

Palestine: Journey through a Fractured Landscape

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Image: Elementary school, Hebron. The children's play area across from the school was closed in order to accommodate buses from nearby settlements. (Photo: Sandy Tolan)

The numbers tell a certain kind of grim story in the landscape of Palestine:

109,000: the number of West Bank settlers, excluding East Jerusalem, in September 1993, the time of the christening of the Oslo accords on the White House lawn.

350,000: the number of those settlers today — a tripling during something called the “peace process.”

40,000+: the population of Maale Adumim, well inside the West Bank, but considered a “suburb” of Jerusalem by Israel.

20,000: the number of settlers in Ariel, where the separation barrier [snakes a third of the way](#) inside Palestinian lands to make the settlement part of “greater Israel.”

18: The number of Israeli settlements [directly encircling](#) the hoped-for capital of the Palestinian state, East Jerusalem, cutting off the city from the rest of Palestine, but for a piece of land called E-1, which [Israel plans to develop](#).

Roads [60](#), [443](#), and myriad other randomly-chosen numbers: smooth-as-glass highways slicing through West Bank Palestinian lands, but for long stretches reserved for almost exclusively for settlers.

Yet the numbers, telling as they may be, can't begin to evoke the feeling of the transformed Palestinian landscape, nor the profound power imbalance that defines relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Only a road trip through Palestine can do that.

We left Jerusalem on a hot dry morning, the precious yellow license plates of our Palestinian host, a resident of Jerusalem, ensuring access to the exclusive West Bank roads. “For now,” said H., aware that because of his national origin, he could be banned from the road at any time. Our destination was the old city of Hebron, one of the most surreal tableaux of the entire tragedy of Palestine and Israel, where [500-600 Jewish settlers](#), many from the U.S., are protected by 1500 soldiers in a city of 170,000 Palestinians.

I looked out the open window to the east, feeling immediately the dramatic changes to the landscape in the two years I'd been away. The red-roofed settlement of Efrat now stretched for nearly two miles — this, including the adjacent rows of white trailers, part of an [“outpost” that Israel deems technically illegal](#), but which, by Israel's design, will soon be absorbed into

the settlement. Israeli leaders call settlement expansion "[natural growth](#)"; this is how a Palestinian landscape is transformed into a Jewish one. The official population of Efrat is about [10,000](#), though H. claims it is more than twice that.

In the distance, the 25-foot-high [separation barrier](#) marched south with us, and now, suddenly, it reached us at a narrow passage, transformed into a tastefully-etched boundary of beige and tan. Settlers, H. told us, complained that the ugly gray slabs were a distasteful part of their commute to prayer in Jerusalem, or shopping and the beach in Tel Aviv; now, its offensive aspects eliminated for the privileged population, the separation of peoples carries the deceiving look of a simple sound barrier.

Presently the road opened up again, and for a lovely fleeting moment, the landscape of Palestine appeared, unimpeded by barriers, settlements, or checkpoints. Ancient [terraced olive groves](#) dotted the landscape, interspersed by vineyards of [Hebron grapes](#), nearly ready. The cries of "*Khalili ya anab*," H. told us, would soon ring out in the markets across Palestine: "The Hebron grapes are here!"

Few vendors were calling out 30 minutes later as we walked through the moribund Old City of Hebron, where urban settlement blocks stand brick to brick with Palestinian homes in a contorted geographical designation known as [H-2](#). This agreement was sanctioned by the international community in an [agreement signed by the Palestinian Authority](#) as part of the Oslo "peace process." Israel had insisted that the few hundred settlers be allowed to stay in a neighborhood of tens of thousands of Palestinians, because of a long Jewish presence there. The current settlers say they are honoring the memory of Jews massacred in Hebron by Palestinians in 1929, during riots over Jewish immigration to Palestine. Yet the current settlers, among the most extreme of all Israelis, have little or no connection to the descendants of those massacred, some of whom have denounced the Hebron settlements, pointing out that other Palestinian families [sheltered Jews during the massacre](#), and [calling for the settlers' removal](#).

Instead, today at least 1500 Israeli soldiers, more than twice the number of settlers they were sent to protect, spend much of their time [escorting their charges](#) from one part of the city to another. When the armed escort squads push through the narrow alleys of Old Hebron, life on the Palestinian street freezes; such is the primacy of Israel's settlement project. [Steel screens above the old Arab casbah](#) protect the Palestinian vendors against a stream of trash, bottles, plastic chairs and bags of feces the settlers hurl down from above. This is everyday life.

We walked toward [Shuhada street](#), the once-bustling main street of Palestinian life here. H. stopped; as a Palestinian, he is not allowed to walk there. Now the street was nearly vacant. The doors on some of the shops were welded shut; access to some homes is now possible [only by ladder](#), or, in one case, [a rope to a window](#).

We came upon one of H-2's [120 military checkpoints](#) and other obstacles ensuring separation between Arab and Jew. As we paused, 50 meters away, a soldier's voice called out from a loudspeaker, imitating the call to prayer. "Allahu akbar," he sang in accented Arabic. His mocking laughter followed.



Image: A tiny mosque in Hebron. The concrete blocks behind blocked the path to the 92-year-old imam's home just above. Now he must make a much longer journey to the mosque. (Photo: Sandy Tolan)

Around the bend we came to a tiny mosque, whose imam, H. told us, is in his nineties. He wants to retire, but if he does, he fears the settlers will take over the modest building. So he hangs on, despite increasing obstacles. The latest: 24 massive concrete blocks, each 16 feet high, cutting off the imam's path from his home on the hill just above. Now the 92-year-old must walk a mile to reach the mosque. Others manage: As we spoke, two young men walked toward the concrete blocks; a moment later, when we looked again, they were atop them, having scaled the barrier like cats.

