



Reality and Reckoning: The Sanctity of Humanity in the Occupied Territories

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“This was my bedroom. We had paintings of horses. It was so beautiful.” We stand still, Abeer’s wide amber eyes cutting through me as she speaks. She squeezes my hand, then runs down the pile of rubble to join a soccer game with her cousins. Her sure and steady nine-year-old feet move effortlessly through the sharp concrete blocks, tattered children’s clothing, and shattered dishes that litter the ground. For a moment, the unrelenting heat dissipates and a chill runs down my spine. I crouch down and watch the children play amidst the remains of their demolished home. The edge of a photograph peeks out from beneath the harsh, heavy rocks. Pulling it out carefully, I stare into the scratched, crumpled image of Abeer tightly holding onto her father’s leg.¹ Their dust-covered smiles feel like an iron fist around my stomach.

Abeer is not unique in her suffering. She is just one of tens of thousands of innocent victims whose lives have been torn apart by government-sanctioned house demolitions. Since 1967, over 24,000 Palestinian homes have been destroyed by the Israeli government in both the Occupied Territories and Israel proper.² The reasoning for these demolitions ranges from punishment for suspected illegal activity to making room for the “security” wall that is in the process of being constructed.³ Regardless of its justification, this policy is subversive to Palestinian society, stripping families of their basic human right to shelter and personal security, as granted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴ These demolitions go on quietly, often in the Arab-populated East Jerusalem, far from the eyes of religious tourists, Birthright travelers and the media. The most publicized case came with the tragic death of an American humanitarian volunteer in 2003. Rachel Corrie died under the treads of a fifty-three ton Caterpillar bulldozer in Gaza. Her story flashed across American headlines for weeks.⁵ She is only one example of the many lives lost and futures destroyed by this policy.

This summer, I came to the Occupied Territories seeking to find out how the occupation affects individuals. I am here to help rebuild these demolished homes, to in some way fulfill my responsibility to justice and humanity. No matter how many homes are rebuilt, it is impossible to rebuild the memories that linger here, the childhood that was stolen from those amber eyes.

Before I set foot in Ben Gurion Airport, Israelis, American Jews, and Palestinians all gave me advice for my time in the Holy Land. I was exposed to endless news stories about the conflict and a campus brimming with strong political opinions. I had heard testimonies from former combatants, members of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as well as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, talk about mistakes of the past and ways to move forward. But I had not seen anything for myself. With neither Jewish nor Arab roots, my personal investment in the conflict is by choice rather than obligation. Years of participating in United Nations forums has instilled in me an unshakable belief in universal human rights and international law rather than an emotional connection to one side or the other. To me, they are two sides of the same coin, the coin of humanity.

The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) advocates for legal representation for Palestinians facing house evictions and works to rebuild homes that have been demolished. With limited funding, it is impossible to rebuild every

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home that is illegally destroyed, but dozens of volunteers, from both Israel and abroad, construct new homes with their bare hands in an attempt to restore the basic rights that armored bulldozers and gun-toting soldiers so efficiently decimate. I am assigned to a field research project: travel to the Israeli-controlled portions of the West Bank to collect data on the undocumented evictions and demolitions taking place there. Armed with a few years of Arabic classes, a major in Middle Eastern studies, an unfamiliar face and unmistakable American accent, I venture to meet with the few resilient families who live in some of the most remote areas of this country, nervous and excited about how this tattered community will receive me.

It is in the enforced captivity of a friend, the deep-set eyes of a farmer holding on desperately to his infertile land, the pained face of a sick young girl held back from medical care, and the joy of a family being given a new roof over their heads that I see the spectrum of Palestinian emotion. I constantly ask myself, what is the source of this suffering? Who is responsible for this suffering? While I learn about the justification behind government decisions that lead to these demolitions, it is through my own eyes that I witness the harsh results of those decisions. My duties as an intern, chance meetings and friendships move me through the seldom-told stories of the true Palestinian plight.

Rejoice

The bus fills with excited chatter as we pull away from our small, unmarked office door in West Jerusalem. My mind drifts out of conversations flowing around me. I peer out the front windshield, watching the cars swerve carelessly through the clean, paved streets of West Jerusalem. Through the open window hot, dry air circulates throughout the bus, causing moisture to seep from my mouth and eyes. I see signs pointing towards the Old City, Mount Scopus and the City Center, first in English, underneath in Hebrew, and at the very bottom in Arabic. With Hebrew and Arabic as the two recognized languages of Israel, it is curious that English is elected to the primary position and Arabic reduced to the lowest. Still, I find a sense of security in the simple fact that my mother tongue is recognized in this land. One of my ICAHD colleagues calls for us to look out the window. There is a blur of red and my eyes try to focus on one of the countless identical posters that line the street as we speed by. "Barack Hussein Obama. Anti-Semitic Jew-hater" is written in black next to a picture of my President wearing a kheffiyeh in the same style as Arafat. The number of these posters is astounding. The earlier sense of security I felt quickly dissipates. I wonder how my Obama/Biden bumper sticker back home would be received here.

