

Introduction

Israel has always meant something to me. When I was young, my grandmother, who had fled Europe and lost most of her family in the Nazi Holocaust, used to talk about Israel as the one protection that our family and Jews everywhere had against persecution or murder in the future. When I first visited Israel myself, sponsored by a program called “Birthright Israel” that sends young non-Israeli Jews on a 10-day all-expenses-paid tour of the Holy Land, I saw nothing to make me think that Israel was anything other than a peace-seeking democracy. My image of Israel was of a tiny victimized country that simply wanted to live in peace but couldn’t because of its aggressive, Jew-hating Arab neighbors.

I came to question my view of Israel during a trip through the Middle East. At the time, I was teaching English at a university in Ankara, Turkey on a Fulbright grant. During vacations, I traveled around Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. I was welcomed everywhere I went, particularly in southern Lebanon, where I was taken in by several families of Palestinian refugees. One family in particular not only showered me with hospitality and warmth, but accepted and respected me to an extent that I had rarely experienced even in my own communities back home. Through my friendship with the eldest son, Mahmoud, and his parents, siblings, and neighbors, I began to hear a different narrative about the state of Israel from the one I had heard growing up as a Jewish American.

My new friends told me stories of past and present military attacks, house demolitions, land confiscation, imprisonment without trial, torture, and government-sponsored assassination. It seemed that these aggressive actions were not carried out for the protection of the Jewish people, as I had previously been taught, but rather for the creation and expansion of a Jewish state at the expense of the rights, lives, and dignity of the non-Jewish people living in the region. It was hard for me to believe that Israel could act so unjustly. Questioning Israel in any way felt like a betrayal of my grandmother.

Nonetheless, it became important for me to arrive at my own understanding of the conflict through research and personal witnessing. I read books written from different perspectives and attended presentations by local activists reporting on their experiences in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, one place where my Birthright Israel tour bus had not stopped. To my disappointment, I began to see that Mahmoud and his family had been right: there was far more to Israel’s past and present policies than I had been told. After extensive reading, the following aspects of the current situation in Israel and the Palestinian Territories became clear to me:

- Israel’s ongoing 40-year Occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip,¹ and East Jerusalem is illegal and violates the Fourth Geneva Conventions, as well as more

¹ When this book went to press, Israel had evacuated Gaza but continued to occupy it. For a post-disengagement update and discussion, see p. 327.

than 60 United Nations resolutions.² Israel has violated more UN resolutions than any other country in the history of the organization.

- Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and in Israel are denied equal rights to Jews in the same areas purely on the basis of their religion and ethnicity.
- The Israeli military controls the movement of nearly four million Palestinians through a system of checkpoints, roadblocks, and segregated roads. By the same means, Israel also limits the supply of food, water, medical supplies, and other basic necessities to Palestinian civilians.³
- The Israeli army and government exercise virtually unchecked freedom to detain, threaten, arrest, imprison, torture, and assassinate Palestinians, often without charge or trial.
- The Israeli government sponsors the mass transfer of Jewish Israeli citizens from Israel to Jewish-only colonies, known as settlements, built illegally on internationally recognized Palestinian land in the Occupied Territories.
- Israeli settlers suffer practically no legal consequences for building new illegal (according to international and Israeli law) settlements, for expanding existing ones, or for threatening or physically attacking Palestinian civilians.
- Israel's human rights violations since September of 2000 have left more than four times more Palestinian civilians dead than the total number of Israelis (both civilians and soldiers) killed by Palestinians.⁴
- The Wall, or "Security Fence," that is currently under construction by Israel in the name of preventing terrorism in fact weaves *through*, not around, the West Bank, effectively separating hundreds of thousands of West Bank Palestinians from their land, jobs, hospitals, and schools, and from each other.
- Israel's policies of occupation and colonization have been consistent with a steady pattern of transferring the indigenous Palestinians out of Israel/Palestine, and confiscating their land, water, and resources for Jewish Israeli use. This process, similar to the ethnic cleansing carried out in North America, Australia, and the former Yugoslavia, began before Israel's creation in 1948, and continues today.

² Mazin Qumsiyeh, *Sharing the Land of Canaan* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

³ According to US, UN, European, and Palestinian research and relief agencies, Israel's restrictions on transportation are a major cause of widespread malnutrition, unemployment, and poverty (at 43% when this book went to press) among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Norman Finkelstein, *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, second edition (New York: Verso, 2003), p. xx; *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs: PASSIA* (2007 Diary).

⁴ *Middle East Policy Council*. www.mepc.org/resources/mrates.asp

"Numbers *do not* include Palestinian suicide bombers (or other attackers) nor do they include Palestinians targeted for assassination, though bystanders killed during these assassinations are counted. However, [Israeli] soldiers killed during incursions into Palestinian lands *are counted*. Data collected from *B'tselem* (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs"; The Red Cross estimates closer to 10 times more Palestinian civilians have been killed than Israelis. Qumsiyeh, p. 104.

