

Killing the Palestinians

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Setting the scene

A drive through the West Bank quickly dispels any notions one might have of Israel's beneficent intentions. There are none. The first ugly blight on the horizon are gleaming white structures clumped together on hilltops. They jut out treeless, naked and unashamed as below them the green valleys continue to gently undulate in their menacing shadows. A shimmering sliver cuts through the land or over it, every now and then brought to life by cars that speed along these highways towards Jerusalem, Tel Aviv or Haifa: and below them, life barely moves at all. A looming watchtower confirms the feeling of something very wrong. Grey and threatening with cavernous windows, behind which shadows watch and aim at things that move, this is one of hundreds of such towers overseeing the mass of humanity waiting endlessly at yet another checkpoint that makes every journey torture for every Palestinian.

Soldiers, machine guns, tanks make up the rest of the set pieces as does the razor wire which coils around the kilometres of fencing before it comes up against the Wall - mammoth in size and structure and even more monstrous in the reason for its existence.

Closing in

The Wall is Israel's provocative solution to the Palestinian problem in the West Bank. It is a wall ostensibly built for Israel's security, yet its path does not follow the borders between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Instead, at many points it goes deep into the heart of Palestinian territory. The Wall is being built, despite an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice that condemned it. It is being built despite a similar wall coming down almost two decades ago between East and West Berlin. Then, the whole world breathed a sigh of relief that such barbarity had finally come to an end - in the West at least. Israel's Prison Wall - much higher and longer and begun only 4 years ago - hardly raises a whimper of protest where it counts, despite it being built contrary to the Court's ruling.

It is a wall, the like of which most people cannot imagine - 8 metres high in places and up to 100 metres wide in others and running 720 kilometres the length and breadth of the West Bank - a wall in some places and electrified razor fencing with ditches and a no-man's land in others. Already 180 kilometres of wall run right through thousands upon thousands of acres of private land - Palestinian land. Half of that wall encircles East Jerusalem, isolating the city from the rest of the occupied West Bank and separating it from its Palestinian neighbourhoods which are dependent on Jerusalem for their survival. In the process, the Wall has skirted around three of the largest illegal Jewish settlement blocs - aggressively staking out more territory - and connected them to Israel, wiping out all the areas needed

for Palestinian natural growth and economic development.

The Wall is the most dangerous phase of Israel's occupation of Palestinian land because it allows for the continual expansion of illegal Israeli settlements deep inside the West Bank. The end result for the Palestinians will be three miserable truncated enclaves without access to valuable water resources or the fertile agricultural land on which they have depended for centuries. Certainly, there will be no contiguity between them or the walled-in Gaza Strip on the coast. It also means that Palestinian movement will have to be severely curtailed within the West Bank in order to protect these implanted illegal settlements. And these illegal activities are still going on while everyone continues to talk in absolute terms about a two-state solution and totally ignoring the realities on the ground. The wall has relegated Palestinian self-determination in their own sovereign state to the bulldozed, treeless dust heap of a prison that Israel has deliberately and systematically succeeded in diminishing. This is the land that Israel wants and is taking, while herding Palestinians into ever smaller disconnected Bantustans, in order to establish an exclusively Jewish state.

How it happened

The actual owners of all of historic Palestine - the Palestinians - have watched their land being dispensed, taken, fragmented, violated and bartered over since 1947 with no regard for their ownership by stint of their birth, residence, contributions, achievements, and continuous ancestry going back to time immemorial. Not only were they - the majority population - driven from it, made refugees and refused their right to return home, those who remained in what was left, have now found themselves living under a brutal regime of occupation and apartheid.