Past quaint houses with brightly painted gates and large, lush hotels, the houses become smaller and more compact. Bright colors of the homes, deep black of the new asphalt, and bright white of freshly painted road lines give way to a monotony of grey and brown. It is as if the bus has traveled from paradise to a wasteland. It is very clear which side of Jerusalem receives proper maintenance from the Municipality. It would appear that the local government has forgotten about East Jerusalem if it weren't for the massive number of house evictions and demolitions that take place there.

The chatter in the bus wanes as our diverse group of ICAHD volunteers peer out the windows towards the thousands of homes that blanket the valley below us. Flat tin roofs laden with large black water tanks and crowded laundry lines – the distinctive symbols of an Arab neighborhood – stretch out over the hillside, peacefully rolling down and then back up, as far as the eye can see.

There is a break in this mosaic of cinderblock houses and small dirt roads. It looks as if someone has drawn a thick grey line through the middle of a serene picture, meandering down through the valley, separating the background from the fore, somehow creating an artificial delineation in this otherwise undisturbed scene. It feels foreign. Imposing. Out of place. Yet it stands silent, vigilant watch over the meager homes on either side. Even from this distance, the wall's solemn authority is tangible.

This is Jabel Mukaber; a neighborhood in southeast Jerusalem that has been cut in two by the barrier wall. The obstruction divides not only the geography of the town, but separates families, landowners' plots, and children from their schools. In 2008 alone, 959 demolition orders were issued to Palestinians in East Jerusalem,⁶ including Jabel Mukaber. Most demolition orders are issued for building without a proper permit. The burgeoning Arab population requires construction of new homes, and thousands of permit applications are filed to the Jerusalem Municipality each year. The number of permits granted is small. The gap between housing needs and legally permitted construction is estimated at 1,100 housing units each year.⁷

On this day we have been invited to a housewarming party by the Jumaa family. I have never met them, but I am familiar with their story. The land on which the house is built has been family-owned for generations. In 2004, the head of the household, Ali Jumaa, was summoned to court for building on his own land without a permit. After paying legal fees, the appeal was unsuccessful, and the Jumaas were fined \$8,500 for building without a permit. Working hard to save the home, Ali had plans drawn to alter his

property's status so that he could freely build on it. After spending another \$16,000⁸ trying to prevent a pending demolition, the Municipality rejected his plans, and his home was destroyed. ICAHD helped to rebuild the house in 2007 as Ali, his wife, and his seven children had nowhere to sleep. The costs are stifling for a family whose average monthly income is only \$280.⁹ A year later, the house was demolished yet again, leaving the Jumaas homeless for a second time. A little over a week ago, ICAHD volunteers worked to rebuild the home yet again. It was completed in only two days, a remarkable feat.

The bus rumbles to a stop and we are greeted by cheers and waves from a slew of family members outside a meager, boxy house. A little boy runs up the hill with a stack of plastic chairs. We file into the house. Somehow, two dozen of us manage to pile into the small kitchen. The interior is dark, for although electricity lines have been carefully placed and wired, the grid has been shut off today, as is common in the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem. The linoleum tile floors look crisp and clean. Complete with counters and cupboards, light gently pours into the kitchen from the square windows, illuminating the small space in the absence of electric light bulbs. I peer into the two small bedrooms that house the seven children of the Jumaa family. I smile at the door that hangs crookedly on its hinges.

For some time, we sit elbow-to-elbow, laughing and eating store-bought pastries. The mother of the house, Marwa, apologizes repeatedly about the blackout and not preparing a full meal for us. The small house fills with our voices, reverberating off the newly erected walls, bouncing through the hallway and spilling onto the open-air patio. When Ali Jumaa stands up to welcome us, it feels as though our clapping and shouting will shake the roof clear off the frame.

