

Visiting Palestine

Jenine Safioles

Jenine graduated from the MAIS program (Cultural Studies focus) in 2013. She has an undergraduate degree in social work, studied structural social work and anti-oppressive practice at the University of Victoria, and has been in the social work field for over twenty years. In her spare time, she is also a writer, and her articles and short fiction have been published and produced for radio. Traveling to Palestine and writing this piece was a way of combining her deep and abiding interests in social work and writing.

*We love life tomorrow
When tomorrow arrives we will love life
As it is, ordinarily shrewd,
gray or colored,
No resurrection in it or end.*

-MahMoud Darwish¹

People clap and cheer as we land. I don't know whether to attribute this to the turbulence we've experienced or the fact that we have arrived in the Holy Land. I've been uncomfortable and anxious the whole flight, partly because a large man is seated next to me and I am trying not to encroach on his space. Mostly, I am anxious because I've been advised not to tell the airport security what I am doing here. I will have to say that I am a tourist only, be disingenuous, to avoid being detained. I'm not good at that, and I say a little prayer to whoever will listen that I find some acting skill.

In July 2008, I took a trip with Middle East Children's Alliance, an educational tour to Palestine intended for peace activists, humanitarians and others with similar interests. The conflict between Israel and Palestine had always mystified me—I grew up in Alberta with vague ideas about the "fighting in the Middle East." It seemed no one around me could really explain it, except that it was interminable, and that was the end of the conversation. It was so far away and so foreign, but mostly so difficult to understand. Perhaps it was a mini mid-life crisis of sorts that made me travel alone to Palestine, but I was looking for an experience with potency and meaning, and I found it. I wrote this narrative to offer something back to the people of this land, where life has "no resurrection in it or end."

¹MahMoud Darwish was known for his activism and poetry about the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Faith

The first morning, I hear the call to prayer at 5:00 a.m. It is a haunting and melodic chanting. Later, I learn that sometimes the call to prayer is a recording. Today, in Dheisheh, it is a live performance, the sweetest voice in the community picked for this holy duty.

I had made it past the scrutiny of the airport security; perhaps I do look like a Christian pilgrim. In the van from the airport I saw a land of red rock and cedars. Leaving Tel Aviv, I smelled water, the sea, as if I were on vacation in Mexico, instead of on my way to a Palestinian refugee camp. There are hills and hills and hills; in what seemed like a scene from history, two children herded black and brown goats across the land. I saw something that looked like ruins.

Dheisheh, the refugee camp I am staying at, is practically indistinguishable from Bethlehem (Bethlehem itself is part of the occupied West Bank). My group will visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem near where Jesus was born. Later, we will also visit Lake Tiberias, the water Jesus reportedly walked on. I am not Christian, but I grew up in rural Alberta where Christian traditions prevailed. I remember being a child, lined up on the school stage with my counterparts, wailing, "O little town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie / Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by" at Christmas concerts on long-ago, snow-filled and freezing winter nights. Bethlehem: as a child, I imagined it to be a place of history, not here, today. I am amazed and grateful

to be here. *Shukran*.

Thank you.

First, a very brief history primer

The following is adapted and summarized from Phyllis Bennis² (2007) book *Understanding the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*:

- After World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine became part of the British Empire. When the British ended their Palestine Mandate in 1947, they turned control over to the United Nations (UN). Palestine was divided by the UN: 55% for a Jewish state and 45% for a Palestinian Arab state, with Jerusalem holding special status and left under international control.
- War broke out immediately. 750,000 indigenous Palestinians, whose families had lived in Palestine for centuries, were forcibly expelled by or fled the militias that were the precursor to the Israeli army.
- In May 1948, the new state of Israel was announced; only 22% of the land was left for Palestine.
- The Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem were part of this 22%. In the 1967 war, Israel took over these areas, which are now identified as occupied territories.
- Military occupation means “complete Israeli control over every facet of Palestinian civil and economic life” (Bennis, 2007, p.14).
- Despite international law and UN resolutions, none of the Palestinians forced into exile have been allowed to return to their homes. A condition of Israel’s admission to the UN was that they abide by UN General Assembly Resolution 194 calling for the “right to return and compensation” (Bennis, 2007, p.10).

