Comments on "Israel's Occupation: Planning and Civilian Control"
A document by BIMKOM members, Amir Paz-Fuchs and Alon Cohen-Lifshitz

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Amir Paz-Fuchs and Alon Cohen-Lifsitz, as members of Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights, present a strong indictment against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank. They discuss planning and its results in these areas as the "long hand" of Israeli politics. They deal with land policy and regulations and with Israeli construction that arrest and constrain the development of Palestinian towns and villages. They present a map of some 120 Israeli settlements and 100 Israeli outposts in these territories. While there are some inaccuracies and debatable issues with their presentation, I concur that their paper does reflect an untenable reality.

Rather than dealing with these minor points, I would like to address three questions that arise from their work and require greater attention:

- Who stands behind the policy that they describe and who opposes it;

- What do Israeli planners do regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;

- Most important: Where do we go from here? In light of the current situation, what is a desirable and possible solution?

Who stands behind Israel's occupation policy (and who doesn't)?

Paz-Fuchs and Cohen-Lifsitz (PF & CL) do not present the historical or political context in which the occupation exists. Although I personally disagree with the Israeli rationale for continuing the occupation and all that entails, it is important that the reader is aware of it. A significant proportion of the Israeli electorate and a lobby of 40 (out of 120) members of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, favors continued occupation of the West Bank. Their reasons are diverse ranging from the religious - biblical justification for a Jewish national presence; the land is "rightfully" ours, to the security-oriented - relinquishing the West Bank would leave Israel in an untenable and dangerous situation vis-à-vis national security; some believe that their (Israeli/Jewish) survival is under very serious threat, and hence, support the existence of Israelis settlements that can closely watch the Palestinians' steps. Further, not a small number of citizens who would prefer to leave the West Bank, but see no tenable exit plan that would not leave behind a power vacuum that may – like Gaza – be filled by militant fundamentalists.

So what of the fate of the Arab-Palestinians, according to this standpoint? They can live under Israeli government, or join the Kingdom of Jordan on the other side of the river (today close to half of the Jordanians are of Palestinian origin), or remain where they had already settled in one of the 20 Arab States in the Middle East. When the State of Israel was established in 1948, about 700,000 Jews were driven away from the Arab countries and a very similar number of Palestinians left or were made to leave the new Israeli State. The Jewish refugees do not require going back to the Arab countries they had lived in for many generations, and, so the argument goes, the Palestinian refugees should not require the lands they left.

The elected governments of Israel seem to believe in all or parts of this rationale and they promulgate the policy described by PF & CL. Indeed, some of the settlements and outposts were initiated, planned and constructed by small groups of extremists, but most of them were either established or approved by the governments or at least constructed with their tacit approval. These governments were elected through democratic and free elections, in which all citizens of Israel took part, including the 20% that are Arab-Palestinian.

Ironically, however, several reliable polls have shown that the majority of Israelis would prefer to end the occupation and leave the West Bank. These are not only members of organizations like B'tzelem (the data collected by B'tzelem were used extensively by PF & CL) and Shalom Achshav (Peace Now), which vociferously criticize the Israeli government, both in Israel and abroad, or members of the Israeli Arab parties and the leftist party of Meretz. Beyond these, within all the large political parties in Israel, especially the Israeli Labor Party and Kadima (the party established by Ariel Sharon to fill the center between left and right), but also in the Likud (Bibi Netanyahu's party), a not insignificant proportion of voters and their elected representatives oppose the government's policy in the West Bank. Even within the government, and certainly within the public service, there are voices against this policy. An example is the Sasson report, commissioned by the prime-minister and submitted (2005) by Adv. Talia Sasson from the State Attorney General's office; It deals with the hundred outposts in the West Bank, states clearly that the government and public authorities contravened the laws and regulations they themselves issued, and are obligated by Israeli High Court decisions to evacuate outposts.

How could the governments continue this policy, in spite of the persistent opposition? That is likely explained by a mix of ideology and coalition-politics. A coalition between national-religious Jews (~10% of the population) and the sizable groups of those who are deeply convinced that unless Israel controls the occupied territories the Arabs will put an end to their state and kill or deport them, has enabled the adoption of this policy in its first 20-25 years. In the early 1990s, during what is now called "The Oslo Period," it seemed that there might have been light at the end of the tunnel, when two unrelated major events changed the scene: Yitzhak Rabin was murdered and Israel received a large wave of immigrants from former USSR; about 1.2 immigrants were added to a population of 5 million. They included a large proportion of highly educated people who assisted Israel's economy, yet also brought many who strongly believed (and believe) that military power and other

demonstrations of power are the only shield for protecting Israel. Within a few years of their arrival they gathered significant political power. Today, their representatives (headed by Avigdor Lieberman) constitute the third largest party in the Knesset and are prominent members of the ruling coalition with Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party.

