



ISRAEL'S

WALL

OF CHRIS
HEDGES

HORRORS

ColdType



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Hedges, the former Middle East Bureau chief for The New York Times, is a senior fellow at The Nation Institute. Hedges has fifteen years of experience reporting from war zones in the Persian Gulf, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, the West Bank and Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, the Punjab, Bosnia and Kosovo. In 2002, he shared a Pulitzer Prize for The New York Times' coverage of global terrorism. He is the author of the bestseller "War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning."

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ISRAEL'S WALL OF HORRORS



THE RAGE and extremism of the Islamic militants in Lebanon

and the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza appear incomprehensible to the outside world. The wanton murder, the raw anti-Semitism, the callous disregard for human life, including the lives of children and other innocents, permit those on the outside to thrust these militant fighters in another moral universe, to certify them as incomprehensible.

But this branding of these militants as something less than human, as something that reasonable people cannot hope to understand, is possible only because we have ignored and disregarded the decades of repression, the crushing weight of occupation, the abject humiliation and violence, unleashed on Lebanese and Palestinians by Israel because of our silence and indifference. It is the Israeli penchant for violence and occupation that slowly created and formed these frightening groups.

The failure by the outside world to react to the years of brutal repression, the refusal by the United States to intercede on behalf of the occupied Lebanese and Palestinians, gradually formed and galvanized the radicals who now occupy the stage with Israel, answering death for death, atrocity for atrocity.

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Those inside these zones of occupation pleaded over the years for help. We refused to listen. And once they burst through these barriers, enraged, bloodied, bent on revenge, we recoiled in horror, unable to see our complicity. We asked them to be quiet, to be reasonable, to calm down, and when they did not, their blood heated by years of abuse and neglect, we condemned them to their fate

The barrier built by Israel in the West Bank is one of the most tangible and important symbols of this long humiliation, this strangulation of the Palestinians by Israel. To understand the role of this barrier is to begin to understand the rage it has now unleashed. Understanding is not excusing, but until we grasp that these militants do not come from another moral universe, until we face our own complicity in their creation and the awful violence now underway in Lebanon and the occupied territories, we cannot begin to understand the gross injustices that fuel these militant movements. It was, after all, the \$10 billion in loan guarantees by the United States that made this barrier possible.

Ending the loan guarantees, as long as they were used to build settlements and seize even more Palestinian land, would have done more to blunt the rage and violence of militants than all the iron fragmentation bombs Israel has dropped on the hapless civilians in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza.

But we react too late. We react to the manifestation of rage rather than the cause of rage. We are as morally compromised as those we condemn, as incomprehensible to them as they are to us. And until we become comprehensible to each other there will not be peace in the Middle East.

MASSIVE, COLD AND ALIEN

There is a 25-foot-high concrete wall in Mrs. Nuhayla Auynaf's front yard. The gray mass, punctuated by cylindrical guard towers with narrow window slits for Israeli soldiers, appears from her steps like the side of a docked ocean liner. It is massive, cold and alien. The dwarfed shrubs, bushes and stunted fruit trees seem to huddle before it in supplication. I struggle to make sense of it, the way I struggled to make sense of the smoldering rubble that was the World Trade Center a few hours after the planes hit.

We do not speak. Mrs. Auynaf lives with the wall. She is as drawn to it as she is repelled by it. It absorbs her. She goes out on her second-floor balcony every morning and looks at it. She implores it for answers, as if it is a Sphinx that will

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answer the riddle of her new existence. "My old life ended with the wall," she tells me.

The wall, built by Israel a year before, blocked her from the neighboring Israeli town of Kfar Saba where she used to shop. It cut her off from Israel. It made it hard to reach the rest of the West Bank. The lone Israeli checkpoint with its guard towers, floodlights, concrete barriers, dust, stench, crowds, special pass cards, intrusive searches, rude remarks by border police were more than she could bear. She tried to pass through once.

"I could not stand the humiliation," she says. "I turned back. I went home. Now I never leave."

The wall reduces her world to its ugly perimeter. Her five boys beg to go to the seaside. The wall makes this impossible. No one goes to the sea anymore. There are days when the checkpoint is sealed, days after suicide bombings or days when the Israeli soldiers shut it down abruptly without explanation. On those days she sometimes gathers up her children and walks the empty streets, wandering like prisoners in a circle. Other families do the same. It gives her a sense of movement. Families pass each other two, three, four times in an afternoon. All are thinking the same thoughts.

"The town would rent buses to go to the sea," she says. "We would go for the day. We would stand in the water. We would look at the rocks and the waves. This was before."

The house is pleasant. It was finished at the start of the uprising, when business was good and peace seemed possible. The floors are marble. The kitchen has a counter and white appliances. The sofa and chairs have muted blue and beige striped fabric. We sit in the living room. A large window fan, set on the floor in front of the open door, provides a weak breeze. The door frame is filled with the expressionless gray face of the wall. It draws our eyes to it, the way a muted television screen distracts me during conversations. Sometimes we turn to look at it, as if it is a presence in the room, someone who should be offered sweet tea or a glass or water or asked to leave. We want it to speak to us.

