

# **Horrors of Occupation\***

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Even a short visit to Palestine blows the mind. Although the overall conditions of the Israeli occupation are well known, the quotidian impact cannot be understood until it is experienced. Nothing prepares the visitor for the sheer extent of control over their lives by an unsympathetic power that Palestinian people are forced to deal with, or the inconvenience, mortification and insecurity associated with performing the most ordinary of daily tasks.

Surely there is no place like this anywhere in the world: a 21st century example of ongoing displacement of native residents and subsequent settler colonialism, which is allowed to persist and continues to expand because a peculiar combination of global and regional forces simply lets it happen. The Palestinian problem has existed for decades, but it forces itself onto global consciousness only periodically, when the simmering discontent of an oppressed people leads to some eruption of violent resistance that generates even stronger counter-violence from Israeli forces and makes the rest of the world sit up and take notice.

Now, the region is in the midst of what some have called the third intifada—albeit this is not a mass movement yet but a more individualised but widespread series of stabbings and sporadic incidents of minor violence like stone-throwing by desperate youth, being met once again with greater shows of force from the Israeli authorities. The global media describe this as a situation in which attitudes on both sides have hardened to a degree that makes compromise impossible. But the unevenness and huge power imbalance of the equation makes it almost laughable to talk of two sides as if they are even roughly equal. The Palestinian people are subject to the colonial control of the state of Israel, and to daily harassment and humiliation, to a degree that is almost unimaginable for anyone who has not had direct exposure to it.

Consider just the current geography and the question of physical access. The Palestinians in Palestine live in four areas (in addition to the area of pre-1967 Israel): the West Bank (of the Jordan River), East Jerusalem and Gaza, and the North (which is basically the area that became Israel in 1948). Yet the Palestinian areas are not just separated from one another, they are not even contiguous areas internally. Rather, even the largest section, the West Bank, is fragmented into often tiny, disconnected sections, rather like an archipelago of islands within the wider land mass of Israel.

The occupied Palestinian territory is almost entirely landlocked, with only the Gaza Strip facing the Mediterranean Sea (but without a port and with strict controls on even fishing rights off its own coast). And Gaza, whose citizens made the wrong choice of voting for Hamas, has since 2007 been punished by becoming almost completely cut off from the rest of Palestine, since it has no port or airport, and roads to the West Bank run through Israel, which does not allow free movement. Indeed, the blockade of Gaza has absurd aspects and tragic effects. During the worst years of the siege, food allowed into Gaza was based on some notion of average calorie requirement that allowed only basic foodstuff like rice and

pasta, and items like chocolate were strictly forbidden. There were reports of diabetes patients dying because of lack of medicine. Gazan attempts to circumvent the blockade through tunnels to Egypt are periodically frustrated by Israeli bombing of such tunnels and, more recently, flooding of the tunnels with seawater by the Abdel Fatah al-Sisi regime in Egypt.

Currently, the land area that is ostensibly part of occupied Palestinian territory is not under the uniform control of the government of the non-sovereign state of Palestine. Rather, it is divided into the "A Area", in which the Palestinian Authority (P.A.) is supposed to exercise civil and security control, the "B Area" in which there is supposedly "shared autonomy", and the "C Area", which is entirely under Israeli control even though it is formally within the territories occupied in 1967 by Israel. These distinctions are determined and imposed by the Israeli state, and so they are constantly shifting as the effective jurisdiction of the P.A. in the "A Area" is squeezed further. In the other two areas, there is no question as to who is in control. Indeed, the constant presence of Israeli security forces is a reminder that their writ runs large over the entire territory, even when they do not bother with the responsibilities and burdens of civic administration and public services delivery.

This is not how it was intended to be when the United Nations resolved to partition the British Mandate for Palestine into Arab and Jewish states in 1947. Since then, the Palestinians have seen their putative state's territory shrink by more than half, most significantly after the 1967 war, and thereafter through a series of still ongoing incursions in which land is expropriated and converted into Jewish settlements or roads linking these. These can occur directly when Israeli builders move in, with protection from Israeli security forces, and simply build walled and gated colonies that prohibit Palestinian entry. Or, they can and do occur indirectly, through the purchase by Jewish Israeli citizens of land or buildings earlier held by Palestinians who find it simply too complicated or too expensive to continue to live on the land of their ancestors and so relocate to regions deeper into what is still dominantly Palestinian territory.

