

An Anarchist in Palestine

Militarism and Madness

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Growing up in the post-9/11 U.S., I've experienced the psychological discord of this culture and witnessed the expansion of its violent global footprint. This June, I traveled to Israel for two weeks with Interfaith Peace-Builders hoping to broaden my understanding of conflict and nationalism.

Albert Einstein, who once declined the Israeli presidency, said that "nationalism is an infantile disease" and after this journey, I would propose that madness is its root and its defining symptom. Various state agencies inflict madness on the Israeli and Palestinian populations. Their tactics are many. Every state inflicts some level of coercion and violence upon its population, but I know no state as brazen with its power as Israel, other than perhaps the U.S.

Why do societies choose this path? Why is the madness of conforming to the pathology of nationalism more appealing than psychological, emotional, and physical freedom? These questions were on my mind while traveling on a packed two-week itinerary that took me and my fellow travelers from Tel Aviv to East Jerusalem, Ramallah, Ashdod, Nazareth, Bil'in, Bethlehem, Hebron, and the Jordan Valley.

Our group met daily with U.N. officials, legal and human rights organizations, peace groups, and individuals in Israel and the West Bank. At each meeting, another element of the U.S. narrative was deconstructed and amended to match reality on the ground. Those of us who have studied the conflict in depth, and those jaded by mainstream perceptions were less surprised than those who came with a strong Zionist and/or nationalist narrative in their upbringing. For them, the journey was highly disorienting and emotionally chaotic.

This region's public dialogue about statehood and systemic change achieves a level of intensity and nuance far beyond the conversation at home. For instance, in the U.S., intermittent updates on the peace process often center on the idea of a "two-state solution."

Not a single Israeli, Palestinian, or international group we met with mentioned the notion as a desired possibility. In reality, there is no contiguous land for a Palestinian state. On honest maps, the West Bank looks like an archipelago suspended in an ocean of Israel that extends to mix with the Jordan River in the east. The Gaza



Italian solidarity activists join Palestinians in a weekly nonviolent demonstration against the separation barrier that would cut off the Occupied West Bank village of Al Ma'sara from its agricultural lands.

Strip completes the chain of islands with a gate to Egypt in the south and coastline extending three miles into the Mediterranean Sea.

It shouldn't be surprising that the U.S. narrative disregards reality; the media here generally restricts content, and lowers the level of analysis to as simple a story as possible. Only the more extreme right-wing elements of Israeli politics are allied with the U.S. in clinging to the idea of two states, while their ethnic cleansing plan aims to eliminate the demand for a Palestinian nation altogether.

In moderate and liberal Israeli circles, the mainstream Palestinian demand for one state with equal representation has taken root. In more radical circles, cynicism stemming from dissatisfaction with the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government alike has seeded a different dialogue centered on autonomy and unconvinced that statehood will solve underlying problems.

In the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, near Bethlehem, a young activist named Ibrahim summed up this sentiment, saying, "Some people, they like Palestinian Authority, but for me, no. I don't like authority anymore. Any authority." Ibrahim's grandparents arrived at the temporary camp after their forced displacement by Zionist armies during the 1948 Nakba, meaning catastrophe in Arabic.

Today, Dheisheh resembles a poor American urban neighborhood with convenience stores, cafes, and densely packed people living in poverty. Ibrahim and many other activists characterized the Palestinian Authority as the manager of the occupation. His radicalization and rejection of state authority follow his experience at the bottom of the existing hierarchy where experience with state sanctioned violence is frequent and brutal.

As a stateless refugee by birth, Ibrahim has been afforded the opportunity to see the system from the outside and from the bottom, where its fundamental flaws are obvious. I asked him, "Is this what it takes?" meaning, does it take domestic conditions this extreme to trigger people to act or even imagine another way of being?

He responded by describing his frustration with people who aren't politically engaged in his community despite the conditions; it mirrored my feelings that I have about my own community, though average people in Dheisheh are by necessity much more engaged than my neighbors.

In a highly militarized, industrial civilization like ours, it may take extreme shocks like those experienced daily by refugees and other Palestinians to break through the deeply conditioned madness in our society. In Israel, the bedrock of life is fear. The idea that enemies lay in wait on all sides seeking an opportunity to attack pervades the entire culture. Given the origins of Israel and its treatment of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, it is a self-fulfilling fear.

The background of walls, checkpoints, and ubiquitous soldiers reinforce the sense of danger. In Israeli schools, teachers and students are regularly employed as state informants, acclimating students to surveillance and rigid behavioral expectations. This state-fostered paranoia is reinforced in the religious establishment, advertising, and media.

In order to develop nationalistic feelings toward a militarized state, a person needs to create positive associations with violence, prejudices of all stripes, hierarchical structures, and fear. The alternative to this is to shut down cognitive function in order to avoid any dissonance that might emerge. Both of these psychological options for comfortable survival in a military state can shape people who are fearful, and, hence, aggressive, violent, distrustful, and xenophobic.

As I sat on the edge of a planter placed in a West Jerusalem roundabout holding a sign that said "Stop the Occupation," one of many in English, Hebrew, and Arabic during a demonstration called by Women in Black, I experienced what Israelis face when they choose to dissent against their military and government. In a display quite similar to what I've seen in roadside peace demonstrations in the U.S., curses were flung from cars, some swerved closer to spit at us, and the finger was flipped many times.

