

## The Impact of Occupation on Israel's Corruption: No Wall Can Stop a Half Century Contagious Disease

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*Corruption is a form of dishonest or unethical conduct by a person entrusted with a position of authority, often to acquire personal benefit.*

Research on Latin America has shown that there is a spectrum between democracy and dictatorial regimes, but both tend to become close to each other when corruption is rampant, and particularly when, as in the Hebrew expression, "the fish stinks from its head". In an op-ed that I published in "*Forward*" [March 22, 2017], I briefly covered the domestic reasons for such dramatic developments within Israel. In this article, I wish to provide an additional and main explanatory variable: **The regime in the Palestinian Occupied Territories is based on corruptive and corrupting practices that originate from and feedback back into Israel.**

Over the last two decades, the deterioration of the quality of governance is spreading across many spheres of the ruling elite: the former President of Israel recently received an early release from years of imprisonment for rape and sexual abuse; a former prime minister is still in prison for financial corruption; a former minister of finance was released some years ago after pocketing part of the donation to cover group visits to Auschwitz and Israel; I myself could not imagine until reading in *Ha'aretz* [23.3.17] in a well-documented article that in the last 20 years 54 mayors and heads of regional councils were involved in legal criminal processes [among them seven Arabs and 47 Jews, and only one woman mayor, at times two consecutive mayors in the same city], from the Northern city of Kiryat Shemona in the Upper Galilee down South to the southern town of Dimona in the Negev Desert.

When looking at the entire behavioral trends in corruptive practices, the range includes trading concessions for big money with privileges, bribery, fraud and vice; from rape to sexual harassment; luxury perks, presents, treats and hedonism; connections between favoritism, nepotism and family promotion; abusing for personal gains the benefits from the taxpayers' contributions and more. Gradually, the ruling elite is becoming infected with what smells as much as perfume. Often, though not always, power corrupts, and long term power corrupts even more. In Israel, the interconnection of the different faces has been often characterized as the collusion of wealth, government and media [in Hebrew it rhymes: *Shilton, Hon velton*. Nowadays the Prime Minister, in addition to being *primo inter pares*, the first among equals, also controls two additional portfolios, Foreign Affairs and Communications, with the latter attempting to control public radio, TV, Internet news, and dirty business with competing newspapers (though he was required by the Government's Legal Adviser to turn over the Communications Ministry to one of his most loyal MK associates). With the generous payment of U.S. casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, the freebee daily "*Yisrael Hayom*" [Israel Today], the largest circulation daily in the country, additionally represents the phenomena identified by Benedict Anderson as "long distance nationalism", a situation in which a Diaspora "influential" tends to support more extreme policies than the one preferred by the majority living in the epicenter of conflict.

### Why am I so angry?

Our current Prime Minister has been being investigated by the police time and again for corruptive behavior, including having received approximately \$200,000 in presents, a punishable behavior for holders of public office; his wife is guilty of maltreating domestic personnel; both parents and son living a luxury life easily welcoming valuable presents, from jewelry to cigars and champagne; from flights in private jets to vacations with the rich and famous in top hotels, and more than a suspicion of the implication of some of the Prime Minister's upgraded standard of living in his private villa, at the expense of the taxpayers. Economics Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman, whose economic philosophy is much admired by the Prime Minister, coined the phrase "there is no such

a thing as a free lunch”, and general Israeli public opinion assumes that this is the case with our Israeli royal-like family

While normally many friends consider me to be friendly and calm, why am I so angry? Looking at the bigger picture, I ask myself, how many Israeli prime ministers had a private residence with a swimming pool? And where - in the most exclusive resort of Israel, Caesarea!. Hosting in his villa, attracting the most privileged rich and famous, having a mansion with a swimming pool could make sense, but maintained with taxpayer money? The Prime Minister's nickname has been “Teflon”, no investigation sticks - like a frying pan- for a lasting duration. Indeed, his tenure as PM has been longer than any other PM, including David Ben Gurion the founding father of Israel.

