

The waiting game

Three years ago, the acclaimed Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif travelled through the West Bank to write a special report for G2. This month, she returned for the first time

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Sunday October 19, the West Bank

I thought it was bad three years ago. Now the landscape itself is changed. New settlements spring up everywhere; more than 60 since I was here last. You can watch their metamorphosis from a handful of caravans, to some Portakabins, then basic bungalows and, finally, the bristling, concrete hilltop fortress that is an Israeli settlement. Hardly a Palestinian village exists without an Israeli settlement lowering down on it from above. Everywhere there is construction going on - illegally: wide, Israeli-only highways to connect the settlements to each other, great mounds of rubble and yellow steel gates to block the old roads between Palestinian villages. And there are people waiting; waiting with bundles, with briefcases, with babies, at gates, at roadblocks, at checkpoints, waiting to perform the most ordinary tasks of their everyday lives.

All this, Israel tells the world, is in the cause of security. On my first morning here we drive up through the West Bank to see the biggest construction of all: Israel's "security fence", a monster barrier of steel and concrete that separates farmers from their land and refugees from their homes. Brute technology hacking away at a living body of land and people. It rears up to block the sunset and the evening breeze from the people of Qalqilya, then spreads out to swallow great stretches of land cultivated over hundreds of years by the neighbouring villages.

This section of the barrier has been built right up close to the western side of the village of Jayyus. From the windows of the village hall you see it slide down the hill, snake into a huge S and vanish around the farmland to the right. Running along the inside of the barbed wire is a deep trench. There is also a patrol road, a swept sand track to reveal footprints and an electronic fence with hidden cameras. Alongside this barrier, at short intervals, red signs in Arabic, English and Hebrew proclaim: ANY PERSON WHO PASSES OR DAMAGES THE FENCE ENDANGERS HIS LIFE.

You cannot read the signs from here, but you can see them punctuating the acres that the mayor of this village has spent the past 40 years of his life cultivating. From his office window he can watch - on his land on the other side of the barrier - his olive trees waiting to be harvested, his guava trees dropping their ripe fruit on the ground. In each of his three greenhouses, 40,000 kilograms of

cucumbers are hardening.

From this village of 3,000 souls, 2,300 acres have been confiscated for the barrier. And on the other side of the barrier another 2,150 acres, with six groundwater wells, are inaccessible, 12,000 olive trees stand unharvested, and the vegetables in 120 giant greenhouses are spoiling. Three thousand five hundred sheep have been driven off the land; actually, 3,498, because one man has lost two lambs. Three hundred families are totally dependent on their farms. Now their harvest is rotting before their eyes and they cannot get to it. They are feeding their flocks the husks from last year's planting.

There are yellow steel gates in the barbed wire but they are closed. Farmers are busy making phone calls, some are going to see the Israeli military to demand that the gates be opened. Eventually, soldiers arrive. Harvesting is a family affair so the soldiers face a crowd of men, women and children. What they do is this. First they collect all their identity papers. Then they call the people out one by one. Today they have decided that no male between the ages of 12 and 38 will be allowed on his land. Also, no woman will be allowed unless she is over 28 and married. So the majority of the farmers - men, women and teenagers - stand at the gate, the Israeli soldiers and the barrier between them and the harvest that is their sustenance and income for the coming year.

Two men set off to try and find a way of infiltrating their own land. The rest make their way back to the village hall. On the mayor's desk lie some 600 permits that appeared in the village this morning. They are issued by the Israeli authorities and made out to individual farmers. About half of them are in the names of people who can't use them: babies, infants, a couple of men who have been in Australia for 15 years. But that is not the point. The point is that the people know that if they use these permits they are implicitly accepting their terms: three months' access with no recognition of any rights to the land. They suspect that after three months Israel will start playing games with them. Permits like these were one of the mechanisms by which their parents and grandparents were dispossessed of their land in 1948. What should they do? Use the permits and try to salvage their crops and deal with the rest later? Boycott the permits and starve?

The next day a Jewish Israeli woman gives me a copy of the military order on which the permits are based. It names the West Bank land now trapped between the barrier and Israel's borders the "Seam Zone". It states that the people who have the right to be in the Seam Zone without permits are Israelis or anyone who can come to Israel under the Law of Return. That is, any Jewish person from anywhere in the world. But in this district alone, 11,550 Palestinians have their homes in the Seam Zone. "It is Nuremberg all over again," she says.

Today, the mayor is beside himself as he tries to get advice from the governor. One man tells me that his father, who is 65, is talking of buying explosives. "There will be no life for us anyway without the land," he says. The fighters and

the suicide bombers have generally come from the urban deprivation of the camps. Now they will come from the villages, too.

Monday, Jerusalem al-Quds

Our taxi driver says: "The Israelis are clever. They build the wall and now everybody is talking about the wall. The wall is just a wall. It was built and it can be removed. The real questions are the borders, the settlements, Jerusalem and the refugees."