Stomach laden with hot tea, I wander outside to find the children of Jabel Mukaber kicking a soccer ball back and forth, having to sprint down the hill after the ball and then slowly climb back up the steep dirt paths. I stand silently, the chatter from inside behind me, the laughter of the children before me, looking westward towards the setting sun over the ornate houses of West Jerusalem above me. An older woman whom I recognize from inside walks slowly toward me, introducing herself as Marwa's mother. Her face is sun burnt, with deeply chiseled lines that speak more of wisdom than age. The wrinkles in her brow tell that she has seen great tragedy, but her crow's feet say her sadness has been tempered by joy as well.

"Thank you," she murmurs to me in Arabic. I try to explain that I was not here to help build the house but she shakes her head and repeats, "Thank you." I ask if she lives in the house too and she explains slowly, watching to make sure I understand every word. "I live down there. My daughter and her family lived with me for four months until you rebuilt their home. But now, I will have to live with them. I received an eviction order two days ago." Looking into her deep-set, dark eyes, trying to find the right words to say, I find nothing in any language. All I can say is "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." She turns away from me to face the sunset over West Jerusalem.

There is no telling how long this house will stand before it is demolished again. The bulldozers may come next year, next month, or maybe even tomorrow. Is it worth rebuilding the home again, if we know it will eventually crumble to the ground? I do not understand the threat that this house poses to the Israeli government – why is it so necessary for their permit to be rejected and seven children to be left without a roof? Wouldn't a soldier who could see the joy that fills this house today, who could see the passion and determination that thrives within it, reconsider his orders to tear down these walls?

Reconsider

The urban centers of Jerusalem and Ramallah stand less than 10 miles apart, on opposite sides of the border between Israel and the West Bank. Travelers passing between them are faced with the daunting task of crossing the Qalandia checkpoint. The junction is a mess of cars, mini-busses, taxis and hawkers selling steamed corn and cookies to the long lines of cars waiting for inspection. Busses unload their passengers before passing through their own special inspection line, and the passengers are made to cross the border by foot.

Returning to my home in Jerusalem from Ramallah, I walk through the now familiar intricate series of gates and turnstiles, the gauntlet that allows passage through the wall. There are six separate lines for bag and passport inspection. Ten-foot-high metal gates usher the crowds forward, knocking against elbows if one walks with too much freedom. I imagine this is what cows feel like as they are led off to slaughter. The next barrier is a large metal turnstile that locks after every third person. The flow of human traffic is controlled remotely by an IDF border guard on the other side.

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A conveyor belt and metal detector wait just past the turnstile. If they are not set off, a border guard will then shout through thick, bulletproof glass, demanding travel documents. After passing an interrogation by the guard, you are then allowed to leave the facility, walking through more gates under the eerie watch of countless security cameras. Even with proper documentation this is a humiliating procedure, void of trust, void of sympathy.

Today, I find myself unlucky enough to be stuck in the no man's land inside the metal turnstile.¹⁰ It has been locked remotely by a guard on the other side. The group of three in front of me places their bags on the conveyor belt. Feeling incredibly claustrophobic and breathing heavily, my heart jumps as a voice cuts through the stagnant air. A thick Israeli

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accent shouts broken Arabic, "Come back tomorrow at 5. Leave! Come back tomorrow." A middle-aged man stands at the bulletproof window, looking bewildered and frightened. A small girl, presumably his daughter, stands next to him. One of her eyes is shoddily bandaged; the edges stained with dirt, peeling away from her small, delicate face. She struggles to squint out of the uncovered eye. "I said leave!" The man timidly steps backwards through the metal detector, calling to his daughter who jumps away from the foreign, bellowing voice, closer to the Jerusalem side of

the border. She looks around in confusion, obviously unable to see clearly enough to return to her father.

This is a story that exists in human rights reports and within the printed covers of activist booklets. It is not a scene that I prepared myself to witness. The man who has been waiting for his turn with the border guard steps past the father, through the metal detector, and directly up to the guard's window. He holds up his blue Israeli identification card for the guard to see. In perfect English, he questions the armed teenager behind the glass. "Do you see this little girl?" I stand very still, listening with all my might.

"What?"

"Do you see this little girl? Do you see that she *needs* to go to the hospital? Look at her. They cannot come back tomorrow, they need to go *now*. You must reconsider."

"The girl can go. But he cannot. There are hospitals back there." The guard jerks his head toward the Ramallah side of the border.

"This girl is six years old. Are you suggesting she goes alone? There are no eye specialists in the West Bank. Who are you to play God?" His voice rises in frustration.

Unfazed, the guard lets out a cold, cruel laugh. "I don't care what happens to the girl or if she goes through. But the man is not going to Jerusalem."

