

LOOKING FOR THE HOLY LAND

I was in Jerusalem and environs for ten days in late December, 1996. These are some first-hand observations (in no particular order) about the situation just before the breakthrough agreement on Israeli partial withdrawl from Hebron. Hebron is a sideshow, albeit an important one. The main issue is the expanding Jewish settlements and the relentless pushing of Palestinians out of the West Bank.

I traveled outside of Jerusalem with the director of UN Palestinian refugee services.

Jerusalem

The Arabs now constitute only 30% of Jerusalem's residents (170,000), and receive 7% of the municipal services. 9000 building permits were issued for (Jewish) West Jerusalem last year, none at all for (Arab) East Jerusalem. The reason is simple: it's against the law to apply for a building permit in East Jerusalem. Arabs may not repair or "improvise" property in the Old City; if someone fixes a roof or adds a room, it is demolished. There is a special Israeli unit created for this, which takes aerial photos looking for evidence. They have devised ways to reach across the old walls into the Arab quarter to destroy illegal buildings (one Arab family is digging a sub-sub-basement in their centuries-old family home, the only way to expand). The Arab areas are terribly crowded, but nobody dares to move away and risk losing their Jerusalem ID.

There is a serious gap in infrastructures between the Arab and Jewish areas. 150 kilometers of road need to be paved in East Jerusalem, there are almost no sidewalks, and many streets lack lighting. There are open sewage channels outside the walls on this side, and heaps of garbage. Less than 1% of the most recent allocation of funds was for East Jerusalem, and *this* was for the building of another flyover highway linking Jewish settlements with a new industrial zone (part of the planned (restricted) "Trans-Israel Highway").

Yet the Jewish Quarter is new, sleek, well-lit, with cobblestone streets, quaint shopping malls, artists' shops -- it looks like Disneyland. You can't tell that you're in the same Old City. Plenty of building and improvement is in evidence! Perhaps another reason it looks so much better is because there are ten times more sanitation workers per inhabitant there than elsewhere.

I walked extensively through the Arab Quarter several times, and noted some new "Jewish culture centers" established in some of the old buildings near the Dome of the Rock. The Israeli government is planning to increase police presence in East Jerusalem and open branches of government ministries there. There are also moveable *pedestrian* checkpoints in the Old City. People are arrested, taken away for questioning, stood up against walls for checks (and this includes old women). 19-year-old Israelis with submachine guns run the checkpoints and inspect the papers.

In contrast, all of West Jerusalem (outside the walls) is beautiful -- many parks (named for donors), many new buildings, the Knesset, the national museum. There are excellent wide streets and shopping areas, big hotels, and a mix of new housing and old Arab stone houses. Many Jerusalem Arabs can point out the old houses that belonged to their families; the Arab houses are intact, with Israelis living in them!

Israel is establishing a ring of settlements all around the perimeter of the walled city, a *cordon sanitaire*, for the express reason that (I paraphrase from the Jerusalem Post) "Jewish settlers must have unrestricted mobility between Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem." There is still a notable gap at an Arab area called Ras El-Amoud, and plans to build settlements here are being strongly resisted by Arabs. The (Israeli) peace group Ir Shalem also opposes these plans, having stated that they are illegal and would "turn the 11,000 Palestinian residents of Ras El-Amoud into hostages in the hands of the Israelis." There are plans to establish a Jewish neighborhood near the (Arab) Flowers Gate, and houses and land are being seized for this "East Gate" project. But the settlements which surround Jerusalem are not called that; they are called "neighborhoods." In early December the new government began considering a plan to nearly triple the number of Jewish residents in Jerusalem in the next five years.

The statistics on land seizure in Jerusalem and its eastern suburbs are numbing and constant: 1200 acres in 1968, 3100 acres in 1970, 1100 acres in 1980, 470 acres in 1991, 500 acres in 1992. So far, 6500 acres of private Palestinian property has been seized in East Jerusalem (estimated value in excess of \$1 billion). As one peace group put it, "the Palestinian Muslims and Christians are not only being dispossessed and replaced, they are becoming impoverished."

There is a concerted campaign to keep or drive Arabs out of Jerusalem. Checkpoints into the city are moved every day, and ID's are checked. The much-coveted and precious Jerusalem ID's, if taken away, are almost impossible to regain. One person had his ID card ripped up, asked the soldier, Why? It's still valid. The soldier looked again and said, So it is. Sorry.

