



## The Palestinian 'Wailing Wall'

### *A Palestinian in Dhahiat al-Barid Records a Life Transformed*

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It is mid-November 2005.<sup>1</sup> Together with another three families we are about to leave the neighborhood of Dhahiat al-Barid in the northern part of Jerusalem. The Israeli separation wall will soon be completed and each of us, for different reasons, must find a new home. Most of our friends have already moved away. Those left behind lack either money or documents—Israeli identity cards or Western passports that would give them access to other areas.

Amer<sup>2</sup> and Manal are in a unique situation: he is originally from Nablus, in the West Bank and she is from Ta'mra, a small town in the Galilee, Israel. Neither can join the other in his or her hometown. He doesn't have Israeli citizenship and, with cruel irony, possession of citizenship prevents Manal from joining her husband in his West Bank town. Every visit to her in-laws requires a permit from the Israeli military authorities allowing her to enter Nablus. In the new reality created by the wall, there is the risk

that Manal, because of her Israeli citizenship, will not be allowed to continue living in her home in Dhahyat al-Barid. Amer proposes a typical Palestinian solution: both can move to Jordan, where she can stay with his relatives in Amman while he tries to find a job in Libya, an option that has become especially attractive in light of Qadhafi's new reconciliation with America.

Aging Abu al-Sa'id must leave his home in the neighborhood in order to retain his Israeli health insurance. For 30 years, he has worked in construction in various Israeli cities. He has paid all the required fees, including that for Israeli national health insurance. But in October 2005, he received a notice from the national insurance office requiring him to prove that he lives in the city limits of Jerusalem in order to remain eligible for health services. He doesn't think about this in terms of politics; this matter of where exactly one lives in Jerusalem, he believes, is designed to avoid paying him his dues.

Now he is nearing retirement age and in need of more frequent visits to clinics and doctors. His son Sa'id isn't sure he agrees with his father that this is a personal slight, but isn't any less worried about the repercussions of the wall. He works in a supermarket in West Jerusalem and the wall will make it difficult for him to get to work on time—or at all. This will put his job at risk, something that the father of two young daughters cannot afford.

Because we hold Israeli citizenship, Naila and I share the dilemma of Manal and others who will no longer be able to enter the neighbourhood upon completion of the wall. For me it is a relief—it is time to leave this place. With the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000 and the checkpoints surrounding Jerusalem, I have long wanted to leave. After Israel announced its plans to ghettoize the West Bank behind a wall, I tried to convince Naila to move, but she vetoed my proposal.

Now, albeit unwillingly, she is finally giving up and ready to move. Checkpoints, the wall, and recent changes in the neighbourhood have proven too much. The fact that Um al-Sa'id is leaving helps confirm her decision; pregnancy makes moving now more urgent. It is very sad to see the crumbling of Naila's ideals of *sumud* [steadfastness] and identification with the other inhabitants. Still, I think we are lucky that we have the option of leaving. Most Palestinians don't enjoy such a 'privilege', if leaving one's home can be called a privilege.

## A Farewell

Naila suggests parting from the neighbourhood with a get-together—a crazy idea, given the non-festive nature of the circumstances—but the other three families like it. We bring meat for the barbeque, Rousan and Sa'id make salads, and Manal and Amer bring Nabulsi *knafa*, a Palestinian cheese pastry. The table is heavy with all kinds of salads, cold drinks and pastries. Out of respect for Abu al-Sa'id, the only fully observant Muslim in the group, we decide to leave the wine and the beer in the kitchen. Anyone wanting a sip can hide in the kitchen or simply use opaque cups to hold the wine or beer. This is a typical Palestinian detour, a way to enjoy alcohol without offending observant guests.

