
Witnessing Palestine

Reflections of a Forty-Year Journey

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MCC West Bank, 1986–1989

We drove silently, speeding bumper-to-bumper up the New Jersey Turnpike, to New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport. At the security gate, I turned briefly to see my mother and father waving. An hour later, I boarded my plane, a KLM 747. As the behemoth thrust itself into the clouds, I imagined myself free-falling through the sky. I was gone, cascading headlong, not daring to feel the pain of the separation or the fear of the unknown.

Twenty-four hours later I found myself in Amman. I tossed sleeplessly that first night in the Jordanian capital, rising bleary-eyed at dawn as the call to prayer roused the city’s Muslims, reminding them that “prayer was better than sleep.” A taxi ride with Harold Dueck, Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC’s) West Bank director, lay ahead of me. Harold and I would cross the Allenby Bridge and then take another taxi westward past Jericho into the desiccated hills that ascended toward Jerusalem.

That journey occurred in August 1986. For the next three years, I would live in the West Bank Palestinian town of Beit Jala. Predominantly Christian, the village hugged the eastern side of a steep hill facing Bethlehem. The silver dome of its Greek Orthodox Church glinted in the morning sun. Hope Secondary School, my home and place of work during those years, sat at the top of the road that wound upward through the town. From my room’s window, I could gaze over the western hills spilling down toward the plain and the Mediterranean Sea beyond. Just above the school, a wonderful restaurant called “Mt. Everest” offered plates of humus, freshly baked *khobz* (flat, pocketed bread), and tangy chopped salad. Israeli soldiers in jeeps would drive past or sometimes stop at the eatery on their

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way to the scientific observatory and security outpost perched at the top of the hill. The military vehicles, antennae, floodlights, and barbed wire of the hilltop settlement became a constant reminder of the Israeli presence in my adopted town.

I landed at Hope School having just graduated from college. The school, still known locally as *madrasat al-manunayt* (“The Mennonite School”), had been established decades earlier by MCC, which had eventually transferred control to a local group, the Arab Charitable Society. Recently, however, MCC had reversed course, renewing its support to help the school with nagging financial difficulties. My posting as a teacher had been part of the deal struck with the board.¹ I came to Hope School filled with an earnest, naïve idealism. I would teach English while also bearing witness to the cause of nonviolence “in the name of Christ,” as the MCC slogan went. That idealism would soon be tested.

Within months of my arrival, the First Palestinian Intifada—or uprising—against the Israeli occupation began. The military closed the schools, trying to suppress the street demonstrations that youth were leading. Our students joined the protests, nonetheless. Some were shot or arrested while doing so. Months later, a soldier killed the eldest son of our school cook, firing on him at point-blank range. Jiriyis had been trying to cross an impromptu checkpoint on his way home from work.

Every day I sat with other Hope School teachers to listen to the minute-by-minute updates on the BBC’s Arabic Service. The protests were spreading and Israel’s corresponding response intensifying. At one point, the military announced a new “breaking the bones” policy in which soldiers would fracture the arms of protesters caught in stone-throwing incidents. Soldiers also fired rubber bullets and live rounds. Deaths and injuries mounted. The daily litany of casualty figures stripped any pretension I might still have had to heroic service. What could I, a privileged outsider, possibly do or offer amid this unrelenting, engulfing violence?

Answers came eventually through the creativity and resilience of my neighbors. Community activists in Beit Sahour opened their homes to teach children

1 I learned later that other expatriate non-governmental organizations had criticized MCC’s decision. The reversal, they said, undermined basic development principles stressing local control of projects. MCC leaders had been fully aware of the potential consequences of financial reinvolvement for local autonomy. Their decision to increase support came after a sober realization that the school could not, at that point, survive entirely on its own. Requesting placement of a volunteer simply reflected the MCC principle of making human as well as financial investments in its projects. Even if it might have violated the prevailing orthodoxies of international development work, the opportunity I received to go to the West Bank would prove decisive for the rest of my life; as a scholar, I have written extensively about Palestinians and have taught my students about Palestinian historical experience. Arguably, in this sense of the impact on me, the decision to get reinvolved had positive consequences extending beyond the immediate financial needs of the school at the time.