A law established in 1994 requires Palestinians to prove that Jerusalem is their "center of life" in order to retain IDs. This is impossible for anyone living, or marrying someone who lives, outside the city's boundaries, and has led already to thousands of people losing residence status. One prominent Palestinian woman (a friend of a friend) renewed her Jerusalem residency (after proof of paying real estate taxes), but her 15-year-old son's ID was *denied* because *he* hadn't payed taxes. What??

The West Bank

Since the February "closure" imposed by the Israeli government, virtually no West Bank Arabs have been allowed to enter Jerusalem. About 150,000 have lost their jobs (some employers, such as the American Colony Hotel, continued to pay them for several months, but could go on no longer). No problem for the Israeli economy, though; they are replacing Arab (mostly menial) workers with new Israeli citizens, such as Ethiopians. The fact that Arabs cannot travel between towns without Israeli permission has also led to problems in the supply of consumer goods and is costing the Palestinian economy \$10 million a day. Palestinian per capita income has fallen by one third since 1993; it is one sixth Israeli per capita income.

There are now 125 Jewish settlements on the West Bank and 20 in Gaza. The total number of people was about 280,000 in 1994. The Israeli government has claimed that they only seize state land, but in fact, 95% of the land seized for Jewish settlements was private property. Hundreds of Palestinian villages have been destroyed and their

cultivated land appropriated for settlements. *Almost every night* Arab vineyards, olive trees, and fruit trees are destroyed.

Settlers often install "caravans" of house trailers near existing settlements in order to expand and take over more Arab land. In August, the Israeli government approved the installation of 300 new caravans in the West Bank. Nine Palestinian houses were destroyed by the government in that same week in August.

Settlers

The biggest problem with Israeli "settlers" is that a large number of them are *fanatics*, and are recognized as such by the majority of moderate, pro-peace Israelis. A distressing number of them have come directly from the US. Many see themselves as furthering frontiers, and are militant about Israel keeping all of the occupied Arab land permanently. Extremist settlers are a destabilizing factor in domestic Israeli politics, counterbalanced by groups such as Ir Shalem and Peace Now. Fortunately, approximately 75% of the Israelis support a peace initiative. There is also a growing tension between fundamentalist Jews and "secular" Jews (the large majority). Fundamentalist sects do not have to serve in the Israeli military, but they cause most of the problems -- some Israelis would like to isolate them in their own state and let them try to settle the West Bank on their own, because they're tired of protecting them.

The settlers are well organized politically, as are the conservative Jewish groups. In Jerusalem they have distributed a map and have told people that it is their *duty* to participate in a weekly demonstration, in this case, along a "yellow line." The line is drawn around the homes of the American consul, prominent Palestinians, "anti-Semitic journalists," and even Arafat's mother (!)

The World Zionist Organization, as far back as 1980, called for "comprehensive" Jewish settlement in the West Bank. The intent was "to surround Palestinian cities with blocks of settlements, while at the same time creating barriers between Palestinian cities." Preventing geographical continuity among the Arabs will make a Palestinian homeland impossible. *After* the Hebron accord, Netanyahu assured Jewish settlers that the Palestinians will get no more than 10 percent of the occupied territory -- the cities they have now and a few *disconnected* patches around them.

The new Likud government has completely reversed Rabin's policies to limit new settlements on Arab lands. The number of settlers has nearly doubled since the Oslo accords were signed, and the government recently announced additional mortgage and rent subsidies for people moving to West Bank settlements. Establishing settlements in Arab areas is known as "creating facts on the ground." Six months ago, settlers were preparing (calmly) to leave the Golan heights area; now the new government has made it clear that they will keep this. Widening bridges in the Golan is part of a \$75 million highway project.

The Likud government has just allocated a 57% increase in money for settlements, compared with last year. On December 13 the Cabinet conferred "top national priority" status on establishing more settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. The government plans to "open expansion" into 60% of the territory of the West Bank. The settlement Emmanuel, near Nablus, will double its population (currently 9000 residents) and will have swimming pools (a sore subject -- many settlements have swimming pools while there is a

water crisis for agriculture. 4 times more water is used per each Israeli settler than per Arab resident.)

