

THE PALESTINIAN PLIGHT

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I recently returned from a two-week trip to Palestine (West Bank but not Gaza) and Israel.

I have traveled to the area six times but this was my first visit in nine years. (I retired in 2005 after twenty years as Director of the Washington Office for the American Friends Service Committee [Quakers].) My recent trip was led by Professor Tony Bing, a longtime Quaker friend and colleague, who has led some thirty-six previous group tours to the region. While our itinerary included some of the usual tourist and religious sites, the focus was on meeting with Palestinian leaders and civil society organizations along with some of the stalwart Israeli peace activists. We had three home stays overnight with Palestinian families in West Bank towns.

Although we went to some places and met some Palestinians new to me, my overall impressions were sadly familiar. Palestinians remain in bondage living under a cruel Occupation in West Bank and unequal treatment as “Arab” citizens in Israel. (Roughly 20% of Israelis are Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian.) Despite marginal improvements in economic and security terms in the West Bank, both the daily lives and deepest aspirations of Palestinians there are controlled by Israeli military pressure and power exercised at whim and with impunity. Both inside Israel and in West Bank Palestinians face sustained injustice, denial of rights, and relentless dispossession in every aspect of their lives.

The disparity of treatment is apparent promptly upon arrival in Israel when one travels on the modern highway that connects the airport near Tel Aviv with Jerusalem in the hills to the East. A section of this road passes through the West Bank. The Israeli Supreme Court gave permission to build this road provided that West Bank Palestinians would also be able to use it. Upon completion, the highway was closed to such Palestinian cars and remains so. On the trip we encountered further instances where Supreme Court rulings in favor of Palestinian rights were ignored or openly flouted. Most incidents arising in the West Bank are handled in military courts with limited access to possible redress in the Israeli civil courts.

As background for the current plight of the Palestinians, one must understand that the state of Israel at its creation in 1949 (after being attacked by Arab forces and fighting a war in 1948-1949) claimed 78% of the land of historic Palestine (rather than the 55%-45% split proposed by the United Nations with Jerusalem set off as a separate jurisdiction). From the start Palestinians lost most of their land. Over 500 “Arab” villages inside Israel were destroyed, ploughed under, and removed from the map. Currently 93% of land inside Israel is reserved for Jews only, leaving over a million Palestinian citizens on the remaining (and shrinking) 7%. The 1949-1967 border between Israel and Palestinian West Bank—called the Green Line—remains the starting point for negotiations and the legal demarcation recognized under International Law.

In the 1967 war Israel moved to occupy West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. They have since annexed the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem (with an enormously expanded metropolitan area) although these actions are not recognized internationally. Soon after 1967 Israeli settlements proliferated in these Occupied Territories in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and various U.N. resolutions. So many Palestinians were displaced and dispossessed by these two wars and subsequent Israeli policies that today three-fourths of all Palestinians remain refugees and more than half the refugees in the world are Palestinians. (Only the Kurds are a larger national/ethnic group without a recognized state of their own.)

As Israel has constructed the Separation Wall in recent years, only 67 kilometers out of a total of 774 kilometers of the Wall/Fence lie along the 1967 Green Line. As a result Israelis have confiscated an additional 10-12% of West Bank land and resources. Several Palestinians told me that they would have helped to build the Wall themselves if only it had been put along the 1967 border. In the current disposition of West Bank land "AREA A" is the only zone that is to be strictly under Palestinian control (mainly the cities in West Bank) and represents only 8.5% of historic Palestine. Even in Area A the Israeli military intervenes at will and in force whenever they deem that "security" concerns require. To date some 450,000 Israeli settlers live in the illegal West Bank settlements with another 200,000 equally illegal Israeli residents in East Jerusalem. The West Bank is carved into truncated Palestinian cantons in a sea of Israeli control by the settlements and settler-only road grids.

In the larger context of the overall data of dispossession we had direct experience in a series of West Bank villages and farmsteads where the relentless Israeli encroachment and takeover were a daily reality. (We also saw the process of settler intrusion and Palestinian displacement at work in the city of Hebron.)

We visited the village of Atwani in the countryside around Hebron. Residents told us that this small rural town had been on that site since Roman times. The community had finally been able to build a school for children in the area but since the Israeli authorities had refused a building permit, the building had an Israeli demolition order issued against it as an "illegal" structure. Such demolition orders are in place against thousands of such "illegal" Palestinian homes and buildings all across West Bank and in East Jerusalem. Many of these orders are carried out each year in pitiless but "legal" acts of destruction.

An Israeli settlement presses close to Atwani and had seized much of its agricultural land. The pressures on Atwani are cruel and constant. Even in the land still available to Atwani, settlers have put out poisons to kill the herds of sheep and goats. They have thrown dead chickens down village wells. They regularly invade the perimeter of the town with armed groups. All this hostile activity takes place under the watchful eyes of the Israeli soldiers posted on the edge of the town to "protect" the settlers.

