



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



Fieldnotes from Jerusalem and Gaza, 2009–2011

Author(s): Elena N. Hogan

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Winter 2012), pp. 99-114

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2012.XLI.2.99>

Accessed: 02/05/2012 15:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press and Institute for Palestine Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Palestine Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



FIELDNOTES FROM JERUSALEM AND GAZA, 2009–2011

ELENA N. HOGAN

Written by a humanitarian aid worker moving back and forth between the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem over a two-year period (May 2009–June 2011), the observations in these “fieldnotes” highlight the two areas as opposite sides of the same coin. Israel “withdrew” from Gaza and annexed East Jerusalem, but both are subject to the same degree of domination and control: by overt violence in Gaza, mainly by regulation in East Jerusalem.

THE FLIP SIDE: JERUSALEM, AUGUST 2009

It was early Sunday evening, 2 August 2009. Just off the corner of Nablus Road in the East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, a small crowd was gathered in front of the al-Hanun family home. The area around the front entrance was taped off, and heavily armed Israeli police were guarding a moving van parked nearby. A few bearded orthodox men wearing traditional black *kippas*, white button-down shirts, and black trousers were unloading the last of their boxes and carrying them inside. They were walking swiftly back and forth through a protective police corridor. As they walked, they looked straight ahead, showing no acknowledgment of the commotion around them or even of the dozens of policemen lined up to protect them.

Although the gist of things wasn't hard to imagine, I didn't know exactly what was going on. I had been in the Gaza Strip for three months, working with an Italian nongovernmental organization (NGO). I was in Jerusalem for a required Israeli work visa and I happened to be driving through Sheikh Jarrah with a colleague.

We pulled over to ask someone what was happening. A woman explained that in the early morning hours the Israeli army had raided the home, entering through the windows and physically dragging the al-Hanun family out to evict them. The family were former 1948 refugees who had exchanged their refugee cards for this vacant lot, which they received from the United Nations in 1956 when the area was under

ELENA N. HOGAN has been active with fair trade and humanitarian aid work in the occupied Palestinian territories since 2002. In 2006–2007, she lived in Ramallah, where she worked as an nongovernmental organization project coordinator while completing field research with the *Alma Mater Studiorum*, University of Bologna, Italy. From 2009 to 2011 she worked in the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem as a humanitarian aid operator. She is currently based in Bologna.

Jordanian control. Nahalat Shimon, a settler-affiliated real-estate company with plans to gut Sheikh Jarrah and build a Jewish settlement neighborhood,¹ had bought the lot from two Zionist organizations with nineteenth-century Ottoman deeds.² After a decades-long legal battle, the Israeli court had controversially given the company a green light to empty and take over the house, though these same pre-1948 property documents are worthless for Palestinians.³

This now world-famous incident, together with the parallel strong-armed eviction and “ethnic replacement” of the al-Ghawi family further down the road, raised a particularly high level of international outcry. It also sparked the “Sheikh Jarrah Solidarity Movement,” a heterogeneous grouping of Israelis chanting for social justice weekly in the neighborhood park alongside the dispossessed Palestinians. Encumbered with squatter fines and legal fees, and camped out on the sidewalk across from their occupied home, the al-Hanun family became a symbol of the ongoing plight of many Jerusalem Palestinians faced with evictions and demolition orders.

East Jerusalem was a fundamental part of my two-year (2009–11) experience in the occupied Palestinian territories, though people tend to ask more about Gaza since narratives about life there are scarce. I moved from Gaza to the Bab al-Zahra neighborhood of East Jerusalem after August 2009 and stayed there for one year, before going back to Gaza for NGO work briefly in September 2010 and then again for about five months starting in December 2010, traveling back to my apartment in Jerusalem almost every weekend. These notes are thus a reflection of my time in both places, as both not only had a strong impact on me but also are fundamental to understanding the workings of the occupation and its consequences on Palestinians.

Writing in 2009 about my dealings with the Israeli Interior Ministry the week of the al-Hanun eviction, I described East Jerusalem as “the flip side of the same geopolitical ambiguity afflicting the Gaza Strip.”⁴ Gaza is crushed under full Israeli economic, territorial, and military subjugation, in an alarming state of imposed isolation and consequent environmental and social degradation, while Israel bureaucratically purports that the enclave has been autonomous since its 2005 unilateral disengagement from the Gazan settlement blocs. Conversely, Israel views East Jerusalem as an integral part of its territory, even if its annexation of this portion of the city has been declared null by the UN Security Council as a violation of international law.⁵

So while Israeli bombs do not tear through the skies of East Jerusalem as they did two or three times a week in Gaza, I observed the flip side exploding into the daily lives of Jerusalem Palestinians all in the same program of domination and oppression, as Mahir al-Hanun was to declare from his corner tent: “In Gaza they attack with tanks and F-16s; in Jerusalem they attack with evictions and transferring property.” The

violent process of geographically establishing a single “Israeli” Jerusalem is quite evident to the naked eye, as the de facto borders defined by extensive illegal settlement activity cut through the West Bank on the eastern perimeter of the city and are complemented and reinforced by the trajectory of the Separation Wall, which positions East Jerusalem firmly on the Israeli side, isolating the city from its Palestinian hinterland.