Everything is ready. Manal, Amer, Sa'id and Rousan come early to help with the preparations. Spirits are not high and the atmosphere isn't exactly celebratory, but we want to share experiences, stories, and gossip from our lives in Dhahiat al-Barid. Abu and Um al-Sa'id, the elders of the group, come late. And with their entrance, the atmosphere changes. The old man's silence and Um al-Sa'id's red eyes trigger suppressed emotion. We look at each other, speechless. Sadness and tension dominate. Everyone expects the others to say or do something, but out of respect for these two old people, we keep silent. Naila, who has developed a close relationship with Um al-Sa'id over the last six years, bursts into tears. Manal and Rousan choose to stay in the kitchen. Abu al-Sa'id feels embarrassed and blames his wife for spoiling the gathering. Amer and I are protective of her, but somehow her tears have exposed the façade of celebrating this forced parting. The idea of a party as an act of revenge—as Naila wanted it to be—comes to its failed end. No one has an appetite, so we sit down, silently sip coffee and smoke a *nargila*.

Later, I tell Naila that this whole idea doesn't fit our Palestinian character. We lack the needed humour. Of course, she disagrees. Her position is that we weren't sensitive enough to the situation of Um al-Sa'id, the one most affected by the wall. She has been living in her house for 25 years. She gave birth to her children here and raised them in a peaceful environment. Her two daughters are married and live in Ramallah, and visiting them has become impossible.

Sa'id is going to live with his in-laws in Shu'fat, in Jerusalem, and his younger brother 'Umar has not yet decided what to do. He cannot join his parents since they will be living in a small room in the house of Abu al-Sa'id's sister in Wadi al-Joz, in East Jerusalem. Her entire family is disintegrating and dispersing, but most difficult for her is the separation from her two grandchildren. (On the other hand this may be a relief for Rousan, her daughter-in-law. Finally, she will have control over her daughters without Um al-Sa'id's endless comments.)

The al-Sa'id house, because its owners were a veteran couple in the neighbourhood and because of its location, served as a meeting place. In the absence of cafes and clubs, the hospitality of Um al-Sa'id encouraged neighbours to gather almost every evening in the house's *saha* or courtyard. They brought their *nargilas* and she served coffee and tea. From time to time one of the neighbours volunteered to bring *knafa* or *mukasarat* (mixed nuts).

These gatherings in the *saha* became a kind of tradition in the neighbourhood. Here, in this enchanted and protected space, issues of history, politics and religion were discussed and resolved. Palestinian liberation was sought; Zionism was fought and, of course, defeated. Real memories were narrated and unreal ones invented. Stories and experiences from the checkpoints were shared. And, of course, there was news and speculation about the wall. People moved quickly in these discussions from hope to despair, from a belief in liberation to feeling profoundly threatened by the prospect of another Israeli population transfer. Positions weren't based on consistent theoretical thinking but on immediate daily experience. Difficult encounters made people extremists; easy ones moderated them. Brutal Israeli attacks on Palestinians created a unanimous demand for revenge, many advocating suicide bombing. A normal passage at the checkpoints made people believe in the possibility of peace. In fact, the only consistency in these discussions was Um al-Sa'id's cynicism about them. She often ended her participation with a request: "When you complete the liberation of Palestine, please put the chairs and tables back in their place so I can clean the floor in the morning."

With the construction of the wall and the subsequent exodus of many families from the neighbourhood, these gatherings gradually became more infrequent and more sparsely attended. Um al-Sa'id lost some of her prestige as hostess. But after her forced migration, she will be reduced to total marginality. From a large house with a large *saha*, she is moving to a small room in the apartment of her sister-in-law. The two women were never ideal companions. Tension and hostility have characterized their relations for years. For her, this is no less meaningful than the *Nakba* [Catastrophe] of 1948, when her family, together with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, were forced into exile.

## Chronicles of Division

"They are going to build the wall," was my answer to Abu al-Sa'id's teasing inquiry about the headlines of the Hebrew newspaper that I was reading. He never appreciated my obsessive review of the daily papers. It was a waste of time, he believed. He thought there were two kinds of people—those who experience tragedy and those who write and read about it. Palestinians were among the first category; they didn't need to read newspaper descriptions of their lives.