who were unable to attend classes following the school closures. They invited me to provide English lessons as part of these efforts. During one session, I hurriedly exited the house I was in with my students as an Israeli patrol approached. The military, we had heard, would arrest teachers and students and even dynamite homes hosting underground lessons. Palestinians had always emphasized the necessity of education: The occupation could never confiscate your learning. But it could try to stop it.

We tried to keep our teaching activities going at Hope School. As the closure dragged on, we started delivering homework packets to our students in outlying communities. I would drive our Peugeot van with a teacher to the villages and refugee camps in which our students lived. The van, I remember, had yellow-colored Jerusalem license plates, which allowed us to cross through military checkpoints more easily than vehicles that featured blue plates indicating a West Bank registration. My presence in the driver's seat as a white foreigner also likely helped us avoid any extra scrutiny from soldiers manning the crossings.

After arriving in the villages or camps, we would give our students and their families the homework packets along with clothing, quilts, and cans of beef bearing MCC's logo. A week later we would return to pick up the completed work and distribute new assignments along with more food and other necessities. I'm not sure how much success we had in helping our students progress in their studies, but at least we maintained a supportive connection with them.

A new Palestinian human rights center linked to the Palestine Human Rights Campaign in the United States also launched in East Jerusalem during this time. Since I was no longer bound to a strict class schedule, I volunteered as a driver for the center's field-workers. I used our MCC cars, which also had yellow Jerusalem license plates. I traveled the length and breadth of the Occupied Territories with my Palestinian coworkers in these vehicles, documenting Israeli army abuses against Palestinian civilians in the camps and towns.

I left Beit Jala in 1989 with the Intifada still in full swing. I was headed to Egypt to study linguistics at the American University in Cairo. Two years later, degree in hand, I accepted a position directing the English Language program of the Amideast organization in the Israeli-occupied Gaza City. My task was to prepare Palestinian professionals for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the main hurdle to acceptance at US universities. The Intifada was imploding at this point following the suffocating twenty-four-hour lockdowns that the Israeli military imposed on the Occupied Territories during the Persian Gulf War (1990–91). Nightly curfews continued after my arrival. The prevention of movement allowed Israeli patrols to operate at will in the darkness. Tensions between the Islamist movement Hamas and the secular-nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions were also intensifying. Clashes, arrests, and killing continued without letup.

I left Gaza in 1993 just weeks before the announcement of the Oslo Memorandum of Understanding between Israel and the PLO. I had departed for Chicago, where my life would unfold in a very different direction. I nevertheless would remain deeply connected to the Palestinian issue, making it a focus of two books about the impact of religion on Palestinian identities in Palestine and in Chicago's Palestinian diaspora community. Today, as I write these words, I am at work on a third book exploring Palestinian experiences in Denmark and Sweden.

My leap into the void nearly forty years ago has led to a personal and professional journey with “the question of Palestine.” The question has defied easy answers—at least for me. I went to the West Bank to serve the cause of peace “in the name of Christ.” Four decades later, I have come to understand the terrible cost that the absence of peace exacts for Palestinians first but also for Israelis. I have also witnessed, especially now amid the horror of the war in Gaza, the courage and sacrifice of individuals, Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews, and the many others allied with them who refuse to accept anything less than a peace worthy of its name.

Memories from the West Bank and Gaza Strip

I will end this reflection with three brief memories from my experience of living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two poems that I wrote during that time accompany these stories. The vignettes and poetry illuminate complex, intimate moments hard to capture through exposition or analysis.

The first story, which I have titled “Eggs,” recalls an event that opened my eyes to the subtleties contouring Palestinian-Israeli interactions. The question of who is a Jew and who an Arab resists simplistic resolution, at least in this story.