Emerging out of British and European colonialism and a desire to protect Western interests, the United Nations had arbitrarily given 55 per cent to European Jewish immigrants and left the Palestinians with 45 per cent of their own country. The Palestinians did not accept this, but soon news of massacres and the razing of villages began filtering through which terrified Palestinians into fleeing for their lives. A war ensued involving the Arab states and the newly-created Israel, but it was a war for which the Palestinians were not prepared. The exodus of Palestinian families gathered momentum and became a tragic turning point in their history known as al-Nakba or "the Catastrophe". The fleeing families sought refuge in neighbouring Arab countries until they could return home. This never happened: most of them are still languishing in pitiful circumstances in refugee camps waiting for the day they can return and/or receive compensation for the terrible damage done. For those who stayed, the only concession the world made was to allow them a reduced 22 per cent of their own land. But, the Palestinians never really had it - the West Bank and East Jerusalem was controlled by Jordan, and the Gaza Strip, by Egypt. Israel waited in the wings.

In 1967, Israel wrested control of all the remaining lands of historic Palestine when it won the 6-day war - an occupation that has continued for 40 long and bitter years and now affects some 4 million Palestinians. Israel never adhered to the requirements of international law and conventions that required it to withdraw to the 1949 armistice "Green" line once hostilities had ceased. Nor did it seek to protect the people living there. Rather, its policies and practices have intensified and degenerated way beyond that allowed by an occupying power.

Like any people, the Palestinians want to be free and independent and to live in peace: they have pursued all avenues towards that end. None of them have been successful, despite

umpteen United Nations resolutions supporting their inalienable right to self-determination. America holds veto power in the Security Council and uses it always in favour of Israel. Also, the effects of the Israel Lobby's powerful influence have been felt not only in government circles, but also the media, business, NGOs, academia and even in trade unions and religious organizations at the highest levels. Therefore, as long as the world's only superpower - the United States of America - supports Israel, the international community is powerless to implement the UN resolutions. Only at the grassroots level is there a chance for people to come together and force the issue by demanding truth and justice for the Palestinians. But, time is running out.

Apartheid by any other name

Today, the Palestinians are facing imminent ruin as Israel embarks on yet another reprehensible program that deliberately regards the Palestinians as "non-existent". Not only are those under occupation being subjected to a worse kind of apartheid than was ever practised in South Africa, but so too are the 1.4 million Palestinian citizens of Israel who are realising, that despite Israel's claims to being a democracy, they are in fact not equal. They are the subject of an elaborate system of laws and administrative regulations that have been designed to discriminate against non-Jews - essentially the Palestinians - in order to create and preserve an exclusively Jewish state. Now, all the Palestinians are being discriminated against in favour of Jews from anywhere in the world who want to make Israel their home, including those who want to settle in the illegal settlements being built in the areas that have long been designated for a future Palestinian state.

Those deviant laws and regulations have allowed Israel to expropriate Palestinian land, confiscate their property and demolish some 18,000 homes since 1967 to make way for the illegal settlements, Israeli-only roads, prohibited military areas and the Wall. The result has been the breaking up of lush and productive farming communities and a centuries-old Palestinian society that prospered in ancient cities like Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus, Hebron, Jenin and Ramallah. Long used to visiting and trading between these towns, the Palestinians have been forcibly stopped from moving freely by a grid of Israeli military checkpoints that make it difficult and sometimes impossible to get to work, school, shops, hospitals, or just visiting friends and family. At these checkpoints, Palestinians are humiliatingly subjected to endless waiting, never knowing if they will be refused permission to continue their journey or be detained or even die. Such is daily life for every Palestinian in the Occupied Territories.

The waiting game

There are over 500 checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank that seriously impede the movement of the whole population. Journeys that for the most part do not even entail entering Israel, but are merely passage within this occupied Palestinian territory. A journey of 5 minutes can now take up to an hour and may possibly require changing vehicles to continue the journey on the other side of the checkpoint. Palestinians have to take secondary roads that are long, circuitous, and often full of potholes and steep inclines, while some 430,000 Jewish settlers come and go without restriction. These settlers live in their fortified housing estates built illegally on prime hilltop locations on Palestinian land and Israel has provided exclusive highways to connect these settlements to Israel.

Queues of taxis line up for people needing transport after they leave their cars behind and people find themselves sharing the trip with others. The silence on these trips is pervasive

as people try as best they can to act normal when everything is not. There is simply no point in worrying about meeting work schedules or getting to appointments because anything can happen. It could be another flying checkpoint or two set up to slow everything down even more, or the soldiers at a checkpoint might decide to have their lunch and make everyone wait at their convenience. A not very subtle message of just who has power over whom.