Her son Ibrahim, 6, sits on her lap. He has a scar on his leg. He was shot two years ago by Israeli soldiers. It happened at dusk. The soldiers were firing at a group of Palestinian workers who were trying to slip into or out of Israel without proper work permits. He was watching from the front yard when a bullet went

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astray. He stays close to his mother, especially when he hears the sounds of gunshots. He does not like to leave home. The world frightens him.

The family was one of the wealthiest in Qalqiliya before the wall ruined them. They spent \$200,000 on their home, with its sloping terra cotta tiled roof, its pleasant garden. It looks like the homes in the middle-class suburbs outside of Tel Aviv. Once the wall went up, the family's car parts business was wiped out. Mrs. Auynaf's husband makes less than 10% of what he once earned. He has trouble shipping car parts into the walled enclosure. He often cannot reach suppliers. Customers, those in Israel and those in other areas of the West Bank, can no longer get to his store. He does not have a permit to drive the family car through the checkpoint. He must stand in line, often for several hours, to go in and out. He is away now. He is trying to salvage his business, but it cannot go on like this. She hopes he will be home tonight. But she does not know. The lines are long. Sometimes the soldiers get tired or bored or surly and turn people away until the next morning.

"We talk about how we are going to survive, what we are going to do," she said.

She hangs laundry on the balcony. Her only view is the wall. The other morning she was hanging laundry to dry and she heard singing. The song was by Fadel Shaker, a popular Arab singer. The singer had a sweet voice.

"You who are far away, why do you forget those who love you?" the words go. "When I fall asleep I think only of your eyes. I think only of you."

Her five boys were in the yard. They began to sing. There was a chorus of voices, the sweet voice and the voices of the children. She peered up into the glaring sunlight to see the singer. She saw an Israeli soldier in his green uniform standing on top of the earthen mound on the Israeli side of the wall, the mound the army drives jeeps up to peer down on those below. He looked like an Olympian god. She thinks he was a Druze, the tiny, nominally Muslim sect that lives near the border with Syria and serves in the Israeli army and border police.

"He waved when the song finished," she says. "The children waved back. Then he disappeared behind the wall."

She was on the balcony a few days later. She was pinning up cloths on the line. The wooden shutters were open into the house. She looked up and saw a soldier watching her from the top of the mound. There was no singing. His raspy voice crackled over the megaphone mounted on the jeep. He ordered her to go inside

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and close the shutters. She obeyed. Her wet laundry lay behind in the basket.

"I live in a zoo," she says. "They come and watch me. I am a caged animal. They have the freedom to come and go, to look or not look, to be kind or cruel. I have no freedom."

She fears madness. She points to an elderly woman 200 feet away squatting under a fig tree.

"The wall was the end," she says. "When it was finished she went mad." We watch the woman. She is keening slightly. People are being destroyed by the serpent's teeth of the wall, springing up from the soil of the West Bank like the evil warriors sown by Cadmus. This for me is the story, not the amount of concrete or coils of razor wire or razed olive groves and villages, but what all this is doing to human souls.

A CATASTROPHIC BLOW

I walk down the road to the elderly woman. I kneel in the shade beside her. She is missing many teeth. Her dirty hair, plaited and uncombed, is thick and white. Her name is Fatme Khalil al-Bas. She is 72. Her husband died a few years ago. Next to us are the shattered walls of an old stone house. It was her house. She was born in it and lived there until Israeli tanks blew it up in the 1967 war. She and her family continued to work the fields around the wreck of a home, never rebuilding. When the Israelis built the wall they seized her land. She was left with a small garden lot. Her fields, the ones where she worked as a girl, as a mother and a grandmother, are inaccessible. They are overgrown and untended on the other side of the wall. They belong to Israel now. She left her small apartment to sleep under the fig tree. She has built a shelter out of old boards placed across the branches. In the small patch of land she grows tomatoes and cucumbers.

Much of what she says is incoherent. She rails against her husband's second wife and then says softly, "He was a good man." She spits out the names of Ariel Sharon and George Bush and Yasir Arafat, hissing with anger. She vows to protect her little plot with her life, even though she says she is afraid at night, "afraid as a woman to sleep alone on the ground, afraid for my honor." I stand to leave. She looks at me with plaintive eyes. I turn and see Mrs. Aynaf watching us.

"I am a bird in a net," the old woman whispers.

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A DYING GHETTO

Qalqiliya is a ghetto. It is completely surrounded by the wall. There is one Israeli military checkpoint to let people into the West Bank or back home again. Only those with special Israeli-issued permits can go in and out of Qalqiliya. It is not the Lodz ghetto or the Warsaw ghetto, but it is a ghetto that would be recognizable to the Jews who were herded into walled enclaves by Pope IV in 1555 and stranded there for generations. Qalqiliya, like all ghettos, is dying. And it is being joined by dozens of other ringed ghettos as the serpentine barrier snaking its way through up and down two sides of the West Bank gobbles up Palestinian land and lays down nooses around Palestinian cities, towns, villages and fields.

Construction began on the barrier in 2002 with the purported intent of safeguarding Israel from suicide bombers and other types of attacks. Although it nominally runs along the 1949 Jordanian-Israeli armistice/Green Line that demarcates the boundary between Israel and the Palestinian-held West Bank, around 80 percent of the barrier actually cuts into Palestinian territories—at some points by as much as 20 kilometers.