²Phyllis Bennis is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C.

Home

I have a small room, with three double bunks crammed in, at the Ibdah Cultural Centre in Dheisheh. There is a window, which looks out on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) parking lot. Their pretty blue buses and vans fill the parking lot. Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, the UN created UNRWA to deliver temporary relief programs to the Palestinian refugees. Since then, the United Nations has repeatedly renewed UNRWA’s mandate.

In 1949, Dheisheh was established as a refugee camp—a temporary refuge for the people from 45 different Palestinian villages who were expelled from their homes after Israel was created. They fled their villages, locking the doors of their homes when they could, and took their keys with them. Some Palestinians are still holding on to those same keys, over 60 years later, and the key has become a poignant symbol for the Palestinian people.

Dheisheh holds almost 13,000 registered refugees living on about 77 acres; it is the size of a small city. It started out as most refugee camps do, as a sea of tents. After a freezing winter resulting in the deaths of several people, more permanent structures were erected. There are two schools, one food distribution centre, and one UNRWA health centre in Dheisheh.

On an early morning walk I see rubble and garbage on some streets. There are narrow alleys between some of the buildings—I can stand, stretch my arms out and touch each building. I see backyards with grape vines tangled in arbours. I encounter children on their way to school and they let me take their picture—two scrubbed, small, dark-haired boys, laughing at me. They tell me in accented English that I am an “*international*”, the term they use for the well-meaning people from afar who visit them.

I see the pita bread deliveries—cheery pink packets of fresh pita bread hanging on doors everywhere. They look like presents, warm and welcoming, left in the very early morning hours, apparently safe from any stealing.

What I am witnessing here is a very systematic destruction of people's ability to survive...People try to maintain what they can of their lives. It's hard to hold in your mind what's happening here.

– Rachel Corrie³

Our group meets with the Israeli Human Rights organization B'Tselem. B'Tselem was established in 1989 by a group of prominent Israeli academics, attorneys, journalists, and Knesset⁴ members. B'Tselem⁵ aims to “document and educate the Israeli public and policymakers about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, combat the phenomenon of denial prevalent among the Israeli public, and help create a human rights culture in Israel” (www.btselem.org). Its reports have gained B'Tselem a reputation for accuracy, and the Israeli authorities relate to them seriously.

Credibility is everything. Most North Americans are exposed to pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian media coverage; many people's opinions are based solely on this biased media coverage. When I go home, it is difficult to describe the experience of being with the Palestinian people, because it is such a contrast to what the media reports in North America. It is also difficult because I am angry and sad about what I have seen. I have always believed that most people are mostly good. It is too hard, with my new vision, not to be deeply angry about what human beings are capable of doing to each other. Our ability to oppress, degrade, destroy. To repeat history. It's why I have decided to document my experience here.

“Documentation is an enterprise of advocacy,” says Risa at B'Tselem (personal communication, 2008). She talks to us about one of the main issues for Palestinians, that is, home demolitions. Home demolitions, she says bluntly, are necessary in order to take the land; “As the *Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions*⁶ has rigorously documented, house destruction is part of Israel's intention to turn the annexation of East Jerusalem and other areas into a concrete fact.”

Risa tells us that there are three ways that Palestinian homes can be demolished:

- Administrative demolition (sample rationale: “You built on to your home illegally”);
- Military necessity (as in Gaza, where a tank has to get through); and
- Punitive demolition (demolition as a deterrent to terrorist attacks; a rationale is created).

You can re-build a house (where?), but we are told that if you are Palestinian, a housing permit alone will cost you an average of \$25,000 US. And most—virtually all—of the land in Israel is owned by the Jewish National Fund, and the principle is that land is only available to the Jewish.