His reaction to the news of the wall was indifference. I thought he would curse the Israelis, the Jews, and probably the Americans—or at least say something about them. He just shrugged his shoulders. This strategic change in Palestine was met with a long inhalation of smoke from his *nargila*. For someone who was first driven out of his home in Ramle as a child in 1948 to become a refugee in East Jerusalem, only to be driven out of the Old City to the al-Ram neighbourhood in Israel's 1967 occupation, and now once again to have to leave Dhahiat al-Barid for Wadi al-Joz in East Jerusalem, the wall was just another chapter of the Palestinian saga.

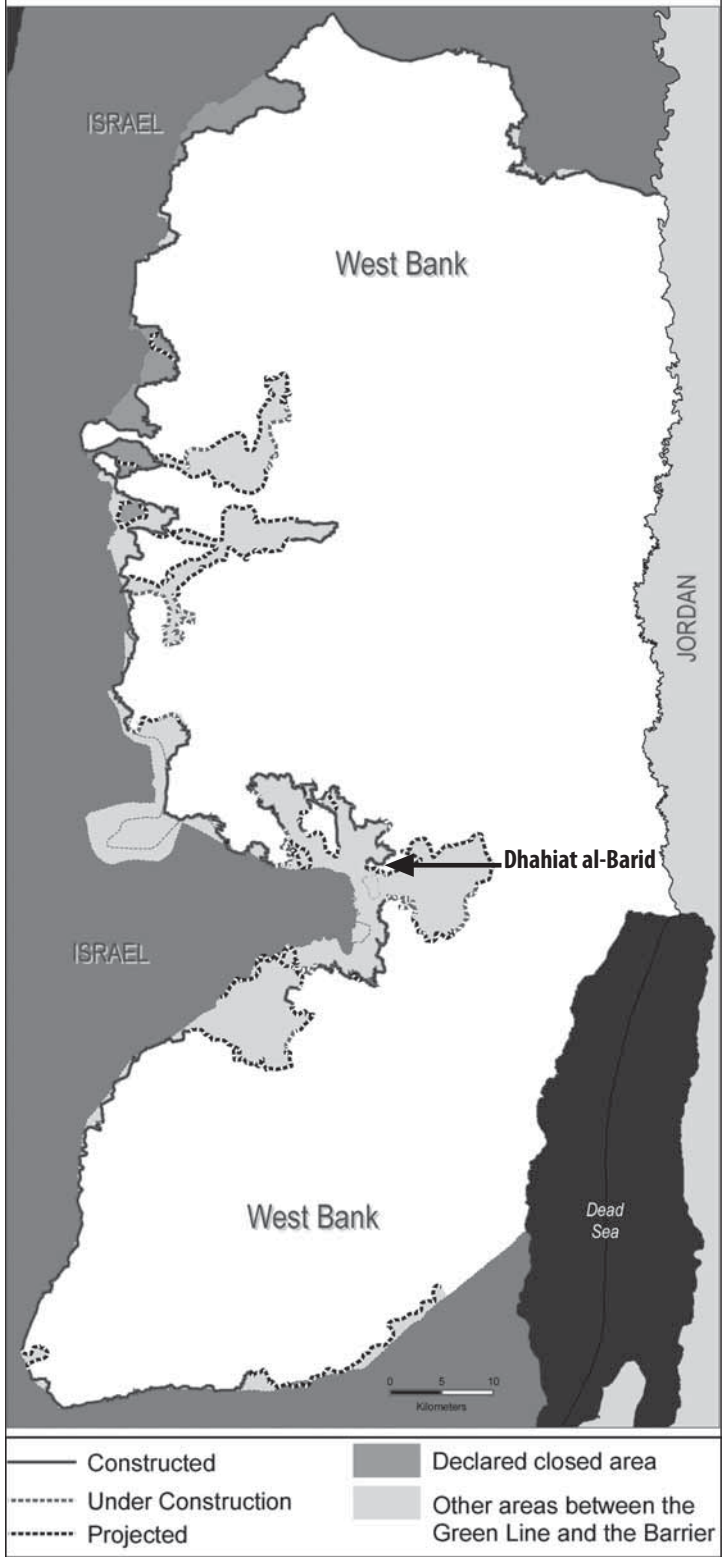
One might describe the history of Palestine and the Palestinians since the beginning of the Zionist project as a history of walls of various shapes, lengths and heights. The first 'walls' in the history of the people of Palestine were established at the end of the nineteenth century and Jewish immigrants' creation of separate colonies, which drove native peasants off their lands. Without indulging in nostalgia, it is fair to say that for centuries of Ottoman rule, Muslims, Christians and Jews managed to share the same space. The quarters they built side-by-side in the villages, towns and cities of Palestine, as well as other parts of the Middle East, exemplify this common way of life. In spite of inter- and intra-communal feuds and conflicts, tolerance between the various communities of the region was a well-established norm.

