

Life Under Siege: The View from the West Bank

Erica Weitzman

The old woman in front of me holds up a piece of unrolled parchment as lined and dry as her own skin. The scroll is gorgeous, covered in richly colored illustrations and the swooping lines of Arabic script. But it is not art that she holds, nor words from the Koran. It is a legal document, almost two hundred years old: the Ottoman deed to her family's lands. She can't read it, of course - the text is in Turkish before Turkey's reform-minded government latinized the language - but the meaning of the document, for her, is no less clear.

Today, she tells me through a translator, what used to be her family's farm is now a large hospital near Tel Aviv. Since 1948, when she was driven out of her village at the age of 15 by armed gangs, she has lived in the cramped, semi-squalid little town that is Old Askar refugee camp, on the outskirts of Nablus. Early this August, her grandson, an 18-year old boy, saw his best friend shot dead in the street by a soldier. Without telling anyone, he went off to Israel: probably with the intention of committing a terrorist attack, though he was shot and killed by the police before anything happened. The family only found out their son was dead when they saw the story on the evening news. Now their house and all the neighboring houses are under constant threat of demolition by the Israeli army. Every night the families keep vigil, waiting for the knock on the door, a voice telling them they have five minutes to collect their things and get out.

When I was there, Nablus and the surrounding refugee camps (which are no longer the tent cities "refugee camps" seem to imply; rather, they are well-established ghettos of exiles from Israeli territory) were under curfew. People have their methods for getting around the curfew, of course - shops you can enter only through the back door, constant vigilance for army presence - but if the curfew were fully enforced, it would mean house arrest, for each and every inhabitant of the town. In the evenings, I would walk down the street, and see whole families hanging out their windows. Children even flew their kites from the windows of their houses. It looked lovely: but then I would remember that everyone was in the window only because they were forbidden to go outside.

When curfew is imposed - and when I was in Nablus, curfew had been imposed for over 65 days, with only 48 hours total of reprieve - it is forbidden to go to the market, to visit other houses, to work, to walk in the street. A tourist, unaware of the situation, would think that no one actually lived in Nablus anymore: the shops shuttered, the streets empty. The third oldest city in Israel/Palestine, Nablus's stone walls and ancient buildings give the emptiness a preserved, museum quality, though in actual fact it is a living, modern city of over 200,000 people. The rare times when curfew is lifted, there is a desperation to everyone's actions: people jam the streets trying to buy all the food and medicine they will need for the next week. They have only four hours; then the tanks roll back in. The army comes down especially hard after these brief reprieves, and arrest can mean anything from a few hours in handcuffs to being "disappeared" forever. Despite the rhetoric of the IDF - "just following orders," every soldier says - its actions are often capricious at best. Palestinians thus live in a state of constant uncertainty, never knowing what the day will bring: only that whatever happens, they will be almost totally powerless against it.

There is much more to be said, but ultimately, these details all come down to one thing: the Palestinians are fighting for their lives - indeed "not for territory, nor for a national identity," but "with hopeless determination" for their very survival, as individuals and as a people.

It is time the world community realizes that there are more forms of violence than just bullets and bombs. The Occupation is the slow strangulation of life in Gaza and the West

Bank, a dull torture designed to break people's spirits, to quash real political solutions and drive people to acts of desperation. No analysis that fails to recognise this, however well-intentioned, can be a just one. q

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