

Dear Reader, the Israeli Occupation of Gaza Was Not 'Canceled'

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The mini-state that disappointed: Answering Reader S., who asked why 'the strongest resistance' emerged 'from the place where Israel canceled the occupation?'

Ariel Sharon surveying the Western Negev for places to relocate evacuees from Gaza settlements, 2005. Credit: Avi Ohayon/GPO

S., who lives in a Gaza border community, asked me several questions that I've heard from others, too. With his knowledge, I'm publishing an initial reply here to his letter. He wrote:

"I'm a regular reader of Haaretz and of your articles. As a resident of a Gaza border community, I'm trying to understand your take on what has happened in the Gaza Strip since the disengagement. Why, in your opinion, did the strongest resistance emerge from the place where Israel canceled the occupation?"

The Israeli occupation was not canceled. Israel continued its highhanded control of the lives of the Gaza Strip's residents and Gaza's development options.

"For years, people have been shouting that all the major problems stem from the occupation. And here a small experiment to cancel the occupation was conducted. The Palestinians could have built themselves a [model mini-state](#) there. Instead, they preferred to invest the money in a war against Israel. Do you have an explanation for that?"

First of all, the Israeli occupation was not canceled. Israel continued its highhanded control of the lives of the Gaza Strip's residents and Gaza's development options, well after Israel dismantled the settlements and army bases located there. Second, as per the Oslo Accords, to which Israel is a signatory, the Gaza Strip is not a separate entity but an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied in 1967.

Palestinians gather at the site of an Israeli strike on a house in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip,

February 12, 2024. Credit: REUTERS/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa

According to the Palestinians, and according to international opinion, this territory was supposed to become the Palestinian state. The facts that Israel severed the Gazan population from the West Bank's and that Israelis have continued to treat an isolated Gaza, which is 365 square kilometers in size and lacks resources, as a separate entity, are in themselves evidence of Israeli control over it - and of Israeli chutzpah to boot.

I can't quote what I've written in hundreds and perhaps thousands of articles. So I'll be brief: Prime Minister Ariel [Sharon neither consulted](#) with the leadership of the Palestinian Authority about the disengagement, nor did he coordinate its implementation with that limited self-rule government, which in 2005 was not split yet between Fatah and Hamas. Sharon followed a gradual track that Israel outlined from the early 1990s, while doing a good job of concealing its severity and significance during the Oslo process: [creating a regime of prohibitions and restrictions](#) on the Palestinians' freedom of movement, while creating Palestinian enclaves. On January 15, 1991 Israel [began this comprehensive policy](#), and its immediate result, which worsened over the years, was cutting off the population of Gaza from the West Bank and from the world.

Sharon continued his predecessors' work. The [draconian siege](#) imposed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Gaza in 2007 was a quantitative change, but not a change in essence. This consistent policy indicates the forethought behind the action: not an experiment to cancel the occupation, but one of the ways to prevent the establishment of the Palestinian state based on the plan that the Palestine Liberation Organization and the international community saw before their eyes.

The continued Israeli domination over the Gaza Strip, up until October 7, was manifested in several ways. The first is its total control of the Palestinian population registry, which includes Gaza's residents. It is Israel that decides who is permitted to carry the [ID card](#) of a resident of Gaza or the West Bank. Every detail - including place of residence - registered in the ID card, which the PA technically issues, [requires Israeli approval](#). Even natives of Gaza, whose residency status Israel revoked before 1994, cannot renew it without Israel's approval.

The severance from the West Bank (and from Israel) critically damaged the capabilities for economic development in the Gaza Strip. In any case, Gaza has been in a state of economic deterioration or stagnation since 1967 due to deliberate steps that Israel adopted. Israel controls not only the border crossings but also Gaza's aerial and maritime space, which means it doesn't permit Gazans to exercise their right to freedom of movement via the sea and air.

Israel also uses this control to restrict the Palestinian fishing industry, prevent Palestinians from using the gas reserves discovered in Gazan waters and control the wireless frequencies necessary for technological development. By controlling imports and exports, it restricts the ability and feasibility of domestic production. Israel continues to control income from customs payments. Egypt - whether for fear that the Gazans will settle there, political opposition to severing Gaza from the West Bank or obedience to Israeli dictates - hasn't opened the Rafah border to free movement of Palestinians and foreigners.

Whether deliberately or inadvertently, Sharon's unilateral move weakened the PA, which adhered to the negotiations route. Thus, he awarded a prize to the Hamas movement, which claimed that only the "armed struggle" that it practiced during the Second Intifada, while improving its military capabilities - could force the Israeli army to withdraw, not negotiations and a signed agreement.

That's what many Palestinians thought and still think. It's no wonder that several months after the disengagement, in January 2006, Hamas won a majority of the seats in the election for the

Palestinian parliament (but not a majority of the votes of the electorate).

First we have to answer the question as to why Israel did everything possible to thwart the establishment of the small Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Then we can move on to trying to explain why the residents of the besieged and cut-off “mini-state” that it shaped in Gaza felt like lifetime prisoners, at a time when their brothers in the West Bank live under the violent rule of the expanding settlement enterprise. And afterwards, at the first opportunity, we’ll talk about the illusion or about the delusion or about the armed struggle project.

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P.S.

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