³Middle East Broadcasting Company (2006) Rachel Corrie interview, www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3JI-axaRF4. Rachel Corrie was a 23-year-old American human rights activist. She was killed in 2003 by a bulldozer operated by two members of the Israeli army while trying to block the bulldozer from destroying a Palestinian home.

⁴The Knesset is the Israeli legislature

⁵B'Tselem is independent and is funded by contributions from foundations in Europe and North America that support human rights activities worldwide, and by private individuals in Israel and abroad. B'Tselem ensures the reliability of information it publishes by conducting its own fieldwork and research, which are thoroughly cross-checked with relevant documents, official government sources, and information from other sources, among them Israeli, Palestinian, and other human rights organizations.

⁶Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, www.icahd.org

Case study

The home of Basem and Miriam Bushqar, in which they had been living for seventy years, was demolished in June 2005. The area had been designated an industrial zone. Police enforcing the order sealed off the area and confronted Jewish and Arab peace activists defending the house; twelve people were injured and twenty arrested. Because of a severe shortage of land, 4,000 homes in this community and another have been declared illegal and will be demolished (Arab Association for Human Rights, 2006, n.p.).

No one has been able to stop the bulldozers.

My family contacts me; they are worried. While our group has been drinking chilled lemonade in the Jerusalem hotel, the international news is reporting a terrorist attack in Jerusalem: a bulldozer rampage.

A Palestinian construction worker drives a bulldozer into traffic on Haffa Street in Jerusalem. He rams into a bus, killing three people. Al Jazeera⁷ reports that this man's employer owed him a large sum of money; his girlfriend is quoted as saying he had addiction problems—we are told this man has simply flipped out, gone crazy. There is no known association to any terrorist organization. He acted alone. Or he didn't, depending on what you read. Here, the truth is nebulous; uncertainty is a constant. You treasure small moments, enjoy simple things that bring pleasure in the present.

⁷Arab news service

Halva

The sweetest thing in Palestine in the morning is the halva, a dessert made with sesame seeds and honey. I eat it with fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, and I savour it.

Security

Everything is done under the guise of security.

- B'Tselem

When I first arrive in Palestine, I begin writing in my diary. I write my group's names automatically, and then stop. I don't want to get anyone in trouble—should I be creating this record? I am already less naive, less the woman raised in rural Alberta, no point of reference for this place, this situation. (Later, taking the advice of our hosts, I will mail this diary and other information home to myself, instead of trying to carry it through the airport, where it would likely be confiscated).

When the Israeli military comes into camp, everyone moves. People run to the windows. One night, at 2:00 a.m., some young men are taken away by the Israeli military. Their younger brothers throw rocks at the trucks. I've learned that if they do this, they can be considered combatants and can also be detained.

Combatant: person engaged in an act of war

Administrative arrest: detainment without knowing the charges

These same kids are in photos hanging in the lobby of the Ibda Cultural Centre. They remind me of my own two sons, who played soccer for many years, getting bigger each year, wearing the community league t-shirt with the same emblem, only the colour of the shirt changing. I count over 100 soccer and basketball trophies and about 50 plaques. The kids here apparently love soccer, and they are good at it.

One day, we visit a former youth detention centre. We learn about means of torture and creative ways of humiliating: Palestinian prisoners are made to spit in each other's mouths. I notice a cement block in the middle of the yard. It is elegantly simple: a "sitting block," making use of the resources at hand. The youths are made to sit there, in the desert sun, with no water.

Water

The Israelis made the desert bloom.

- State of Israel slogan

I wake up early. I go upstairs and find water pouring on the floor. An old, rusted pipe has broken and there is water everywhere, trickling down the stairs, all over the floor of the eating area, and running out the door. Water is a central issue; some say the real issue in this land. UNRWA notes that many of the refugee camps are running dry:

The lack of water results from a combination of a natural depletion of water resources and a competition for water with

Israeli settlements in the West Bank where water frequently flows in abundance to water farms, gardens and swimming pools. Palestinians have devised a number of ways to overcome water scarcity, including drawing water from ancient wells, filling plastic bottles from wells known to be unclean, as well as trucking in water tanks. In Dheisheh refugee camp outside Bethlehem, the water pressure is so weak in the summer due to lack of water that the houses higher up in the camp can go for weeks without running water from June to September, forcing the residents to store water in any available containers (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2010, n.p.).

