

Occupied Palestine: The Old Evil. Chris Hedges

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It comes back in a rush, the stench of raw sewage, the groan of the diesel, sloth-like Israeli armored personnel carriers, the vans filled with broods of children, driven by chalky faced colonists, certainly not from here, probably from Brooklyn or somewhere in Russia or maybe Britain.

Little has changed. The [checkpoints](#) with their blue and white Israeli flags dot the roads and intersections. The red-tiled roofs of the colonist settlements — illegal under international law — dominate hillsides above Palestinian villages and towns. They have grown in number and expanded in size. But they remain protected by blast barriers, concertina wire and watchtowers surrounded by the obscenity of lawns and gardens. The colonists have access to bountiful sources of water in this arid landscape that the Palestinians are [denied](#).

The winding 26-foot high concrete wall that runs the 440 mile length of occupied Palestine, with its graffiti calling for liberation, murals with the Al-Aqsa mosque, faces of martyrs and the grinning and bearded mug of Yasser Arafat — whose concessions to Israel in the Oslo agreement made him, in the [words](#) of Edward Said, “the Pétain of the Palestinians” — give the West Bank the feel of an open air prison. The wall lacerates the landscape. It twists and turns like some huge, fossilized antediluvian snake severing Palestinians from their families, slicing Palestinian villages in half, cutting communities off from their orchards, olive trees and fields, dipping and rising out of [wadis](#), trapping Palestinians in the Jewish state's updated version of a [Bantustan](#).

It has been over two decades since I reported from the West Bank. Time collapses. The smells, sensations, emotions and images, the lilting cadence of Arabic and the miasma of sudden and violent death that lurks in the air, evokes the old evil. It is as if I never left.

I am in a battered black Mercedes driven by a friend in his thirties who I will not name to protect him. He worked construction in Israel but lost his job — like nearly all Palestinians

employed in Israel — on Oct. 7. He has four children. He is struggling. His savings have dwindled. It is getting hard to buy food, pay for electricity, water and petrol. He feels under siege. He *is* under siege. He has little use for the [quisling](#) Palestinian Authority. He dislikes Hamas. He has Jewish friends. He speaks Hebrew. The siege is grinding him, and everyone around him, down.

“A few more months like this and we’re finished,” he says puffing nervously on a cigarette. “People are desperate. More and more are going hungry.”

We are driving the winding road that hugs the barren sand and scrub hillsides snaking up from Jericho, rising from the salt-rich Dead Sea, the lowest spot on the earth, to Ramallah. I will meet my friend, the novelist Atef Abu Saif, who was in Gaza on Oct. 7 with his 15-year-old son, Yasser. They were visiting family when Israel began its scorched earth campaign. He spent 85 days enduring and writing daily about the nightmare of the [genocide](#). His collection of haunting diary entries have been [published](#) in his book “Don’t Look Left.” He [escaped](#) the carnage though the border with Egypt at Rafah, traveled to Jordan and returned home to Ramallah. But the scars of the genocide remain. Yasser rarely leaves his room. He does not engage with his friends. Fear, trauma and hatred are the primary commodities imparted by the colonizers to the colonized.

“I still live in Gaza,” Atef tells me later. “I am not out. Yasser still hears bombing. He still sees corpses. He does not eat meat. Red meat reminds him of the flesh he picked up when he joined the rescue parties during the [massacre](#) in Jabalia, and the flesh of his cousins. I sleep on a mattress on the floor as I did in Gaza when we lived in a tent. I lie awake. I think of those we left behind waiting for sudden death.”

We turn a corner on a hillside. Cars and trucks are veering spasmodically to the right and left. Several in front of us are in reverse. Ahead is an Israeli checkpoint with thick boxy blocks of dun colored concrete. Soldiers are stopping vehicles and checking papers. Palestinians can wait hours to get past. They can be hauled from their vehicles and detained. Anything is possible at an Israeli checkpoint, often erected with no advance warning. Most of it is not good.