This geographical cleaving is all a part of an ethnic redefinition: that is, the demographic establishment of a unified Israeli capital, where a Jewish majority is manufactured to slowly replace the Palestinian majority of East Jerusalem. Articulated through an insidious process of control by regulation, this form of violence, I would argue together with al-Hanun, is no less oppressive and no less destructive to Palestinian lives than the military might used on Gaza, and it is fully based on the same doctrine of forced isolation and exclusion, fashioned to perfect an ethnically monolithic Jewish state,⁶ which does not contemplate a non-Jewish Palestinian population.

Israeli bombs do not tear through the skies of East Jerusalem as they do in Gaza but the violent process of geographically establishing a single “Israeli” Jerusalem is evident to the naked eye.

LEGAL STEPS: JERUSALEM, OCTOBER 2009

Two months later, about 9:00 P.M. on Wednesday, 14 October 2009. We were waiting for the automated teller machine (ATM) at the Hapoalim Bank in al-Zahra Street across from a green, tank-like, overfull dumpster, about three minutes down the road from my newly rented apartment. Little Palestinian boys were running through the streets shooting at each other with cheap plastic handguns recently received as ‘Id al-Fitr gifts.

The Palestinian couple in front of us was trying to use the ATM, pushing buttons slowly and awkwardly, and pausing at intervals to stare down at the monitor. After a minute or two, the man turned around, slightly embarrassed, and asked us something in Arabic.

“I don’t believe it,” my friend said, “there’s nothing written in Arabic.”

We got closer and looked down at the display screen. Hebrew, English, and Russian were the only language options. Arabic—one of two official languages in Israel⁷—was simply missing. This right in the heart of Palestinian East Jerusalem. I pressed “English” and we guided the couple through the steps necessary to withdraw their money.

That incident was to repeat itself and I noted it. After all, if full-out political suppression of a language by definition constitutes a form of ethnocide, the absence of Arabic imposed by Israeli banks on a coveted Palestinian area should at least raise an eyebrow.

This Hapoalim branch, and Leumi, Israeli Discount, and Mercantile Discount, are the only banks operational in East Jerusalem on the Israeli side of the Wall. Exclusively Israeli, these banks enjoy a roughly 99.9 percent

Arabic-speaking clientele, but none of them offer Arabic-language statements.⁸ Beyond their involvement in illegal territorial control and systemic linguistic discrimination, these banks offer a window onto the flip side, as banking obstacles are deeply woven into the all-important Israeli “legal” fabric that is smothering Palestinian East Jerusalemites. This legal fabric is the dynamic framework in law that works at the core in articulating Palestinian oppression in Jerusalem.

Mortgage loan services for Palestinian homebuyers, for example, are completely unavailable at all four bank branches.⁹ But the issue goes deeper: “I do not absolve the banks by any means,” Israeli economist Shir Hever emphasized, “but here it is also essential to consider the broader context: When the Israeli authorities don’t give any building permits to Palestinians, services for housing loans become impossible for banks to offer.”¹⁰

Israeli building permits for Palestinians are only available in 13 percent of East Jerusalem.¹¹ But even here these permits—also needed for expansion and renovation—are extremely difficult to acquire, and partial land owners¹² may be flagged as “absentees” in the process, triggering expropriation.¹³ While buildings crumble, as many as 130,000 Palestinians live in homes considered illegal, which the State of Israel can demolish or expropriate at any time.¹⁴

Inside the illegal Israeli settlements in and around East Jerusalem, the contrast is striking. Building permits abound in Ramot Eshkol, Pisgat Ze’ev, Gilo, and Ma’ale Adumim, for instance, and the banks offer government-subsidized mortgage loans for individual homebuyers, as well as special loans for housing projects.¹⁵ In other words, the financial infrastructure that facilitates expansion and homebuying in the Jewish-only settlements swallowing up East Jerusalem is denied Palestinians.

At any rate, the Separation Wall assures Palestinian clients for these Israeli banks. “The Palestinian banks in the so-called East Jerusalem Municipality are all behind the Wall now, in Abu Dis, Eizarya, and Al Ram,” explained the Palestinian branch manager at the Israeli Discount Bank. “This means people would have to cross an Israeli military border every time they went to the bank. Just think of the traffic at the checkpoints, nobody has time for that . . . so they use the Israeli banks—at least the people that *can*.”¹⁶ In fact, only about 12 percent of Jerusalem Palestinians hold active accounts in these banks.¹⁷ Beyond widespread poverty,¹⁸ lack of residency rights and debts owed on the Arnona, an Israeli municipal property tax, influence this low number.