Zionism, on the other hand, introduced something different and alien to our history and culture. Nationalism brought us the idea of a political order based on exclusivity. The search for an exclusive Jewish space meant conquering the land for the use of Jews only, establishing separate Jewish colonies, farms, markets, labour forces and institutions. A massive Jewish influx was yet another 'wall' meant to deprive Palestinians of their status and rights as owners of the land. The subsequent deportation of about half of the Palestinian people who then became refugees, is one of the most painful walls in Palestinian history. This deportation was not incidental, but a continuation of the policy of keeping Palestinians out using physical and virtual walls. The systematic destruction of Palestinian neighbourhoods and villages (the cities were re-populated by Jews rather than erased), work that took about 20 years for Israeli bulldozers to complete, effectively walled many Palestinians off from their former homes.

The war in 1967 brought new walls to Palestine. Once again, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were driven into exile, many of them for the second time. New villages were added to the long list of those destroyed. Palestinian communities were separated from one another by the new divisions, sometimes boundaries running down the centre of a single village, dividing communities and families.

Exile absorbed the majority of Palestinians. Refugee camps became 'home' for most of them. Those who remained in Palestine were divided into three communities, each

### West Bank Barrier Route - June 2007



with a different legal status. Approximately one million became second-class citizens of Israel—a third of them are displaced people. Another three million found themselves under the yoke of military occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Finally, the Palestinians living in Jerusalem were separated from the rest, straddling a strange legal identity validated by Israeli ‘permanent residency’ cards and Jordanian passports.

Each Palestinian community suffered its own unique Israeli oppression, but all shared in a common narrative of deprivation and suffering. In this context, homelessness, perpetual exile, and the absence of any kind of security became the defining characteristics of the Palestinian national experience. With the first *intifada*, new methods of collective punishment, curfews and sieges and much more killing further linked them. Checkpoints and strategic roads slicing up the West Bank and turning it into cantons were introduced after the signing of the Oslo peace accords in 1993. With the breakdown of the Camp David negotiations in 2000, the concept of building a concrete and barbed wire wall to isolate the Palestinians within ghettos opened a new chapter in our history.

## **A Man and an Island**

It is not my intention to deal with all the walls that Palestinians have come up against since the appearance of Zionism in their homeland. Rather, I will resume my personal narrative concentrating on one small portion of the long wall that slices through the West Bank (which is, of course, only one small part of historic Palestine).

Al-Ram neighbourhood was spared Israeli annexation into the new borders of Jerusalem in 1970. At the time, its population was less than 10,000. In 1967, when Israel began expelling Palestinian inhabitants from the Jewish quarter of East Jerusalem to make it exclusively Jewish, the first wave of Palestinian Jerusalemites arrived in the neighbourhood. Their numbers increased as Israel began denying permits to Palestinians who sought to build in the neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem. The result was that the population of al-Ram increased fivefold. It is now home to approximately 50,000 residents, 70 percent of them Jerusalemites.

In the summer of 1999, I moved with my future wife, Naila, to Dhahyat al-Barid in the southern part of Al-Ram. Both of us are from the Galilee in Israel but have been living in Jerusalem for almost twenty years. We first arrived in the city as students, but stayed on, Naila as a social worker and I as an instructor, first at al-Quds University in East Jerusalem, and subsequently at the David Yellin College of Education and the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, both in West Jerusalem.