If and when the barrier is completed, several years from now, it will see the West Bank cut up into three large enclaves and numerous small ringed ghettos. The three large enclaves will include in the south the Bethlehem/Hebron area and in the north the Jenin/Nablus and Ramallah areas.

B'tselem, a leading Israeli human rights organization that documents conditions in the occupied territories, recently estimated that the barrier will eventually stretch 703 miles around the West Bank, about 450 of which are already completed or under construction. (The Berlin Wall, for comparison, ran 96 miles.) B'tselem also estimates that 500,000 West Bank residents will be directly affected by the barrier (by virtue of residing in areas completely encircled by the wall; by virtue of residing west of the barrier and thus in de facto Israeli territory; or by virtue of residing in East Jerusalem, where Palestinians effectively cannot cross into West Jerusalem).

I stand on Qalqiliya's main street. There is little traffic. Shop after shop is shuttered and closed. The heavy metal doors are secured to the ground with thick padlocks. There are signs in Hebrew and Arabic, fading reminders of a time when commerce was possible. There were, before the wall was built, 42,000 people living here. Mayor Maa'rouf Zahran says at least 6,000 have left. Many more, with

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the unemployment rate close to 70%, will follow. Over the top of the wall, in the distance, I can see the tops of the skyscrapers in Tel Aviv. It feels as if it is a plague town, quarantined. Israeli officials, after a few suicide bombers slipped into Israel from Qalqiliya, began to refer to the town as a "hotel for terrorists."

There are hundreds of acres of farmland on the other side of the wall, some of the best farmland in the West Bank, which is harder and harder to reach given the gates, checkpoints and closures. There are some 32 farming villages on the outskirts of Qalqiliya, cut off from their land, sinking into poverty and despair. Olive groves, with trees that are hundreds of years old, have been uprooted and bulldozed into the ground. The barrier is wiping out the middle class in the West Bank, the last bulwark in the West Bank against Islamic fundamentalism. It is plunging the West Bank into the squalor that defines life in the Gaza Strip, where Palestinians struggle to live on less than \$2 a day. It is the Africanization of Palestinian land.

It is also ethnic cleansing, less overtly violent than that I watched carried out by the Serbs in Bosnia, but as effective. Thousands of Palestinians have left, never to return. Cities such as Bethlehem are emptying. This, Palestinians say, is the real goal, to make life impossible and force them to leave.

The Israelis, who have thought hard about making the project as linguistically benign as possible, call the barrier "the seam line." They insist it is not meant to be a border. They say it will make Israel more secure. They said that once Gaza was enclosed, suicide attacks from the Gaza Strip would end. They promise that once the West Bank is sealed off, terrorists will not be able to cross into Israel. The promise of security for the weary Israeli populace is like manna from heaven.

This assumes, of course, that the barrier will separate Palestinians from Jews. It ignores the 1 million Israeli Arabs living inside Israel, some of whom have already elected to use their bodies as weapons. It ignores the presence of Jewish settlers in some 200 settlements who often live within yards of Palestinians. But most ominously, it ignores the consequences of total enclosure. The West Bank, like Gaza, will erupt with high-octane rage.

Hamas was an insignificant group with little following in 1988 when I first reported from Gaza. The Islamic radicals are now the vanguard of the resistance. Every pillar of concrete driven into the soil of the West Bank will bring forth screeching bands of killers. It happened in Gaza. It will happen here. Security will

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never come with the barrier, but then security is not the point. What is happening is much more insidious.

If the barrier is being built for security, why is so much of the West Bank being confiscated by Israel? Why is the barrier plunging in deep loops into the West Bank to draw far-flung settlements into Israel? Why are thousands of acres of the most fertile farmland and much of the West Bank's aquifers being seized by Israel?

The barrier does not run along the old 1967 border or the 1949 armistice line between Israel and the Arab states, which, in the eyes of the United Nations, delineates Israel and the West Bank. It will contain at least 50% of the West Bank, including the whole of the western mountain aquifer, which supplies the West Bank Palestinians with over half their water. The barrier is the most catastrophic blow to the Palestinians since the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The barrier itself mocks any claim that it is temporary. It costs \$1 million per mile and will run over \$2 billion by the time it is completed. It will cut the entire 224-mile length of the West Bank off from Israel, but because of its diversions into the West Bank to incorporate Palestinian land it will be about 400 miles in length. A second barrier is being built on the Jordan River side of the West Bank. To look at a map of the barrier is to miss the point. The barrier interconnects with every other piece of Israeli-stolen real estate in Palestinian territory. And when all the pieces are in place the Israelis will no doubt offer up the little ringed puddles of poverty and despair and misery to the world as a Palestinian state.

TRAVELING THE BARRIER

I traveled along the completed parts of the barrier for 10 days. It is being built in sections. When I go into and out of the West Bank, often passing through multiple Israeli checkpoints, it takes three or four hours. The northern sections were completed in July 2003, although the Israeli Defense Ministry was still razing houses and fields along the barrier in the north for a buffer zone when I visited. Bulldozers, trucks and backhoes belch diesel smoke and lumber across the landscape. Where there is no barrier there is often a wide dirt track being graded and smoothed for construction. On either side of the emerging barrier are the dynamited remains of markets or homes and the blackened stumps of destroyed olive groves. It is one of the most ambitious construction projects ever undertaken by the state, certainly one of the most costly.