We see the barrels on the roofs of the homes in Dheisheh; the residents show us bullet holes in the barrels. Someone has been taking pot shots at the barrels; they are leaking and the water is gone. We have quick, sparse, and trickling showers, newly aware that water is a precious and limited resource.

The Wall

The construction of the wall being built by Israel... in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem... [is] contrary to international law. Israel is under obligation... to dismantle forthwith the structure... [and] make reparation for all damage caused...

- International Court of Justice, July 9, 2004

Israel's Separation Barrier, despite being contrary to international law, continues to be built. The scope of the project is huge: Israel's Separation Barrier, dubbed the "Apartheid Wall" or "Berlin Wall" by Palestinians, has increasingly attracted international media attention, largely due to the hard-to-ignore scale of the project. Israel's barrier is planned to be 650 kilometres (403 miles) long, and 8 metres (25 feet) high at its tallest. The Berlin Wall was 155 kilometres (96 miles) with an average height of 3.6 metres (11.8 feet). Israel's wall, therefore, will be four times as long and in some places twice as high as the Berlin Wall (Palestinian Grassroots, 2003, n.p.).

We walk beside the wall. It is larger than I ever imagined, the formidable, oppressive concrete looming above us, stretching on and on. Our host, laughing, tells us that in one village, the wall is used as a giant movie screen for community movie nights. There is graffiti art, messages for us. From the wall:

I have a dream Warsaw ghetto To exist is to resist

Paix en Palestine Jesus said "Love one another"

Movement

Stolen land is concrete, so here and there calls are heard to stop the building in settlements and not to expropriate land. But time? It is abstract. Time, however, is a precious resource for everyone. The time that is stolen at checkpoints, in anticipation of permits, cannot be returned. The loss of time that Israel steals daily from three and a half million people is evident in everything:... in impeding the ability to gain a livelihood, in economic, family and cultural activity, in leisure hours, in studies and in creative efforts, in reducing the living space of every person, and thus in narrowing horizons and expectations (Hass, as cited in B'Tselem, 2007, p. 2).

I grew up on a cattle farm and I know what a chute looks like. Long metal corridors, no way out, circular turns to confuse, gates clanging shut behind you. And in Palestine there are catwalks above you as well, young women and men with rifles ready. They speak to me in Hebrew first, checking my pack and purse, and I don't know what they want. It is intimidating and frightening, and I find it difficult to imagine the stress of going through the checkpoints every day, staring down rifles every day, just to go to work, or to go to school or the market, to move at all, anywhere. According to B'Tselem (2007):

- Palestinians need Israeli permits to travel between the West Bank and Gaza, to enter East Jerusalem or to travel abroad. There are more than 80 checkpoints, in the West Bank alone.
- The army sets up dozens of temporary checkpoints every week.

- The army also blocks access to main roads with dirt piles and concrete blocks, to ensure Palestinians have to go through checkpoints.
- Palestinians have to show identity cards wherever they go.
- 311 km of road are banned from Palestinian use.

Debka dancing

In the evening, I watch a group of Palestinian teenagers whirl and dance. The movement of their bodies and the music tell us a story, the story of the Nakba, the disaster of the expulsion from their homes. Through the dance, the costumes, their sweeping, beautiful movements, they tell their story.

Facts

This land, we're told, is the most reported-on area in the world.

At night I lie on the narrow bunk, listen to my roommates breathing. My head swirls and hurts with the facts. Facts are what matter, we are told: go back to the world. Tell them the facts.

Facts on the ground

Facts on the ground is the term used to describe a strategy of building on land that doesn't belong to you. Build a house, build a settlement, on Palestinian land, and create an illusion of ownership that becomes "fact."