1. Eggs

Eggs again. Two eggs, fried in olive oil, served on scratched glass plates with warm flat bread and a sweet paste made from grapes harvested at the end of summer. Every morning and every evening, eggs, our own eggs.

The Intifada gave us the eggs. The military's indefinite, prolonged closing of the schools threw us into financial crisis. To keep the lights on and salaries paid, we decided to build two chicken barns so we could sell eggs in the local markets. Building the barns had been the easy part; my teaching colleagues had construction skills. Finding the hens proved almost impossible; the military required dozens of permits they really did not want to give us. We tried to get them anyway. After a long, frustrating afternoon of traveling between government offices in Tel Aviv, we finally gave up. We knew what we were facing if we kept at it: endless rounds of application filing, fee paying, being told we had the wrong applications, needing to pay more and other fees, and pleading before military officers who

were never at their desks or wanted things we could never give them—information, cooperation, collaboration. Why even try?

Namir, my colleague who had taken the lead on this project, suggested another route—the black market. After some discussion, everyone agreed. So, one clear morning, Namir and I climbed into the school’s dented, coughing vintage 1960s Volkswagen microbus. The car had an impish spirit. Its gears required coaxing and just plain luck to make them go. But I had long ago learned what to do, and soon we were on our way. Namir—a math teacher, handyman extraordinaire, and possessor of a name that means “leopard”—held a map and set of directions in his lap, guiding me through the meandering back roads of the West Bank hills. We were headed west across the Green Line—the invisible 1948 armistice border separating Israel from the territories it would occupy two decades later—toward a *moshav*, a type of Israeli co-op farm that doubled as a settlement outpost.

We pulled into the farm just before noon. A neatly paved road led past long barns. A sharp, acrid scent cut into our nostrils. The din from the caged birds muffled the backfire as I parked our van.

We got out of the car and walked past the barns toward a low office. The door appeared half open. Namir called out in his limited Hebrew, “Shalom!”

“Shalom,” came the response from inside.

We stepped in. Seated around a low table in front of a desk were three stocky men—like Namir, olive skinned and mustached. Quickly evaluating the situation, Namir switched to Arabic—*Sabah al-khayr, kif balkum?* “Good morning! How are you all?”

The reply came immediately and fluently—*Al-hamdu lillah bi khayr, ablan wa sablan!* “We’re fine and well, please come in!”

Namir and I took seats in front of the small table. Someone poured us tiny cups of sweet, thick coffee.

Namir got to the point. “We need eggs,” he said.

“Where are your permits?” they asked.

“We don’t have permits,” Namir said.

A pause. We sipped our coffee. I drank carefully. Once at a cafe, soon after I had arrived in the West Bank, I swilled too quickly and ended up with a mouthful of grounds.

One of the men replied, “You know we need the papers.”

Namir remained silent.

The man continued, “Maybe we can do something for you.”

The real business now began. The man named a price, Namir balked. A new price was named, less than the first. Namir balked again. On it went for ten minutes between renewed rounds of the sweet, thick coffee. I could see from the corner of my eyes that we would soon be heading into a round of sweet tea. This was going to take a while.

Finally, the man nodded and Namir smiled.

A new tray of glasses. Tea this time, amber and sweet with mint leaves floating on the surface. The conversation turned to other topics. Namir had figured out that these Jewish men were from Yemen or Morocco or maybe Iraq. He was curious, so he asked: *Min al-maghrib?* “From Morocco (literally, “From the west”)?”

Ayuwa [Yes], *min al-maghrib*, came the reply.

Namir continued asking questions. He wanted to know how they came here, what Morocco had been like, what they thought of Israel.

The last question triggered a bitter torrent: “Those Ashkenazim [Jews from Europe], they control everything! We can barely keep this business going! They’ve taken everything from us.”

