

Dispatches from the 21st Century Colonial Frontlines

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The West Bank, despite its centrality to Israeli designs and Palestinian aspirations, is often overshadowed by other events in the Middle East. Last summer, Gaza 'disengagement' grabbed the headlines, and indeed since then, Qassam fire and Israeli military operations in the Strip have stayed at the top of the news agenda. When you also consider more recent events in Lebanon, and a general regional focus on Syria-Iran, West Bank Palestinians have continued their lives under Israeli occupation without international publicity or outcry. Often, when concerned friends from the West contact those they know in Bethlehem to ensure they are not in danger, we reply that here, everything is 'normal'.

Welcome to the normal.

Numbered Olive Trees

To my right, the hill falls steeply, before rising again, the olive tree covered steppes climbing to meet the outskirts of Beit Jala. Ahead, filling the horizon, is Gilio settlement, just another 'suburb' of Jerusalem staring out across the valley at its Palestinian neighbours. The geography of occupation leaves its mark. Down towards the bottom of the valley cuts Road 60, the Israeli-only highway that speeds citizens and settlers from Jerusalem down to the Etzion settlement bloc, and onto Hebron.

I am with Johnny, Beit Jala resident and owner of a piece of land on the hillside. A few days before our visit, the Israeli army had arrived to mark out land for confiscation, and paint numbers on the olive trees that are to be uprooted.

They look awkward these trees, shorn of their branches, leaves and fruits. They are like someone in a nightmare who realizes they are caught in public without clothes; frozen to the spot, they stand silent. These olive trees are resilient; if they were simply left, they would grow back their finery.

Inner City Planning Occupation Style

Pass through the north of Bethlehem and be prepared for a visual assault. There is no other way to begin to describe the Wall, in its concrete brutality, than an assault. Alien, hostile, the grey slabs cut through the city like a monstrous snake.

Charlie has called this part of town home for the best part of 40 years. His café sits right on the roadside, and in a time almost forgotten, it would have been the perfect place for travellers from Jerusalem to seek early refreshment.

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Now, he is surrounded by grey walls. Look out of the kitchen window and see dust, and concrete. Sit at a table out front—and see dust, and concrete. Daily, Charlie returns to his café, to serve the faithful regulars who return, mostly taxi drivers and old friends. His stubbornness has rendered his café a small sideshow of the occupation, and international groups troupe in and out to take pictures and wonder at it all. In the early evening, the Israeli soldiers arrive in their jeeps, and Charlie leaves the café and returns home to his family. And so he continues, until the day comes when the gap in the Wall is sealed, and Charlie must go somewhere else.

To Get to Jenin

Last week, my friends Shireen and Ibrahim went on a journey to Jenin, a town in the north of the West Bank. The one way trip is about 60 miles, yet en route, the pair of them faced 8 checkpoints in just under 5 hours. Remember—at no point were they trying to enter Israel proper; they were simply travelling from one Palestinian town to another.

Ibrahim became depressed by the experience, and reiterated his desire to leave the country. It's the humiliation that he can't stand. There he stands—shirt lifted to his chest—a terrorist in his own country, young soldier with loaded gun at the ready. Come! Stop! Turn around! In the power economy of Occupied Palestine, he is truly a pauper.

Identity Crisis

When Rania and George (not their real names) married they faced a dilemma. Rania, as a Palestinian with Jerusalem ID papers, is not allowed to live in Bethlehem, where the Palestinians are given West Bank identity by the Israeli occupation. George, on the other hand, as a Bethlehem resident, has been forbidden from living in Jerusalem.

Is the blow any less violent when it is delivered by a bureaucracy rather than a rifle butt?

Rania has decided to move to Bethlehem, but must keep this a secret anytime she encounters Israeli occupation soldiers. When I was returning from Jerusalem with her one morning, plain-clothes Israeli intelligence officers stopped to ask us questions. If they had doubted her story, she later told me, she could have been stripped of her identity and health insurance.

The two of us were still standing by the side of the road, a light dust swirling around our feet, as the officers got back into their car, and drove on a few hundred yards to where there was another group of Palestinians.