Only Palestinians with the crucial “Blue ID,” that is, permanent residency rights, can hold an Israeli bank account. These so-called permanent rights, however, can be forfeited or expire,¹⁹ and permanent residents must moreover be able to demonstrate to Israeli bureaucrats that Jerusalem is their continuous “center of life.”²⁰ Family unification with “nonresident” Palestinians is virtually impossible to obtain, while

child registry is extremely difficult for “mixed residency” parents.²¹ By these “legal” means, Israel has revoked approximately 14,500 Jerusalem Palestinian residencies since 1967, while an estimated 10,000 children go unregistered.²² I watched in April 2010 as “illegal” residence in Jerusalem became a criminal offense, punishable by heavy fines and up to seven years in prison.²³ None of this is true for Israelis and even non-Israeli Jews who decide to make *Aliyah*.²⁴

Two decades ago, Ziad al-Hammouri, former law student and small-business owner, foresaw the Arnona tax as just one more legal trap since his own clothing store on al-Zahra Street was in jeopardy: businesses that cannot pay the Arnona risk foreclosure as do indebted residents, though taxation of an occupied population to the benefit of the occupier is a violation of international law.²⁵ Al-Hammouri waged a high-profile campaign for an Arnona decrease in East Jerusalem based on socioeconomic factors, but in 1997 the city foreclosed. In protest, he staged a sidewalk sit-in nearby for months, before founding the Jerusalem Center for Social and Economic Rights, where he is now general director.

“This is a very dangerous tax,”²⁶ he emphasized, “because we estimate that more than 85 percent of Jerusalem Palestinians owe on the Arnona. It’s no less dangerous than the Israeli revocation of Blue IDs or the demolition of houses. This tax is used now and will be used in the future as a weapon to control property and houses through ‘legal’ steps. Israel does nothing in East Jerusalem without going through its own ‘legal steps’ first.”

Indeed, as I sat in his small office, people unable to pay the Arnona were filing in and out, interrupting our interview, to ask for legal help. Afterward, as I walked down the street, I contemplated the people passing by. Though indigenous to this land, their language, homes, businesses, and right to live here at all had grown highly precarious: a largely invisible legal structure was at work behind the scenes to secure their “legal” displacement and destruction.

LOCKDOWN: GAZA, OCTOBER 2010

An explosion. The office windows shook and I felt my chair vibrate slightly under me. It was 11:00 A.M. on 12 October 2010 in Gaza City. I instinctively stood up and walked into the next room. Two of my colleagues, Marco²⁷ and Sa’id, were working at their computers.

“Did you guys hear that?” I asked.

“A-ha!!” exclaimed Sa’id, smiling broadly and pointing his finger. “You got *soft* staying so long in Jerusalem, *ya* Elena! . . . She got soft!” he repeated to Marco, obviously amused. After over a year in Jerusalem, I had been in Gaza for three weeks, completing a needs assessment for the construction of household sewage networks in poorer pockets of the north.

Our cell phones all signaled a new message: “Loud blast heard over Gaza City at 11 am, confirmed as IDF [Israel Defense Forces] sound bomb,” read the humanitarian-aid workers’ safety update. A sound bomb inexplicably dropped on Gaza City by an Israeli war plane, something I was no longer used to.

The truth is by October 2010, my distress went beyond the need to reacclimatize myself to Gaza. Even before the extensive destruction of Operation Cast Lead, a 2008 NGO coalition report had summarized: “The situation for 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip is worse now than it has ever been since the start of the Israeli military occupation in 1967. The current situation in Gaza is man-made, completely avoidable and, with the necessary political will, can also be reversed.”²⁸ This statement continued to hold true throughout my stay, although Gaza has received one of the world’s highest levels of per capita aid for almost two decades.²⁹

Aid is not working in Gaza, and the reasons are political. Gaza has become, by Israeli will, one of the most densely populated spaces under lockdown in the world. The 1948 refugees alone now number more than 1.1 million largely aid-dependent people with extremely bleak prospects.³⁰ Blockade, closure, and military assault perpetuate a crumbling infrastructure³¹ where natural resources are severely overburdened and tightly controlled by Israel. Even in these simple terms the problem is political.

“It is both puzzling and tragic,” Sara Roy summed up prophetically in 2002 about the systematic Israeli de-development of Gaza’s economy,

that donors including the World Bank are still pursuing the same kind of apolitical approach, seeking technical solutions that will mitigate economic damage rather than political solutions that will enable structural reform. . . . The destruction of the Palestinian economy is not a technical problem but a political one, and it requires a political solution. Anything short of this will fail.³²

Hence my mounting distress in implementing depoliticized technical solutions, whether emergency or developmental.

Already on an initial field visit through the sandy unpaved streets of Izbet Bayt Hanun, I had been struck by just how decrepit everything in Gaza now looked to me after a year’s absence: the bullet-riddled bare concrete of half-finished housing blocks; the dust covering everything from the streets to the products on mini-mart shelves; the dirty barefoot children playing in the narrow alleyways; the sickly rundown donkeys whipped by their masters to keep them limping down the crowded roads, dragging their carts behind them; the mangy sheep grazing trash from overflowing dumpsters in the streets. Had I really just gotten used to all this?

I was no longer patient with the exhaust and loud roar of diesel generators running for hours every day just about everywhere to compensate

for the power cuts—outside offices, health clinics, stores, restaurants. It was as if a constant line of buses were noisily idling directly under my windows. The dumpster on the corner next to my apartment was continually lit to eliminate its contents, and the sea breeze directed the toxic smoke and awful stench my way. Undrinkable brackish water ran through the tap, and every single utensil in my kitchen was at least a bit rusted—every pot, every pan, every spoon, fork, knife, even the coffee machine.

