

Jerusalem, Twenty Years Later



By Ali Qleibo

More than twenty years after the Oslo Agreement, it has become evident that the slogan “Gaza and Jericho First” was a euphemism, preparing the ground for the Israeli takeover of our city. The Israeli Judaization of Jerusalem has escalated to an unprecedented level. In the systematic takeover of Jerusalem, most institutional Palestinian offices in Jerusalem have been driven out. The checkpoints and the arbitrary inclusion, or exclusion, of major Arab “suburbs” have created a great demographic change, leading to the total isolation of Jerusalem and of Jerusalemites. Through Israeli-manipulated bureaucratic procedures and unsurpassable barriers, families are broken apart. And as one walks the streets of the Old City, the blatant scarcity of rural peddlers in their colorful embroidered garments and of people in general is a saddening symptom of the demise of Al-Quds.

Following the Oslo Agreement, through a series of Israeli bureaucratic and military procedures, the Palestinians in the West Bank have been denied entry to Jerusalem. Israelis have systematically isolated us Jerusalemites from our fellow Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. With the completion of the separation wall and heavily guarded checkpoints, access to the Holy City is under total military surveillance. Victims of isolation, abuse, and

THIS WEEK IN PALESTINE TURNS TWENTY



Entering Jerusalem's Old City from Nablus Road via Damascus Gate. Photo by Sharif Sarhan.

forced displacement, Jerusalemites must also contend with Israeli economic, demographic, and political sanctions amidst shy mumblings from both Arabic national and Western international communities. Foreign diplomatic missions, to mollify the Palestinians, and in lieu of vociferously standing up against the occupation, have conceded to dole out charity to various dubious cultural institutes and nongovernmental organizations.

Jerusalem is a sad, very sad city. In the past two decades Israelis have

forcefully created a *de facto* reality whereby the status of Jerusalem as an occupied city and that of the Palestinians as a people under occupation has become internationally overlooked. The historical rights of the Palestinians and the incumbent obligations of the occupying army as specified in the Geneva Conventions are violated daily in defiance of all Geneva Conventions. In the absence of international sanctions to coerce an end to the occupation, Israel has become increasingly recalcitrant.



The recent step taken by the United States to ratify and legitimize the Israeli occupation has been epitomized by the move of its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in defiance of international law. This was followed by hesitant grumblings of the European community. On the other hand, the Israeli alliances with the Arab nations have developed on both the military and economic levels. This normalization of the Arab/Israeli relationship has increased to

Jerusalem is austere, rugged, and moody, yet thrilling in its unrelenting beauty and spirituality. The sense of the sacred permeates every corner. Though the sacred is immutable, Palestinian hegemony over their religious symbols and Palestinian social, demographic, political, and economic conditions are facing sustained strenuous challenges.

the detriment of the Palestinians and their historical rights to their homeland. In the emerging political scene, given the new geopolitical alliances, the Palestinian Authority has been isolated, marginalized, and too weak to make any political dent.

Despite the Israeli municipal insistence on Jerusalem as a united city, the Jerusalemite Palestinians remain without a defined political status. Neither Palestinian nationals with Palestinian passports nor Israelis, we are extended a Jordanian courtesy passport that simply allows us to travel.

In violation of the Geneva Conventions we have been stripped of our historical rights by the Israeli occupation and have become alien residents in our homeland at risk of losing the right of

residence should we not fulfil one of the conditions that define Jerusalem as one's home. The Israeli demographic war waged against Palestinian Jerusalemites employs insidious bureaucratic measures whereby we are deprived of our residency rights. To add insult to injury, it is almost impossible to officially register the properties we have inherited or purchased, and trying to obtain the property deeds has become a tortuous bureaucratic challenge.

Despite the apparent economic dependency of Palestinian Jerusalemites on the Israeli labor market, forced normalization, the hiatus that separates the occupied from the occupier has never been deeper. The disparity in the municipal services administered to the two sectors of the divided city have never been more glaring. The lackadaisical municipal services, insufficient school budget allocations, unpaved roads and potholes, inadequate garbage collection, scarcity of building permits, and the policy of home demolitions are examples that demonstrate Israeli discriminatory measures. In fact, the 23 villages that comprise "Greater Jerusalem" have turned into run-down ethnic slums where drugs and crime run rampant.