Across much of the territory, evidence of colonial geographical expansion proliferates: from the newly built settlements in what was until then clearly Palestinian territory to the roads linking various Jewish settlements and towns that blatantly cross through Palestinian territory but are treated by Israel as under its own jurisdiction, to the extraordinary wall that was built after the second intifada in 2000 supposedly as a "security barrier" but which in effect further extends the municipal boundaries of the city of Jerusalem. The wall even cut through houses, in some bizarre cases effectively making it illegal for people to enter their own kitchens.

The combination of abrupt and then creeping expropriation of land is most evident in East Jerusalem, which was once seen as a city that would not be a part of Israel but has been effectively completely taken over by that country and is now treated as its capital. The eastern part of the city was controlled by Jordan until 1967, but has been annexed to Israel since then. East Jerusalem has seen the Arab population reduced to only about 300,000, accounting for a third of the city's total population (western and eastern). New Jewish settlements and colonial outposts have cropped up all over the "suburbs" of East Jerusalem. The municipal boundaries of Jerusalem have been extended unilaterally by the Israeli state almost to Ramallah, creating a peculiar no-man's land in between the two within which

Israeli security is in charge, and the municipality collects taxes but does not take responsibility for any proper public services.

Many Palestinians have moved further away from the centre to more affordable villages some distance away. Even in the Old City, where some local Arab residents can trace their ancestral residence for more than four centuries, more and more Israeli flags fly as testament to their newly acquired ownership. This more “market-based” acquisition is slower and more insidious, as there is evidence that Palestinians have been cheated into selling their houses to Israeli Jews through middlemen and brokers. Many local Arabs see it as part of the gradual encroachment of their territory and a further pushing back of the Arab population into smaller and smaller physical spaces. Often, religion is used as the pretext for land grab or establishing control over physical spaces, a pattern we in India are only too familiar with. Indeed, the simmering dispute over holy sites—particularly the important Al-Aqsa mosque that is under the control of a Muslim *wakf* board but is seen by Jews as the site of the Temple Mount—was the proximate cause of the latest violence in East Jerusalem.

This is not just about physical control of the land. The impact of all of these peculiar divisions is felt hugely in the daily life of Palestinians, who operate in a peculiarly brittle and uncertain atmosphere. Three categories of Arab Palestinians are recognised by the Israeli state. First, the “1948” group, consisting of those who stayed on in the territory after the creation of the Jewish state and have been granted citizenship rights. Next, the “1967” group, whose territory was annexed by Israel after the Six-Day War and which covers many of those now in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. Third, those in East Jerusalem, who have residence rights but not full citizenship. Other Palestinians officially do not really exist for Israel, since Israel treats all others as Arab refugees whose return to their homeland is denied.

These categories of Palestinians recognised by Israel in turn determine all sorts of things: which places they can go to, where and how they can travel, which roads and forms of transport they can use, which colour licence plates their cars can have, where they can own land or real estate, and in some cases, even what occupations they can pursue. The complicated rules are difficult, if not impossible, to absorb for outsiders, and even for the Arab Palestinians who have to deal with them, and they make even normal life complex and edgy, with restrictions and uncertainty dominating one’s approach to doing anything.

West Bank Palestinians, for example, are not allowed to use the Ben Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv, even though it is the nearest and most convenient. They must cross the bridge to Jordan and then travel by road to Amman to take a flight—a journey that could be done in less than two hours but usually takes four to 12 hours because of the typically long wait at the crossing. As a result, international air travel involves a minimum of four days’ journey time, with two days devoted to getting to and from Amman airport. Even from there, entry into Palestine is by no means assured. Even Palestinians with United States passports have been stopped and sent back at the border because the Israeli security identifies them as essentially Palestinian. West Bankers also cannot visit Jerusalem without a permit, which is not easily granted, and they may be stopped and forced to return (at gunpoint, of course) at any time even if they have a permit.

As a distinguished former Minister and current head of an economic research institute in Ramallah put it, everything is prohibited except that which is explicitly allowed. And even that is constantly subject to change, as new restrictions are imposed, as is seen now, for example, in the nervous Israeli reaction to the spate of stabbings and rock throwing by youth that has been rocking East Jerusalem.

Take the road blocks at checkpoints, which are not only placed in some defined locations but also take the form of “flying checkpoints”, arbitrarily imposed by Israeli security forces at random places without warning anywhere in the occupied territories. A journey that could take half an hour can take more than three hours simply because of the long queues at the security controls, which often seem to be completely random. So, there can be no certainty even about normal activities like going to school or work, while emergency situations are even worse. Everyone has stories of women who have delivered babies in cars waiting at checkpoints, or people who have died because they could not reach medical attention in time because of such controls. To arrive late for work or school because of delays at checkpoints is so common as to arouse no comment.