And I was living in Rimal, one of the most upscale areas of the Gaza Strip, a bubble for international workers and affluent Gazans, complete with generators and running water. Yet the overall environmental degradation seemed almost unbearable, especially when I contemplated the depleted uranium Israel has dropped over the years, the white phosphorus of Operation Cast Lead, the cheap asbestos rooftops crumbling in the refugee camps, and the highly toxic pesticides—the only ones affordable—coating the fields.

The first thought I had had upon my return to Gaza seeing the cracked windshield of our driver Abu Shadi's 1980 long yellow Mercedes cab was, "God, that car is getting old." I knew he wouldn't be replacing the windshield anytime soon, due to highly inflated glass prices because of the Israeli blockade. He needed a new car, but cars were also extremely expensive, as was just about everything, all goods being rare or temporarily available, even when smuggled through a dangerous makeshift Rafah tunnel.

"Welcome back to Gaza," Abu Shadi greeted me as he hotwired his car under its broken ignition. Heading south down the coastal road toward our office, he pointed out fishermen selling crabs. "It's crab season," he narrated, a habit of his after years of escorting foreign journalists, "you see the fishermen with the nets? It's a nice picture for a magazine or a newspaper; do you want to take a photo?" He paused. "We are like animals here, *ya* Elena," he continued impassively, another habit of his, as if this were a natural extension of his thought on crab season: "We can eat, we can sleep . . . sometimes we can work. There is no life here."

I didn't answer because I was thinking the same thing.

THE FINE ART OF CROWD CONTROL: JERUSALEM, MARCH 2010

Seven months earlier, about 9:00 A.M. on Tuesday 16 March 2010. An Israeli police helicopter circling overhead woke me. I looked out to see, anchored to the Rockefeller Center across the street, the blimp-shaped Israeli observation balloon hovering over the city. It was the "Day of Rage" proclaimed by Hamas (and backed by Fatah) in response to restoration work at the Hurva synagogue, thought to jeopardize the foundations of al-Aqsa.

Outside no one was around. The metal shutters of stores, restaurants, and money changers were down in al-Zahra and Salah al-Din Streets.

Dozens of Israeli soldiers and police in riot gear were lined up on alert at the Damascus Gate, while groups of young Palestinian men, the *shabab*, silently stared them down. Further on, at Herod's Gate, soldiers and Palestinians were facing off with the same fixed gaze. The tension was palpable.

Just then an Israeli tourist bus pulled up and a group of South American pilgrims got off, snapping pictures of the Old City walls. I watched incredulously as their Israeli guide directed them placidly through the soldiers' ranks and on through the gate as if all were normal. I wondered what these tourists noticed, and—perhaps more importantly—what they didn't.

Bused in from the huge modern Israeli hotels located on the near west side, these tourists, unwitting instruments of normalization, usually

Bused in from the huge modern Israeli hotels in the west, the tourists cannot see that this dying place was once a vibrant center for Muslim and Christian Palestinians, most of whom are no longer permitted here.

do not see the mostly empty and rundown hotels on the east. Though they often walk through the dingy poverty of the Palestinian Old City on their way to the Via Dolorosa or the Temple Mount, they cannot see that this dying place was once a vibrant center of commerce and prayer for both Muslim and Christian Palestinians, most of whom are no longer permitted here.

While filing through the Damascus Gate, perhaps these tourists don't even notice the small platoon of five or six Israeli soldiers stationed here everyday, as if a normal part of city life. They arbitrarily stop Palestinian men walking by, ask for IDs, question them, and sometimes hold them by the side of the road until they let them go. Perhaps the tourists also miss the other small platoon stationed immediately inside the gate doing the same thing, as well as those at all the old entrances to the al-Aqsa compound.

The terrace, with its breathtaking view of the Old City atop the slopes of the Mount of Olives, is a typical tourist stop. Just behind the terrace, the huge Israeli flag of Beit Hoshen, a building complex housing ideological Israeli settlers, flies so high that it is topped with a flashing red airplane-safety light.

Israeli flags such as this actually form a concrete map of the ethnic expulsion at hand in East Jerusalem, since they fly over each of the scores of Jewish settler homes dotting the Palestinian landscape from Sheikh Jarrah to the Mount of Olives to Ras al-Amud and the Old City. Silwan, an East Jerusalem hillside neighborhood now being destroyed to make way for the "City of David" archeological site, perhaps hosts the highest concentration of Israeli flags mapping the occupied houses.

Tourists entering the visitors' center at the City of David cannot see that the site is administered by Elad, a far-right Israeli settler association whose mission to "Judaize" the area is explicit.³³ They cannot see that this center is located where Palestinian houses stood just a few years

ago, as is the large parking lot under construction across the street. They also cannot see that almost ninety Palestinian homes in the valley area have been served demolition orders so that the “King’s Garden” can be recreated.³⁴ They may notice, however, the Israeli military jeep parked at the entrance to the visitors’ center, backing up Palestinian traffic along the steep and narrow road; or the men with M-16s strapped across their backs walking through the neighborhood, the private security forces of the settlers.

This backdrop provided the field behind the fear for the safety of al-Aqsa, the crowning symbol of Palestinian Jerusalem and the easily lit fuse for the Day of Rage.