Waiting has become just part and parcel of getting on with life for the Palestinians. There is more waiting than movement in a day and so it is not unusual to find young boys making a meagre living by offering tea to the crowds of people for almost nothing. Everybody has an experience to relate during these periods of waiting, but while the Palestinians are enormously patient in the face of such humiliating conditions, anxiety lurks not far away. Perhaps this day the checkpoint might close before they can get through; perhaps the pregnant woman will be forced to give birth in this public place; perhaps a soldier will punish a young man for saying too much or not enough and make him squat with his hands bound and eyes blindfolded for hours on end; perhaps someone will have to tip out all their shopping so the soldiers can check it and then have to pack it all up again; perhaps the grey-faced woman or breathless man who needs to get to hospital will die because the soldiers refuse to let the ambulance through; perhaps the impatient young man will be shot because the soldier thought him threatening. Best to be quiet and wait.

And in the Gaza Strip it is worse. No Palestinians are allowed in or out. All border crossings are closed and are only opened arbitrarily to allow some limited goods passage or aid to come in. It also means that the Palestinians are not able to flee Israel's aerial bombardments and military invasions. Seriously ill patients have not been able to seek treatment in hospitals outside Gaza, and since March last year, Palestinians have been refused permits to work in Israel when 40 per cent of the population able to work is unemployed. No one can make plans: the unpredictability of everything affects every aspect of Palestinian lives. The only thing that gives them any security is the green card that is their momentary pass out of just waiting.

Permission to move

Palestinians need permits for everything. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, they are issued with green IDs with an identity number that allows them to reside there and to get through the checkpoints in their own country. They cannot get anywhere without them. If they want to travel abroad, they must obtain a travelling document known as the laissez passez which notes the holder is of undefined nationality or more bluntly, stateless: it is valid for one year only.

The Jordan Valley, which represents 30 per cent of the Occupied West Bank has been the latest target for permit restrictions. Only Palestinians who hold Jordan Valley residency IDs can move freely in and out of the area. The rest of the 2 million Palestinian West Bank residents are being prevented from visiting their families, doing business or farming their land. There is strong reason to believe that Israel plans to annex this area unilaterally because it has rich agricultural land and precious water resources.

Jerusalem too has become a "no-go" zone for Palestinians. Those with green cards living in the Occupied Territories have not been able to enter Jerusalem for years, but even those with residency rights in Jerusalem are at risk of having their blue IDs revoked if Israeli bureaucrats can prove that they no longer maintain Jerusalem as their "centre of life". And

the Wall has made sure that Jerusalem will become increasingly inaccessible to them. Israel has already de facto annexed 320 sq km and isolated more than 120,000 Palestinians from Jerusalem which is about half of the city's Palestinian population and now Israeli urban planners are seeking to use Israel's absentee laws to appropriate more Palestinian houses and property.

And, it is not only Palestinians under occupation who need permits. New rules on IDs are affecting foreign nationals who wish to visit family, conduct business or take part in academic exchanges. If they do not hold an Israeli-issued Palestinian ID, they will no longer be allowed into the country. And Israel completely controls the granting of permits. Now, foreign nationals have found themselves refused re-entry visas. That means that foreign nationals cannot get back home where they may have lived for most of their lives and this has resulted in agonising decisions for spouses and families about whether to stay or leave and has even meant the closing of businesses. No one knows if they can come or go or how long they can stay at all. In one way or another, everybody loses.