When the children from nearby hamlets walk to the school in Atwani, settlers often harass and threaten them, sometimes actually assaulting them.

International volunteers usually walk with them to deter the worst threats. Clearly the Israeli soldiers are in place to protect the settlement but not Palestinian school children. The Israelis who live in such remote locations deep in the West Bank are often extremist zealots—in this case some had been relocated from settlements in Gaza when Israel pulled back from the Gaza Strip.

Another village in the area around Hebron—Beit Ummar—has similar stories of lands taken, steady encroachment, and intimidation. In one instance Israelis took hundreds of young men into custody and held them just long enough that they missed crucial year-end exams and would have to repeat a grade in school. We barely got into Beit Ummar on a back road. I have learned since my return that the town is now under total Israeli blockade to prevent any international visitors from reaching it.

Another striking example is the village of Bil'in west of Ramallah where a campaign against seizure of their agricultural lands has been under way for six years. Bil'in has drawn support from Palestinian, Israeli, and international activists. We stayed overnight in the homes of local families whose lands had been confiscated to build a new Israeli settlement on a nearby hilltop. Four years ago the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the seizure of so much land from Bil'in had been an illegal taking. We walked from the village out to the Separation Wall/Fence where weekly non-violent protests are held. The ground was littered with tear gas canisters. Two residents of Bil'in have been killed and many injured in the series of protests.

We saw a “temporary fence” that sealed off roughly 30% of the confiscated land but lay outside the real Wall/Fence. A few days earlier a fire swept across this intermediate zone scorching the earth and some 1,200 olive trees. The night after we slept in the village soldiers came through Bil'in firing tear gas shells in the streets. Soon after, reports indicated that the Israelis had pulled down the “temporary fence” and “returned” 30% of the land. News accounts in the West failed to report that a fire had been set to damage or destroy the agricultural resources on that land prior to the belated Israeli “return” of it.

It is difficult to grasp the comprehensive denial of rights and of normal life patterns under Israeli occupation. Even though the days we spent in West Bank were relatively “quiet” with little overt violence and somewhat reduced Israeli checkpoints, Palestinians cannot move around and gain access to familiar places without the daily permission of teenage Israeli soldiers at checkpoints or Israeli clerks in offices where permits must be secured. A Palestinian professor living in Bethlehem/Beit Sahour explained that he could more easily travel to China than to Jerusalem even though the hills of that city were visible a few miles away. Muslims and Christians in West Bank rarely get clearance to worship at their holy places in Jerusalem. Another example arose as we drove in the group bus on a rural road South of Hebron. We came upon an ambulance pulled to the side of the road. As we drove past, we suddenly realized that the back door was open and a woman was giving birth right there attended only by the ambulance staff. She was almost certainly Palestinian. It is unlikely that an Israeli mother would give birth anywhere but in a medical facility.

Another example involved Jean Zaru, a longtime friend who is a leader of the small community of Quakers in Ramallah (where Quakers have run an excellent secondary school for 140 years). Jean is an internationally recognized Palestinian Christian author who has spoken widely and especially in the U.S. She is also a woman in her 70's who has serious heart and health problems. Jean told me that she recently needed to see a medical specialist in Jerusalem. It took her ten days and three offices before she could secure the needed permit for entry into the city. Then she stood for two hours in the blazing sun at the checkpoint before a young Israeli soldier cleared her to get to her doctor's appointment.

Jean Zaru is a tireless advocate for non-violent struggle against the Occupation and what she calls the "deep structures of injustice" that impose such daily humiliations upon Palestinians—for example, many students at the Quaker school in Ramallah get up at 5 a.m. so that they can get through the checkpoints in time for classes at 9 a.m. Jean is an eloquent voice for faith and values that embrace reconciliation and peace-making but she will not be silent in the face of systemic oppression. As she said, "Under Occupation the Israelis bleed morally and the Palestinians bleed literally."

I cannot summarize much less give details of the many conversations with Palestinians as well as Jewish Israelis who shared their experiences and analyses with us. In broad summary I was encouraged by the deepened commitment to non-violence in the ongoing struggle by every Palestinian we met. (Of course we did not get into Gaza or talk with representatives of Hamas.) For many Palestinians non-violence is a matter of personal philosophy but others have come to see the strategic necessity of non-violent tactics so as not to enable Israelis to respond violently with impunity.

The actual historical tradition of Palestinian resistance has always been non-violent with occasional but dramatic exceptions. Broad public campaigns have consistently held to a non-violent discipline. For ordinary Palestinians no value is more cherished than "samoud"—the determination to stay on their land and resist aggression by patient endurance that outlasts the invader. There is an extraordinary tenacity under duress in the daily lives of Palestinians today—in the villages, in the cities, in the refugee camps, in Israel as well as West Bank. Given the suffering and mistreatment they have experienced, when most Palestinians speak of the future that they seek as a shared arrangement with Israelis, they also manifest an astonishing measure of forgiveness.