Wednesday, Bethlehem

It is less than two months to Christmas and the streets of Bethlehem are empty. There are no tourists, no pilgrims. On Star Street many of the shops are closed. The market where the neighbouring villages brought their produce to feed the town is deserted. The closures imposed by the Israeli army mean that farmers cannot come into Bethlehem and Bethlehemites cannot leave the town. The Monument to Peace built to celebrate Bethlehem 2000 has been demolished by Israeli tanks. The International Peace Centre - built on land where Turkish, then British, then Jordanian police stations each stood in turn - was used by the Israeli army as its headquarters when it besieged the Church of the Nativity. "They put up a crane with a box on top," says the friend who is taking us round, "with lights and a camera and an automatic sniper. And recordings. They played terrible sounds: explosions, animals, people screaming. All the time. Into the church."

In the church today, an old priest dozes on a chair. Two Franciscan monks are silently busy about the Armenian altar. A young man - one of the besieged "gunmen" - explains the Tree of Life mosaic to a group of schoolgirls. Three young women in hijab sit in a pew reading. And Christ and the Madonna observe us from the walls.

The settlements of Gilo, Har Gilo and Har Homa surround the city. Israel's military edicts are doing their best to strangle her, but Bethlehem will not lie down and die. The Peace Centre hosts an exhibition of Nativity scenes sent in by schools from all over the world. Annadwa, a new cultural centre, is buzzing with activity. The staff there are young and dedicated. They are headed by the softly spoken Reverend Dr Mitri al-Raheb, a gentle and impressive man who is fluent in many languages and has a beautiful and stylish wife. They run an exhibition space currently featuring a Norwegian artist, a gift shop that sells its merchandise on the internet, a workshop, a state-of-the-art media centre and a theatre. Today, Al-Raheb has been refused a permit to travel to a church meeting in Washington DC.

Every road out of Bethlehem is blocked by mounds of dirt and a checkpoint. Imagine driving along as you have always done, between Hampstead, say, and Regent's Park, when you come upon a barrier of earth thrown up the night before. Soldiers stand at the barrier in full battle gear, yelling at you in a strange language or a pidgin version of your own. They tell you to get out of your car - you're not allowed to drive here any more. If you're allowed to carry on, you will do so on foot. They yell at you to line up and they take their time checking your papers, questioning you - Where are you going? Why do you want to go there? Prove to me that your daughter/best friend/dentist/music teacher lives there. A few metres away you can see the new highway that cuts across your old road. Cars are speeding along on it, driven by men and women of that other people, the people that the soldiers belong to.

We stand at one of these checkpoints, my son taking photographs of the pedestrians waiting to be allowed to walk to the next village. Two soldiers leave the checkpoint and stride towards us, raising their M16s to the level of our heads and shouting: "No photographs! Give me your camera. You! No photos."

"Where's the notice that says no photography?" we call.

"Everyone knows. Give me the camera. I can shoot you. You take photo of me..."

"We took photos of the people waiting."

"You took photo of me. I can shoot you..."

"What's the problem? Are you ashamed of what you're doing? Show me the paper that says we can't take photos." This is Tony, our Palestinian guide. He's a film editor with an international press agency and has a US passport.

"I don't need no fucking paper. I can shoot you, that's my paper."

"Show me the paper."

"This is Israel, I do what I like. I can shoot you. Here I do what I like."

"This isn't Israel. This is the West Bank."

"West Bank? What is this West Bank?" The soldier turns to his friend questioningly.

My son tries to chip in but I stamp on his foot.

"Look: in there, is Palestine. You do what you want. Here is Israel. In your country, can you take pictures of secret soldiers?"

After a bit more of this Tony gets out his mobile and phones the army. The

soldiers take off their shades and turn into unhappy young men: "You think I like to do this? You think I like to stand all day wearing this, and this, and this? This I have to do so my mother is safe in Tel Aviv." We suggest it might be a happier situation all round if they did this on the green line. "Green line? They can creep under the green line. Look: we give them everything. They always want more. We give them land, we give them water, we give them electricity. They want more..."

"But you are stealing these people's land. What about the settlements?"

"That is for the politicians. We don't know about that. It is the politicians." They go back to the checkpoint. We keep the camera. Tony has to take our photos to the army censor for clearance within 48 hours.

Tony's family's business is on Star Street, close to Manger Square. Four years ago he and his father pooled their savings and built a spacious home on five floors: one each for Tony and his three sisters, the parents at the top. He is married to a diaspora Palestinian who has come back from Europe to live with him in Bethlehem. Two weeks ago his first child was born. I guess he is thinking a lot about what kind of life his child will have here. On the walls in the street the portrait of Edward Said has taken its place alongside the pictures of Christine Saada, the 10-year-old girl shot in her father's car in March, and Abed Ismail, the 11-year-old boy killed by a sniper in Manger Square.