Breaking up families

This assault on family life is undermining Palestinian society and nowhere more so than in Jerusalem. So determined was Israel to obtain exclusive rights to all of Jerusalem, that it declared the city the capital of Israel after the 1948 war, illegally annexed East Jerusalem in 1967, and declared all of Jerusalem "complete and united" as Israel's capital in 1980. In doing so, Israel ignored Jerusalem's internationally recognised status as a corpus separatum or separate body from Israel and the proposed Palestinian state. No doubt it wanted to head off any Palestinian move to consolidate East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

However, none of these acts solved the problem of the very significant Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. Now, Israel has implemented The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law (Temporary Order) which denies Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip their right to join their families who are citizens of Israel or residents of occupied East Jerusalem. Tens of thousands of Palestinian families have been divided since the law was implemented in 2003 and since revised and extended until July 2008. No family unification is allowed for Palestinian men between 18 and 35 and for women aged between 18 and 25. Applications by anyone older than that who has engaged in activity that Israel deems hostile to the state (which includes non-violent political protests) will be refused. These are families who have lived and worked within a few kilometres of each other all their lives and now find themselves separated as though they are in a foreign country. According to Amnesty International, this law is "profoundly discriminatory . . . which cannot be justified by genuine security concerns."

"This land is mine"

The tug-of-war over Jerusalem has spurred Israel on to take as much land as possible from the Palestinians. It has, therefore, escalated its illegal annexation efforts through a complex system of manoeuvres under the pretext of urban planning and expansion - for Jews only. Over the last four decades, Israel has illegally appropriated over 50 per cent of Palestinian land in the West Bank for the benefit of Jewish settlements, declaring it "state land". More than 3,400 buildings have been built in these illegal settlements.

When Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took office in early 2001, he undertook to

dismantle all settlements that he had built in contravention of not only international law, but also Israeli law. In exchange for dismantling these illegal outposts, US President Bush agreed to recognise Israeli “population centres” that had been set up inside the Palestinian West Bank, also in contravention of international law, but not Israeli law. Six years later, not one settlement in the West Bank has been dismantled.

Sharon’s disengagement from Gaza was simply a token display that actually led to increased illegal settlement building in the West Bank and a relocation of the settlers from Gaza with substantial compensation. Not a word of condemnation was uttered by Western leaders, but there was plenty of praise for Sharon’s “courage”. Nothing has changed since Prime Minister Olmert took over. More than 952 tenders for new housing units inside the West Bank have been approved and now Olmert seeks to connect the biggest settlement Ma’ale Adumim to Jerusalem by annexing even more land. This demographic re-structuring of Jerusalem is deliberately designed to cut Palestinians off from Jerusalem and gives, what is effectively ethnic cleansing by stealth, the veneer of legality.

And houses come tumbling down

In order to effect land clearing for new or expanded Israeli settlements, as well as the Wall, Israel uses one of its most lethal weapons – the bulldozer. A familiar sight, the specially-constructed bulldozer arrives with barely a moment’s notice and begins tearing down the family home, crushing everything inside. There is no time to save clothes, furniture, toys, books, photographs and when the dust settles, the traumatised family is reduced to finding shelter with friends until the family is issued with a UN aid tent.

To lose the family home is always devastating, but for children to see their homes demolished in such cruel and senseless ways is psychologically devastating. Yet, Palestinian children are somehow expected to deal with such arbitrary violence regularly.

The 18,000 homes already destroyed since 1967 have left some 200,000 Palestinians homeless – many of them for the second, third or even fourth time and none of them have been compensated for the loss of their homes, furnishings and personal items. Israel justifies these demolitions on the basis that they have been built without a permit on land that Israel has zoned as agricultural land according to a British plan (RJ-5) formulated in 1942, then used to freeze Palestinian building works. Family homes are also destroyed as a form of collective punishment if a Palestinian is accused of committing a terrorist act against Israel whether the family is involved or not. On both counts, it denies Palestinians the fundamental right to respect for private and family life and home.

Starving them out

And just when the Palestinians thought it could not get any worse, sanctions were imposed on the Palestinians last year which absolutely crippled the Palestinian economy and plunged ordinary Palestinian families into the sort of poverty that has forced many to raid garbage bins to salvage anything at all to eat or sell.

