



One Border, Two Worlds

By Fida Jiryis



I stand in the long line of cars waiting to leave Qalandia Checkpoint, my anger and frustration still boiling over, even after six years. I've never been able to get used to it, and I don't think anyone does, really. We just grit our teeth and go through the motions.

A child, no more than twelve or thirteen, taps my window, offering cheap gum. I look at him, and an image of the children on the other side comes to my mind.

The dust, car fumes, and piles of garbage add to the choking feeling of the large, concrete checkpoint ahead. It's one of the most depressing spaces I've ever had the misfortune to frequent. We inch forward, bumper-to-bumper, squeezing to within an inch of the next car, lest someone squeeze in ahead of us. Relief can't come too soon. The road is battered, the passengers weary, the Israeli soldiers smug and insolent. We hope and pray that the line will move forward uneventfully and that the teenagers imprisoning us will see nothing wrong in our ID cards and let us through.

I cross, and within a few minutes, the entire reality changes. About two kilometers is all it takes to be transported to a different world. Suddenly, dust and dirt are replaced by green and cleanliness. If you didn't know where you were, you would imagine some civilized, peaceful country where law and order reign supreme and the system is expertly fine-tuned to the citizen's rights and comfort. Wide, impeccably engineered highways, pothole-free and freshly tarred every season, lead you through the multifaceted landscape of open spaces, fields, and hills. The three-hour journey to the Upper Galilee, close to the Lebanese border where my village, Fassouta, lies, offers beautiful scenes of



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Palestine that change with the ascent, beginning with the more arid hills, moving to the greener, flat plains, and ending in thick, mountainous forests.

The order is the first thing to hit me: traffic lights, pedestrian crossings, well-arranged streets and buildings. Everything moves to a precise, ordered logic. People drive by in excellent cars. Modern, expensive malls, coffee chains and restaurants pave the way. Not a single piece of garbage litters the

streets. Despite myself, I consider it refreshing, after the dirt and chaos I've just left behind to make that crossing.

But another feeling strikes me simultaneously: one that, again, I've never been able to shake, not twenty years after coming to this country. The beauty, order, cleanliness, and structure all feel like a beautiful park built on a graveyard.

There's nothing organic about it; the entire country has a surreal, "created five minutes ago" feeling, almost like a giant hand wiped out the landscape



The horrendous chaos caused by Qalandia check point.

and erected all this modern structure in its place. Which is, pretty much, an accurate representation of our recent history.

So acute is this feeling that I was surprised recently to hear an Australian friend living here express it to me. "I hate the place," he said. "It's... fake. It's ugly."

True. I've often wondered why Israel's painstaking efforts to erect rows of perfect homes dotting perfect hills have produced such ugliness. Is it the implied menace of the systematic organization? The clear lack of organic, slow growth? Or is it that we know how it got there?

The more I drive along the route, the more I'm weighed down by despair and melancholy, feelings curiously at odds with the perfect surroundings. I think of the isolation we live in, in Ramallah, of our political setup, of the slogans we still have. They are so far removed, so futile, when I look at the massive reality around me. I balk, painfully, at our collective self-delusion in thinking that we can change one slab of concrete in this ruthless structure.

I am crushed not by the weight of Israel alone and what it has done to

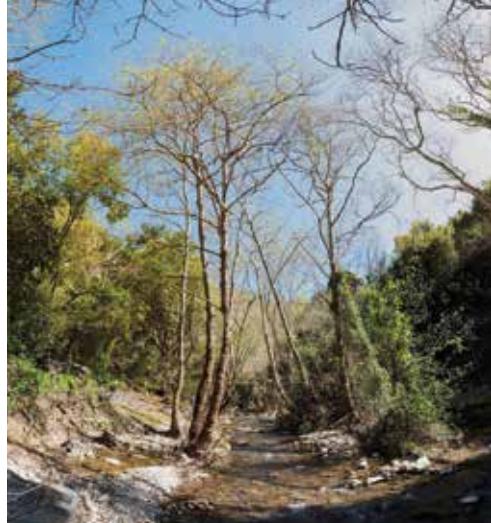
us, but by the weight of where my own people – those who live inside it – have come. The severing of the two population groups, Palestinians in the West Bank and those inside Israel, is not merely physical. It's much deeper and more dangerous: it's also political and psychological. There is almost nothing in common between people on the two sides of the divide anymore. Many will hasten to shout: "We are Palestinians! We are one people!" and we are, but the oneness has been impacted by years of a different reality for each.