Israel brought in 1 million Russian Jews several years ago; its population jumped from 4 million to 5 million overnight. There are still 1 million more Russian Jews that the government would like to bring in. These are the people who are often housed in settlements. *Where will they put one million more people?*

Gaza

Tourists don't go to Gaza. There is no way to do it. Access is only through one checkpoint, and traffic in either direction is limited to UN personnel and some (about five) Palestinian VIPs. No diplomats may drive through, and no private cars. Israeli settlers in Gaza are not inconvenienced because they have their own private flyover highway, on which nobody else is allowed (including diplomats and the UN); this is regulated by license plates.

Gaza has a population of 750,000. It is a slum, but a spotless slum -- there's not a gum wrapper on the street. Most housing is very poor quality indeed, running toward cinder blocks. There are some shabby apartment buildings, but some nice ones too, and now expatriates are building highrises. With "freedom" (self-rule), Gaza will improve, and people are becoming quite enterprising. But streets and sidewalks are not being repaired for lack of money. The UN staff is required to wear rubber boots when it rains -- the water puddles are full of cholera.

There are several roads into Gaza, but all have been blocked due to the special closure imposed in February, and nobody can go between Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem in any direction. Trucks driven by Arabs are allowed in to deliver supplies, but may not take anything out, and are subject to a several-hours delay each time while Israeli inspectors check in all parts of the truck, including under it. They have special stations, equipment, and hoists for this. Since nobody can leave Gaza and nothing can be exported, it seems to me that it qualifies as the world's largest concentration camp. The population density is among the highest anywhere in the world.

The Israeli government does not permit Arabs to compete in products or exports. Periodically they raise the restriction on particular items. Most recently they announced that five agricultural products, including roses and strawberries, could be marketed by Arabs, and everyone in Gaza planted these heavily. Then the government changed the regulation and the crops rotted in the fields.

Four universities have been created in Gaza because students cannot depend on being allowed to attend classes on the West Bank (and for that matter, West Bank universities are repeatedly ordered closed). Gaza is very conservative, and virtually all of the women are wearing the Hijab hair cover.

Despite the fact that the Israeli has "withdrawn" from Gaza officially, it is still there in force. The justification is that Israeli settlers there need the Army's presence, although all of them (some 6000) are heavily armed.

Gazans are desperately poor, and West Bank residents are becoming more so. In Gaza, everyone who has a job is supporting ten other people; in the West Bank, every worker supports five.

Hebron

The Washington Post quotes the settlers who are have taken over houses in old-city Hebron as "taking back Jewish property [about 25 houses] seized by Arabs in 1929." This was done by extremists, a total of 35 families (many Americans), and their actions were publicly disavowed by representatives of (17) old Jewish families from Hebron. The settlement of Qiryat Arba above Hebron is certainly the most notorious of all Israeli settlement outposts, and is responsible for the constant clashes with local residents. They have now built a public memorial to Baruch Goldstein, the man who massacred people in the mosque in Hebron in 1994.

I met the mayor of Hebron at the consul's Christmas party. And the wife of a man who works for an Arab relief organization there. The mayor said that he has problems every Saturday because of settlers whocome into town. On this day they had been throwing eggs at people. One time they threw rocks at girls coming out of an Arab kindergarten. Then he has to go and protest. It took these people two hours to get permission to come to this reception in Jerusalem.

We now see a new agreement for Israelis to withdraw from much of Hebron. Few people realize that the Arabs there have been under curfew since October. There have been problems bringing in food, medicine, and supplies. The partial withdrawal may help with the problem (as stated by an Israeli inquiry commission) of Israeli authorities having been *seriously* deficient in protecting Arabs against the settlers (four attacks against them in the last six months). Inside the city of Hebron, there are (were?) 32 roadblocks and 10 manned checkpoints. 400 Jewish settlers will remain in the center (with military presence), thus continuing to disrupt the daily lives of 120,000 Arabs. I liked this quote from the Washington Post:

"So long, Hebron," wrote A.B. Yehoshua, the distinguished Hebrew novelist. "So long and goodbye to that strange and absurd and immoral ambition, in which 400 Jews sought to gradually take over a heavily populated Arab city -- sought, in the name of patriarchs 3,300 years ago, to turn its 120,000 living residents into conquered and humiliated minors, permanently lacking in the rights of citizenship."

