

The great land grab

Part One: Turning plows into gun barrels



Young shepherds lead sheep and goats to pasture near Qbdya, Palestine, a village famous for a Sharon-lead massacre in 1953.

Imagine you are farming in the rolling hills east of Fredericton, N.B. It's the year 2020, another dry summer, but here anything grows if you have water for irrigation.

You and your family raise small quantities of a wide variety of crops, vegetables and fruits on irrigated land; and livestock, including sheep and enough chickens to keep you in eggs and broilers, plus a few extra for the

Fredericton Farmers' Market where you've been selling produce for the past 15 years.

Your wife and three small children handle the bulk of the farm chores, while you commute daily to Oromocto where you're foreman on the public works crew. The job brings in the greater part of your annual cash income.

Now imagine the Oromocto municipal government decides it's no longer

going to employ non-residents. Fortunately you have the farm, where everyone can find work and eke out a living. But then, imagine that the water authority cuts your irrigation allotment by half. It is arbitrary, and there is no appeal.

Imagine, in the name of security and the need to combat crime, that barri-

Thousands of small farmers are being forced off the land.

ades are thrown up on all highways leading to Fredericton, Sussex, Saint John, and Moncton. You may still take your wares to the Farmers' Market in Fredericton, but to do so means driving as far as the nearest barricade, leaving your truck there, unloading what you hope to sell, packing it over the barrier, and loading it into a taxi which then carries you on to the market.

But wait. There was a fire in Fredericton North last night. A suspicious fire that's being investigated in case terrorism is a factor, and for now no one is allowed in or out of the city. And so you return home, only to find your orchard torn up to build a security



Establishing "facts on the ground," Israel has established settlements throughout the Occupied Territories like the one seen here below the West Bank village of Jit.

fence along the highway, and a bulldozer poised to level your home because no one can produce a building permit.

You have just imagined the life of a farm family in Palestine, today, on a good day.

We think we have it rough, and many of our farmers do face enormous difficulties. Yet how lucky we are not to be living and farming in the West Bank and Gaza. It is an occupied territory, under harsh military rule, where farmers I met this past month would shrug off inconveniences like BSE or U.S. threats to slap duties on pigs and blueberries.

Two weeks in Palestine participating in the olive harvest and living with farm families in small communities north of Jerusalem did nothing to erase or even soften the grim picture painted in news reports, documentaries, and personal accounts by people representing Jewish, Christian, Muslim and secular society. Thousands of small farmers are being forced



The olive (*zatoun*) is lifeblood to Palestinians who consume quantities whole, extract oil for food and other products including soap, and find numerous uses, from livestock feed to compost, for the by-products.



Farmer Abraham Achmed Mustafa holds aloft plastic jugs of olives and pickles, a sample of the foods and other necessities he and his family have prepared from products they raise, now stored in a larder atop their Qbya, West Bank, home. (RD photos)

How they “won” the West

“There has been a massive expropriation of Palestinian lands, part of a systematic campaign designed to confine Palestinians to small and disconnected enclaves while expanding Israel’s settlements. (There are more than 200 Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. ed)

“Since 1967 Israel has expropriated for settlements, highways, ‘bypass roads’ (on which only Israeli traffic may travel), military installations, nature reserves and infrastructure some 24 percent of the West Bank, 89 percent of East Jerusalem and 25 percent of Gaza. Because Israel does not recognize Ottoman or British-era deeds, 72 percent of the West Bank is considered Israeli ‘state lands.’”

From: Jeff Halper’s “Obstacles to Peace: A Re-framing of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict,” presented by The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, second edition, February, 2004.



Israel's contested separation barrier runs through a Palestinian olive grove depriving farmers access to trees on the far (right) side.

off the land.

It is a shame. There are many good Israelis who would not have it so. But the government of Ariel Sharon, with the blessing of the United States (and no objection from Canada), appears hell-bent on clearing most of the West Bank of its indigenous people.

Even the notion that Palestinian people are indigenous and have a right to be there is disputed by many, and not just by hard-line Jewish Zionist ideologues. Christian Zionists are on the march.

My first conversation with anyone in Israel was with an older woman shar-

ing the back bench of a shuttle from the airport to Jerusalem. She was, she told me, a born-again Christian from Jacksonville, Fla., and was taking up permanent residence in Israel. "The Palestinians are trespassers," she stated bluntly. "It's sad that Arab countries won't let them in."

So much of life in the Holy Land is framed by religious belief and myth. Arriving at Ben Gurion airport, I proceeded to customs and immigration. "What is the purpose of your visit," the woman asked from the protection of her tight little booth with high counter and glass. "Visiting friends," I replied.

"What are their names," she demanded, fingering my passport photo, noting that it was lifting from the page. I blurted out the first name that came to mind and hoped that would do for I had no long list. "Is she Jewish?" the agent demanded.

I might have said, "I don't know. Never asked." Perfect hindsight. Instead I nodded, "Yes."

She waved me through.

