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The curse of victory

Ex-Shin Bet chief Carmi Gillon reflects on 50 years of Israeli occupation

50 years ago, between 5-10 June 1967, Israel conquered the West Bank from Jordan, and the Gaza Strip from Egypt. The Six-Day War marks the beginning of the Israeli occupation. Carmi Gillon witnessed the occupation through his carrier in the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency. The agency's former chief tells Hannes Alpen he has grown critical of the occupation and believes Israel lacks the right leadership to end it.

Tell me about your experience of the the Six-Day War which led to the conquest of the Palestinian territories?

I was seventeen and in my last year of school in Jerusalem. We were terrified. We thought this would be the end of the country. Israel won the war and they opened the gates to East Jerusalem we thought we would now live in peace. And there was peace until 1987. As a young soldier I used to go partying in an East Jerusalem disco. [Israeli] soldiers and Palestinians would dance together, no one cared. We would eat hummus together in Ramallah, [a city in the West Bank].

How did you see the future of the occupied lands at the time?

There were those who said that we needed to use the opportunity to make peace. But it was difficult for us, because when you are afraid of death, and then you are so successful, you defeat three armies within five days, it feels like a miracle. Or rather, since I don't believe in miracles, I believed we had the best army in the world and we could control the territories until the end of time. It was only after I entered the Shin Bet in 1972 that I recognised the problems.

So what about the idea of trading land for peace: Palestinians recognising Israel in exchange for a claim to land in historical Palestine?

That was certainly in the minds of the majority of Israelis at that time. But the main issue was how to have secure borders. We thought the

Green Line (the pre-1967 boundary with the West Bank agreed in 1949 between Israel and neighbouring armies) was not secure. Nobody looked at the occupation from a moral point of view. That's only how we see it today.

At the time the Israeli Army was arguing it needed a certain strategic depth in order to defend the country against the armies of neighbouring states. But that threat has diminished. Is security still a good argument for continuing the occupation?

Security is always a relevant argument in Israel. It will always be the issue that dominates public opinion in Israel. But security has changed over the years. The only reason the number and the magnitude of terror attacks has decreased is the collaboration between the Israeli Army and the Security Service of the Palestinian Authority.

So do you think you can have secure borders nowadays?

Let's think about the problem with the rockets that were fired into Israel from Lebanon in 2016. We found a solution to that with the Iron Dome, a system that shoots down arriving rockets. We will always find a solution, because we are a start-up nation. We have the strongest army in the region and we are much stronger than the Palestinians. But we need to change the way we think. We have to start thinking about what is good for Israel and not what is bad for the Palestinians. We have the mentality that we are ready to lose one eye if the Palestinians lose two. This is ridiculous.

The price of the occupation is so high that it's not worth it, considering the changes on the strategic map. The situation is no longer the same as 50 years ago. And I'm not the only one saying that. Six former heads of Shin Bet, who have different political backgrounds, from the [right-wing] Likud party, from [liberal, centrist] Yesh Atid, from HaAvoda [Labour], we all agree.

So why is it so hard to find a consensus in Israel for a final peace deal with the Palestinians? Some people even say Israeli society is so diverse, it needs a conflict to unite around.

Prime Minister Netanyahu believes that as well. That's why he was trying to create the impression Iran is a threat. But then the head of Mossad and the head of the army disagreed with him and said, even if there is a threat, Israel will know how to deal with it. There is only consensus in Israel about two things: one, there is no way to have peace with the Palestinians, because they hate us and we hate them; and two: we need to find a solution; we can't keep on like this. So it's a crazy country, let's agree on that.

The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made headlines when he decided to cancel a meeting with German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, after Gabriel met with Israeli NGOs critical of Israel's occupation of the Westbank. What do you make of that?

It was a big mistake: ignoring the foreign minister of such a great friend of Israel, and we don't have that many friends, especially in Europe. It showed that Netanyahu is not a statesman; he is just a third grade politician. He thinks more about how he can gain more support from the extreme right in Israel than about the interests of Israel.

To be clear: organisations like B'Tselem, Breaking the Silence and the like were really irritating when I was head of Shin Bet. They kept forcing me to go to the Supreme Court to justify, for example, methods of interrogation. But I respected them. Because I recognised their right of freedom of speech in a democracy, I was fighting to preserve democracy not to destroy it.

Why do organisations such as Breaking the Silence [ex-soldiers who want to bring an end to Israeli occupation] face so much pressure in Israel? We are talking about Zionist soldiers who served their country and think that they are acting in Israel's best interests.

Until a couple of years ago they kept their criticism inside the country. It's when they took the criticism outside of Israel that they got in trouble. Israelis don't like it when you wash their dirty linen in public, outside of Israel. But I think there are other values in Israel that should be just as important as the good name of the Israeli Army. I stick to the principles laid down in the Israeli declaration of independence which proclaims a Jewish and democratic State. Unfortunately we live in a bad time for Israeli democracy, and the reason for that is the occupation.

There was once consensus in Israel that peace would come through a two-state solution. Admittedly some Israelis were angry when in 2005 Ariel Sharon ordered a pullout from Gaza. But the vast majority supported the withdrawal. This consensus seems to have vanished since then.

I am not sure that this consensus existed. But there was a policy. A policy that Netanyahu adopted himself at that time. Now there is no policy. And that is the biggest problem I have with our leadership: that there is no leadership. Actually the biggest hope for peacemakers in Israel is Donald Trump. Why? Because he feels he has the power to force Netanyahu to make a deal. He wants to impress the world and is seeking a great regional deal that goes beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and involves the Sunni Arab countries like Egypt, Saudi

Arabia and Jordan.

What do you think a two-state solution could look like?

I think we should pull out of most of East Jerusalem and put the Old City under an international regime. When it comes to the settlers, most of them would have to move out of the West Bank into Israel. But that's mainly a money issue. Maybe the Gulf countries could pay for that.

It would require a strong Israeli leader convince the settlers and the Gulf countries of such a policy.

Only the most religious settlers would want to stay. The rest live there mainly for financial, rather than ideological reasons. They will move. And for the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia this would be a way to say that they contributed to the liberation of the Palestinians.



Carmi Gillon
Jerusalem

Carmi Gillon is an Israeli diplomat and the former head of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency. From 2001 to 2003, he was Israels ambassador to Denmark