

Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008, p 318, \$ 12.95.



Israel has used the Gaza Strip as a free fire zone for 22 days and nights. Inevitably, the question arises how could Israel's occupation become so brutal taking into account the country's claim of being a "benign occupation power". Neve Gordon's book asks exactly that question. Did it happen because of decisions made by politicians or military officers or did the reasons lay in certain elements of the occupation's structure? The author sees the latter as the main cause of the conflict. Initially, "the occupation operated according to the colonization principle" which means the administration of people's lives, while exploiting the territories' resources. Structural contradictions undermined the original principle and gave way in the mid-1990 to the separation principle. By separation, Gordon means "the abandonment of efforts to administer the lives of a colonized population". This lack of interest towards peoples' lives that is characteristic of the separation principle "accounts for the recent surge in lethal violence".

Neve Gordon, professor for Politics and Government at the Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, has written the first comprehensive history of the Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory since 1967. Early on, he makes it clear that the conflict started way before 1967. The struggle for land began in the late 19th century and reached its peak in 1948. One cannot understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "without taking into account the ethnic cleansing that took place during and after the 1948 war". The author does not intend to reduce the conflict to the military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem although his analysis concentrates on the occupation since 1967. Gordon hints at an ambivalence: Israel has neither emphasized the de jure distinction nor the de facto bond between the regions, because in each case a contradiction emerges. To show to what absurdity this might lead the author asks the reader to imagine, for instance, that the Secretary of State of the United States would live permanently outside the country as several Israeli legislators and government ministers do, who live in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

Right from the outset, Gordon mentions the differences in the methods of managing the occupation. In the early years, Israel tried to behave like a "benign occupier". It improved the livelihood and the food basket of Palestinians, not only allowing them to work in Israel but also by planting hundreds of thousands of trees in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli political elite hoped Palestinians would get used to the occupation. According to the dictum by then Defense Minister Moshe Dayan: "Don't rule over them, let them rather lead their own lives." Although the methods of managing the occupation changed over time, the aims remained the same: Israel wanted only the "dowry", not the "bride", i.e. Israel wanted the land, but not its indigenous population. The separation not only failed but the Palestinians did not either accept the colonial rule.

According to the author Israel ruled till 1976 through the traditional (Palestinian) elite. Its power was challenged by the newly emerging economic elite, which built the nucleus of a new political and national movement. At this moment, a major shift in Israeli politics took place. Gordon calls this political shift a change from a "policy of life to a policy of death".

The author paints a sober picture of the Oslo years. From the beginning of the occupation till the outbreak of the so-called peace process in 1993, thirty per cent of the Palestinian labour force worked in Israel proper and created an enormous wealth. Their proportion dropped to seven per cent in 1996 when Benjamin Netanyahu became Israel's Prime Minister. The Palestinian GDP dropped by 37 per cent from 1993 to the year 2000. The Oslo years were the best of the colonial settlement project; the

number of Israeli settlers doubled in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. This period also saw an economic boom in Israel. Nothing equivalent happened on the Palestinian side. None of the promises made to Palestinians materialized. "The Palestinians suffered more under Oslo than before Oslo." The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) had neither sovereignty over the land nor over the people or their free movement. For the failure of Oslo, Gordon blames not only Israel but also the Palestinian leadership.

According to the author, the PNA was created as a tool to keep the Palestinian population under control. When it could no longer control the people, Israel changed the mechanism of control, i.e. it established some sort of "remote control" by creating checkpoints and barriers to limit and control movement and by using military drones, F-16 fighter jets, etc., for surveillance and intimidation. Up to this day, Israel has not given up any sovereignty, not even over the Gaza Strip, from where it pulled out its military forces in 2005. The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which is surrounded by Israeli barbed wire, still live like in a prison. Their right to leave or enter the Strip is controlled by Israel. Having no individual rights or any positive perspective whatsoever it was no surprise that the second Intifada broke out in the year 2000, so Gordon.

He explains the rising support of Hamas by the "excesses and contradictions produced by Israel's controlling apparatus and practices" which culminated in a landslide victory of that movement in the democratic elections of January 25, 2006. The ascendancy of Hamas is not only due to its reaction to Israel's colonial project, but is also a consequence of this project. The Islamist movement profited also from the globalization process. The author is rightly concerned over the successful consolidation of Hamas rule, because it will be "extremely tragic for all those who have fought for the establishment of a secular democracy in Palestine".

In the early 1990s, Neve Gordon worked for "Physicians for Human Rights". Already then, he demonstrated his courage. I am not surprised that he wrote such a powerful book on Israel's occupation, which damaged the reputation of his country, even more so by the horrific onslaught on the Gaza Strip. His review of 40 years of occupation is a must read for anybody.

Ludwig Watzal