There had already been a slow and steady strangulation of the Gazan economy and living standards since Israel occupied Gaza in 1967. Before then, Gaza’s rich and fertile land yielded some of the best citrus fruits in the world and together with a flourishing fishing industry, Gazans had access to substantial export markets and plentiful supplies for themselves. But, shocking figures came out in the World Food program’s report of 28 August

2006: around 70 per cent of Gaza's population was found to be food insecure. Unprecedented malnutrition has crept into the Gazan population and Palestinian children are suffering from micro-nutrient deficiencies, referred to as "hidden hunger" by the World Health Organisation. Over a generation, these deficiencies have led to stunted growth, anaemia, weakened immune systems, and severely damaged cognition. While not dramatically noticeable at first, the signs of mental and physical retardation creep up over years. It is malnutrition on a large-scale and entirely Israeli-made.

The reason for the current sanctions are petty and without any justification on a human scale. The US and Israel did not approve of the democratically-elected Hamas government and sought to oust it by putting pressure on Western donors to impose an embargo on the \$1 billion aid package intended to give humanitarian, developmental and budgetary support. Israel stopped the monthly transfer of about \$55 million in customs and tax revenues that it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Hundreds of thousands of government workers went unpaid for more than eight months and most are still not receiving a regular income. The message to the Palestinians is that their democratic choices are only valued if they fall in line with the wishes of the Occupier and Western interests. The real failure though has been the international community's incapacity to act with responsibility and justice to force the implementation of its own resolutions vis-à-vis Israel and to end the collective punishment of a whole people.

As bad as it can possibly be

The Palestinian situation is one frequently compared to the imaginary circumstances described in George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-four". For the Palestinians though, it is anything but imaginary. Two, even three generations have grown up knowing almost nothing about the freedom we take for granted. Instead, they are confronted by the awesome arsenal of Israel's sophisticated military machine – the ever-present soldiers, guns, tanks, the constant whirring sounds of Apache helicopters, the sickening scream of F16 fighter planes overhead, the watchtowers, the bombs, the sonic booms, the bullets, and the unlimited power of the Occupier. But more than that, they must endure Israel's Machiavellian twists and turns that have made the situation so malevolently complex and have so demonised the Palestinians in the eyes of the world. As the occupation and Israel's apartheid policies intensify, governments internationally have knowingly used or fallen into line with Israel's designs to further their own or piggy-back on the superpower agenda for Western dominance of the Middle East. Thus, the space for the Palestinian narrative is continually overtaken by these powerful interests and so the truth rarely emerges in mainstream news. It is no wonder that people find it easier to shrug off the inconvenience of the Palestinians' existence, regardless of the crimes being perpetrated against them by Israel, and why every peace effort has been reduced to nothing and every plea has fallen on deaf ears.

Unbelievably, the world has normalised the occupation by making the victim responsible for the crimes of the occupying power. Every act by Israel is justified for reasons of security. Every act against Israel invites collective punishment on the whole Palestinian population. This happened to the people of Gaza last year when an Israeli army corporal was abducted. A massive military operation was launched which decimated Gaza's infrastructure, pulverised homes, shops and government buildings and killed and wounded hundreds of civilians. And just to punish the Palestinians for voting the Hamas party into government, Israel also kidnapped 64 Palestinian members of parliament including 8 cabinet ministers and 22 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. A year later, they are still being held

in Israeli prisons.

The audacity of Israel's policies and practices are breathtaking, though only now are Israel's true intentions dawning on a world long believing that Israel was "a light unto nations". In reality, it always was a cold and calculating plan to bring about the Judaisation of all of Palestine. The whole two-state solution was a hoax that even the Palestinians bought into with dire consequences for their people's future. And, the effects are being felt today in ways which only a very few envisaged then. While hands were being shaken on the White House lawns between Israel's Prime Minister Rabin, the Palestinian Chairman Arafat and US President Clinton to seal the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, Israeli bulldozers were ripping up more and more land in the West Bank, and illegal Jewish settlement building proceeded uninterrupted. By the time the ceremonies were well and truly over, the Palestinians began to see the awful reality of this peace. Their last remaining land had been impossibly fractured and Arafat had been given the role of policeman over his own people with a charge to stop all violence if he ever wanted to realise a Palestinian state. Israel, however - while continuing to fragment the land with its settlements - was left controlling all the borders, airspace and water - in other words, everything a Palestinian state needed for economic viability and territorial sovereignty.