In addition, the politics of fear takes center stage in Israel of the early 2000s, and ironically, it serves both ends. Many Israelis are afraid of the Muslim fundamentalism belligerence from Arab and Muslim states and para-military organizations. They are afraid also from the Muslim demography; the rate of natural increase in the occupied territories is very high; total fertility 5.8 in the West Bank and 7.8 in Gaza, probably the highest in the world (Pedersen, J., S. Randall, and M. Khawaja, 2001). The very same facts of demography are those that convince a growing number of Israelis, from right wing parties as well, including Kadima party and its heads (counting Ehud Olmert, former Prime minister of Israel), to relinquish the occupied West Bank in order to preserve the Jewish, democratic nature of Israel . This same idea has recently (February 2010) been expressed by former US State Secretary and White House Chief of Staff, James Baker; he stated that "Israel will be unable to maintain its Jewish and democratic character While occupying the West Bank".

My aim in this section was not to justify the occupation nor the policies that result, but rather to provide crucial context to the reality outlined by PF & CL. As of 2010, following so many disappointments on all sides, what may save us are probably not beautiful dreams of happy peace future but the growing fears on both sides. The Palestinian fear from the deteriorating situation and the out-migration of young persons of the West Bank (especially the more educated, Christians and also Muslims), while the Jewish Israelis fear from loosing the Jewish and democratic nature of their country (for ethnic democracy see Smooha, 2002, and if you want, Wikipedia as well). These may lead the leaders on both sides to create an agreement that ends the occupation and allows each side to focus on development and quality of life.

Israeli planners and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

No referendum regarding this subject has ever been conducted among Israeli urban and regional planners. Yet, because their number is small, with only approximately one thousand professionals in the entire country, and many of them are graduates of our school (the only school in Israel accredited to grant degrees in urban and regional planning), I can estimate trends that are common among them. To the best of my knowledge, only a small minority among Israeli planners supports the government's policy in the West Bank and even fewer take an active part in implementing it. The majority can be divided into three groups:

• Planners who are intensively involved in studying, writing, lecturing and demonstrating against the occupation – Some of them in Bimkom, the organization that the two authors, PF & CL, are part of. Others are active in Ir Amim (City of Peoples) and other NGOs with similar goals. A considerable number of colleagues devote their career to

analyzing the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In their writings and lectures, to which many of the readers of the TPR have probably been exposed, one usually finds detailed reports of all injustices created by the Israeli occupation (with little if any criticism of the Palestinians).

- A large group of individuals who frequently speak against the government policy towards the Palestinians, who sign petitions from time to time, but who otherwise are not involved due to distractions of career and family.

- An especially large group of planners whose contribution towards addressing the Israeli-Palestinian issue is to work towards advancing the status of Palestinian-Arabs within Israel, both for itself, for the sake of promoting just and equitable society, and for the hope that they can build a bridge of peace between the two nations. These planners work for equality in allocation of resources, in education and employment, they jointly prepare alternative plans for neighborhoods, villages and towns, and they often participate in mutual Israeli-Palestinian activities related to the environment. Sikkuy ("opportunity" in Hebrew) is an example of a country-wide NGO that develops and implements projects to advance equality between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel in government budgets, resource allocation, hiring policy, land usage, and access to government services. Shchenim (neighbors), an organization of Israeli Jewish and Arab planners, prepares plans for the Galilee area that are intended to benefit its Arab and Jewish residents. These are two of several dozens civil society organizations of this type.

Where do we go from here?

The most important question is where do we want to go and where can we go from here? There are three main (albeit simplified) alternatives: One, to leave things as they are, i.e., to continue the occupation for at least another few decades; second, "Two States for Two Nations" through the withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state here and in Gaza, and third, a single bi-national state for Jews and Arabs in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The first alternative is popular primarily with the very right end of the political spectrum. The third alternative has the support of a small eclectic group at the right and left fringes of the Israeli political spectrum. Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli political scientist who was Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem in the 1970s and since then has been a critic of Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, is one of the more prominent spokespeople for the bi-national state option. He recently published an op-ed in Israel's prestigious HaAretz newspaper (often compared to the New York Times) in January 2010, in which he leads the reader to an unequivocal conclusion: The economic dependence and the geographical picture that the State of Israel has created in the West Bank (see the map in PF & CL's document) allows only for the bi-national state option. I will devote this last section of my response to support of the second alternative, "Two States for Two Nations" and explain why this option is both possible and desirable from the points of view of Israel and Palestine.