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The small town of Mas'ha lies in the path of the barrier. It has been in decline since the start of the uprising three years ago when Israel blocked the road leading from the town to Tel Aviv. The closure ended the businesses of the dozens of fruit and vegetable sellers who lined the road with shops and markets. The closure trapped most Palestinians inside the West Bank and because of this the barrier for Israelis is an abstraction. It does not slice through any Israeli land. It does not change Israeli life. It only solidifies the status quo.

The Baddya Market on either side of the small asphalt road is empty, the tin-roofed sheds and warehouses that once had piles of fruits and vegetables for sale abandoned. The town's population has fallen from 7,000 to 2,000 since the closure of the road.

I stand on top of one of the two dirt mounds that block the road to Tel Aviv. There is an army base on a hilltop in front of me. There is an electric fence that runs around a settlement a hundred yards up the road on my left. Two green Israeli army jeeps lie parked at an angle blocking the road a few feet beyond the second mound. The two dirt mounds and strip of empty road between them are filled with old cardboard boxes, broken bottles, empty wooden vegetable crates, cans, plastic Coke bottles, tires, shredded remnants of plastic bags, a broken chair and the twisted remains of a child's stroller.

A young boy is loading three cardboard boxes into a shopping cart. An elderly woman, standing on the mound a few feet from me, is helping him. When the cart is full the boy begins to push it to the other mound about 50 feet away. The woman follows. When they get to the other side he lifts out the boxes for her. She drops a silver shekel in his hand for payment. He goes back to the other mound to wait. He does this all day. It is the only way goods move up and down this road.

I walk into a small shed where a man is seated at a table. The shelves around him are bare. He has two boxes of tomatoes in front of him. There are cold drinks in a large refrigerated case with glass doors. A single light bulb hangs from a wire, casting a soft hue over the gray stubble on his face. Fat, languid flies buzz nosily. It is the only sound I hear. I ask him if he will speak to me. There is a long silence.

"Why?" he finally says. "It won't do any good."

I walk up the road, over the two mounds, and turn left to go up through the opening in a post fence with loops of barbed wire. A rainbow flag flies from a post

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planted in the ground along the fence. The dirt in the yard is pitted and gouged with tread marks from heavy earth-moving equipment. I hear the squelch, grunts and guttural moans of engines at work. I cannot see the machinery. The sky is clear, that searing crystal-like clearness that makes the light of the Middle East unforgiving and overpowering.

There are tarps in the yard in front of the house. Under the tarps are a collection of dirty mattresses and foam pads. Piled around the mattresses are backpacks, some with tickets from European airlines. A blue backpack has a tag with the letters SAS. There are plastic water coolers under the tarp. There are plastic cups scattered on the ground. Several young men and women, many in baggy cotton pants and sandals, lounge on the mattresses speaking quietly. Some are asleep.

I go to the door of the house. Munira Ibrahim Amer, who lives there, takes me upstairs to the flat roof where laundry is hanging and there is a large water tank. The heat on the roof is withering. I edge my way under a narrow eave to capture some shade. A young woman with short blond hair and glasses holds a video camera. She is wearing a green T-shirt and green cargo pants. She has a small pouch strapped around her waist. She says her name is Maria. She says she does not want to give me her last name.

“Thousands of us have been denied entry visas by the Israelis at the airport,” she says with what I suspect is a German accent. “Many of us who get picked up are deported. If I give you my name I will be on their blacklist. They will not let me in. They will put a ‘No Entry’ stamp in my passport.”

She has been in and out of Palestine, she says, for over a year. She was one of the first internationals to get into the Jenin refugee camp after the Israeli attack against armed militants that left scores dead and sections of the camp destroyed.

“I could not breathe because of the smell of the dead bodies,” she says. “I saw children collect body parts of their parents. None of us could eat. It was terrible. And the world stood by and did nothing.”

She was an Islamic studies major. She speaks Arabic. She became involved in protests in Italy against the occupation. She joined a group called International Women’s Peace Service, which sends activists to protest the construction of what it terms “the apartheid wall.” She lives in a house with other activists in the Palestinian village of Haras. She has been in and out of the West Bank and Gaza

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for over a year, surviving on the meager funds given to her by the organization.

TEN YEARS OF WORK, BULLDOZED

The activists surround the house when the bulldozer, belching smoke and groaning, lumbers through the yard on the way to grade the track on the hill below. Three activists chain themselves to a shed next to the house when they think the bulldozer might turn to attack. The shed next to the house, the family has been told, is about to be destroyed. When Maria speaks of the bulldozer it is as if it is a living object, some Leviathan rising out of the bowels of the earth to swallow up Palestine.

“When we do an action it is beautiful,” she says. “It is what life is about, living together, not fighting simply for our own happiness. The real pursuit of happiness is not about making me happy. It is about living together and sharing.”

There is something wistful in this, as if she knows much of human sadness, which I later find out she does. Activists, like aid workers and foreign correspondents and soldiers, are often orphans running away from home. I was one. They seek new families and new reasons to live, often messianic reasons that are intense enough to blot out the past and keep the darker clouds of memory at bay.