From within, neighbourhoods and their boundaries are defined somewhat differently than from the outside. Before moving to al-Ram, it appeared to us to be a single entity. With time, however, we learned the politics of internal subdivisions. Dhahiat al-Barid residents not only considered their neighbourhood separate from al-Ram, but also distinguish between the upper area, which is populated mainly by large, poor families, many of them religious to varying degrees, and the western regions where residents are generally secular in their practices and come from well-to-do backgrounds.

This last area was established in the 1950s when Jordanian authorities allocated land for employees of the post office (*'barid'* in Arabic) to build a community neighbourhood. Half a dunam, or an eighth of an acre, was allocated for each house. The homes were built using the characteristic stones of Jerusalem—40 houses built in four rows. Around and even between them, new homes of a different style have been constructed.

A salient feature of the neighbourhood is the diversity of its inhabitants, which include Muslims and Christians originally from Jerusalem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus and Bethlehem. Families that were forced to leave Jaffa and Lod live side-by-side with Palestinians who returned from America to start a new life in the wake of the Oslo agreements with Israel. The presence of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens is notable.

In contrast to other Palestinian neighbourhoods dominated by one family, clan or sect, this one resists traditional characterization. Until recently, religion was almost invisible here. Dhahiat al-Barid escaped the religious revivalism that has invaded many parts of the Middle East and the world at large. Not more than two women that I know of dressed in 'religious' dress. One of them wasn't religious at all. She observed none of the Muslim rituals, but clothing became for her, as for many others, a substitute for traditional Palestinian attire—a sign of identification. And even so, she dressed differently from the women in the religious upper part of Dhahiat al-Barid.

Abu al-Sa'id and Abu Musa were the only people to attend Friday prayers in a mosque. Muslims and Christians lived side by side, shopping at the same markets and sending their children to the same private schools. Those nostalgic for a shared Palestinian and Arab society could easily find it in this neighbourhood where Christmas and the Muslim feasts were celebrated almost equally by the inhabitants, regardless of their religious backgrounds and religiosity.

Cohabitation of unmarried couples is usually unacceptable in Palestinian society. But in a diverse and pluralistic neighbourhood like Dhahiat al-Barid, such a phenomenon was accommodated as well. The tendency of inhabitants to respect the privacy of others made it possible. When Naila and I decided to get married, we invited the Abu al-Sa'id family, the agents of our landlord, to the wedding and they were surprised



to learn that we weren't married. Nevertheless, they respected our way of life and even tried to validate the semi-normality of the phenomenon by acknowledging other couples who had lived together in the neighbourhood before getting married. Abu al-Sa'id called these couples 'apprentices'—they were practicing marriage without a license.

The stories of those we learned to know in Dhahiat al-Barid are rich and varied. The wedding of Manal and Amer was a uniquely Palestinian tale. Traditionally, wedding parties are held at the groom's family home. But because Nablus, Amer's hometown in the West Bank, is prone to daily Israeli incursions, they decided to hold the wedding party at her family home in Ta'mra, Israel. They had made all the necessary preparations save securing a military permit from the Israelis for Amer (without it he, a West Bank ID holder, is not allowed to enter Jerusalem or Israel). The military had promised to issue it only on the day of the wedding. These are the rules.

Manal, edgy by nature, couldn't stop asking everyone what would happen if Amer wasn't able to attend the wedding. There might be a military closure of the area, a troop incursion or the contrary whim of a soldier that prevented his passage. Ibrahim, the cynic of the group, suggested a live video up-link to represent Amer in absentia. Ibrahim volunteered to serve as a surrogate for Amer, for a good fee.

Ricardo's story is illustrative of other aspects of Palestinian life. Himself born in Jordan, Ricardo's family is divided between al-Bira, Jerusalem, and the United States. After his parents divorced, they tried several times to send him to live with his grandparents in Jerusalem, but he was denied entry by the Israeli authorities. After completing high school, he joined his family living in the US. There he studied law, changing his name from an Arab 'Ahmed' to the Latino 'Ricardo'. With his new name and American passport, he returned to Palestine to work for different Palestinian human rights organizations. This is the safest way for a Palestinian to visit his country—by shedding his authentic identity and adopting a foreign one. It was here that he met Laila, a graduate student at Birzeit University. How they would continue their relationship was only another chapter in the Palestinian identity.