Recalcitrant Israeli measures in defiance of international law have proceeded at an accelerated rate. As the Israelis solidify their alliances with the Arab nations, the Jerusalemites under occupation feel forlorn, abandoned, and isolated from the world at large. The *de facto* Israeli hegemony over Al-Quds, the pernicious Israeli strategies to annex the occupied city under the rubric of the united Jerusalem, but to exclude the people, seeks to obscure the fact that we are an occupied people with historical and civil rights to be protected under Geneva Conventions that specify the duties and obligations of the military occupier towards the occupied civil population.

Over the past two decades, the daily incursions, transgressions, and constant Israeli violations of the sanctity of Al-Aqsa Mosque in preparation for a partition of the sacred place and an eventual takeover have become a daily occurrence. Three years ago, in an unprecedented move, Israelis closed the gates leading to Al-Aqsa Mosque. For over ten days. Neither regular prayers, Friday prayers, nor funerals were allowed.

The tardy response of the authorities on previous occasions and in this grievous moment in particular created a vacuum that forced the Jerusalemites to assume individual responsibility. They gathered around the gates of Al-Aqsa in stunned silence. Left on their own, forsaken by the world, they projected an amazing spectacle as they huddled outside the closed gates all day and night keeping vigil. Prayers were held jointly by Christians and Muslims outside the sacred precincts. As the days of closure and waiting were prolonged, social media provided minute by minute developments. Complex factors, namely the political vacuum and the prevailing sense of being abandoned and battered by the daily harangues of the Israelis led to the use of social media, and in particular Facebook, to foment the dynamics of an emerging Jerusalem political community.

In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to survive in Jerusalem while being confronted with Israeli incursions and efforts to undermine the family, the sacred, and society.



The “liberation” of the mosque, the reconciliatory Israeli decision to reopen it, remains a most joyous memory and a confirmation of Jerusalem’s determination against Israeli measures. The images of the multitudes rushing to celebrate the freedom of the sacred grounds, kneeling and kissing the floor, and the exalted joy filled the Facebook posts. But first and foremost, the event proved to the Jerusalemites that they had won the day on their own merit.

Over the past few years, access to Internet and hence to social media has become ubiquitous. Social media, namely Facebook and WhatsApp, have become the basis for the formation of a cyberculture and a political community in Jerusalem. By posting descriptive, critical, and analytic accounts of the day-to-day eventualities, sharing these posts, placing commentaries, or silently reading to keep up with the developments on the scene, a new social political consciousness has formed. Significantly, the once marginalized silent majority came to be directly involved in the day-to-day details related to the problematics consequent to the continual Israeli occupation of our city. Social media has not only developed as the alternative to journalism but has come to establish a hierarchical political community of “ring leaders,” advocates and devoted followers who exert a coercive power.

In the continual struggle to end the Israeli occupation and to curb its

malicious strategies to transfer the Arab majority outside Jerusalem, Facebook and WhatsApp have become the new vehicle. Economically, politically, and ideologically abandoned by the Arab world at large and by the feeble authorities in Ramallah, the conditions in Jerusalem on all levels have deteriorated, which is further compounded by the heavy self-censorship in the Arab press. Against this dismal background, Facebook has become the reliable source of information. In fact, it provides the thick description, the detailed day-by-day account of historic developments in Jerusalem and of everyday life.

Forlorn, overwhelmed by a sense of international indifference and abandonment, Jerusalemites are resolutely trudging on. Battered, beaten, and worn out – but not destroyed.

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بياسي القدس

JERUSALEM NIGHTS 12-15/12/2018

From our readers

*What a lovely message to receive – and during my lifetime!
Keep up the good work. It is people like you who make me proud and hopeful about Palestine.
With my best wishes,*

Raja Shehadeh – March 30, 2017 (email on being featured among “Palestinians Who Leave Their Mark”)