Minutes later a second Israeli tourist bus pulled up. This time, about fifty Israeli police in riot gear got off. By the looks of it, things were about to get ugly. I left quickly and went home. I could hear the clashes erupt behind me as the helicopter circled back over the neighborhood. There was already street fighting throughout the east side in Issawiyya, Wadi al-Juz, the Mount of Olives, Silwan, and Qalandia.

The Day of Rage got much news coverage for its size. But smaller-scale clashes were almost the status quo in East Jerusalem. It was no strange event to see tires burning in Wadi al-Juz; soldiers jumping out of jeeps into combat formation in Silwan; or young men, their faces wrapped in kaffiyehs, throwing stones from behind overturned dumpsters from Shufat to Ras al-Amud to the Mount of Olives. The observation blimp at the Rockefeller Center was a standard part of the skyline, raised and lowered to monitor these Palestinian neighborhoods as needed. The police helicopter circling overhead was commonplace too. Israeli roadblocks were often on every corner, stopping circulation and cutting off access to the Old City, especially on Fridays when large numbers of Palestinians arrived for prayers at al-Aqsa. Through these means the constant scattered revolts were routinely quashed after a few hours of police or military intervention and simply seemed to fizzle out, easily neutralized by the fine Israeli art of crowd control.

WITHERING LANDSCAPES: GAZA, JANUARY 2011

Nine months later, sometime around noon, 10 January 2011 in Gaza City. My cell phone was ringing and vibrating on my desk. I was up to my neck in tending procedures and I didn’t want to be interrupted. I looked circumspectly at the phone display. It was my colleague, Daria, calling from the field, where she was interviewing project beneficiaries for a video about the rehabilitation of agricultural wells destroyed during Operation Cast Lead.

“Something terrible has just happened!” she exclaimed when I answered. “A tragedy. An Israeli sniper just murdered a farmer we interviewed for the video. . . . It’s horrible.”

Shaban Shakir Qarmut, a sixty-five-year-old farmer, had just been shot in the neck from an Erez Crossing control tower and was killed instantly. He was working in his field, next to one of our rehabilitated wells situated about 600 meters from the northern border. He had agreed to be interviewed that morning but he had asked for no video cameras.

“This land was full of trees: palms, lemons, oranges, mandarins, and other fruits,”³⁵ Qarmut had said just minutes before, describing how his now mostly barren fields once were. “There was a walnut tree, and I was getting two full sacks of walnuts every year from it. Then the IDF came and uprooted it when it was ready to be harvested.”

One night in November 2000, he had awakened to the sound of bulldozers approaching. That night, his land—his life’s work and his family’s only source of livelihood—was to be obliterated in just a few hours while he was forced to stand by and watch. “The IDF came that night and destroyed all our fields and orchards with their bulldozers,” he recollected. “It felt like they were ripping my heart out. . . . I thought it would just stop [beating]. It was a night during Ramadan. Then at dawn eight bulldozers came back and ruined what was left. It only took them three hours to destroy all our land.”

The destruction of Qarmut’s farmland was part of Israel’s vast military leveling operations, clearing Gazan houses and farms to carve out the infamous “buffer zone,” now an extremely dangerous IDF free-fire range along the northern and eastern borders. Nor was the southern border at Rafah spared: here the Israeli army systematically destroyed 1,600 homes over a period of five years.³⁶

Although officially set at 300 meters by Israeli decree, the buffer zone can be as deep as two kilometers, determined daily by when the IDF decides to open fire. This unclear periphery can thus prove just as deadly, but these areas are some of the most fertile in Gaza and comprise almost one third of its agricultural land. Forced by poverty and circumstance, farmers like Qarmut continue to risk their lives. He stated:

Last year when I planted forty-seven dunums of wheat, the IDF opened fire and burned all the crops. This year we began planting again, but they started shooting at us, so we fled the area. What am I supposed to do? This is our land. . . . I keep coming here every day. I take the full risk. And I am going to buy two sacks of wheat to plant again . . . the shooting doesn’t bother me anymore. How many times can a person die? Only once, right? And only God can know when I will die.

Shaban Qarmut was murdered less than twenty minutes later. The IDF gave no explanation. “Of course not, it’s just Gaza,” my Gazan colleagues quipped at my forlorn indignation.

By June 2009 almost half the agricultural land of Gaza was reported inaccessible or out of production due to the buffer zone and the

destruction of Operation Cast Lead.³⁷ And as leveling operations and Israeli incursions in the border areas continued during my stay, Gaza's overall total inhabitable area continued to shrink, while another of its important natural resources was severely compromised. Strewn with debris, the farmland-turned-wasteland of the buffer zone is still a place where Gazans dodge "warning shots," now to collect scrapmetal for a needy market.

Anyone living near the coast in Gaza also hears "warning shots" injuring and killing Gazan fishermen or forcing them back to shore almost daily. One particular morning four months before,³⁸ I had been awakened by the machine gun fire of a naval vessel. Though I didn't realize it until later that day, a twenty-year-old fisherman, Mansur Bakir, was being gunned down by an Israeli warship while I listened from my bed.