- The most basic argument is that <u>both sides have a just claim on land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River</u>. From the point of view of most Israeli Jews, their just claim is related to the fact that Jewish people have had a strong attachment to this piece of land, which has been carried from generation to generation since the days of King David in Jerusalem, about 3,000 years ago, an attachment that has been known to Christians and Muslims alike. Secondly, they base their claim on the modern right of self determination that has received wide international recognition; the right of Jews to establish their "national home" in the debated area was recognized by the League of Nations in 1922, by the UN in 1947 and numerous times thereafter (Yakobson and Rubinstein, 2009). From the Arab/Palestinian point of view, the just claim is based on residing in the region since the Muslim occupation some 1,300 years ago, and on the requirement for self determination that followed the development of their national identity in the twentieth century (probably as a response to meeting the Jewish nationality). In spite of the many differences, the bottom line is that each side can justify its claim for self determination on this land, including the right to exercise its language and culture in its place.

- An important argument is that <u>the situation in the West Bank is reversible</u>. Indeed, over a 100 Israeli outposts are scattered throughout the area, but there are just 5-15 persons in each, and most frequently, not more than 1-2 permanent buildings. In about 120 Israeli settlements there are many more inhabitants (all combined about 300,000), but most of the settlers are located in clusters that are very close to the Green Line (the pre-1967 border that is expected to also be the border between the two states in accordance with the UN resolutions, with certain modifications). Hence, what is needed in order to reverse the situation are: (a) a strong political will to vacate those outposts, all or most of which have been deemed illegal by the report commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office mentioned above; (b) an agreement on land exchange: Israel will annex the lands which encompass the few large settlement clusters and will give the Palestinians an equal amount and quality of land within the Green Line; (c) a joint declaration by the two states that there is no need to evacuate the scattered Israeli settlements (unlike outposts) that are outside the big clusters. Israelis who want to continue living in the West Bank may do so and become citizens of the Palestinian State, as do a million and a quarter Palestinian Arabs that currently live in the State of Israel (this idea was raised and is supported by Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of Palestinian national Authority). There are many indications for believing that as soon as the settlers are convinced that Israel is serious in its intention to leave the West Bank, almost all of them will leave the settlements and return to Israel (unlike the Israeli Palestinians who have declared in several reliable polls that they want to stay in Israel even if a Palestinian State is established next door).

- <u>Unification between Israel and Palestine is doomed to fail because of the enormous differences between the two societies</u>. The history of the twentieth century has taught us that political connection between different religious and ethnic groups frequently fails, even where there was a joint history and other common denominators. In the

Palestinian-Israeli case there are very large differences in every important aspect of society, culture, politics and governance. It is not only a matter of different languages, Hebrew and Arabic, and different religions, Judaism and Islam, but a very different level of religiousness: About 8% of the Jews in Israel are ultra orthodox compared to 87% of 1200 interviewees in the occupied territories who said that they "agree to a large extent" with the statement that "religion should guide our deeds" (even if this is not a representative sample of the relevant population, this large sample does give us an indication of a very different mode of life). The status of women in the two societies is extremely different and so is the attitude to democracy and freedom of press. We have to add to these the pain and the open wounds created on both sides by long decades of conflict. Under these conditions, is there any rationale in forcing these peoples into one state and hoping that something good will come out of it?

- <u>Unification between Israel and Palestine is against the will of the majority of the two peoples</u>. The solution of Two States for Two Nations is not only the one that is declared as preferable by President Obama, the heads of the European Union and several Arab states, including Egypt and Jordan, but this is the solution that the majority on both sides of the conflict prefer. Indeed, unlike the situation several years ago, currently many in our region are skeptical regarding the attainment of peace agreement in the near future. Yet, in a survey conducted in June 2009 by Ford Foundation (Cairo) and the Konrad Edenauer Foundation (Jerusalem and Ramallah), administered by Israeli and Palestinian scientists, it was found that in spite of the general pessimism, 63% of the Israelis and 61% of the Palestinians support the two state solution.

In conclusion, the current situation is bad, morally and practically. The way ahead is to promote a solution that satisfies the national vision of the two nations and takes into consideration the deepest interests of both sides. One cannot live in the Middle East without having hope for a better future. As I said beforehand, I hope and believe that the solution of Two States for Two Nations is not only desirable but also possible.

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Acknowledgement