Perpetual violence

Short of becoming a brutal dictator, Arafat could no more guarantee a complete cessation of violence than any leader whose people knew they had been short-changed and that they were just as completely under Israeli domination as ever before. Israeli soldiers were still present in their lives and their land had been diminished even further. No one was doing anything about the violence they were having to endure - the nightly raids, the beatings inflicted on their menfolk, the sudden arrests, the children "accidentally" shot, whole families blown up. Thousands of Palestinians have been killed and tens of thousands more have been permanently wounded, scarred and traumatised with many dying unaccounted for in the statistics because of the injuries inflicted on them by the Israeli military. Last year alone, Israel fired 6,000 artillery shells into Gaza - an area not much bigger than Melbourne's City of Casey - except that there are 1.4 million people squeezed into that space with no freedom to leave when the bombings begin. And the bombings over Gaza have begun again, almost a year to the day.

Israel's seizure and occupation of Palestinian land after the 1967 war, drove thousands of Palestinians of all backgrounds, professions and beliefs to resist that occupation. The list includes doctors, lawyers, academics, tradespeople, business people, politicians, journalists, students - ordinary men, women and children who want to be free from Israel's occupation. Free to come and go as they please and free to live their life without violence. Some took up armed resistance with the meagre and often home-made armaments available to them, but many more resisted non-violently through strikes, demonstrations, petitions, and other protests. So intense was the desire for freedom that even children began throwing stones at the tanks and military machines invading their towns and villages. This became known as the First Intifada of 1987. But as useless peace deals were struck and Israel increased the level of provocations against the Palestinian population, the feeling of hopelessness grew. A new generation of children was growing up in an environment that was continually violent and oppressive and there was no relief from the constant feeling of being besieged with nowhere to flee.

The Second Intifada began in 2000 - now much more violent and desperate. Whole families

were seeing not only their menfolk killed, tortured and imprisoned, but also the women and children. There would hardly be a Palestinian family that has not suffered the loss of a member of their own immediate family or extended one.

With so much antagonism against the Palestinians for resisting the occupation, one has to ask if anyone of us would do things differently if we found ourselves so emasculated by circumstances beyond our control. When talks fail, when law fails, when people fail, when peace fails, resistance is the last resort permissible under the United Nations Charter's Article 51 in order for people and nations to free themselves from colonial oppression and occupation. And the world has continuously failed to protect the Palestinians as required by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In effect, the international community has driven the Palestinians to resist their occupiers and oppressors.

Go straight to jail

For the Palestinians though, it makes no difference whether their resistance is armed or non-violent: Israel's punishment is the same. Almost 11,000 Palestinians are currently in Israeli jails from the 700,000 men, women and children who were imprisoned at one time or another since 1967. That is about one-fifth of the Palestinian population – an incredible figure for any civil society and one that says more about the occupier than those who were or are in jail. Belonging to a political organization means ten years in prison, and any military action carries a life sentence. The figures on torture are also horrendous with some 85 per cent of prisoners having been tortured and having no recourse to a fair trial. Children as young as 12 are held in jails with adult Israeli criminals and it does not take too much imagination to know what they must endure in such conditions.

A term in jail is practically unavoidable for many Palestinians because even words are seen as undermining the Israeli state. Interrogations happen frequently and families live in a constant state of fear wondering when it will be their turn for an unwelcome visit by Israeli soldiers or intelligence officers. With so many new military regulations being introduced without notice, Palestinians do not know which act will be considered punishable, and therefore, anything and everything could be a jail-able offence. Already there are some 1,500 military regulations governing the West Bank and another 1,400 governing the Gaza Strip. Every moment of their lives comes under suspicion and they are contained and checked at every turn.

The final solution - ethnic cleansing

The diabolical endgame is closing in. Left on the board are apartheid, enslavement, transfer, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Unpalatable as these terms are, more and more people are beginning to see just where Israel's policies and practices are heading.