At this point, the Israeli ID-toting man shakes his head, gathers his effects, and walks out towards sunlight and freedom. I stand wide-eyed, feeling slightly nauseated. The crowd behind me, mostly Palestinians, has gone silent and somber. The buzz of the metal gate tells me it is my turn to push through. The father stands on my side of the metal detector, looking distraught. I quietly slide past him as I put my bags on the belt and pull out my blue American passport. I walk through the metal detector and hold my picture page up to the window, receiving a leisurely wave of the hand in return. I am embarrassed that I am allowed to pass so easily without being questioned or harassed.

Collecting my things from the belt, I notice the little girl with the bandaged eye is standing next to me. She looks around, squinting out of her good eye, a pained look marring her innocent face. Her father calls to her softly to come back to him, and she feebly attempts to pick her pink backpack up off of the floor. The space inside my chest is frozen and I struggle to breathe. There is no air. My only reaction is to pick up the backpack, pass it back through the detector to her father, and gently guide the girl back through the gate. I hear the guard yelling, but I cannot recognize the words. My body goes numb as I turn towards the sunlight.

Goose bumps run up and down my arms despite the sweltering heat. Returning to my seat on the bus, a barrage of warm tears streams down my cheeks. It is the first time I have cried since arriving here. I want to run to the girl, take her in my arms and bring her to the hospital in Jerusalem. Had the man not obtained the proper travel permits to cross the border with his daughter? Had there been time to get the permits? Regardless, was the guard truly heartless enough to doom this girl to blindness? Has his training taught him that it is acceptable to deny a child medical treatment?

Resolve

The roads in the West Bank are sparse and rarely marked. The route numbers listed on our map are nowhere to be found, and the occasional road sign bears only the names of nearby settlements. I slow the car to a halt and read the names on a promising cluster of signs. "Eli and Ariel towards the left. Shilo, Ro'i and Rotem to the right. Can you find us?" I wait for an answer from my friend in the

passenger seat, checking my rearview mirror for a heavily armored military truck. While I haven't seen anyone on the winding roads for miles, I feel as if a weight is pressing down on me, a force watching my every turn as I search for any of the small Palestinian villages that I had researched so dutifully from my air-conditioned office in West Jerusalem. This is Area C, as established under the Oslo Accords. It is completely Israeli controlled and Israeli administered, and makes up sixty-one percent of the West Bank.¹¹ An unsure answer finally emanates from my friend and the warm, dry desert air again circulates through the car as I speed off down the right fork in the road.

Around a corner there is a lush green field being sprayed with water from automated sprinkler heads that sit within the barbed wire atop a metal fence. The fence encloses a dozen small, square houses, flanked on either side by welcoming green fields, far more vibrant a hue than anything on the monotonous brown countryside that surrounds me. We drive past the sign for Beqa'ot settlement and stare through the chain link fence. I squint, trying to determine why someone would want to live in this remote wasteland, surrounded by nothing but barbed wire and dry rocks. I presume it is because land prices are cheaper, taxes are lower, and there are sizeable subsidies for Israelis who choose to live here.¹² This land sits far outside the Green Line, the borders of pre-1967 Israel. Although this land was taken from Jordanian control in 1967, it has never been completely annexed by Israel; internationally the line is the recognized border of the West Bank. The environment is harsh and unforgiving, qualities that have rubbed off on the people who live on this land.

An outline of a tent appears atop one of the rocky outcrops. As our little rented Hyundai struggles up a steep dirt path towards the tent, we see four women and a man sitting in the shade of a tarp, engineered into a crude tent. The women jump up and pick up the flattened foam mattresses they were sitting on, turning their backs and heading towards another tarp structure in the distance. I want to yell out to them, to plead with them to come back. We had been searching for them for hours and now they are running away! But to them, our mint green car with its blue and yellow Israeli license plates is a sign of danger, a reminder of atrocities committed in the past by nearby settlers and the constant presence of the Israeli military force that controls this area of the Jordan River Valley.

Climbing out of the car slowly, I greet the lone man, now watching me warily. "*Asalaamu alaikum wa rahmatullah,*" I say, explaining that we are from a human rights organization in Jerusalem and that we would like to speak with him about house evictions and demolitions in the area.

He welcomes us to sit down in the wall-less tent, more out of common courtesy than genuine trust. A couple of the women have come out from behind the square tarp structure in the distance to watch our curious presence. The pressure is on. The man is suspicious of us. Suspicious of our intentions and of our ability to do any good. I sense his doubt and it begins to spread over me.