It's good to have mentioned Ben Gurion. Let me be clear: modesty and transparency was not the domain of the left or right-wing parties: From Ben Gurion and Ariele (Liova) Eliav in the Labor Party, the more kibbutz based leadership of Mapam to its left; and from Menachem Begin as the leader of Herut/liberal coalition to its right and even more to the nationalist wing Yitzhak Shamir: they all understood the concept of an “exemplary state”: that the “public relations of deeds” has been an existential priority for the new reborn Jewish state. Not all of today's parties are corrupt, one with a long and admirable record, the left-wing Zionist Meretz has lasted since 1948 in different variations, and so is the case for a couple of newly formed center parties. And when looking at individual members of Knesset, it is important to remember that a majority of them across the party lines were not investigated nor consider by public opinion to be corrupt. And yet, the stereotype of “politician” is problematic. When the popularity of Israeli professions is ranked, the Knesset ranks lowest with around 30% popularity, and this has tainted all the governmental institutions. Many of the past leaders from the ruling Likud, and even a number of current insiders, are perplexed to see how the “head” has been changing the standards of behavior. Good habits and morality seems now more measured by reprimanding a minister for not wearing a tie at a Cabinet meeting [when the norm in the formative years was just to have an open shirt], but also by having the Knesset guard checking the length of skirts of the female employees. But let's move on from the anecdotal to the dramatic patterns of deterioration of ethics and honesty.

### **Israel's corruption ranking going up**

Transparency International, through a fair and complex index, has been for 20 years monitoring levels of corruption [from less to more] with the help of expert's assessments. Israel, firstly mentioned in 1996 was then honorably ranked as 14<sup>th</sup> worldwide. But by 2016, two decades later, Israel has been downgraded to 28<sup>th</sup>, below Uruguay [21] and Chile or United Arab Emirates [24]; and closer to Qatar [31]. A report issued by the OECD in 2016 ranks Israel as the country with the highest rate of poverty among its members. Approximately 21 percent of the Israelis were found to be living under the poverty line – more than in countries such as Mexico, Turkey and Chile. The OECD average is a poverty rate of 11 percent. Furthermore, Israel has the third highest gap between the rich and poor among the world's advanced economies after the US and Mexico.

Our current Prime Minister was elected for the first time in 1996 after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. This was despite the fact that he had remained silent at a public meeting in Jerusalem before the assassination where a photo was displayed of Rabin dressed in a Gestapo uniform. He soon managed to ruin what was left of the Oslo Peace Process. His first term in office was a dismal failure, but he came back to power in 2008 using the conjectural moment of the demise of another corrupt prime minister who grew up together with him in the same party.

In 1977, Rabin had taken a personal decision to resign as prime minister because his wife had left \$18,000 in bank accounts in the U.S. from the time he served as Ambassador in Washington DC, which was not permitted then by Israeli law. His integrity was at stake and nobody challenged him when he ran again became prime minister for a second time in 1992. On the contrary, after Rabin's assassination assassinated in 1995 by a fanatic religious Bar Ilan University Law School student- the expressions of his political enemies such as former PM Yitzhak Shamir, who related not only to the loss of “the best minister of defense” but also stated that “he will cherish his modesty and devotion to the country”. Others called Rabin a “a man of integrity, honesty, straightness and openness “or as a “a real, decent person who cares for the people”. Paradoxically, that same year in a heavily contested election Netanyahu won over Rabin's default successor, Shimon Peres.

Back to the present reality: Within the current two year budget there is an allocation of 300 million shekels to be distributed by about a handful of members of Knesset that receive from 10 to 80 million NIS to dispersed as they wish, as personal presents to institutions, that will generate dependency and promise for political support in primaries in the future.

### **Occupation Corrupts**

Why is this happening? In a recent book edited by my colleagues Daniel Bar Tal and Izhak Schnell "the Impact of Occupation on Israel" by Oxford University Press [also available in Hebrew], I contributed an article on "The Impact of Occupation on Human Rights in Israel". I have been following with great apprehension, along with many of my colleagues, the deterioration of the standards of democracy in Israel. In a book I coedited with Shukri Abed and Robert Rothstein in 1993, on the eve of the Oslo peace process, we could point out the harmful nature of occupation of another nation without the right to exercise their right to be free. Think about the behavioral effect of trying to curb the rebellion of those Palestinians who pretend to have the right to bear arms against tyranny- What sounds familiar in the history of the U.S. as a legitimate way of action has been militarily defeated time and again by the Israeli superiority of arms. But to prevent an uprising, our dominating forces need to find collaborators, be they by bribes, blackmail, threats, bodily or psychological harm or other immoral practices. No wonder that in order to "beat the system" and often keep oneself at float, with a document, a permit, intermediaries to get you access to a job, an education, the use of a hospital in East Jerusalem, our security systems have developed subtle ways to recruit what in our Yiddish lexicon they are disrespectfully called "Stinkers". Indeed, "it takes two to tango" but the one that leads is the corruptor. Seeking "*Wasta*" in Arabic or "*Proteksia*" in Hebrew slang are synonyms and widely used in our region. Debasement as a norm for exploitation and control becomes a gradual matter, privileges or punishment are not regulated by "legal laws", decrees can be more arbitrary in the Occupied Territories, but the Prime Minister's capricious and obstinate demands become just a matter of degrees, finding the adequate loopholes.