EVERYWHERE A CHECKPOINT

My passport would become well worn over the next 15 days, hauled out at hotels and hostels, at military checkpoints and roadblocks. According to the UN there are 200 checkpoints at any one time in the West Bank and Gaza. No one travels far without identification, especially Palestinian men in their late teens to early 40s.

Look: A small knot of Israeli soldiers stands in the narrow cobblestone street in front of the Damascus Gate leading down into the heart of the Arab quarter of the



Five times longer and up to twice as tall as the Berlin wall, Israel's separation wall, seen here behind the Qalandiya checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah, all but ignores the internationally-accepted Green Line between Israel and the Occupied Territories.

What is a Christian Zionist?

Christian Zionists believe, as Arthur Balfour proclaimed in his famous "Declaration" of 1917, that a modern state of Israel was part of the divine plan announced in Old Testament prophetic literature, ie God's promise to Abraham, "I give you this land [Palestine] to your descendants" (Genesis 12:8).

"(They) were ecstatic when Jerusalem came under Israeli control in 1967. At the Third International Christian Zionist Congress, held in Jerusalem in February, 1996, under the auspices of the ICEJ (International Christian Embassy - Jerusalem), some 1,500 delegates from over 40 countries proclaimed: 'According to God's distribution of nations, the Land of Israel has been given to the Jewish people as an everlasting covenant. The Jewish people have the absolute right to possess and dwell in the Land, including Judea, Samaria (West Bank territory), Gaza and the Golan.'"

From: Michael Welton, *Canadian Dimension*, March, 2003.

Old City of Jerusalem. Occupied territory. More soldiers sit or loll on the stone benches along side. All are armed with truncheons and automatic rifles. The soldiers on their feet wander about like bored car salesmen, back and forth, talking amongst themselves, joking, idly surveying the endless procession of pedestrians sprinkled with merchant traffic. Handcarts rumble by, and 4-wheel drive Holder tractors hauling trailers loaded with anything from fresh produce to construction materials.

Barely breaking stride, one of the soldiers shifts into the path of a young Palestinian, hand out. No words need be spoken. The man stops, reaches into his hip pocket, and presents a green identification card. The soldier flicks it open, reads briefly, then hands the card to one of his seated comrades. More checking against a list, perhaps followed by a phone call. After two or three minutes, if all's well, the ID is returned without word, eye contact, or the slightest indication the Palestinian is a thinking, feeling human being. He's free to go, but not free at all in this land where to be a young Arab is to be treated, at best, as a suspect.

If suicide bombers have done this and nothing more (for a moment forget the walls and roadblocks, water restrictions, home demolitions and land grabs for settlements and outposts, the targeted assassinations and killings of innocent men, women, and children) then they and the fanatics who send them are winning the day. Hatred of the occupier builds with each encounter. Years from now no one will remember the high ideals and good intentions of Jews who moved to the Middle East desiring to live in peace with and among Arab neighbors.

BIG CHILL

One evening I was sitting in the courtyard of a farm home in Qibya, a hilltop village that's far more widely known than its small size would have one suspect. It has the distinction of having been victim of a massacre in 1953 at the hands of Israeli fighters under the command of a young Ariel Sharon.

Men, young and old, came and went throughout the evening, sharing news and taking part in an uninterrupted supply of sweet tea, small cups of dark

Stop the wall

In a decision handed down in July, 2004, the International Court in The Hague ruled that, "The wall, along the route chosen, and its associated regime, gravely infringe a number of rights of Palestinians residing in the territory occupied by Israel, and the infringements resulting from that route cannot be justified by military exigencies or by the requirements of national security or public order." Fourteen out of 15 judges voted against the security wall. The sole backer was U.S. Judge Thomas Buergenthal.

October 23, in a 144 to four vote, the UN General Assembly called on Israel to "stop and reverse" building the separation barrier on Palestinian land and particularly in and around East Jerusalem, calling it a "contradiction to international law." The four countries voting against the resolution were Israel, the United States, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia. Twelve countries, including Canada, abstained.

Arabic coffee and trays of fresh fruit, all passed 'round by my host's youngest brothers. I spoke mostly with Muhammad Khaled, a retired schoolmaster who had taught English and social studies and who wanted to know, among many other things about Canada, what our public school teachers receive for a salary. The answer nearly bowled him over.

But then, in the closing dark, a young boy of perhaps 14 spoke out from behind me. "Do you like Jews?" he asked. The night was suddenly chilly. "Yes," I replied. "My problem is with Sharon, and Bush. People like that." The boy did not reply. Soon after he slipped away.