Nearby stood a [Palestinian elementary school](#), its entire perimeter topped with looping razor wire [picture atop this story]. Many of the children must [cross checkpoints to get to the school](#), walking past graffiti in English shouting "[Gas the Arabs!](#)" and sometimes enduring a gauntlet of flying stones and rotten vegetables, and attacks from settlers' dogs. Across from the school lies a flat expanse of asphalt. Once this was a play area for the school. The old soccer and volleyball grounds have been replaced by long parallel strips of paint. It's now a parking lot for buses from the settlements.

It was from an adjacent settlement, [Kiryat Arba](#), in 1994, that a settler from Brooklyn named [Baruch Goldstein](#) emerged, traveling with his Galil automatic rifle to the Ibrahimi Mosque, somehow getting through Israeli security and gunning down 29 Palestinians while they prayed. Survivors beat him to death. Today Goldstein remains revered among some settlers. At his gravesite in Kiryat Arba, [these words are inscribed](#): "He gave his soul for the

people of Israel, the Torah, and the Land. His hands are clean and his heart good...”

We head to the Ibrahimi Mosque, also known as the Cave of the Patriarchs. Near the entrance we pass through a pair of metal floor-to-ceiling turnstiles and submit ourselves for inspection by Israeli soldiers, as does every Palestinian who wishes to worship here.

From this mosque, H. tells us, the call to prayer is often banned by the Israeli authorities, who say it bothers the settlers. In December, for example, the call was [banned 52 times](#); in May, 49 times, or about one of every three prayers. “Just a humiliation,” H. says. “Showing their power.” Sixty percent of the mosque has been taken over by Israel and is now a synagogue.

At the entrance we take off our shoes. Just inside lies a mound of plastic throw rugs – seemingly redundant, as plush Turkish carpets cover the interior of the mosque. But they’re essential, H. tells us. If a member of the Israeli government, or its legislative body, the Knesset, wishes to visit, he or she can enter the Muslim side with only a brief warning. Such visitors refuse to remove their shoes, so the faithful line their path with the replacement rugs, preserving the sanctity of their religious space.

Here, it is believed, lie the remains of Abraham (Ibrahim) and Sarah – central to both faiths. The tomb of Abraham/Ibrahim is visible to each segregated side. Peering past the tomb, I could see a woman on the synagogue side, peering back toward us.

We emerge again into the harsh midday light outside the mosque. Inside or out, the overriding feeling is about imbalance of power: That officials would refuse to remove their shoes in someone else’s holy place; that metal screens would be required to protect shopkeepers from debris hurled in hatred; that someone, somewhere, would actually decide to close a play area for Palestinian children in order to put in a parking lot for the buses of Jewish settlers.

From this place, surrounded by the actual facts on the ground, it is strange and oddly disconnecting to consider the protestations coming from Tel Aviv, certain American pro-Israeli circles, or Sheldon Adelson’s Las Vegas Casino. Those, in other words, who charge that Israel’s critics, especially people who dare to use the “A-word” in connection with Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, are [anti-Semitic](#).

Yet it is not only in Hebron where the Apartheid analogy however imperfect a match it is with South Africa’s version, is apt. As Israel continues to colonize the West Bank with settlers, and its army ensures their dominion over the lands they occupy, avoiding the A-word requires shielding one’s eyes, or, at a minimum, engaging in verbal gymnastics. What, after all, to call a system of legalized discrimination based on ethnicity and religion in which one group has full voting rights, and the other does not? Where one people can travel freely on [roads built specifically for them](#), whisking through checkpoints because of their religion and the [color of their license plates](#), and the other must submit to inspection at military kiosks frequently manned by snipers? Where one population in their hilltop enclaves is protected by troops and [military surveillance towers](#), while the other is subjected to frequent [night raids](#) by those same troops – so much so [that 40 percent of their adult male](#) population has spent time in prison? Where one group’s “civil administration” can declare the other group’s town a historic archeological site and [evict all the villagers](#), who then move into tents nearby? Where, just this spring, in a public swimming pool, [soldiers ordered the Palestinian bathers out](#), so that the Jewish settlers could have a swim, alone and unbothered

by the darker-skinned native population?

Power here, as it does across the West Bank, lies most clearly in the hands of Israel; Palestinians are no match for Israel's military might or its political influence with the world's sole superpower. Palestinian power lies instead in *sumud*, or steadfastness: A determination to persevere and to live for a better day, confronting Israel on moral grounds while hoping the world will one day bear greater witness to the facts on the ground.

As if to underscore this point, near the end of our trip to Hebron, H. gestures to a small neighborhood near the mosque, on the other side of yet another entrance controlled by soldiers and armed with metal detectors. Just beyond live six Palestinian families on a tiny island of territory amidst the patchwork jurisdictions of H-2. They live essentially surrounded by settlements and the military, and because of that proximity, any items that could be construed as weapons – [including kitchen knives](#) – have been [banished from the home](#) by Israeli authorities. The Palestinian residents must have their meat cut in the market, brought back in pieces. “For how long are you able to live under these shitty conditions?” H. asks. Israel, he says, wants to force the families out: “what we call slow transfer.” But for now, the families’ *sumud* is intact. They remain steadfast. Existence, declares a popular Palestinian slogan, is resistance.

But the system in which they exist, in the long run, cannot stand.

And while some continue to decry the use of the A-word, to me it matters little what we call it. I am also fine with comparing these conditions, and others like them all over Palestine, to the legislated racism and ethnic violence known in America as Jim Crow.

Whatever we call it, it is separate and unequal. And like Apartheid, like Jim Crow, it is destined for the dustbin of history.

Sandy Tolan is the author of the new book [Children of the Stone: The Power of Music in a Hard Land](#). Learn more on his website [Ramallah Cafe](#).

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