He is the head of the village of Furush Beit Dajan and owned over 200,000 dunums of land under Ottoman law. But now, Israel has control of all his land. Israeli rule is final here in Area C. His hilltop home looks over the Hamra Checkpoint, delineating between this region and the Palestinian controlled city of Nablus. For this reason, the Israeli government has been trying hard to convert his land into a military watchtower. The growing population of the town required the construction of a few new homes. Building permit applications were submitted, then rejected, and ultimately ten of the new homes were razed. After those homes were destroyed, a twenty-year-old livestock shed was demolished – the only structure providing shade and a watering area for the sheep, the village's only livelihood.

Next came the water: a well was confiscated to sustain the green fields of Beqa'ot. But still, he refused to move. Seeing this man's resolve, the Israeli government finally offered him three million U.S. dollars to relinquish his property. After paying for water and feeding his sheep, this man barely has enough money to feed his own family. I bluntly question his refusal of the deal. He picks up the small dry rocks that make up the ground below his feet. He rolls them between his thick fingers with dust deeply settled in the timeworn wrinkles. I look from the rocks to his face, and as he speaks, he looks at me with purpose. His words are deliberate and slow:

"My family has lived on this land for eight generations. Eight generations. Israel has taken my water. They have killed my livestock. They have torn down my houses. I own nothing but this land. I am this land and this land is me. We cannot be separated. If this land belongs to Israel, my soul belongs to Israel. What price do you put on your own soul? Maybe you would trade it for three million. Maybe my neighbor would trade it for three million. But I am worth more than Israel can offer and my land is worth more than Israel can offer."¹³

The soldiers at the checkpoint below are surely watching us with their binoculars. They can easily see our rented car atop this hill. They swelter in the heat, under the weight of their bulletproof vests and gear. Once their shift ends, they will gladly return to their air-conditioned barracks. This is not their home. To them, these dry rocks and desert shrubs do not carry

any meaning. I cannot grasp why this man loves this barren land so much; I am sure these soldiers cannot understand it either. Outside of their conscription, it is doubtful that they would fight this man for such an insignificant piece of land. But this is their duty, to secure every boulder and crevice for Israel, for the expansion of the illegal settlements and for the disenfranchisement of the impoverished farmers that cherish the unforgiving pebbles below their feet.

Repay

I am proud to call Jerusalem my home; however, it is temporary. I can see the Old City from the front steps of my hostel. The limestone gives a warm radiance in the sunlight, and the gilded Dome of the Rock shines with a brilliance that cannot be compared. Being a long-term resident means that the owners and workers befriend me. In a business and a country where everything is transitory and nothing is reliable, I am their constant, as they are mine.

Sam is proud to call Jerusalem his home; however, his papers say otherwise. Like many other Palestinians in Jerusalem, Sam does not have Israeli citizenship. Nor does he have Palestinian citizenship. He is simply a resident of Jerusalem without a passport, without a country. He cannot leave, so he works menial jobs in and around the Old City to support his family without losing his land or residency. At the hostel, he mainly answers questions from the guests about how to make the most of their visit to the holy land. It is a far cry from the business degree for which he worked so hard back in London.

Every night, like clockwork, Sam comes in to take over the night shift. He stays until the owners decide to show up in the morning, which means that he often works fourteen-hour shifts. With no one else working the night shift, Sam is

trapped in the hostel, unable to go out for food or fresh air. We stay up late, gossiping about the new guests and the owners, drinking endless cups of tea and watching American movies subtitled in Arabic. Sometimes, if I promise to stay awake in the common room, Sam will sneak out for *fajr* prayer at al-Aqsa.¹⁴ Putting the hostel under my care while he fulfills his religious duties is my way of showing appreciation for him. There is little else I can do.

His family has lived in the Old City for centuries. They own three properties near Jaffa Gate – an area that has been turned into a crowded

tourist venue. It is favored by the Israeli Tourism Ministry over nearby Damascus Gate since it does not lead directly to the Muslim Quarter. Palestinians living in the Old City face more direct pressure from the Israeli government to move than most who live in rural areas of the West Bank. Sam is no exception to this rule. Control of Jerusalem is one of the most controversial topics in the conflict. Both Israelis and Palestinians want the Holy City as the capital of their state. Whoever has power over Jerusalem has the upper hand, and it seems as if neither side will rest until they are the sole administrators of the Old City.