For three generations the indigenous natives have been denied or grossly limited in their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Survival skills require the use of any method, and corrupted Palestinians gain priority treatment. Not that the governance in other Arab countries and among their own Palestinian leadership is clean from corruption, but our Israeli governments have taken advantage of such fertile ground

The other corruptive situation is the blatant benefits received by the Jewish settler as compared with the native Palestinian population, be it in terms of access to water, land, freedom of movement, long-term imprisonment without trial and more. Take the entire Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted by Rene Cassin, a proud French Jewish jurist and recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, and compare Jews and Arabs in the Palestinian Territories. With honesty, check item by item to realize the illegal and degenerating practices that are being carried out.

In the past, our judiciary tried to stand firm against the slow deterioration of standards of equality, but the power elite is trying and succeeding to erode their independence day in and day out. And the IDF- the most respected institution by most Israeli Jews, has been already weakened by popular demands for illegal rulings. When populism is now common practice by large segments of the political leaders, it is not only the extreme right who insist they are innocent when killing a mortally wounded Arab terrorist or retrospectively legalizing Jewish settlements on private Palestinian land, let alone on a territory that has not been annexed in any form by the military occupier and hence is not part of the State of Israel.

### **It is time to say *dayeinu*, Enough to Occupation!**

And a warning to our Jewish brothers and sisters in the Diaspora: unless you want to be passive facing the revival of the anti-Semitic stereotype of a Shylock, a conniving type and a liar, pay attention. Much of the settlement enterprise in "Judea and Samaria" [the government did not officially annex the area yet it changed the universally recognized name West Bank of the Jordan River]; the replacement of the Arab language signs for Jerusalem from the original Arabic *Al Quds* to the Hebrew *Yerushali'im*; the erasing from official and school maps of the pre-1967

borders, the Green Line, making the difference between the Occupied Territories and Israel proper invisible. The goal is to hide such changes, perhaps confuse and fool the new generations of Israelis about what is and has been the recognized names and borders. Indeed, much has been concocted with the settlers' associations, with secretly corruptive deals, and cover-ups by Likud and Jewish Home ministers. The colonizers wink and the others turn a blind eye, or the other way around. And there are the corruptive stories of the Israel Beiteinu – Israel is Our Home party members who were caught in a mixed case of personal enrichment and taking a cut from illegally transferred money to "their" sympathizers among the settlers.

It is incumbent upon us, those who find multifaceted corruption repugnant and destructive, to stand up and help the already loud but not yet powerful enough voices within Israel trying to denounce or repeatedly announce that "OCCUPATION CORRUPTS. And last but not least, it is vital for the Jews in the Diaspora and for true friends of BOTH Palestinians and Israelis to differentiate between rotten governance and supporting Israel, the nation as a whole. At the moment, as in the Snow White story, the stepmother is asking: mirror, mirror on the wall: Am I beautiful? It will be a shame to lie, best to tell us the truth in our faces; that indeed the venality and perversion of this leadership is not giving the pride and honor the Jewish people deserve for all its contributions to humanity then and now as well. Spread the word, Write publicly and directly to remind Netanyahu that the "Chosen People" was not meant to be the ruler over Other people but to show the path to "proclaim release for our redemption." Stand up and say: "Enough is enough". Sounds familiar? Not only as a recurrent motto in Bernie Sanders's electoral speeches. The term in Hebrew "*Dayenu*" [we have had enough] is recited numerous times in the Jewish Passover dinner. Now in the 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee year [from Hebrew '*Yovel*' and Arabic '*Yubil*'] we should add *Dayehinu*, Enough to Occupation.