The larger political context for Palestinians in their complex plight is bleak. No Palestinian or Israeli with whom we talked held out serious hope for the long-running "peace process." This negotiating sequence has been moribund in real terms since Netanyahu became Prime Minister. It now can be declared "dead." For peace activists the final nail in the coffin was the U.S. veto at the United Nations in February of a resolution that said Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories were illegal. This resolution stated what had been the declared U.S. policy in earlier Administrations, announced in full support of international law as well as the Fourth Geneva Convention. Given the vast disparity in power between Israel and Palestine, the only recourse Palestinians have is to international law which clearly backs their rights and condemns

Israel's settlements and extended Occupation. Without international law, they are helpless to defend their rights.

When President Obama ordered the veto at the U.N.—a 14 to 1 vote in the Security Council—activists in Israel and Palestine gave up hope that Obama would break out of the pro-Israel box that has defined core U.S. policy on the conflict, especially in recent Administrations. Facing a re-election year, there is even less chance now that the President will do so. By contrast, Prime Minister Netanyahu is triumphant (for now) in his hard-line positions which rule out any genuine accord with the Palestinians. Netanyahu's sense of command over the U.S. political process was evident in his insulting lecture to Obama in the White House after which he was overwhelmingly cheered in the U.S. Congress for the most intransigent speech ever given there by any Israeli leader.

Seeing a dead-end to the “peace process,” Palestinian leaders decided to make an attempt at the United Nations in September to thaw the frozen status quo which perpetuates their relentless dispossession. They will seek a vote to recognize a Palestinian state based on the 1967 lines, a vote which would implement the other half of the dual U.N. resolution in 1948-1949 on the basis of which the statehood of Israel was recognized and welcomed as a member of the United Nations. This whole endeavor is controversial and unpredictable. Not all Palestinians think that it will be worth the effort, largely because the United States has emphatically announced that it will block the move with another veto. Other Palestinians we talked with think this gesture is the last and only way to open a path forward diplomatically and politically.

In the view of several analysts we spoke with, notably U.S.-born Jeff Halper—a longtime Israeli activist who founded the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions—a veto by the United States in September would slam the door on further Palestinian efforts to sustain a negotiating process with Israelis. Halper told us that defeat of this effort at the U.N. would be a “game-changer” with uncertain but ugly outcomes.

Halper suggested that the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas would likely collapse or even resign, leaving Israel to administer the West Bank directly. Facing the prospect of a discredited Fatah leadership and well-organized Hamas elements, Israel may then feel compelled to re-install a full military occupation throughout the West Bank. The security hawks in Netanyahu's government might then press to re-occupy Gaza as well. Despite deep Palestinian commitment to non-violence, it is difficult to imagine that any such sequence of events would not trigger some version of a Third Intifada.

Such is the scale of tragic outcomes that may take place if and when the United States once again blocks Palestinian aspirations at the United Nations. I do not see why, in light of the facts and the law in this situation as well as “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind,” our government is not able to respect the claim for Palestinian statehood—indeed, to support their attempt “to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate

and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them." Is the analogy so far-fetched?

Much of what I experienced and have written here is a grim report on the realities of Palestinian life under the sway of Israeli power. Jewish experience through the centuries has also been a chronicle of victimization and suffering culminating in the massive atrocity of the Holocaust. There are deep reasons why Jews fear for their safety and mistrust those they take to be their adversaries. The Jews who live in Israel have created a vibrant society and culture rich in scholarship, the arts, and humanitarian impulses. And yet the modern state of Israel was created upon a land already inhabited by an equally ancient people—the Palestinians. Just as those who have been abused when young often grow up to be abusers, a terrible alchemy in the post-Holocaust generation coming to Israel transformed "Never Again" into "Ours Alone."

Two national narratives with profound similarities collided—each rooted in a suffering and courageous people. Alas, too few on either side have developed a respect for the narrative of the "other," as was urged by some of the wisest founders of Israel. Such mutual comprehension and caring is the key to resolution of the conflict and a peaceful co-existence.

Realizing the weight of Palestinian distress and resistance in my comments so far, I want to close with a more hopeful anecdote. Tony Bing told us a story from one of his earlier trips. He was visiting a Palestinian scholar whom he knew well just when the man's teenage son was released from an Israeli prison. Tony heard the first account the young man gave of his experiences. He had been arrested with others at a protest in the time of the First Intifada when the announced Israel policy toward protesters was "break their bones."

The young man told of his arrest and the beatings given to his companions. He feared the worst when a young Israeli soldier pulled him behind an armored vehicle. The soldier then said to him, "Yell loudly when I hit" and began to whack the vehicle's fender with his club. After uttering suitable cries of pain, the young man was cuffed and taken to prison. He told his father and Tony that the only thing that kept him going in solitary was the memory of the compassionate Israeli soldier. Would that it were so more often.

An extended trip through current Palestinian reality is a journey in heartbreak illuminated by the inspiring example of those, both Palestinian and Israeli, who remain steadfast in the struggle for a better future.