Facts on security

Land, we are told, is appropriated for "security purposes." People are told they have to leave their homes for "security purposes." The checkpoints, permanent and temporary, are for "security purposes." The road blocks and road closures are for "security purposes." The wall is for "security purposes."

Facts at school

We learn from our tour guide that the "Green Line," the UN boundary outlining the Palestinian and Israeli nations, is not taught in school. An alternative Israeli (biblical) narrative is taught. Israeli school children are taught that the Palestinian villages were "abandoned" or that they didn't actually exist.

Facts about history

Helping history: We visit the ruins of Lifta, a village near Jerusalem, which is now a park. There are perfect holes in the roofs of the old stone buildings, the size of very large manhole covers. When asked, our guide tells us that this is to expedite the decay and dissolution of these buildings, this evidence of a Palestinian village. The holes were made to help Mother Nature along; much more subtle than a bulldozer in a park.

Facts in the news

The Military Censorship Centre reviews everything that is published in Palestine, as news has to go through this centre. Israelis do not recognize a Palestinian press card. The first thing soldiers are trained to do is take care of the media. Since 2002, Palestinian journalists have been denied Israeli press cards. Citizen journalism has taken hold in this land (www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAuKMoeQkCI). *Welcome to Hebron.*

<i>Citizen journalism</i> : non-professional journalists documenting news through video, blogs, and other means.
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Hebron

Hebron is the only Palestinian city in the West Bank (other than East Jerusalem) with an Israeli settlement in its centre. Hebron also has religious significance. It is a microcosm of the conflict here.

Here, Christian Peacemaker Teams escort children to school. The children need to be escorted as they will be attacked by the settlers (Jewish-Israeli occupants of Hebron) who live here. Here, in the market, there is wire screen over top of the walkway, like chicken wire at home, but thicker, creating a cover for the (Palestinian) market shoppers. Stuck in the wire is debris: mostly bottles, sticks, rocks, all items thrown at the shoppers.

I am nervous here; I can feel the tension in the air. The violence feels imminent. As our guide talks, another crowd starts to gather; the settlers, easily identifiable, husbands, fathers, sons, gathering and talking and watching us. I want to leave. I'm not that brave.

The military, we are told, is here to protect the settlers. Here, for the settlers, there is an atmosphere of impunity.

Impunity: exemption from punishment

The Russian-Jewish settlement

I should feel practically at home here; my own dad and my granny were 100% Russian. Russian Jewish immigrants make up 25% of the settlers here. The sign that announces the settlement is written in Hebrew and Russian.

Our guide points out the remains of a Palestinian village. As we watch, a tall, husky man approaches our group.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"We're just learning some history," I say, puzzled, wondering why he is lurking about.

He glances at our van, which proclaims the name of the organization we are with. I feel uneasy as I get on the bus; others join me. I don't know where the stranger went, but suddenly our bus driver gets off the bus; he is yelling at the man; there is an argument I can't understand. The men in our group, who are already seated on the bus, rise, tense, ready to intervene.

We are Americans and Canadians. We are not military; we are social workers, doctors, peace activists. The man had picked up a large rock and was attempting to slash the van's tire. This time, the settler decides to retreat.

On the way home, I see Palestinian children lounging and talking in an olive tree, its low curving branches too inviting to resist a climb. Many olive trees have been razed here, to make way for construction (no matter that some have lived for thousands of years; some have been here since Roman times). Today, the children stay and play in this one. It's here now, its ancient gnarled trunk strong, its steadfast roots attached to the soil, lacy leaves capturing small bright bits of sun.

Home

Tel Aviv: I am carrying a rababa, a musical instrument I'm taking home for my son. Through this act, I am exporting Palestinian culture. This, my friend tells me later, is why I was singled out at the airport. I am waved to the side at the first screening, the second, and the third. Finally, they take everything in my suitcase out; they test my electric toothbrush, running it through futuristic machines with blue lights. I am frustrated at the delays, a little angry. I calm myself, remembering what I've learned. This is an irritating inconvenience; this is nothing.

I am allowed out; I end my visit, and go home.

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