Another unofficial buffer zone has thus in effect been set up in the sea on the western border, where Israeli warships block 85 percent of Palestinian fishing waters.³⁹ The constant harassment of fishermen has become part of the landscape of devastation, and fishermen daring to venture out into the waters are forced to hug the polluted shoreline. I could see them every day from my kitchen window, crowding in to overfish whatever they could, depleting yet another natural resource while increasing overall food insecurity in Gaza.

But despite the plethora of reports about this mayhem, there is actually a serious blackout. The blackout of real and effective political recognition and condemnation of the crime of murdering farmers like Shaban Qarmut, fishermen like Mansur Bakir, and too many other anonymous Gazan civilians who die in the buffer zones, in the collapsing smuggling tunnels, and in the constant Israeli airstrikes.

The close incidence of violent death and injury around me in Gaza was so frequent that by March 2011 it was not even enough to keep me from my usual activities, like visiting the local stationery shop. As had everyone else, I had learned to push the deadly havoc aside in order to carry out my job and attend to daily tasks. I clearly remember hearing the radio announcement en route to the shop: In al-Shuja'iya, two kilometers from the eastern border, four people, including a father and his two boys playing soccer in front of their home, had just been killed by an Israeli tank shell exploding in their neighborhood. The shelling came in response to mortar rounds fired at Israel by an armed group "nearby." Several other civilians were wounded, including a six-year-old boy from the same family.

Although I was just a few kilometers away, I hadn't heard the blast. It was the third deadly strike to hit Gaza that day. By the victims' last name, I knew they were all related to my financial administrator, Sharif. Proceeding on to the store, though, I bought the watercolor paints and colored paper we needed for a hygiene-awareness activity at a local elementary school. Only then did I give Sharif a call to convey my

condolences, telling him not to worry about coming to the office for the rest of the week.

I had again “acclimated” to Gaza. But I wanted out of this sad sort of routine. I had to get away from the violent death in the sounds of explosions and artillery fire in the distance, in the personal horror stories of my Gazan colleagues and people on the streets, in the rubble of destroyed buildings, in the smells of rotting fish and garbage, and in all the official reports and weekly updates sitting on my desk. I wanted out of Gaza, and though I knew I had to wait six weeks more, I was reassured by the fact that, unlike the Palestinians around me, I still enjoyed the luxury of being able to leave.

A GREAT MIRACLE: GAZA–JERUSALEM, MARCH 2011

One day after the al-Shuja’iya incident. I was standing in the waiting area of *khamsa khamsa*⁴⁰ with Khalil, our consulting engineer, and Abu Shadi, our driver. It was 23 March 2011—the big day. Khalil, a jovial, hulking man over six feet tall, was dressed in his best suit. Abu Shadi donned his official European Commission vest and our NGO’s baseball cap for the occasion. I couldn’t believe it: they were actually coming to Jerusalem with me. It had been sixteen years since Abu Shadi had set foot outside of Gaza. Khalil hadn’t left for nine.

For about a month my NGO had been applying at the Erez Crossing for one-week exit permits for our Gaza staff. The idea was to give them an opportunity to finally see Jerusalem, visit long-lost friends and family, and meet in person the local staff from the offices in Hebron and Tulkarm. We had requested permits for all six of our local staff members. It had been years since any of them had left Gaza, and our youngest engineer, Mustafa, had never been out at all.

“Whoever gets it goes,” the staff members had agreed, as no one knew when they would be allowed to leave Gaza again. Likewise, no one knew what the criteria were in granting or denying exit permits—this was at the full discretion of the IDF. While four applications remained eternally and disappointingly “in progress,” Khalil’s and Abu Shadi’s had actually been cleared. They were both over forty-five, married with children, and of course had no record of political involvement. Who knows if this is why they “won.”

Abu Shadi took my passport, triumphantly adding his and Khalil’s Gaza IDs to the pile before handing them to the coordination officer. We all held our breath while the worker closed the door to call the documents in for clearance. The *shabab* at the snack stand and Abu Shadi’s fellow taxi drivers gathered around to see if the men were really going to “make it out.” A few minutes later, the door opened and the officer handed back the passports: “*Mabruk!*” (congratulations!) he proclaimed. A cheer erupted all around as people handed the two men

their luggage, slapping them on the back before we started down the long tunnel.

Inside Erez, they saw the huge empty structure it had become. While we waited for the body scan, they told me stories of the days when it had been a crowded and busy terminal filled with Gazan commuters. After nearly two hours waiting at the luggage search, we got to passport control to end the process. It went smoothly, and I breathed a sigh of relief as we all walked out together into the parking lot on the Israeli side.

I waved as Bilal, a colleague of Abu Shadi's from Jerusalem, pulled up in his shiny white Mercedes cab.

"Everything's different here now," said Abu Shadi, looking out the window of the taxi, trying to recognize the roads he used to drive so often.

"*Aiwa!*" (yes!) Khalil called out loudly when we hit the highway. I looked back to realize that both men were clutching their seats, unaccustomed to the sixty-five mile-per-hour speed.

"*Ya, Bilal,*" called Abu Shadi, "if you drove like this in Gaza you'd take off flying the first time you hit a hole!"