## **Water and Waiting**

Two things surprised me when I first moved into the neighbourhood: checkpoints and water shortages. I used to hear of the latter when I lived just south in Bayt Hanina, but now it was a personal problem. The second week after we moved in, I woke up to find no water in the tap. It was shocking, but we managed to get through the morning using mineral water, and in the evening we showered at the home of some friends. I learned that the dry spells usually last two to three days on end in the summer months.

We often discussed the issue of water with Fadia, our neighbour married to Sa'id Murad, a composer for and director of Sabreen, an avant garde Palestinian band. In 2003, Fadia finished her dissertation on hydrology in Palestine at the University of Edinburgh. The data she supplied about water politics in Palestine were surprising. People who experience discrimination aren't always necessarily interested in calculating its exact specifications. Fadia drummed into our heads the facts about Israel's control of water. Seventy-five percent of the renewable water in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is used by Israel and Jewish settlers. They take about five or six times the water that they allow Palestinians. At the Oslo peace talks, this issue was considered too sensitive to be solved immediately. Like the issues of refugees, Jerusalem and the final borders of a Palestinian state, water allocation was delayed to final status discussions that never materialized. In the meantime, Palestinians suffer under discriminatory allocation of water resources.

To deal with the severe shortage, the municipality of al-Ram, like many others in the West Bank, adopted a policy of 'rotation allocation' during the summer. This meant that the flow of water in our neighbourhood was usually shut off for two to three days a week. So, like other Palestinians, I bought a container for storing water. (Containers in various sizes and colours have become part of the landscape of the Palestinian homestead.) But my container wasn't big enough and inevitably I missed meetings and classes. I remember calling the college secretary to tell her to cancel my classes. Before letting me explain why, she wished me a quick recovery.

"I am not sick," I answered. "We simply have no water for showering."

Surprised, she asked what to write on the notice to the students.

"Because of the occupation," I replied instinctively, using what has become a traditional Palestinian pardon.

The large numbers of people denied entry by soldiers at the checkpoints was my second frustrating surprise. Old women and men who assume it their natural right to pass through to pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque or visit Jerusalem still aren't used to the idea of carrying papers of permission. This is another innovation of the occupation. After peace agreements, these people thought they would enjoy freedom of movement, something Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints still work hard to regulate and restrict.

The checkpoints between Jerusalem, where we work, and our home were the main reason we originally delayed moving from Bayt Hanina to Dhahiat al-Barid. This neighbourhood is surrounded by three checkpoints that separate it from Jerusalem and a fourth dividing it from Ramallah. At the Bayt Hanina checkpoint, passers-through are all Palestinians. Most of them carry a Jerusalem identity card. At the Hizma

checkpoint on the southeast side of the neighbourhood, there are two lanes—one for Jewish settlers and the other for Palestinians. A somewhat similar arrangement is applied, albeit less strictly, at the Atarot checkpoint to the southwest.

Since both Naila and I work in Jewish West Jerusalem, we were mainly worried about the time it takes to get through the checkpoint, which varies from 15 minutes to one hour. But we were told that in cases when the checkpoint is very crowded, there are side roads that can be used if we don't mind risking the condition of our car. As proud owners of a 1985 Ford Fiesta, bumpy roads weren't a major consideration.

The traffic jams at the checkpoints; the noise; the long lines of cars; the notorious Palestinian vans that pass everyone by driving on the sidewalks; the soldiers who enjoy checking your identity card slowly to keep you and the rest of the drivers waiting, using their authority to make drivers stop, start, open the trunk or hood, check under the seat—all this was somewhat expected. Nothing, however, prepared us for the flair for cruelty exhibited by so many of the soldiers. This changed the ten-minute drive to my college into an oppressive and unpredictable hour-long trip. (Knowing that Amer has to wake up at four o'clock in the morning in order to reach Ramallah by nine o'clock when visiting his family in Nablus, I am embarrassed to tell my modest story. For him the usual 45 minute drive between these two cities becomes a four-hour trip, longer than a flight from any airport in the Middle East to a city in Europe.)