We back up. We descend a narrow, dusty road that veers off from the main highway. We travel on bumpy, uneven tracks through impoverished villages.

It was like this for Blacks in the segregated south and Indigenous Americans. It was like this for Algerians under the French. It was like this in India, Ireland and Kenya under the British. The death mask — too often of European extraction — of colonialism does not change. Nor does the God-like authority of colonists who look at the colonized as vermin, who take a perverse delight in their humiliation and suffering and who kill them with impunity.

The Israeli customs official asked me two questions when I crossed into occupied Palestine from Jordan on the King Hussein Bridge.

“Do you hold a Palestinian passport?”

“Are either of your parents Palestinian?”

In short, are you contaminated?

This is how [apartheid](#) works.

The Palestinians want their land back. Then they will talk of peace. The Israelis want peace, but demand Palestinian land. And that, in three short sentences, is the intractable nature of this conflict.

I see Jerusalem in the distance. Or rather, I see the Jewish colony that lines the hills above Jerusalem. The villas, built in an arc on the hilltop, have windows intentionally narrowed into upright rectangles to double as gun slits.



Israeli checkpoint outside the Palestinian city of Ramallah. August 2004 (From the Public Domain)

We reach the outskirts of Ramallah. We are held up in the snarl of traffic in front of the sprawling Israeli military base that oversees the [Qalandia](#) checkpoint, the primary checkpoint between East Jerusalem and the West Bank. It is the scene of frequent demonstrations against the occupation that can [end](#) in [gunfire](#).

I meet Atef. We walk to a kebab shop and sit at a small outdoor table. The scars of the latest incursion by the Israeli army are around the corner. At night, a few days ago, Israeli soldiers torched the shops that handle money transfers from abroad. They are charred ruins. Money from abroad will now be harder to get, which I suspect was the point.

Israel has dramatically tightened its stranglehold on the more than 2.7 million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, who are surrounded by [more than](#) 700,000 Jewish colonists housed in some 150 strategically placed [developments](#) with their own shopping malls, schools and medical centers. These [colonial developments](#) along with special roads that can only be used by the colonists and the military, checkpoints, tracts of land that are off limits to Palestinians, closed military zones, [Israeli-declared](#) "nature preserves" and military outposts form concentric circles. They can instantly sever the flow of traffic to isolate

Palestinians cities and towns into a series of ringed ghettos.

“Since Oct. 7 it is hard to travel anywhere in the West Bank,” Atef says. “There are checkpoints at the entrances of every city, town and village. Imagine you want to see your mother or your fiancée. You want to drive from Ramallah to Nablus. It can take seven hours because the main roads are blocked. You are forced to drive through back roads in the mountains.”

The trip should take 90 minutes.

Israeli soldiers and colonists have [killed](#) 528 Palestinian civilians, including 133 children, and injured more than 5,350 others in the West Bank, since Oct. 7, according to the UN human rights chief. Israel has also [detained](#) over 9,700 Palestinians — or should I say hostages? — including [hundreds](#) of [children](#) and [pregnant women](#). Many have been [severely tortured](#), including [doctors](#) tortured to death in Israeli [dungeons](#) and aid workers [killed](#) upon their release. Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has [called for](#) the execution of Palestinian prisoners to free up space for more.

Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority, was in the past spared the worst of Israeli violence. Since Oct. 7, this has changed. Raids and arrests [take place](#) almost daily in and around the city, sometimes accompanied by lethal gunfire and aerial bombardments. Israel has bulldozed or confiscated more than [990](#) Palestinian dwellings and homes in the West Bank since Oct. 7, at times forcing owners to [demolish](#) their own buildings or pay exorbitant fines.

Heavily armed Israeli colonists have carried out murderous rampages on villages east of Ramallah, including attacks following the [murder](#) of a 14-year-old colonist on April 12 near the village of al Mughayyir. The colonists, in [retaliation](#), burned and destroyed Palestinian homes and vehicles across 11 villages, ripped up roads, killed one Palestinian and wounded more than two dozen others.