One group is under blatant occupation, still able to freely express themselves as Palestinians and claim a territory as their absolute right, while the other group is under a much more dangerous occupation, one that has become tacit and forgotten, as their lame integration into the state has been under way. The integration is far from complete and never will be, but in the meantime, this group does not or cannot, for the most part, identify themselves as Palestinians. Their claim to their country is only in their hearts, and they are shackled in a thousand ways that pound their identity. Recent efforts to affirm this identity, rise in solidarity with their people, and demand their

rights have all led to riots and are tinged with ongoing danger. When I reach Fassouta, the psychological distance is so huge that none of my friends or neighbors can even imagine my life in Ramallah, even if they have visited. Some still look at me with wide eyes and enquire in hushed tones: "You're still... *there*?" as though uttering the name will cause a member of the Israeli intelligence services to pounce on them.

There are no checkpoints here, no roadblocks. A Palestinian citizen of Israel is free to travel anywhere within the country and to use Ben Gurion Airport to travel abroad. This is all taken for granted; none of them can imagine the checkpoints or having to cross into Jordan to travel, crossing bridges and taking one or two days for a trip of a few hours, being barred from the use of an airport that is half an hour away. None of them, in fact, can imagine being confined to a certain geographic area and not being allowed to travel to the next town or village without a permit, which is often denied.

They've paid similar dues, previously. Eighteen years of ruthless military rule after the establishment of Israel, and the confiscation of most Arab lands and destruction of tens of villages dealt the Palestinians a blow that was as painful as losing half their brethren as refugees and losing their country overnight. But then the systematic wrath and sadism of Israel turned to the West Bankers and Gazans, while the Palestinians of Israel were "assimilated," a word that is as sterile and surgical as it is ineffectual. The "assimilation," however, produced the relative, superficial benefits of citizenship that these Palestinians have today, which, as fraught with systematic discrimination and racism as they



Fassouta landscape. Photo by Shiham Abu Ayoub (Shayoub).



The village of Fassouta in the Upper Galilee. Photo Shiham Abu Ayoub (Shayoub). Photo by Shiham Abu Ayoub.

are, are still light years ahead of what the West Bankers – never mind Gazans – have to endure.

To explain all this to my family and friends in the Galilee is akin to having just dropped from the moon.

There is a similar void in Ramallah. When I tell people that I am from the Galilee, there are smiles of faint recognition and happiness. But many have never visited and only have an imagined picture in their minds. "It's very beautiful there, isn't it?" most will ask me longingly, and I nod, my heart pained that it's so close to them, yet out of bounds.

It's a cliché, but one only repeats it because it's true: walls have fallen the world around, and Israel builds more walls to lock us in.

The true picture of this chasm between the two parts of our people is more visible and painful to those of us who frequently cross the divide. Israel has divided us into blue and green IDs, into 1948 and 1967, into West Bank and Gaza, into West Bank and Jerusalem, into a number of such complicated visa and passport and travel arrangements that to look at all the permutations is mind-boggling. Every Palestinian is a story in him- or herself, and a quick question on passport and ID status will form a very accurate picture for the listener, in the West Bank, of a person's



The Greek Church at Fassouta. Photo by Shiham Abu Ayoub (Shayoub).

situation and ability to travel. All this is unheard of to Palestinian citizens of Israel, not through any fault of theirs, but through the massive, definitive, and striking divide that Israel has put in place.

For the majority of people, it would only take an hour or two to cross that divide. But it would take years to bridge it.

Naturally, the same path is then followed by national dreams and aspirations of the two groups. One strives for independence and statehood; the other tries to achieve equality in a state that it does not believe in and that was forced on it. A sense of panic emerges, now that it has been formally isolated from any sought political solution for its Palestinian people as a whole.

One group studies according to the modified Jordanian curriculum; the other is forced to study in Hebrew and pass such subjects as the Torah and “civic studies of Israel.” One group sees Israelis only as soldiers and settlers; the other has to interact with them on a daily basis at school, work, on the streets, and in shops and

public institutions. One group does not know Hebrew, usually hearing the language yelled at it at checkpoints and in prisons; the other group uses it extensively to the point where its Arabic is tainted. One group struggles under suffocating occupation but maintains a very clear identity; the other has a much deeper crisis in identity and self-definition.

Do we wonder, then, that we have become apples and oranges?

And where, exactly, is this fruit basket heading?

At the end of the day, to Israel, we are all the same.

Fida Jiryis is a Palestinian writer, editor, and author of Hayatuna Elsagheera (Our Small Life), 2011, and Al-Khawaja (The Gentleman), 2014, two collections of Arabic short stories on village life in the Galilee. She is currently completing a third Arabic collection of short stories, Al-Qafas (The Cage), and an English memoir, My Return to the Galilee, on her return to Palestine after the Oslo Accords. She can be reached at fida_jiryis@hotmail.com.