Even more exacerbating was the fact that one was never sure if the checkpoints would be open the next morning. Would you get out of the neighbourhood? Should you park your car and walk? Or should you just turn back and call your boss, your professor, or your friends to say that you are sorry but you won't be able to come today. This state of uncertainty is ever-present for those behind the checkpoints. It frustrates plans for casually visiting friends for dinner or coffee. It kills appetite for life outside the neighbourhood. For Naila and I, spontaneity was lost and we began living in a kind of self-imposed curfew. Relatives and friends found it equally difficult to visit us. Regular visitors Hanan, Alice and Rania, after being stuck at the checkpoint once for four hours on their way to visit us, declared that they were not prepared to chance it again. My brother Abed wasn't ready to put his family through that because of my crazy decision to live behind a checkpoint.

With the eruption of the second Intifada in October 2000, things got worse. As middle-aged Palestinian Israeli citizens living in the Galilee, we had experienced various kinds of discrimination, but the concept of closures and curfews declared by the army was new and strange. I should admit that these curfews weren't violent or dangerous as in other Palestinian areas, i.e. they were not accompanied by soldiers with guns breaking down doors, searching houses or shooting wanted Palestinian activists. In general, immediately after announcing the curfew the army vehicle would disappear.

For most residents this was a good excuse to stay at home and watch on television the frustrating news about the Intifada in the rest of Palestinian territories. The only exception was Abu Yaman who used to protest (of course, after making sure that the army had gone) by sitting outside, smoking a *nargila*. For this we honoured him with the title '*al-batal*' –the brave man of the neighbourhood.

“Checkpoint hours” became increasingly long. Soldiers behind sandbagged positions surveying passengers while aiming their guns were a new and frightening development. One day while on my way to the checkpoint I saw an Israeli soldier running after a Palestinian boy. I was very scared. I was sure I was going to witness a murder. And if the soldier went crazy, I would probably become a victim, too, I thought. I braked the car. When the soldier was sure he wouldn't be able to catch the boy, he raised his rifle. The bullet missed the boy, who turned and disappeared among the houses. This happened two meters from me. The soldier, now embarrassed at having been watched so closely, drew his rifle and aimed in my direction. Before I could entertain the idea of death, he shouted “Move your car, shitty Arab.” Hearing his bark instead of the crack of his rifle, I caught my breath and sought anonymity in the crowded street.

Naila's pregnancy in 2001 increased my obsessive worries about the checkpoints. What would we do in case she needed medical treatment or went into labour? In our neighbourhood there was no hospital, only a medical unit inadequately equipped for complications in pregnancy or delivery. In any case, because we are both Israeli citizens, our family doctors are in Jerusalem. The story of Rula Ashtiya, who gave birth behind a rock at Bayt Furik checkpoint to a child who died a few minutes later, happened later. But we knew many other horrible stories.

What would happen if the road was jammed and I wouldn't be able to make my way to the checkpoint? What if, under the pretence of security threats, the soldiers simply wouldn't let us pass? What would we do in case the army declared a closure of the neighbourhood, as had already happened several times since the beginning of the second Intifada?

On 22 December, 2001, at four o'clock in the morning, Naila woke me up. Her water had broken, but she didn't know what it was. She was in her 34<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy and had not even entertained thoughts of the possibility of a premature birth. She called her sister Reem in Nazareth, for consultation, who told her to call the hospital. We had completed only two of our seven meetings for first-time parents. The nurse told us to report to the maternity clinic. At seven we were at the al-Ram checkpoint. It was Saturday, when the traffic starts a bit later than usual. The soldier asked in Russian-accented Hebrew, “Where you are going?”

“To Hadassah Hospital,” I answered. He nodded his head to allow us to pass, not even checking the identity cards that we had placed on the front of the car. This was one of our fastest drives ever through the checkpoint. In 15 minutes we were at the clinic. It was confusing. For months I had been imagining a dramatic event, shouting at drivers to make room to pass, beeping the horn, using the VIP lane for UN employees and Israeli army vehicles, arguing with soldiers and threatening them with a lawsuit in case anything happened to my wife. I had never thought it would be so easy. But we had passed through as if the checkpoint didn’t exist. Contributing to the mundane normalcy of our passage was the fact that neither Naila nor I had any idea that she was actually in labour. She gave birth to Manat about 18 hours later. It may sound strange but I should add that the unpredictable smoothness of our passage made me, in retrospect, feel that we were in some way denied a real Palestinian experience!