She wears a piece of silver jewelry around her neck. It comes from India. “I put my fingers around it and hold it when I am scared,” she says, wrapping her fingers over it. “I have grown superstitious. I risked my life more than once last year. I understand why Palestinians believe in God. When you feel your own impotence in the face of Sharon and the United States you have to believe in something bigger. It is the only way to survive. I don’t believe in God. I believe in this.”

There is the sudden roar and screech of army jeeps. A dozen Israeli soldiers pile out of the vehicles in helmets and flak jackets. They spread out along the road, facing the activists, who now are roused from their mattresses. Three men grab the chains and run for the shed. The soldiers cradle black M-16 assault rifles.

“Oh hell,” she says quickly, pushing the start button on her camera and pointing down at the scene below us, “and another jeep is coming. I have to call the media office and alert them.”

The ragged band of 45 activists spread out in the yard. The soldiers watch, silent, bemused, the way a child watches a line of ants he is about to crush. In a few moments the soldiers depart.

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The activists wait in the sun for a few minutes and then go back under the tarps. Maria joins them from the roof. They begin to discuss tactics. Someone proposes singing "Give Peace a Chance" if the soldiers come again. Another suggests building a small model of a Palestinian village in the path of the bulldozer. They begin a heated discussion over what to write on their banners. When people agree, rather than clap, they raise their arms and flutter their fingers. A member of the group suggests they write condemnations of the wall uttered by world leaders including President Bush. The mention of the American president raises the temperature of the debate.

"I don't agree that we put phrases by George Bush on our banners," says a woman with an Israeli accent. "George Bush don't fucking care about this, about anything. I really hate this man. I don't want any fucking thing he said on any action I participate in."

There is a sea of fluttering fingers. I admire their commitment but find them too sanctimonious, infected with the fanatic's zeal that they know what is good for you, good for everyone. Their anger springs, in part, from the fact that no one will listen, as well as the damage, the damage many I suspect nurse internally and wish to heal.

I go into the house and sit with the family. The family lives surrounded by the madness. The bulldozer severed the water pipe to the house. They have spent the last few weeks carrying water into the house in plastic buckets. The children have turned one side of the house into an outdoor toilet. It sinks of human feces.

Munira Ibrahim Amer and her husband, Hani, have four boys and two girls. They scamper around the room, often shouting to be heard above the noise of the heavy machinery busily tearing up the earth outside. I feel I am in an Ionesco play.

"I spent 10 years working in Saudi Arabia to buy this land and start our nursery," says Hani. "In a few hours the Israelis bulldozed my greenhouses and my plants into the ground."

The family moved into the house in 1981. They made a decent living. They had many Israeli customers. They grew things.

"A year ago army jeeps appeared in the village and scattered leaflets around the mosque," he says. "Soldiers came to our house. They told us our house was in the way of the fence and would be demolished. They said they would compensate us."

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But he does not believe them. He says the Israelis determine the worth of the land and property and he says other Palestinians tell him the Israelis usually never pay.

“They will build their wall and they will take revenge on me and my family for allowing these internationals to protect us. They will demolish my home.” It is dusk. I leave. The activists, fearing a demolition, sleep under the tarps. I speak with Maria the next morning by phone. She tells me her real name. It is Maren Karlitzky. She is German. She reveals her name because she is sitting with the other activists in a police station in the Jewish settlement of Ariel. The Israelis have taken her passport. She is under arrest.

She tells me that at 7 a.m. about a hundred soldiers surrounded the house. They pushed the activists onto buses. The activists watched the bulldozer demolish the shed. The group was kept awake all night. Everyone was questioned.

“When I was called in for questioning they told me I could stay [in Israel] if I collaborated with them,” she says. “I refused.”

At 4 in the morning the police presented the group with typed Hebrew statements and told the activists to sign them. The statements said that none of them would again enter the West Bank or attempt to renew their visas. They signed the papers.

“It was a mistake,” Maren said. “We were tired.”

I ask her what she will do next. “Guess,” she says.

TOO MUCH PRESSURE

I often have to leave my car behind and walk to villages, villages that have not had access to roads for two or three years. Crude barriers of dirt, trenches or torn-up strips of asphalt make the roads impassible. Weeds grow up on either side of the roads. The crude barriers will be replaced soon by walls and fences and ditches and wire.

I am walking down an empty dirt road. It is covered with stones. I am walking to the farming hamlet of al-Nuaman. The farmers have been legally dispossessed, ethnic cleansing by administrative fiat. It was a specialty of the Bosnian Muslims, who did not want the ethnic Croats and Serbs to go back to their old apartments in Sarajevo. So they used the courts to strip them of their property.

There are tens of thousands of Palestinians whom Israeli courts have declared

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squatters in their own homes, homes they were born and raised in, homes which have been in the family for generations.

The cicadas sing out in a cacophonous chorus. The heat feels like the blast from a furnace. Olive groves, with rows of thick, gnarled trees, line the slope to the valley below me. The hilltops are rocky and gray. There are a few patches of light green.

