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Electronic Occupation

By Ghazi Hamad

Gazans may no longer have tanks in their streets after disengagement, but it will still be under the control and surveillance of a foreign occupying power. Judging by statements made by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and army officials, and the security stipulations made in the Knesset-approved disengagement plan, Israel will maintain its presence in the air, sea, and at Gaza's borders after its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Gaza will exist in a liminal state post-withdrawal. It will not be fully independent, but at the same time will not be subjected to the checkpoints, road closures, and other means of movement restriction that characterizes the occupation in the West Bank.

Palestinian Civil Affairs Minister Mohammed Dahlan told the Palestine Report, "It is clear that Israel will not leave the Gaza Strip to its own devices. What kind of independence and sovereignty will there be if the land, sea and borders are all under their control? It is better if they just stayed instead of fooling the world into believing they have really pulled out."

According to the Israeli press, Israel has plans to employ high-tech equipment and tighten security measures along Gaza's borders, further ghettoizing the densely-populated tiny sliver of land.

Israeli Army Brig-Gen. Arnon Zuretz stated in a June 11 interview with Voice of Israel, " Israel would have complete control over the situation in the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal by the most sophisticated technological equipment in the world." He added that digital command posts will enable Israel to survey the situation on the ground, which would enable IDF air and ground forces to fully coordinate."

Indeed, Israel plans to surround the Gaza Strip with more than one electronic fence in addition to the current barrier that runs for 60 kilometers, in order to prevent any movement across the border. The Israeli army's transport and technology department, which is in charge of the fence's construction, estimates this project's cost at approximately NIS6.5 billion. The Israeli defense ministry puts the cost of one kilometer of fence alone at around NIS 10 million.

Running mostly along the 1967 border with a few deviations into Palestinian land, in addition to digital monitors, the electronic fence incorporates a series of observation posts comprised of trenches, deep canals, high cement walls, electric fences, and digital monitoring systems. There are also buffer zones separating the observation posts from the truce line.

Controversially, Israel will also maintain and expand its military presence along the Philadelphi route. Stretching from the Rafah Refugee Camp and all along the Egyptian border, this area has seen some of the worst Israeli rights violations, particularly house demolitions. Where hundreds of refugee houses once stood, running parallel to the border is now a vast buffer zone about 200 meters deep. This area is now designated as a military zone, prohibited to Palestinians.

As was reported in the June 17 edition of the Jerusalem Post, Israel is currently building a sea barrier near the Gaza seashore under the pretext of preventing Palestinian forces from hindering the withdrawal process by infiltrating the 21 settlements slated for evacuation.

The barrier will run 950 meters inside the Mediterranean and will consist of a layer of cement surrounded by an iron fence. The post adds that 150 meters of the barrier will be comprised of steel columns dug into the seafloor, while the remaining 800 meters of the barrier will consist of a "floating fence" 1.8 meters deep into the water.

All these means of control means that legally, Gaza will maintain its occupied status. As is stipulated in Article 42 of the Hague Convention, "Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can be exercised."

Israel insists that after the withdrawal it can refute any claims regarding its responsibility towards the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. But international law says otherwise. Even if Israel does fully withdraw all its forces and means of control, Article 6 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states that an occupying power is bound by the convention for a period of one year after the occupation has ended. So until that time, the Palestinians will remain protected persons and Israel will retain responsibility.

Source: Palestine Report