Once in Jerusalem, we stopped for a shawarma in Salah al-Din. Khalil got us all free Coca-Colas when he declared to the waiter that he and Abu Shadi were Gazans visiting Jerusalem for the first time in over a decade. They then asked to go to al-Aqsa for the Maghrib prayer. "We're from Gaza!" Khalil kept exclaiming, striking up a conversation with every Palestinian he met on the Old City streets.

We held a staff meeting in Hebron, since the West Bank employees had not been able to get permits in time to cross "their" wall into Jerusalem. As we passed through the long tract full of Israeli settlements dominating the West Bank hilltops of Hebron Road, Khalil spoke up: "I had no idea it was this bad here. But I was happy to see that there are still Palestinians in Jerusalem," he added, "I thought they would have all been chased out by now." As a Gazan refugee whose family was forced from their home overnight in 1948 and who still lives in the Nussayrat camp after sixty-three years, he calibrated speed a bit differently.

Abu Shadi's cell phone was perpetually ringing. Bilal and the other taxi drivers were constantly calling to see if the two needed a ride anywhere. He sometimes answered his phone in Hebrew. After working in Tel Aviv as a teenager and, until 2006, driving Israeli journalists around Gaza, Abu Shadi spoke Hebrew better than most Palestinians I knew. As it turned out, he was setting up a visit in Tel Aviv with an Israeli journalist, an old and valued acquaintance of his whom he had driven all over Gaza. In the meantime, Khalil had arranged things for an important weekend with his by now little-known extended family in Lod. On Thursday we parted ways.

Back in Gaza a week later, Abu Shadi came into my office one morning waving the printed copy of a *Ha'Aretz* article that had appeared online in English. Beaming, he asked me, "What does it say?" I read him the article

Gideon Levy had written about their rare encounter in Tel Aviv the week before, which Levy aptly called “a great miracle.”⁴¹

“I *knew* he was a good man,” Abu Shadi stated when I finished. He put the article in a plastic folder and placed it in his glove compartment. In the days to come, I saw him take it out a few times to show people before carefully putting it back. I printed out my own copy of Levy’s piece and walked across the room to where the martyr poster of Shaban Qarmut had been hanging darkly on my bulletin board since January. I took it down and posted the article, complete with a picture of Abu Shadi standing in Tel Aviv’s bustling Hatikva-quarter market.

Six weeks later I left Gaza definitively. I was simply frightened for the future of all of these people, so caged in, bombed out, and so fully excluded that it seemed a great miracle for them even to be able to cross out of their prison for just a few days. I mustered a smile and told my Gazan colleagues that I hoped to see them again one day in a free Jerusalem. It was unconvincing optimism. On both sides.

Back in Jerusalem, I was reminded of this one final time. It was a few weeks later, on 1 June 2011. Thousands of hard-line Israeli Zionists poured into the streets from the west for their annual Jerusalem Day⁴² parade. Palestinians looked on silently from their doorsteps as loud Zionist music, countless Israeli flags, and dancing Israelis took over while platoons of soldiers and police units blocked off all main roads, provoking an inevitable standstill in Palestinian life for the day. While I watched the brazenly triumphant march promenade through the neighborhood, I feared for the future here too. The huge wave of people celebrating their ethnic military reign was swallowing up the streets. They embodied and epitomized the violence of the flip side, closing the Palestinians out and taking over their land with disturbing zeal. Only a great miracle could stop all this.

ENDNOTES

1. Shimon HaTzadik, a 200-unit settlement, would involve leveling the homes of approximately 500 Palestinians. See Town Plan Scheme 12705, submitted to the Jerusalem Municipality Local Planning Committee, 28 August 2008. Ir Amim, “Evictions and Settlement Plans in Shaykh Jarrah: The Case of Shimon HaTzadik,” 19 May 2009, www.ir-amim.org.il/Eng/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/ShaykhJarrahEng.doc.

2. Israeli courts have consistently ruled the 1875 Ottoman title pertaining to this case as valid and regarded the Palestinians as tenants owing

rent—even after Palestinian attorneys obtained access to the Turkish Land Registry Archive in 2009, where they found no legal registration of the title. The court refused to admit this documentary evidence and rejected the appeal in March 2009. For details, see “Settlement Monitor,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 152, p. 181 and “From the Hebrew Press,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 153, pp. 94–95.

3. The 14 March 1950 Israeli Absentees’ Property Law renders Ottoman property documents worthless for Palestinians seeking to reclaim lands within the State of Israel. See

United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL), "Absentees' Property Law 5710-1950," <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/E0B719E95E3B494885256F9A005AB90A>.

4. Elena N. Hogan, "Notes on the Aftermath: Gaza, Summer, 2009," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 152, p. 98.

5. See United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242, 476, and 478, <http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1967/scres67.htm> and <http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1980/scres80.htm>.

6. See the "Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People," a bill introduced in the Knesset on 3 August 2011 by MK Avraham Dichter and thirty-nine cosigners, www.acri.org.il/en/wp.../jewish-nation-bill.pdf.

7. Dichter's "Basic Law" (note 5) calls for Arabic to lose status as an official language.

8. Author interviews with four employees from Hapoalim, Leumi, Mercantile Discount, and Israeli Discount banks, respectively, Jerusalem, 22–24 May 2011. Names of interviewees omitted by request to protect identities.