The road to the hamlet was closed in 1995 by the Israelis. The bulldozers blocked it with dirt and scooped out a huge trench at the edge of the village, tossing the chunks of black asphalt to the side. The Israelis changed the name of the hamlet to Mazmouria, although no Israelis live here. I see the hamlet ahead of me. It is tiny, with 26 modest homes, all with flat roofs and stucco exteriors.

I walk down into the trench. Youssif Dara'wi, a large man with a heavy girth, is standing on the other side looking down at me. He helps me up. He is wearing sandals. He clutches a cellphone. There is a large ring of keys on a silver clasp fastened to his belt. I get into his car and we drive to his house. He has set out a dozen white plastic chairs under the one tree in his front yard. Older men, when they see us, come to introduce themselves and take a seat.

Youssif was born in the hamlet. As far as he can tell, his family has been here for 180 years, but probably longer. He owns about 100 acres of olive groves, making him one of the largest landowners here. The farmers in the village together have 1,000 acres. When they were occupied by Israeli troops in 1967 they were given Israeli identification cards. The cards said they were residents of the West Bank. They were incorporated into the Bethlehem municipality. "It all began to change after the start of the first Palestinian uprising in 1987," Youssif says.

Israeli officials forbade any new construction. When anyone tried to build a house or expand existing ones, Israeli bulldozers tore the structures down. After the Oslo peace agreement the pressure eased, only to come back in greater force with the latest uprising. The road was closed. The children in the village, who had gone to Jerusalem for their schooling, were barred from the city. The Israelis expanded the boundaries of the Jerusalem municipality. The farmers have become West Bank squatters illegally encamped inside Israel. It is a neat little legal trick. Members of the community pooled their money to hire an Israeli lawyer. But cases, even when they get to the Supreme Court, even when they result in a decision in favor of the Palestinians, can be immediately overruled by the state on

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grounds of national security. National security, as in my own country, is the god that is destroying us all.

"I am not allowed to be here or to meet you according to Israeli law," Youssif says. "I am not allowed to be on my own land."

The water to the hamlet was cut three years ago. Water comes now from wells and water trucks.

He pulls out a topographical map. It is marked with colored zones and colored lines to indicate settlements, the barrier under construction around Jerusalem, the land that has been confiscated, the land that will be confiscated and the new demarcation lines for the hamlet. The blue line, he explains, is the new boundary for Jerusalem. The hamlet is within the boundary. The yellow line is the barrier, which when we look up we can see being built down the hill in front of a new hilltop settlement with several hundred concrete apartment blocks. He traces his thick finger around the roads, the settlements and the barrier to show how the hamlet will be encircled, how he and his neighbors will soon lose nearly all their land and live illegally in a ghetto with no running water. I have seen this now many times.

Most Palestinians carry maps. They keep them tucked into their shirt pockets and pull them out at the slightest provocation. They spread them on the ground and chart for you the course of their own demise. It happens so often it gets boring, but I always listen and nod and pretend the information is new. The ritual is repeated over and over and seems to be part of the struggle to cope with the scale and horror of what is happening.

A group of Israeli soldiers appeared in the hamlet four months ago. They said Israel was willing to compensate farmers whose homes had been built before 1992. They told the farmer to submit compensation forms. The army would determine the price to be paid. The other homes, they said, would be demolished. If any home was built after 1992 the family would receive nothing. None of the farmers filed for compensation.

Then the physical harassment began. Soldiers arrived early one morning in July and roused six farmers from their beds and drove them to a nearby military outpost. They were told they would be released when they signed papers saying they would not enter Israeli territory. The farmers signed the papers. They spent the rest of the night walking home.

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“I signed,” Abid Ataya, 55, tells me as we sit in a half circle of chairs under a pine tree. “I didn’t realize that according to them I live in an Israeli area.” Soldiers come frequently to demand other signatures. They were there the night before, their jeeps roaring into the hamlet at 2:30 a.m.. The soldiers handcuffed 20 farmers and took them to the military outpost. All refused to sign. In the morning, after squatting all night outside the compound, they were released.

“The soldiers laughed at us,” Mahmoud Ali Hussein, 43, says. “They told us when the wall was finished we would not be able to enter Israel or the West Bank. They told us we would have no land. They sent us home and told us to wait. They said our time is almost up.”

The farmers sit, bewildered, trying to comprehend it all, the ability to declare reality to be one way when it is another, the ability to swiftly and irrevocably destroy their life, the only life they have known. I say nothing, so we sit like this for a long time.

“Does a condemned prisoner sign an agreement authorizing his own execution?” asks Mahmoud suddenly.

A boy with a tray holding glasses of lukewarm soda moves between us handing out drinks. We sip the soda. The farmers light cigarettes. Ribbons of thin bluish smoke waft toward the pine branches over our heads. Again we are silent, thinking about it all.

“Too much pressure makes explosions,” my host says. “When you deny us education, medical care and work what do you think we will do? When you take our homes and our land from us, when we cannot feed our families, when you strip us of our dignity, how do you think we will behave? How can you ask us to be neighbors after this? What chance do you think there will be for peace?” The men nod.

“We are going to change the name of our village,” he says. “We are going to call it Transfer 2004.” No one laughs.