Israel has [ordered](#) the largest West Bank land seizure in more than three decades, confiscating vast tracts of land northeast of Ramallah. The [extreme rightwing](#) Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who lives in a Jewish colony and is in charge of colonial expansion, has [promised](#) to flood the West Bank with a million new colonists.

Smotrich has vowed to obliterate the [distinct areas](#) in the West Bank [created](#) by the Oslo accords. Area A, which comprises 18 percent of the West Bank, is under exclusive Palestinian control. Area B, nearly 22 percent of the West Bank, is under Israeli military occupation, in collusion with the Palestinian Authority. Area C, over 60 percent of the West Bank, is under total Israeli occupation.

“Israel realizes that the world is blind, that no one will force it to end the genocide in Gaza, and no one will pay attention to the war in the West Bank,” Atef says. “The word war is not even used. This is called a normal Israeli military operation, as if what is happening to us is normal. There is no distinction now between the status of the occupied territories, classified as A, B and C. The settlers are confiscating more land. They are carrying out [more attacks](#). They do not need the army. They have become a shadow army, supported and [armed](#) by Israel’s rightwing government. We have lived in a continuous war since 1948. This is simply the newest phase.”

Jenin and its neighboring refugee camp are [assaulted daily](#) by Israeli armed units, undercover commando teams, snipers and bulldozers, which [level](#) entire neighborhoods. Drones [equipped](#) with machine guns and missiles, as well as warplanes and [Apache attack helicopters](#), [circle overhead](#) and [obliterate](#) dwellings. Medics and doctors, as in Gaza, are assassinated. [Usaid Kamal Jabarin](#), a 50-year-old surgeon, was killed on May 21 by an Israel sniper as he arrived for work at the Jenin Governmental Hospital. Hunger is endemic.

“The Israeli military carries out raids that kill Palestinians and then departs,” Atef says. “But it returns a few days later. It is not enough for the Israelis to steal our land. They seek to kill as many of the original inhabitants as possible. This is why it carries out constant operations. This is why there are constant armed clashes. But these clashes are provoked by Israel. They are the pretext used to continually attack us. We live under constant pressure. We face death daily.”

The dramatic escalation of violence in the West Bank is overshadowed by the genocide in Gaza. But it has become a second front. If Israel can empty Gaza, the West Bank will be next.

“Israel’s objective has not changed,” he says. “It seeks to shrink the Palestinian population, confiscate larger and larger tracts of Palestinian land and build more and more colonies. It seeks to [Judaize](#) Palestine and strip the Palestinians of all the means to sustain themselves. The ultimate goal is the [annexation](#) of the West Bank.”

“Even at the height of the peace process, when everyone was mesmerized by peace, Israel was turning this peace proposal into a nightmare,” he goes on. “Most Palestinians were opposed to the peace accords Arafat signed in 1993, but still they welcomed him when he returned. They did not kill him. They wanted to give peace a chance. In Israel, the prime minister who signed the Oslo accords was [assassinated](#).”

“A few years ago, someone daubed a strange slogan on the wall of the U.N. school east of Jabaliya,” Atef wrote from the hell of Gaza. “‘We progress backwards.’ It has a ring to it. Every new war drags us back to basics. It destroys our houses, our institutions, our mosques and our churches. It razes our gardens and parks. Every war takes years to recover from, and before we’ve recovered, a new war arrives. There are no warning sirens, no messages sent to our phones. War just arrives.”

The Jewish settler colonial project is protean. It changes its shape but not its essence. Its tactics vary. Its intensity comes in waves of severe repression and less repression. Its rhetoric about peace masks its intent. It grinds forward with its deadly, perverted, racist logic. And yet, the Palestinians endure, refusing to submit, resisting despite the overwhelming odds, grasping at tiny kernels of hope from bottomless wells of despair. There is a word for this. Heroic.

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