"Look at it! Look at it!" The arc of Tony's arm takes in the brand-new conference centre completed in 2000 and shelled by the Israelis a few months later. The large hotel and leisure complex set up next to Solomon's Pools and also shelled by the Israelis. And then the wall. Here it comes, creeping up on the west of Bethlehem...

Saturday, Birzeit

Three years ago, Birzeit university was 20 minutes' drive from Ramallah. Now, on a good day, it takes over an hour to get there. The Israeli army has blocked the road at Surda and though today the checkpoint is not manned, people have to get out of their transport and climb on foot over the rubble. I'm told that anyone attempting to remove rubble is shot at and that the rubble is replenished from time to time by the army.

We climb over and proceed on foot for one kilometre till the next roadblock. Alongside the road a market has sprung up with stalls selling food, drinks and housewares. There are horses and donkeys for hire, mule-drawn carriages and small carts pushed by men. There are also some young volunteers with wheelchairs for the infirm and elderly.

We walk along in the crush and I'm thinking of how one of the tasks of the occupation is to push people into more and more primitive conditions. But I am also thinking that this doesn't really matter, that it's manageable, that it's not the worst thing that can happen. Then I hear a low but spreading murmur - "They've come, they've come" - and a Humvee appears at my shoulder. The car is squat and broad and its windows are completely black. It is shouting incomprehensible commands through its Tannoy as it moves in jagged, erratic bursts among the crowd. People step quietly out of the way but no one looks up. This, in general, is how the people treat the Israeli army: by ignoring it as much as possible. But I can feel in my stomach and my spine that the Humvee is here to show us all who is master, who runs this road.

Getting to class here is an act of resistance and at the university the Kamal Nasser Auditorium is full. No one wants to talk about the occupation. For three hours, these students and their teachers want to talk literature, theatre, music. And they want to do it in English.

But over lunch they tell me that earlier in the day the Humvee had parked across the university gates and the Tannoy had sputtered insults. "Provocation. They provoke the students and hope one of them throws something then they can begin to shoot." One young man tells me that a few days before, when the checkpoint was manned, he had been among some 200 students that the soldiers had detained there. Eventually, as the students protested about being made late for class, one soldier had a bright idea: every young man who had gel in his hair could go through. "Today," he said, "gel will buy you an education."

Sunday, Jerusalem al-Quds

Daphna Golan teaches human rights at the Hebrew University. She takes her students out to the "field", the West Bank, to research specific topics. The right to education, for example. Today, they have been south of al-Khalil (Hebron). The settlers there have been terrorising children on their way to and from school. The kids' journey should take 20 minutes but to avoid the settlers they go by back routes which take them two hours. I ask how old the children are. "Seven or eight. Today they went the short way because we were with them and the settlers could not harm them but we could see that the children were very, very frightened." I ask how the settlers terrorise them. "They beat them. And they are armed. It is very strange," she says. "You know, these are not the settlers that you imagine. These are young people like hippies. Long hair, bright clothes, rasta hats. They grow organic vegetables. They carry their guitars and their guns and they are vicious."

How many stories can I tell? How many can you read? In the end they all point in the same direction. Every Palestinian I meet (and many Israelis) tells me the same thing: what Israel wants is a Palestine as free of Arabs as possible. This is

the big push, the second instalment of 1948. Israeli policies make life unbearable so that every Palestinian who has a choice will go. The ones left behind - the ones with no options - will be a captive population, severed from their land, from their community, caged behind barriers, walls and gates. This is the labour that will work in the industrial zones Israel is already building near the barrier.

The Palestinians describe what is happening as ethnic cleansing. They also say that they have lived through 1948 and there is no way they are leaving. Dr Nazmi al-Ju'ba has the optimistic job of restoring old Arab architecture in Palestine. "The Palestinians have many options," he tells me, smiling. "We can live in a binational state, we can live in a Palestinian state, we can live under occupation - but we will live in any case. And we will live as a collective; as a Palestinian nation."

Thursday November 20, Jayyus

The farmers took the permits. Finally, they could not bear to watch their harvest die. And then the games began. Abdullatif Khalid, the engineer who runs the Emergency Centre at Jayyus, tells me he has just come back from a smallholding owned by four brothers. They are struggling to feed their flock of 150 sheep. Since the beginning of November they, like all the other farmers, have been dividing a day's food over five days. They are trying to slow down the process of starvation. Some of their ewes have miscarried and some of their lambs have died. They drive their sheep to the yellow steel gate in the barrier. They have their permits and the Israeli soldiers have no problem letting them through to their pasture. But they refuse to let in the sheep. They have no orders, they say, to let in sheep.

Khalid says that all the sheep owned by the village are going to starve, while their pastures lie across the Israeli security barrier. "Can somebody intervene here?" he asks. "You know when birds get stuck in oil slicks or whales get beached, everybody rushes to help them. Maybe helping the Palestinians is complicated. But the world could help the sheep. That should be simple."