THE GOOD ISRAELIS

And what of the good Israelis? Where are they? What are they doing? I found Allegra Pacheco mopping the floors of her small second-story apartment in Bethlehem. Her infant son is asleep. The furniture is upended in the corner of the living room. She is scrubbing away. The scent of ammonia from the tiled floor fills

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the room, even with the windows open.

“We will have to go outside,” she says.

We sit on her balcony. We look out over the cramped and squalid hovels of the Deheisha refugee camp. The camp cascades, one hovel nearly on top of the next, down a slope. The pope used the camp as a backdrop in 2000 when he visited. He was there long enough for the press to get images and cover his kind beneficence. The camp exploded into rioting five minutes after the pope departed. The local police station was badly vandalized. There was never a coherent explanation for the rioting, other than the obvious, the frustration and rage of a people used once again as a stage prop and then forgotten.

Allegra is a Jew. She grew up in Long Island, where she was a member of a “Zionist-oriented family.” She visited Israel as a teenager on one of the tours designed to get Americans to bond with the Jewish state. She went to Barnard and Columbia Law School. She began to ask questions, questions many around her refused to ask.

She read about the Middle East. The story of the Palestinians began to unsettle her. She began to see another side of Israel. She moved to Israel after a few years as a lawyer in New York. She studied for the Israeli bar. She looked to Lea Tsmel, the Israeli lawyer who has often defended Palestinians, as a mentor. She opened a law office in Bethlehem. She was the only Israeli ever to open a law office in Palestinian territory. She handled cases involving house demolitions, land confiscations, torture and prisoners who had been incarcerated without ever being charged. She documented some torture practices, at first denied by Israel, and took the case to the Supreme Court. Most of the practices were outlawed.

The second Palestinian uprising began as she had taken a break and was writing a book as a Peace Fellow at Harvard University. She dropped the manuscript and came back. The restrictions, however, were so draconian she often could not get through the checkpoints to her office. It was hard to see clients or make court appearances. She took over the case of a Palestinian human rights activist, Abed al-Rahman al-Ahmar, being held without charge in administrative detention.

“I met my husband Abed in 1996, when he was under interrogation and being tortured,” she says. “He was then sent to two and a half years of administrative detention and I continued to represent him. When he was released, he helped me set up my law office and worked with me. That’s how we fell in love.”

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They married. They spent their honeymoon trapped in their apartment under almost continuous curfew.

TWENTY TO A TENT

She was eight months pregnant when Abed was arrested for the 13th time. He was sent to Ofra prison. The prisoners live 20 to a tent in the desert. They sleep on wooden pallets. The tents are sweltering in the summer and cold in the winter.

“Abed sleeps under 10 blankets in the winter,” she said. “There is no heat.” There is an open sewer nearby and swarms of mosquitoes. He is being held on secret evidence, which means he has not been told the charges against him. Abed has never been sentenced. His six-month military detention order had been extended for another six months in June. It too was done in secret. It can be renewed indefinitely. Amnesty International has adopted him as a prisoner of conscience.

His health is precarious. When he was 16 he was arrested for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. He was tied to a chair in contorted positions. His back and stomach were under tremendous pressure. He was in great pain. His head was covered with a bag soaked in urine. Allegra has sued the army for the torture he underwent in 1996. He was also tortured on three other occasions while in detention.

“They have told him he will be released if [we] drop the lawsuit,” she says. “He will not.”

She gave birth to their first child, Quds, the Arabic name for Jerusalem, this spring. Abed has never seen his son. When Allegra asked for the address of the prison to mail her husband pictures of their child she was told there was no address.

“My husband has been banned from Jerusalem for 20 years, so we brought Jerusalem to us,” she says.

She is an Israeli citizen, but because her husband is Palestinian, because of his ethnicity, he is refused citizenship. She was born in Long Island. He was born here. This is how it works in Israel. Israel is a democracy only for Jews. If she had married a Jew he would have a passport and citizenship.

“What democratic state builds its laws based on a person’s ethnicity?” she asks. “The goal of the South African apartheid regime was to separate whites and

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blacks to preserve white privilege. How is this different from what is being done to the Palestinians?”

“Who is really being shut out by this wall?” she adds. “Who is being shut in? Israel will be a closed society when the wall is finished. It will even further shun reality.”

Her son wakes up and begins to cry. She gets up and walks to his room. She comes back with the infant in her arms. She begins to breast-feed him. As she coos over her son she lets me read a notebook smuggled out of the prison. It has drawings by one of the prisoners for her child Quds with stories by her husband. On the cover of the ruled school notebook are the words “Quds Smart Notebook.”

In one picture a small boy is feeding a bird. “This is Quds’ bird,” it says. “Quds feeds the bird. The bird loves Quds. The birds are playing in Quds’ beautiful garden. They know Quds. They love him very much.”

She slips her wedding ring off her finger so I can read the inscription on the band inside. It has two letter A’s with a heart between them. The word “forever” is etched into the band. She cradles the child in her arms and whispers words of comfort to him. She looks up, weary and sad.

“In Israel, I’m considered radical because I advocate equal rights for all persons residing between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea,” she says.

THE NOOSE TIGHTENS

It does not matter where I turn. I see the noose tightening. There is no escape. The barrier is closing in from every side, grinding and crushing everything in its path. I begin to feel the claustrophobia, the sense of inevitable doom, the awful fatalness of it all.