Bethlehem

We were scheduled to spend the afternoon of December 23 with a Franciscan archeologist, author of an excellent tourist book. But found the (just-finished new) road to Bethlehem blocked (on sudden notice), all Arab cars being turned back (a very long line because they hadn't known). Only Israeli settlers, in buses and cars, sailed on through. We got through too, but arrived too late. This new road cost \$42 million, and is huge, sleek, and includes two tunnels. It displaced several olive groves. Settlers in the region declared it to be "the fulfillment of an old dream to be connected to Jerusalem."

On Christmas Eve, we were in Bethlehem again, standing in the big square, listening to carols and waiting to get into the church for Midnight Mass. April says that last year on Christmas Eve, Bethlehem had been free for less than 24 hours. There were jubilant crowds, mostly young people who had never known freedom in their lives. She was in Ramallah when Yasir Arafat made his triumphant entry; she says it was like the Liberation of Paris, not a dry eye anywhere.

The Israeli government has confiscated 61% of the land in the Bethlehem area since occupation in 1967, and has expanded municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to include it. Current plans for more expansion will cut off another 2400 Arab families from their land and olives. Already 43 kilometers of new bypass roads connect the Israeli settlements in this region. In Bethlehem itself, the government is planning to build a new tourist complex called "Bethlehem, Israel," despite the fact that the local Arabs depend heavily on tourist business.

The UN

Only the presence of the UN makes it possible for the Palestinians to survive. The UN is constantly trying to open more schools, for example, but funds are never enough and currently, the elementary students are in classes of 65 or more. Some rooms are so crowded that students walk across the tops of desks to get to the board. Food distribution is very limited, only available to true hardship cases. There are constant reports of human tragedy-- a farmer who had his land or house confiscated, a grandmother who has just had her last son or grandson arrested and has nothing to eat. The Israeli government has made repeated attempts to get the UN out.

The closure has meant that two thirds of the UN staff at headquarters in Jerusalem can no longer enter the city; there are new UN field offices in other West Bank cities to continue administering hospitals, schools, food distribution, and legal assistance. UN staff members drive to the Jerusalem barrier *every morning* as a gesture to assert that they *do* work in Jerusalem, not in the temporary field offices.

April Glaspie

April is the person I visited there, a wonderful hostess. She, as director of UNRWA, supervises a UN staff of 900, and her office is responsible for Palestinian refugees everywhere, wherever they may be. She drives with UN plates and has diplomatic status, so she cannot be questioned, detained, or denied access to Gaza or across the Allenby bridge. She makes it a point to exercise these crossing privileges every 4 to 6 weeks, so that the Israelis cannot justify taking them away because of non-use.

Every morning April starts with the cordless phone and two-way radio to find out where that day's roadblocks have been set up. This helps her plan how to drive into the city from her suburban house. When she has Arab staff with her, and is stopped for questioning and inspection, she is very aggressive, reminding the Israelis that it is illegal to question her, to touch her car (she slapped a soldier's hand)... she does this to boost the morale of her (very frightened and tense) Arab passengers. One day I asked how her day had gone, and April said that three of her staff had had their Jerusalem ID's taken away that morning.

Citizenship

There was an announcement in December that Palestinian Arabs would no longer be allowed to hold dual US-Palestinian citizenship (the US consul has protested this; the US government asserts that nobody but the US can deny US citizenship to someone). Never mind that Netanyahu's press officer (David Bar-Ilan) is an American citizen himself. This regulation, if enforced, will force many Palestinians with US and other citizenship to

leave. Nobody is so rash as to let US citizenship go, and that includes all those brave, stalwart settlers who come from Brooklyn. *The large majority of immigrants from the US retain dual citizenship (the Israeli army is the only armed services in the world in which US citizens can serve without jeopardizing citizenship).*

Hebrew language

A major change since my last visit: *Everything* is in Hebrew. All consumer products (you want to know what kind of fruit juice you're buying? -- learn Hebrew.) All street and traffic signs. Sometimes English is added, rarely Arabic. Much of the Arabic is spelled wrong (surely this must be intentional, how can this be?) (such as متحف and حروج -- problems with dots, alifs, mixing consonants). Or a street like Street of the Prophets, "Ha-Nevim," is *transliterated* into Arabic rather than translated. Everybody should learn Hebrew!! Most gas stations, I noticed, were *entirely* in Hebrew. I watched Arab merchants and moneychangers speaking Hebrew now -- sure, how else to survive?

Well OK.... time to stop. I can't think about all this too much.

Just one more scenario to append---
The Holy Land didn't appear very holy to me.....