The first person to coin the term "genocide" was a Polish-Jewish legal scholar Raphael Lemkin whose idea was widely accepted by the international community and it became one of the legal bases of the Nuremberg Trials. It is interesting to see the parallel between his definition and what is happening to the Palestinians today:

"Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups

themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups." Axis Rule in Occupied Europe (Wash DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), p79.

For those people who think that what is happening to the Palestinians is not apartheid or ethnic cleansing or genocide, ask the Palestinian parents who have just lost their children, the Palestinian families who are watching bulldozers rip into their homes, the Palestinian children who are too afraid to go to school, the elderly and the handicapped who are too afraid to stay at home, the Palestinian mothers who have lost their babies, the Palestinian children who wet their beds, the half-alive Palestinians without legs and arms and only half their face.

Ask the Palestinians who have collapsed from heart attacks and strokes because ambulances are not allowed through. Ask Palestinians who must scramble over torn up bitumen and take the long way round while Israelis zoom along modern highways built only for their use. Ask the Palestinians who are spat on and ridiculed, stripped, taunted and humiliated in front of the waiting crowds by the Israeli soldiers for whom it has become a sport.

Ask the Palestinians who come home weary from all that waiting and all that shame to find their family homes reduced to rubble, their children sobbing, their possessions scattered and buried. Ask the Palestinians who come back to the ruins of their offices and their schools only to find walls and files and books and pictures smeared with soldiers' excrement and fouled with their urine. Ask the thousands of Palestinians who have been woken at gunpoint in the early hours of the morning and herded outside. And then ask the families how they feel when their fathers, brothers, grandfathers, and sons are bound and blindfolded, beaten up and taken away and then killed or jailed or simply disappear without a trace.

Ask the Palestinians how they feel when they hear the rumble of 200 Israeli tanks mass along a 9 kilometre stretch outside their cities. Ask the Palestinians if they shudder when they hear the scream of F-16 bombers slice the skies, or hear the whirr of Apache helicopters hovering overhead. Ask the Palestinians how it feels to have a gun pointing at you when you have been waiting at the checkpoints in the hot sun or the bitter wind and icy rain for hours.

Ask the Palestinians what it is like to be stateless, to have no papers, no passport, no legitimacy. Ask the Palestinians who apply for a laissez passez allowing them to travel overseas, what it is like to be refused re-entry by Israel if they are late for any reason. Ask what it is like to then have to move from country to country because no one will accept you as a citizen. Ask the Palestinian refugees who are languishing in camps without any future or hope for their children because Israel refuses to allow them to return home. Ask Palestinians who have tried to seek asylum and have been told that they must be held in detention for the rest of their lives because Israel will not accept them and neither will any other country. Ask the Palestinians who "write born in Palestine" on forms when it really was Palestine and have it crossed out because no such place is recognised even though legally and actually it is right.

Ask the Palestinian workers who come home empty-handed because a wall rises between

them and their jobs, the Palestinian farmers whose crops are rotting on trees they cannot get to and whose farming land has been turned into roads and Israeli settlements. Ask the men who wait at gates in the wall to open, sometimes all day, to tend to their land so that Israel cannot use the Absentee Laws against them.

Ask what you would say if all this was happening to you and every door to freedom was slammed shut forcing you to stumble from one dead end to another. Ask what you would do, what you would accept. Ask if it is human and if you could see it done even to the least of mankind.

You might well ask the Palestinians to make the concessions for the sake of peace: to desist from violent resistance; to give up the right of return; to forfeit East Jerusalem as their future capital; to agree to Israeli control of their borders; to accept the Jewish settlements, the Israeli-only roads and military posts in their midst; to agree to a Wall that separates them from those they love; to accept that they can never own their own piece of land or their own house; to suppress the feelings of humiliation and shame that they have borne for over half a century; and then what? That is really the question.

Forty years of oppression and almost sixty years of dispossession are too many years of pain for any human being. It is time for the Palestinians to be released from Israel's vice-like control. It is time to balance the scales of justice. It is time to stop killing the Palestinians.

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