Palestinians cling to what they have like shipwrecked sailors clinging to the hull of a sinking boat. There is a mass migration. They are being forced from their homes. Some have moved into their fields. They have set up squalid little encampments in vegetable patches. It is their last stand.

I walk over the heavy earth on the Israeli side of the fence from the village of Jayyous. The village has some 2,200 acres, along with six wells and pumping stations. The fence has separated the farmers in the village from 73% of its irrigated farmland. About 300 families are losing their only source of income. My feet are

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covered with dirt. I see across the fields the sparks shooting up from numerous campfires. I hear voices, the idle chatter of children, women and men.

Suffian Youssef, 30, stands beside an old blue truck. His two brothers, his mother and his father are with him. It is nearly dark. They have set up a small tarp and a crude shack. It is where they sleep. There is a brass coffee pot on the brazier over the fire. I smell wood smoke.

“We began to sleep in our fields a month ago,” he said. “We fear that if they close the gate we will not be able to get to our crop. We are having trouble getting our crop to market. We took the crates of potatoes up to the gate in the truck a few days ago. The Border Police told us to take the crates off the truck and load them back on the truck four times. When we took them off for the fourth time they dumped the potatoes on the ground and crushed them with their boots. They beat us with their rifle butts.”

Crickets chirp softly. I see a half moon poking through the haze in the sky. The roadblocks and checkpoints mean that farmers cannot get their produce to urban areas in the West Bank. There are now Israeli suppliers, who can use the settler roads, who have taken over these markets. Prices, because vegetables are bottled up in agricultural areas, have plummeted.

“We may not have enough money next year to plant a crop,” Youssef says. When I leave it is night. I stumble out of the fields. I know they will not be here next year.

TASTE OF DEATH

It is late afternoon at Gate Number 542 in the farming village of Zita, north of Tulkarm. A sign on the electric fence that runs along the dirt track for as far as the eye can see reads: “Danger. Military Area. Anyone crossing or touching the fence does so at his own risk.” It is in Hebrew, Arabic and English.

The iron gates are painted yellow. There are motion sensors and television cameras mounted along the fence. There is a smooth strip of sand to detect unauthorized footprints. There is a dirt service road. There is a trench about seven feet deep to stop vehicles from crashing through the barrier. There is a paved road for the army jeeps. There are coils of razor wire. The land on either side of the barrier, about 100 feet wide, is desolate. Blackened stumps from uprooted olive trees poke up from the dirt. All living things on or near the barrier have been killed. It

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tastes of death. This is what the barrier will look like in most places on the West Bank.

There are poles mounted with powerful floodlights along the barrier to turn night into day. The farmers who live on the edge of the wasteland, often once their farmland, cannot sleep because of the glare of the lights.

A dozen poor farmers and shepherds are clustered on the other side of the barrier. They have grazed their flocks or tended their plants on their land, land Israel has swallowed up. They have been there for an hour. The gate is supposed to be opened at 6 p.m. On some nights the border police come early. Other nights they come late. There are times they do not come at all. When they do not come the farmers and shepherds sleep on the ground near the gate until morning.

Jamal Hassouna, 43, a farmer, is standing with me. We are standing on land that once belonged to him but was taken without compensation to build the barrier.

"If anyone touches the fence, even a child, they are not allowed to pass," he says. "Every soldier is a little Ariel Sharon."

Two green armored jeeps from the border police roar down the asphalt strip enclosed by the two electric fences. They halt and five policemen climb out. They hold their M-16 assault rifles at an angle. They are wearing helmets. One soldier, watched by two others, goes to open the padlock on the gate on the other side. He swings the gate open and the motley crowd walks out into the empty space, across the tarred road and the dirt road to the yellow gate on my side. They show the police their special permits before they are allowed through the yellow gate.

The police are silent. Jamal says it is because I am present. On many nights, he says, farmers are insulted, cursed, made to lift their shirts or humiliated by being told they have to crawl through the gates. Wives and children no longer cross to spare themselves the harassment. There are many farmers who, although they are never told why, are no longer allowed to pass. Their fields are dying.

I walk to tomato fields covered by gauzy brown netting. Iyad Abu Hamdi, 27, is seated alone on the lip of a small drainage ditch next to the field of tomatoes. His land is on the other side of the barrier.

He was tending his crop of peppers a few days ago when a patrol of the border police arrived at his field. The two policemen began to make lewd remarks to his wife, who was working with him. They ordered her to make them coffee. She obeyed. They ordered her sister to bring them water. She refused. They threw

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their thermos at his brother and told him to fill it with water. He also refused. “They began to beat my brother,” Hamdi says. “They tossed the coffee in our faces. They cursed us. They shouted at us. They confiscated our identification cards. The soldiers told my wife to accept their advances or they would ruin her reputation.”

When he says “accept their advances” his voice quivers with emotion and he turns his head away to avoid my eyes.

The sun is dipping below the earth. There is a dim yellow glow across the fields. His voice is shaking. He bows his head between his knees and looks at the ground.

“This happened on Aug. 3,” he begins again. “I have not been allowed to cross since. They slam the gate shut in my face. My crop is dying.” The tears roll down his cheeks. They too are serpent’s teeth.



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