After meeting his British wife in Jerusalem, Sam moved to London to study business. Before finishing his degree, he received a letter from the Jerusalem Municipality stating that his property in the Old City was now under their control since he was not residing in it, and his residency in Jerusalem was in danger of being revoked since his center of life was now elsewhere. Panicked, Sam and his wife moved back to Jerusalem before the government reclaimed his house and his residency rights. Since then, the government has kept a close eye on his property and his movement. Something as simple as a weekend trip outside the city can result in state annexation of his house. His family's land is a key acquisition in the attempt to Judaize Jaffa Gate, and the Municipality is not going to give up easily.

Sitting on a couch in the foyer, I listen as Sam answers a series of questions. "How do I get to Bethlehem? When's the first bus to Masada? Which checkpoint should I go through to get to Jordan? Where's Yad Vashem? What's your favorite thing in this country? You're from here, you should know." His answers come patiently, even though I can see in his eyes that he is tired of answering the same questions every night.

Despite having lived in London for a few years, Sam has never been to any of these places in his own country. He tells people how to see things that he will never be able to experience. He tells them how to get away from this city to see the world around it. He is like a prisoner telling a free man how to gallivant off to the most beautiful destinations in the world. This is why despite the small smile on his face and the polite "cheers" at the end of a conversation, I can see a shadow pass over his steel-grey eyes. There is an emptiness behind them. This is why I am willing to stay up until 5:00 a.m. every day to watch the hostel while Sam goes to prayer.

Perhaps Sam's limitation of movement is due to his own refusal to apply for Israeli citizenship. But why would he ever pledge full allegiance to the country that has been

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viciously working to steal his land for the past decade? The Israeli government has portrayed itself as a blatantly discriminatory body, whose policies directly target some of the longest-standing but most marginalized members of Jerusalem. It is not surprising that Sam does not want to be affiliated with this government. Likewise, Israel is not eager to grant citizenships to Arabs, and pursues an active policy of revoking residencies whenever possible. Within a five-year period, over 3,000 individuals' residencies "expired," forcing them to leave their homes in Jerusalem.¹⁵ Palestinians in Jerusalem do not want Israeli citizenship. Israel does not want Palestinians to have Israeli citizenship. For Sam and others like him, there is no other option than being held as a captive of one's residency.

Reframe

Turning away from the streets of Jerusalem, segregated East and West. Turning away from the crowds of Ramallah, their movement blocked by concrete and metal turnstiles. Turning away from the rugged farmers of Area C, their ancestors' ground below their feet, the stale, occupied air above their heads. Turning away from Palestine and from the people I have given my heart to, I patiently answer a barrage of questions from a series of machine-like airport security guards. For many, being extensively interrogated is an embarrassing, dehumanizing experience. That is because these people have not heard a woman's sobbing as her children's bedroom is ransacked. They have not seen the determination in the eyes of a man whose only love is for the dry pebbles that cannot feed his sheep or his children. They have not felt the hand of a child as she wanders through the rubble of her demolished home. They have not tasted the dry desert air at a remote checkpoint where dozens of innocent men and women are harassed and abused by teenage soldiers with automatic weapons. They do not know the true meaning of dehumanization, or the carefully calculated process it requires to be systematically imposed upon the entire native population of a land.

After my interrogation, I turn away from the uniformed officers, simply following their orders in a society that thrives upon authority and supremacy. I am left hollow. My spirit has been weakened by the weight of being constantly monitored, having my every movement secretly scrutinized, my actions questioned as if I am a suspect in a crime. It is impossible to imagine how Palestinians endure this for their entire lives. Their strength is astounding. The soul of the Palestinian nation is strong and unifying. It refuses to be defeated and it fights bravely against a government that is desperate for control.

Without being Palestinian or being Israeli, I cannot fully grasp all the nuances of living in this conflict. Perhaps I am lucky that I don't have to. Sam, Abeer, and the girl at Qalandia are individual examples of life under the occupation. They do not encompass all the stories of strife that Palestinians endure. But they do offer a glimpse into the reality of what is happening miles from the beaches of Tel Aviv, just beyond the shopping malls in West Jerusalem, behind the shadow of a menacing wall, under the jurisdiction of a modern, democratically-elected government.

I know that I cannot turn my back on the Palestinian plight. To do so would be to turn my back on the essence of humanity. The vibrant energy of Palestinian life exists even in the direst of circumstances, and that energy must be fueled and encouraged to grow. The freedom of the Palestinian people will indicate the revival of justice that can set an example for the rest of humankind. The question is will Israel take the lead in moving humanity forward, or will it continue to extinguish one of the most resilient flames of determination and hope.

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