The women, part of an international network, have protested here each Friday since January 1988. When I went out to join in for the day, I met 84-year-old Judy Blanc, one of the founders of the movement. In the early days of Women in Black, she says, "We didn't have a feminist left-wing movement, so we decided to come out and just say, 'Down with the occupation.'"

At the beginning, in January 1988, there were only seven women involved, but by International Women's Day in March, there were 500. Blanc says, "It spread like a wildfire over Israel. The women weren't all feminists, but they're a silent majority of women against the occupation."

When we met, she was celebrating her grandson, Natan Blanc's release from prison after serving six months (his tenth arrest) for refusing to serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Peace organizations including New Profile have helped bring the cause of conscientious objection closer to the forefront in recent years, but Israeli teens like Blanc are regularly jailed, harassed, and socially isolated after making the decision to refuse the compulsory draft.

We met Ruth Hiller, of New Profile, in Tel Aviv, where she shared her political story. In a women's study group on feminism, militarism, and the effects of militarism on Israeli society that sprung out of anti-war demonstrations, Hiller says her education began.

"I had all these things that I felt but I had no channel to place them into or a way to understand what was happening. There was no information about how to get my son out of the military, so I started looking around." Today, New Profile educates youth and parents about militarism, and provides counseling through the Refusers Support Network.

In the Occupied West Bank, the daily display of state power by Israel creates a situation characterized by confusion. Our group kept asking questions, trying to get a mental grasp on the dystopian conditions and laws. Almost all of the local Palestinian activists we met responded with humor, laughing and shrugging at the discord they had grown used to.

We walked through the IDF-staffed Qalandiya checkpoint, where every day thousands of Palestinians attempt to cross between Jerusalem and Ramallah, both in the West Bank, in an ordeal which regularly takes several hours. In the late afternoon when we arrived, there were only a couple dozen other people crossing.

The architecture was dehumanizing; the checkpoint consists of a series of barbed wire-topped cattle chutes to be queued into single file, followed by a buzzing electronic turnstile which moves whether the person inside is ready or not, then a long winding line like those in amusement parks, then a second turnstile, an x-ray machine for bags and people, a glass window with young soldiers behind it who examine ID cards pressed against the window one after the other.

I was at the front of my group and right behind a Palestinian business man in his early 30s. He must have sensed my apprehension and confusion at how the turnstiles worked, because he turned around and said, "When they turn it on, it takes three at a time, no more, no less. So be ready behind me when the light turns green, OK?"

I listened, but when the light turned green, only he passed through and I was stuck in the stopped turnstile. He laughed and said, "...except when it only takes one. They made a liar of me." This checkpoint has been part of his daily routine for the last seven years.

My American colleagues were also baffled by the application of the law in Israel, which differs according to citizenship, ethnicity, and location. One's position as a Jew and an Israeli citizen; Palestinian and an Israeli citizen; a Jerusalem resident; a West Bank resident; or a refugee, determine one's treatment under the law.

In Ramallah, we talked to Brad Parker of Defense for Children International who told us about the Israeli military's common tactic of arresting children, often in the middle of the night, almost always charged with throwing stones. We learned that, much like in the U.S. justice system, the burden of proof rests on the accused.

People asked, "What if the wrong person is arrested?" Parker responded, "There is no wrong (Palestinian) person to arrest."

Due to this chaotic legal arrangement, representation through statehood appeals to some Palestinians as a solution in the same way that electoral reform appeals to liberal Americans, only with more urgency. There is hope for peace in this region, and in the U.S., far outside of the mainstream political discourse and legislative or legal change.

Much of the nonviolent resistance successfully employed by Palestinians over the years has been undertaken in a horizontal, anarchistic manner, community by community. Demolished villages continue to be rebuilt after paltry U.S. aid runs out, not due to government intervention, but because people voluntarily help one another. Some villages in the Negev have been demolished by the state and rebuilt by their residents and solidarity activists over 70 times.

In Bil'in, we stayed with the family of the filmmaker Iyad Burnat, whose documentary, "Five Broken Cameras," chronicles their village's five year struggle against the apartheid wall that snakes its way through their land. I was able to see that stretch of wall and the spent teargas canisters scattered along the path, remnants of the weekly demonstration that had taken place two days before.

During these demonstrations, the Palestinian villagers' commitment to nonviolence has been met with multiple deaths at the hands of IDF soldiers. Still, they have persisted with both demonstrations and other actions, including building outposts of their own in the way of construction of the wall.

Villages all along the length of the wall have started protests of their own in solidarity with Bil'in. Anarchists Against the Wall and other groups from within Israel have come to learn the strategies that have been used. AATW and other solidarity organizations share in the risks of resistance with the people of Bil'in and lend a layer of protection by witnessing and amplifying the stories happening there around the world.

This steadfast refusal to comply provides an example to resisters the world over. In the midst of cultural madness, people still feel the pull of dignity and human potential. This is the sole glimmer of hope in this seemingly intractable situation.

I met the Nassar family at Tent of Nations, an educational and environmental project in the hills southwest of Bethlehem. They farm their land at Daher's Vineyard as they have for a hundred years, but today in the company of international volunteers and solidarity groups who come to help work the land and protect it from demolition by the Israeli military.

Usually, I don't think that a problem can be solved by buying something, but I made a contribution to sponsor one of the ten olive trees that is planted every time one is torn out of the ground by the IDF as the surrounding settlements expand.

Meeting these two families and the rest of the groups taking action to target every facet of Israel's violence gave me hope that the dialogue will continue to expand into action, inspiring people everywhere to grasp their full freedom and agency in balance with nature.

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