

Grim reports of repression in Israel-occupied lands

By E. C. Hodgkin

The author, who is Foreign Editor of The Times, has just returned from Israel-occupied Jordan where he revisited places and people he has known for more than 30 years. In this article he records his verdict on the Israel occupation, which he describes as "profoundly depressing". Among the places he saw was the village of Halhul, between Bethlehem and Hebron, which is now reported to have been completely demolished by the Israel army, one of whose lieutenants had been killed in a bomb incident.

The Arabs on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip have now lived under Israel military occupation for nearly two and a half years. It is not to be expected that such an occupation will be popular; but what surprised me was the intensity with which the Israelis are hated everywhere by all sections of the population.

The mood is perhaps similar to that in occupied France at the beginning of 1942. The invaders' hopes of acceptance, and the invaded people's hope of a quick rescue, have vanished. Repression is severe, and acts of resistance are multiplying. Each adds fuel to the other. As yet the stage of massive reprisals and collective punishments has not been reached. But eventually, if things go on as they are now, it will come.

It has been suggested that Israel's occupation of Arab lands is somehow different—the occupiers more benign, or the occupied more resigned. This is not so. The Israelis are at least as determined as are the Russians in Czechoslovakia to crush all opposition and are in a better position than the Russians to do this. Measures currently being used include:

Deportation. About 90 Palestinians, as far as I could calculate, have so far been pushed over the border into Jordan. Most are people who were prominent in West Bank life—the former-mayor of Jerusalem and the present mayor of Ramallah, for examples; judges, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and so on.

Destruction of houses.—On the latest pre-Halhul tally, 7,140 Arab houses have been blown up. This includes entire villages which have been destroyed "for security reasons" but in the majority of cases the houses were blown up because somebody suspected of connexion with guerrilla activity was living in them. What particularly angers Arabs is that destruction often takes place as soon as a suspect is carried off. There is no waiting for him to be charged, let alone convicted. Nor does it matter if he is not the owner of the house. Innocent or guilty, tenant or visitor or owner, the explosives go in. Requisition of buildings is a lesser irritant, though the conversion of the brand-new hospital in east Jerusalem to police headquarters is a constant affront.

'LIGHT' SENTENCE

Imprisonment. Suspects are frequently held for months at a time without trial, without their whereabouts being known, and without lawyers or relatives being able to visit or contact them. Eventually they come before an Israel military court and have the services of an Israeli advocate. Sentences are very harsh indeed. The day before I visited Nablus, for example, it was reported in the Jerusalem Post that four members of a "terrorist cell" had been sentenced there—two, aged 17 and 21, to life imprisonment; one, aged 18, to 30 years, and one, aged 16, to 25 years. What the newspaper did not report was that in passing sentence on the 16-year-old the president of the court apparently remarked that, in view of the boy's youth and the fact that he had pleaded guilty, a light sentence would be imposed. It was not clear whether this was meant seriously or as a joke. Sentences of this order are reported almost daily.

Torture. A common belief in the occupied areas—held by all resident there, not only by the Arabs—is that anyone suspected of belonging to a guerrilla organization or of helping one in any way is tortured as a matter of routine, and there is a great body of evidence to support this belief. The methods reported to be used follow the pattern familiar from Algeria, Hungary, Vietnam and elsewhere, including electrical treatment as well as every form of beating. Torture is said to be carried out in the interrogation centres at the Russian Compound in Jerusalem, Sarafand camp, and Ashkelon gaol.

Curfews. These are a weapon of authority in every difficult situation. They can, however, be applied as precautionary measures or as punishments, and the Israelis prefer to use them as punishments. The example of Beit Sahur, just outside Bethlehem, is fresh in everyone's memory. This is a community of settled tribesmen, each family living in a small box-like stone house. It was near

this straggling village that rockets were installed, two of which fell in Jerusalem last August. The Israelis claimed, no doubt with reason, that some of the villagers must have known what was going on. So a total curfew was imposed. For a week nobody was allowed to leave their house or to open a window. As the latrines are outside the houses, and as it is very hot in Palestine in August, the result was not pleasant. Outside, the livestock of the villagers died or was requisitioned. A modified curfew persisted for some weeks longer.