In general, no one dares protest, because any mildly hostile behaviour can be met with a belligerent response, even shooting. The apparent nervousness of the very young Israeli draftees (often still in their teens) who operate these checkpoints and who currently patrol the streets of East Jerusalem makes things even more tense and fraught. Students, both male and female, describe how bitter experience has made them always worry at checkpoints that they may be rounded up and jailed for no particular reason, and released after a few days with no explanation, with no word to their families in the intervening period.

And then there are other random acts designed to terrorise the population. A professor at Birzeit University (BZU) recounts how a few nights ago her family, including young children, was woken from slumber at 2 a.m. by a posse of fully armed soldiers who simply barged in, herded all the people into the corner of one room and took the place apart, searching for knives. The few small knives that were found in the kitchen were abruptly removed. A taxi driver from Jerusalem describes how a friend of his was shot recently by Israeli police simply because he got down to help a person in a car that had a flat tyre. Such incidents proliferate to the point that they are no longer seen as of much interest or worthy of outrage since life would then simply be consumed by it.

According to some Palestinians, these aggressive controls and other forms of daily humiliation also serve to remind the population that they are effectively under occupation and must behave themselves, be kept under watch and controlled in as many ways as possible.

In that sense, this oppression is class neutral, and the nationalist response has therefore been similarly dispersed across various classes. To see this as a religious conflict would be too simplistic, as the domination of one people by another (or at the very least by the state representing the dominant people who have chosen to define themselves in religious terms vis-a-vis the others) is at the heart of the current situation.

Obviously, all this affects the poor in Palestine even more. There is some economic differentiation: parts of Ramallah appear quite prosperous and there is a spate of new

construction in the city and elsewhere, but the majority of the people are hugely affected by what is effectively colonial status. Around a quarter of the labour force is unemployed, with much higher rates of joblessness among the youth. Those who can find employment have to work in extremely strenuous and uncertain circumstances because of the constantly shifting regulations and prohibitions imposed by Israel that restrict movement and economic activity. Transport restrictions play havoc with those who would like to trade their produce both inside and outside Palestine. Even agriculture is badly affected by various restrictions. Tourism is increasingly controlled by Israeli players who now dominate in Jerusalem, and anyway find it easier because they do not face the controls on mobility experienced by Palestinians.

The other typical aspects of colonial control, in terms of extraction of natural resources, are also widely prevalent. Water is the most significant of these, with Israel seizing control of the major aquifers and water sources found on Palestinian land. The denial of their own water sources has had terrible effects on farming in the West Bank, and has also been associated with widespread water scarcity, even as the per capita availability of water in Israel has greatly expanded.

The overall lack of development is further accentuated by the lack of autonomy and, therefore, inability of the P.A. to take even the most basic of economic policy decisions. There is no independent currency: exchange is conducted in Israeli shekels, Jordanian dinars, dollars or euros. So there can be no monetary policy. Fiscal policy is dependent on the share of tax revenues that Israel chooses to part with, on which there is no consistency or predictability, and on external donor funding which often comes with strings attached. So, the P.A. can only allocate some of the spending, and that too cannot reach Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas. The area is in an enforced “customs union” with Israel, which means that no trade policy is possible. Even so, many Palestinians believe that their government, such as it is, has failed them by not trying harder to engage in some more proactive policies to improve the average citizen’s lot. A significant part of the P.A’s budget goes to “security” (thereby meeting the requirements of the occupying power) rather than to improving civic amenities or assisting producers in agriculture and industry.

In these extraordinarily difficult conditions, it is still amazing to see the resilience of most Palestinians, their ability to carry on despite everything with humour and patience, their hospitality and interest in the wider world. No doubt the simmering discontent and sense of oppression periodically become impossible to contain, especially for young people who cannot see any hope. Even among others the lack of positive action after many decades of attempts at public protest has generated a certain weariness about the likely outcomes of such actions. The lack of meaningful international support adds to such weariness.

It is truly hard to imagine that a colony like this can exist in the contemporary, supposedly decolonised world. So it is not surprising that much of the rest of the world that is not in active connivance with Israel and its supporters in the U.S. has largely chosen to look the other way. Yet nothing will change for this benighted people without much greater international outcry, so ignoring their plight amounts to complicity. The non-violent resistance of the Palestinians through the Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions movement is gathering momentum around the world, and the case for supporting it is a very strong one.

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