- Every year, the US government funnels billions of American tax-dollars to Israel, which are used primarily to purchase American-made weapons to arm the occupying Israeli army and settlers.⁵

As an American taxpayer, I feel responsible for the role my money, government, and country play in the violations of international law and human rights. I feel doubly responsible as a Jewish American, since Israel's abuses are being carried out in the name of Jews everywhere. Although I have never been religious, Jewish culture and history have always been a part of my environment, and identifying as a Jew has never seemed so much a choice as a fact. According to prevailing Jewish law and explicit Israeli law, Judaism is based on heritage, not faith or religious practice. I am a member of the community that Israel claims to be protecting through its violations of international law and human rights.

In the fall of 2003, I decided to travel to the Occupied Palestinian Territories to see the situation for myself. I applied and was accepted to volunteer with the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS), a grassroots peace organization dedicated to documenting and nonviolently intervening in human rights abuses in the West Bank, and supporting the nonviolent movement to end the Occupation. This book is a narration of the 8 months that I spent working with IWPS, spanning the past 5 years. It documents both the situation on the ground as I observed it and my personal emotional and intellectual journey piecing together my own understanding of the conflict.

I have tried to describe as accurately as possible what I saw in the West Bank. I do not claim that my presentation of the situation is unbiased—I cannot deny having strong opinions about the issue, which will inevitably be apparent in my narrative—but I have tried to keep my editorializing separate from my reporting. I also do not profess to offer a broad synthesis of the Arab-Israeli conflict or even of life in occupied Palestine. As a foreigner voluntarily working in a specific part of the region for a relatively short period of time, I cannot begin to understand what it means to be a Palestinian living under the Occupation. These accounts represent no “side” but my own. They are the observations and recordings of one woman's experience living and working in the West Bank.

A lot of details in this book are repeated: dozens of Palestinians detained at checkpoints, threatened by settlers, taunted, and harassed. I have not shied away from these details. It is my belief that to understand the effects of the Occupation one must look not just to the dramatic moments of violence that are represented (or misrepresented) in the news, but also to the small, everyday acts of violence and humiliation, and next to them the small, everyday acts of resistance and human dignity. If my accounts feature too many frustrating details of delays, searches, and abuse, I can only say that this is the nature of life under the Occupation.

This book was primarily intended for Americans and other Westerners who may be uninformed about the current situation in Palestine, but I believe it is suitable for readers everywhere, regardless of their political beliefs or previous knowledge of the subject. Important words and terms have been highlighted in the text and are defined in the Glossary. For those completely unfamiliar with the conflict, I have included a very brief outline of the region's history in Appendix III. Appendix IV addresses some of the major questions and myths that surround the issue, and Appendix V contains quotations from Israeli, Palestinian, and US leaders, as well as other significant voices articulating what I see as the key points of the conflict.

⁵ For more details about US foreign aid to Israel, see the Conclusion.

I have divided this updated and revised edition into Parts I and II. Part I contains my writings from Palestine between 2003 and 2005, the bulk of this book's first edition. Wherever possible I have updated maps and statistics. Most new material can be found in Part II, which was written during my most recent stint with IWPS in 2007. Throughout the book, some names were changed for privacy or security, some quotations were reconstructed from detailed notes, and very minor chronological alterations were made for the sake of coherence. All reports are otherwise fully accurate to the best of my knowledge, and all errors are my own.

Readers may remark a change in my writing between Parts I and II. For example, in my earlier writings, I made an effort to avoid discussing pre-Occupation history, both because I am not an authority on the subject and because I saw it as a sore point and a distraction from addressing the urgency of the current situation in the Occupied Territories. I reasoned that many people who strongly disagreed about the past and future of Israel and Palestine could at least agree that Israel's policies of occupation and colonization were a step backwards from peace, from the point of view of justice for Palestinians and safety for Israelis. I still believe this to be true. With time, however, I have reoriented my research towards exploring the Zionist history and ideology underlying the current situation. I believe these things to be at the heart of the conflict, and thus unavoidable.

I do not expect—or even wish for—readers to blindly accept my assertions about Israel and the Occupation; I certainly did not believe such claims when I first encountered them. My hope is that readers will react individually to my stories and begin to develop their own understanding of the situation. Readers who do not wish to take my word for it certainly don't have to: there are dozens of Israeli, Palestinian, and international groups organizing tours in Israel/Palestine and documenting all aspects of the situation. Many of these organizations are highlighted in the text and listed in Appendices I and II: What You Can Do and the Resource Guide. These appendices also provide suggestions for further research on the subject, as well as various ways to get involved in the growing international nonviolent movement for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine.



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Dedication

*to Mahmoud and his family, for reminding me to seek the truth;
to Daniel, for reminding me to write;
and to Andrea, for reminding me to believe.*

