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Tel Aviv's mayor and the mechanics of occupation

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The attack on a popular cafe in Tel Aviv turned the world's attention back to the cycle of violence in Israel and Palestine. Statements condemning the attack have predictably poured in from all corners of the world, including a Facebook post from Donald Trump.

The majority of statements focused on the deplorable targeting of civilians by two Palestinian gunmen, with one particular exception: the remarks made by Tel Aviv's mayor Ron Huldai. The morning after the shooting, Mr Huldai said Israel's military occupation of the West Bank was a major factor in the attack.

"We might be the only country in the world where another nation is under occupation without civil rights," the mayor told Israeli army radio. "You can't hold people in a situation of occupation and hope they'll reach the conclusion everything is alright. There has been an occupation for 49 years, which I was part of and I know the reality, and I know leaders need courage to not just talk."

The mayor is absolutely correct. In fact, his comments don't reflect any new dimension of the conflict; they simply reflect the reality on the ground. The occupation has long been the most visible source of daily violence in the conflict. Only those in the most narrow-minded, pro-Israel circles would argue otherwise. By addressing the occupation as the main cause of violence

against Israeli civilians, however, Mr Huldai sought to perpetuate an imaginary division between the values of "liberal" Tel Aviv and those of Israel's political leadership in Jerusalem. This false dichotomy has been carefully orchestrated since the beginning of Israel's colonial project in Palestine. Tel Aviv has always embellished its progressive values and placed them in opposition to the conservative nationalism of the rest of the country.

During Mr Huldai's tenure as mayor – he is currently in his fourth consecutive five-year term in office – the facade of Tel Aviv's enlightened virtues has been entrenched further. From the city's embrace of counter culture to conferences on smart urbanism, its leadership and residents alike don't recognise the irony of the city cloaking itself in European values.

Indeed, Tel Aviv is often referred to as a liberal oasis in the Middle East, as if it was not part and parcel of the increasingly ethnocratic Israeli state that oversees an occupation predicated on the disenfranchisement of an entire people. By taking a pragmatic stance on the recent attack with expressed scorn for the occupation, Mr Huldai is trading on this false dichotomy.

The reality is that Tel Aviv is not a European city nor is it removed from Israel's domination of the Palestinians. The city is the heart of the Israeli colonial project and continues to provide soldiers who enforce the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza.

It is hardly surprising that the horrific attack by two Palestinian gunman on civilians took place just two blocks from Israel's defence ministry, which is in the heart of Tel Aviv.

The municipality is deeply entwined in the continued displacement and dispossession of Palestinians from Jaffa. One of the oldest cities in the Middle East, Jaffa was a major commercial and cultural centre of Palestine before Israel's creation in 1948. In 1950, Jaffa joined Tel Aviv under one municipality and has since steadily liquidated its Palestinian residents and their history.

Today, Jaffa is home to many boutique restaurants and art galleries. Property values have skyrocketed as the ancient port has become the target of a gentrification wave.

Tourist maps produced by Mr Huldai's office have erased Palestinian heritage from the urban landscape: Only two mosques are mentioned in the latest maps, and the words Palestinian, Arab or Muslim don't appear at all.

The residents of Tel Aviv are also responsible for enforcing the cognitive dissonance between the occupation and the city's liberal values. In July 2011, hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets of Tel Aviv to demand "social justice" in response to high rents.

The J14 protesters, as they became known, marched under the banner of "The nation demands social justice", but the organisers actively refused to discuss either the social justice implications of the occupation or the ethnic discrimination underpinning Israel's most pressing housing issues.

J14 refused to discuss politics at all, because they claimed it was time for Israelis to debate internal socio-economic issues. The hypocrisy of campaigning for social justice while occupying another people and depriving them of their civil and human rights was lost on most of these protesters. For the majority, the Palestinians are tucked neatly behind walls and checkpoints, while life goes on in liberal Tel Aviv. Out of sight, out of mind.

This is not to discredit Mr Huldai's comments on the occupation as an engine for violence. It is encouraging to see the mayor of Tel Aviv draw a line between terror and the occupation. He made comments no president of the United States and few European politicians would dare to make. (Imagine if a Labour party politician in the UK had said something similarly controversial following the attack).

The occupation, however, is only one manifestation of Israel's colonial enterprise. There is no evidence to suggest that Mr Huldai is ready to come to terms with Tel Aviv's pivotal role in the colonisation of Palestine by ending the destruction of Jaffa or advocating meaningful non-violent measures to the end occupation.

If Mr Huldai were genuine about Tel Aviv's liberal values and his distress over Israel's occupation, he could have gone further with his comments and called for action. At this point in the horrific conflict, Mr Huldai's lack of action throughout his time in office confirms that talk is cheap.