9. Author interviews with bank employees.

10. Author interview with Shir Hever, Jerusalem, 27 May 2011.

11. In the other 87 percent, the land is either off limits or has never been officially zoned for construction, although creating zoning plans in occupied territory is a breach of international law. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "East Jerusalem: Key Humanitarian Concerns," *Special Focus*, March 2011, p. 29, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/0D90191FB C1DDBC88525785C004DF7A5>.

12. Due to factors such as intricate Muslim inheritance laws, many plots of Palestinian land have multiple owners. Some of these landowners became refugees in the 1948 and 1967 wars and are thus considered "absentees" by the Israeli State. See UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem: Key Humanitarian Concerns," p. 30.

13. UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem: Key Humanitarian Concerns," p. 30.

14. UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem: Key Humanitarian Concerns," p. 36.

15. See The Coalition of Women for Peace, "Financing the Israeli Occupation: The Direct Involvement of Israeli Banks in Illegal Israeli Settlement Activity and Control over the Palestinian Banking Market," October 2010, pp. 9–11, 16–17, <http://www.whoprofits.org/Newsletter.php?nlid=59>.

16. Author interview with Israeli Discount Bank employee, Jerusalem, 24 May 2011.

17. Approximately 32,000 people. Author interviews with bank employees.

18. Sixty percent of non-Jewish families in Jerusalem live on less than \$7.30 per person per day. Maya Choshen and Michal Korach, "Jerusalem, Facts and Trends 2009/2010," *Jerusalem Institute of Israel Studies*, 2010, p. 30, [http://jiis.org/upload/facts-2010-eng%20\(1\).pdf](http://jiis.org/upload/facts-2010-eng%20(1).pdf).

19. Regulation 11a for the "Entry into Israel Law 5712-1952." See also UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem," p. 13.

20. *Awad v. the Prime Minister*, 1988 Israeli High Court decision, known as the "center of life" regulation, UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem," p. 14. See also B'tselem, "The Quiet Deportation: Revocation of Residency of East Jerusalem Palestinians," April 1997, http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/199704_quiet_deportation.

21. See UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem," pp. 18–22.

22. See Mousa Qous, "Making Discrimination Legal: How the Law Attacks Palestinians in al-Quds," *This Week in Palestine, al-Quds: A Living History*, no. 157 (May 2011), p. 36.

23. Qous, p. 36.

24. A maxim of Zionist ideology: "ascent," referring to Jewish immigration to Israel.

25. See the 1907 Hague Convention (IV), articles 48–51.

26. Author interviews with Ziad al-Hammouri, Jerusalem, 16 and 23 May 2011. Further citations from these interviews until stated otherwise.

27. All names of colleagues have been changed to protect identities.

28. Amnesty International UK, CARE International UK, Christian Aid, CAFOD, Medecins du Monde UK, Oxfam UK, Save the Children

UK, and Trocaire, "The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion," March 2008, p. 4. http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/gaza_implosion.html.

29. Sara Roy, "Ending the Palestinian Economy" in *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*. London: Pluto Press, 2007, p. 252. For how this trend remains, see <http://search.worldbank.org/data?qterm=per%20capita%20assistance%20ranking&language=EN>. At the end of 2010, the CIA wrote: "International donors pledged \$4.5 billion in aid to rebuild the Gaza Strip, but by the end of 2010 large-scale reconstruction had not begun." United States Central Intelligence Agency, "World Fact Book," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gz.html>.

30. Counting only officially registered refugees. United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), "Number of Registered Refugees (as of 30 June Each Year)," [www.unrwa.org/userfiles/reg-ref\(2\).pdf](http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/reg-ref(2).pdf).

31. Considering wastewater treatment alone, 50–80 million liters of partially treated and raw sewage continue to pour into the Mediterranean each day. UNOCHA, "Humanitarian Situation in the Gaza Strip," July 2011, www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_Gaza_Fact_Sheet_July_2011.pdf.

32. Sara Roy, "Introduction to Part IV," in *Failing Peace*, p. 226.

33. See Emek Shaveh, "Elad's Settlement in Silwan," in *Archeology in the Shadow of Conflict*, <http://www.alt-arch.org/settlers.php>.

34. See UNOCHA, "East Jerusalem," pp. 34, 58.

35. Interview with Shaban Qarmut, Bayt Hanun, 10 January 2011. Further citations from this interview until stated otherwise.

36. See Sara Roy, "Introduction to Part IV," *Failing Peace*, p. 226.

37. See UNOCHA and United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) Fact Sheet, "Farming without Land, Fishing without Water: Gaza Agriculture Sector Struggles to Survive," May 2010, www.ochaopt.org/.../gaza_agriculture_25_05_2010_fact_sheet_english.pdf.

38. 24 September 2010.

39. UNOCHA and UNFAO, "Farming without Land."

40. Containment unit from which Palestinian coordination officers call in passport numbers to Erez Crossing for permission to continue. Referred to as "five by five" because in the past Palestinians were made to proceed from this point in groups of five.

41. Gideon Levy, "Twilight Zone: Return to Shuk Hatikva," *Ha'Aretz*, 1 April 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/twilight-zone-return-to-shuk-hatikva-1.353503>.

42. National holiday celebrating the city's "reunification" under Israeli control after the Six-Days War.