Passes and permits. Permits are needed for travel to or from Jordan and for residents in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip to visit Jerusalem which, with its surrounding villages, has been annexed by Israel. Already more than half the Arab population of Palestine is dispersed in the outside world; the separation of families is now greater than ever before and their reunion, temporary or permanent much more difficult.

Naturally, the Israelis say that everything is the fault of the guerrillas—the fedayin. If they would only stop their raiding and bomb throwing there would be no need for repression. Perhaps not. But it seems ingenuous to expect the Palestinian Arabs not to react to an alien military occupation as other people everywhere else react. Indeed, they have a stronger reason not to lie still because they fear that occupation is only the preliminary to annexation.

I must confess that when going around on the West Bank I found it difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is Israel's aim. Israelis see the Jordan River as historically and strategically a natural frontier. So the new settlements go up on the West Bank, the new buildings rise like mushrooms in and around Jerusalem, the new military roads and communications are constructed. These are evidence of a people determined to stay where they are.

The only inconvenience is the presence of rather a lot of Arabs—650,000 on the West Bank and another 450,000 in the Gaza Strip. As it would be much simpler

if these were not there, every effort is being made to persuade them to go. The most important ones to be got rid of are those with education and authority. This covers most of the deportees (who, it must be assumed, will be followed by their families), and others who find life intolerable either because they have little work and therefore little money, or simply because there is a limit to their endurance of the day to day pressures of occupation.

All sections of the population worry particularly about their children. What is going to happen to the Arab schools? All schools have been threatened with closure if their pupils strike or demonstrate against the occupation authorities. Two schools in Nablus and one in Jenin (run by the United Nations) were in fact shut down during my visit. Moreover, all government schools in the annexed Jerusalem area have been compelled to change from Jordanian to Israeli textbooks and examinations, so that the children start learning to read with such sentences as "I am an Israeli citizen". The prospect of their children having to follow an alien system of education—or having no education at all—is enough to make even the most patriotic think about throwing in their hand and leaving.

Simpler methods are used to speed the departure of simpler people. During the Beit Sahur curfew, for example, the villagers were repeatedly told that if they wanted to join King Husain in Jordan, military transport was available to take them to the border. Various bribes have been offered to make families emigrate. There is no need to evacuate the whole million; trimmed to half or even three-quarters of its size, and judiciously split up by new roads, garrisons, and settlements, the Arab population would be of little trouble.

A catalogue of repression like this is inevitably depressing, and it is more depressing than ever when related to a state so idealist—where its own people are concerned—as Israel. Many people simply believe that "it can't happen there". This may account partly for the double

standard with which the west is often charged by the Arabs. If there are demonstrations in Prague against the Russian occupiers, they say, you applaud; if there are reports of torture in Greece you insist on investigations; if bombs go off in Athens you say this is only to be expected, and cheer; if South Africa keeps "suspected terrorists" in goal for months without trial you protest. But similar things can happen all the time in occupied Palestine, and the world remains indifferent.

USE OF FORCE

This is a main reason for the growth and persistence of the fedayin. The assumption that Palestine Arabs now make—and most other Arabs make it too—is that whatever other countries, and particularly Britain and the United States, may say about the need for a withdrawal by Israel they are not going to use any real pressure to secure it. So pressure must come from the Arabs themselves, and particularly from those most concerned—and hitherto least consulted—the Arabs of Palestine.

There seems to be virtual unanimity in the occupied territories that the only help is self-help, and that this means force. But there are many different ideas about what the political aim should be. Some feel that the occupation has such an appalling impact that it is worth paying almost any price to end it. Others say that a bargain which sent the Israelis back to their pre-1967 borders would solve nothing. The rump of Palestine would be as vulnerable as ever and all title to the other conquered territories would have to be given up. There is, however, widespread support for the idea of a handover of the occupied territories to the United Nations for a transitional period.

This may offer the only hope—if not of peace, at least of avoiding intensified suffering on both sides. Otherwise there is going to be a long drawn-out war.

All occupations are bad. Power slips more and more into the hands of extremists—the big stick on one side and the big

bomb on the other. That is what is happening in what is left of Palestine. On the whole the Arabs there used to be probably the most adaptable, intelligent, and moderate of their race, anxious only

to live and prosper in the land which has so long been their home. It is a tragedy that they are now being persecuted into a new diaspora by the armies and people of Israel.

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