Namir told them that if they thought *they* had it bad, they should come visit him in the West Bank. Everyone laughed. I wondered about the laughter, though. Was the thought of coming to visit, of crossing the Green Line, of being a guest among the occupied somehow obscene, ridiculously out of the question? Or was the laughter a momentary recognition of a different obscenity, the one that insisted on a categorical distinction between Jews and Arabs, a difference that in this moment seemed to have evaporated amid shared Arabic, common feelings of marginalization, and glasses of amber mint tea?

The deal sealed, we stood up, shook hands with our hosts, and got back into the dust-covered microbus. The hens arrived a week later.

2. Rafah Salad

When I taught English in Gaza, I became friends with the field-workers in the offices of the human rights center across the hall from my classrooms. Khalil, about whom I wrote the poem that appears below, was one of these field-workers. He lived in the Rafah refugee camp on the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Israeli soldiers constantly patrolled this camp, which had served as a center of Palestinian resistance during the First Intifada.

The poem recounts a moment in the kitchen of my apartment in Gaza. Khalil and two other friends were staying with me during one of the many curfews the Israelis had imposed on the city. Khalil offered to make lunch for us, and as he did so he told us about his brother who had recently been killed in a clash with soldiers. I call the poem “Rafah Salad.”

“Rafah Salad”

Khalil slit the chest
of a plump tomato breast,
slicing onion,
squirting lemon.
I winced.
Recalling the cinderblock

he heaved
 at a passing jeep,
 Smashing heads of garlic now,
 beneath the flat of the blade,
 “They seized him,” he said.
 “But then,
Majnun.² My brother spit in their eye,
 So, they shot him spread eagle in the dust.”

3. Imm Jiriyis

One of my duties as a volunteer in Beit Jala was to drive our school cooks—both middle-aged mothers—to and from their homes every morning and evening. One of these women—Imm Jiriyis (“Mother of Jiriyis”)—would always make the sign of the cross as we passed the Greek Orthodox church dedicated to St. Nicholas.³ In the evenings when I dropped her off at her home, she invariably invited me to join her and her family for a cup of tea. Sometimes I would accept the offer. During these impromptu visits, I came to know Jiriyis, her eldest son.

Jiriyis was a leader in the local Communist Party faction. The party had served historically as one of the main avenues for Christians to participate in Palestinian nationalist politics. The Communists had long advocated the formation of two states—one Israeli, the other Palestinian. During the First Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, which lasted from December 1987 until November 1993, an Israeli soldier, under unclear circumstances, shot and killed Jiriyis at one of the many checkpoints erected to inhibit Palestinian movement. From that moment, Imm Jiriyis, shattered by grief, wore the traditional black of mourning. In the weeks that followed, she descended into a valley of sorrow. The next poem captures a moment in which I passed by her kitchen door at the school and noticed her sitting at a low table in a pool of winter sunlight. She was reading her Bible.

“Imm Jiriyis”

Morning light lingers
 in the creases of your soft wrinkled face.
 Its rays thread
 between the window’s metal bars,

2 The Arabic term *majnun* means “insane” or “possessed.” It derives from a root that also generates the word for the mysterious trickster beings mentioned in the Qur’an (the *jinn*) who tempt and deceive but also sometimes help mortals. The same root produces the term for paradise (*janna*).

3 Traditionally, Arab parents receive this honorific after the birth of their firstborn child. A mother will be called “Imm . . .,” or “Mother of . . .” A father will become known as “Abu . . .,” or “Father of . . .”

twining with your wintry hair.

Illuminated on a creaking kitchen chair,
you sit reading a matins meditation,
elbows wedged into the grain
of a short-legged table,
brow bending into hands cribbing
your countenance of concentration.

Between the fingers your lips whisper
inaudible words into the silence
of a stilled life:
“Even though I walk
through the Valley
of the Shadow of Death.”

“May God give you the strength.”
My greeting intrudes upon your solitude.
Raising your face from your fingers,
You regard me, smiling gently,
inviting me,
into the light,
into your mourning.