)

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[1] On the causes and consequences of the 1967 war see Moshe Machover, <http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/11...>. For the historical record, important sources are Avi Shlaim's chapter "Israel: poor little Samson" in Avi Shlaim and William R. Louis (eds), *The 1967 Arab-Israeli war: origins and consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Ilan Pappé's *Ten Myths About Israel* (Verso, 2017).

[2] Halper, 3-4. See also Michael Friedman's review of this book in ATC 187, online [here](#)

[3] [See here](#) on the JVP website [www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org](http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org).

[4] For further essential reading, see Middle East Report's online forum on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 war, beginning [at](#).