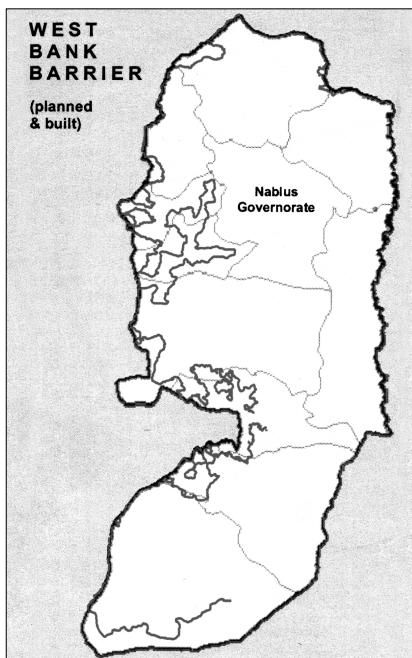
My translator for the days spent in Qibya and surrounding villages was Mahmoud A., a 17-year-old student in the local high school where, I was told, two years earlier the army barged in and shot two boys. A couple of days before my arrival he'd taken part in a protest in the nearby village of Budrus against the security fence. It's the barrier that Israel is erecting in defiance of world opinion, with the exception of Israel, the U.S., and the Marshall Islands. Soldiers asked Mahmoud for his identity card and did not return it. He smiles. That's what soldiers do. The youth can apply for a new card but it will cost him at least \$150, money he does not have. In the mean time he is effectively restricted to home and Qibya.

You don't have to be throwing stones to get caught up in this.

STEALING LAND

The so-called security fence, separation wall, barrier, apartheid wall, or whatever one wishes to call it, has less to do with security than it has with taking land. If that were not so, how is it we were able to drive one night from Ramallah, the base of Palestinian Authority operations, to Jerusalem without going through a single checkpoint? Sure, it was a long way around and cost more than the usual combination of rides through the Qalandiya roadblock, but what is time to a determined adversary?

The barrier has been condemned by the UN General Assembly and ruled illegal by the World Court in The Hague. It is creating havoc and consternation



The above maps are from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, July 2004. Not shown is the planned route of the barrier several kilometers east of the River Jordan and Dead Sea.

for Palestinians. It does not follow the so-called “Green Line” the international community recognizes as the border between Israel and lands it occupied after the war of 1967. It sweeps and curls inside that line, often by many kilometers .

The wall, sometimes just that, 18-foot-high and built of concrete, is at other times a 2-lane paved highway bordered by groomed gravel, wire, and electronic sensors. It snakes around villages, separating them from traditional grazing lands and olive groves and water wells. In built-up areas, it separates people from their hospitals, schools, places of work, family, and friends.

I met a Palestinian agronomist who lives in Bethlehem (West Bank), just south of Jerusalem and works in Ramallah to the north, a half-hour drive before this most recent uprising. Because he must travel through Jerusalem which is entirely under Israeli control (wasn't supposed to be that way when the UN intervened back in 1948) and back into the West Bank, through two checkpoints, the trip by cab and bus and cab again takes an hour and a half at least, often two hours.

Permission to pass through Israel (between the hours of 5 am and 7 pm) is contingent on having a special permit good for three months. Should he find himself stranded in Israel for any reason outside of those permitted hours he risks harsh punishment and denial of any future right to even visit Israel.

Highway barriers (for Palestinians, while special routes for vehicles with Israeli plates make travel across the Occupied Territories a breeze) make it necessary for people and goods to off-load from one vehicle, pass through a checkpoint, and load anew. It can take a few minutes to hours. Without warning a checkpoint may be closed altogether, as happened while we were there in the aftermath of a bombing in Tel Aviv that killed two Israelis.

Imagine you've just driven up with a load of fresh vegetables bound for market in Jerusalem. Palestinians in need of medical care have died waiting to cross checkpoints. The situation is so abominable one Israeli peace group has formed with the sole intent of preventing roadblock abuses.

Lockdowns are a form of collective

punishment, illegal under international law, as was the blowing up of the family home of the young Tel Aviv suicide bomber. Friends with the International Solidarity Movement stayed with the boy's father in the home until after nightfall when the soldiers came to kick them out and destroy the building. It was, they said, a devastating experience. “We couldn't talk about it afterward,” one of them recalled the next week. “It was terrible. . . . No one said a word.” DvL ●

Contacts

PARC, the Palestinian Agriculture Relief Committee, an organization based in Ramallah involved with extension work with farmers throughout the Occupied Territories.
www.pal.arc.org

B'Tselem, a human rights group with an excellent reputation for reputable work including publication of booklets documenting abuses in the Occupied Territories.
www.btselem.org

Rabbis for Human Rights is an impressive, excellently run group that organizes olive picking and other good works. The first language is Hebrew, but translation is offered, and within volunteer groups English is commonly heard.
www.rhr.israel.net

Stop home demolitions by supporting ICAHD, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, headed by Jeff Halper, a professor at Ben Gurion University. ICAHD publishes books and other materials supporting its work. Very good reputation all around.
www.icahd.org

International Solidarity Movement, a loosely-knit organization of Palestinians, Israelis, and human rights activists from all corners of the world though mostly Western Europe and North America taking part in events from olive harvesting to bringing bicycles to villages, to actions against the wall, all designed to help and further the cause of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Informal – don't look for lots of structure.
www.palsolidarity.org ●