Twelve days later, the three of us were on our way home. It was 11:30 in the morning. The checkpoint to Jerusalem on the other side of the street was again crowded. People were very angry and the soldiers were doing their best to keep them waiting. As a new father, the same thoughts and fears that had occupied my mind during Naila’s pregnancy reappeared, and with greater force.

## **The Departure**

The construction of the wall was ultimately approved by Israel in June 2002, having originated with left-wing Israeli politicians in the aftermath of the failed Camp David negotiations. If Palestinians were not ready to accept the Israeli terms for peace, then a wall was a tool to impose it on them. Together with checkpoints, Jewish settlements and the bypass roads that allowed settlers to move easily, the wall was intended to make Palestinian life impossible.

Initially the people in our neighbourhood weren’t sure what the actual plans were. Would we be ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the wall? Speculation and analysis dominated neighbourhood conversations, but all saw the wall’s ramifications.

Sometime in mid-June 2003, on my way home, I found the street blocked that led from the Atarot area to my neighbourhood. A sign indicated that it was now one-way only. This was our first official confirmation that the wall would surround our neighbourhood, creating a ghetto with a single gate that would be opened only during certain hours. Fifty-thousand people were to be imprisoned in this ghetto. Many of them leave the neighbourhood every morning on their way to Jerusalem, either to take their children to school or to go to work. This meant we would be forced to wait together with hundreds and probably thousands of people daily at the gate. It would be completely different from the earlier situation when we had access to three

checkpoints; when one of them was crowded we could try our luck at the other two. Now there would be a single track, one gate, one option: to wait in a long line of cars with angry drivers who could be just as dangerous as the soldiers.

The reaction was panic. Many people started looking for apartments in the neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem, where prices immediately doubled. The owners there identified with the plight of their brethren from behind the wall, but this did not negate the opportunity to double their own income. Entire families moved in with relatives. Large families crammed into rented two-room apartments. Most of the Palestinian citizens of Israel who had lived in the area just disappeared. They either went back to the Galilee or found apartments elsewhere. Ricardo, that complicated symbol of Palestinian persistence, gave up and returned to the United States with Laila and their newborn baby. Sufayan and Lamis decided it was time to use their British passports and return to England. Muna was waiting for papers to join her fiancé in Chicago. Nabeeh, another single male in the neighbourhood, moved to Haifa. Suha, a single film producer, also moved to Haifa. Most of our phone conversations with her consisted of reports on how different life was outside. My decision to leave for another place was vetoed by Naila, who considered it immoral to leave our fellow Palestinians behind. I was stuck with those who had no options but to be entombed inside the wall.

Manal and Amer gave up, too. Their honeymoon in Europe had transformed Manal. Telling us about her experience, she was amazed by one thing only: the possibility of travelling thousands of miles with no checkpoints, which seemed to her 'unnatural'. Even passing from one country to another, she didn't need documents. For someone who lived in a neighbourhood surrounded by four permanent checkpoints (not counting additional temporary roadblocks), and who was used to displaying her ID card several times a day, 'natural' and 'unnatural' were confused.

Amer's reaction was the most relaxed. Of the five daily prayers, he observes the first prayer of the morning. It brings him relaxation and he deeply believes that one should start the day with prayer. The fact that he lives with his girlfriend does not contradict his sense of being an observant Muslim. As someone who had witnessed some of the horrors of the checkpoints around Nablus, Amer found al-Ram to be more like 'light confinement'. Since he worked in Ramallah, he didn't believe that the wall could make things any worse. The only thing that worried him was being cut off from the Freij grocery, the only store in the vicinity that sold beer. Just as he could not start the day without the morning prayer, he could not sleep before sipping a beer. The 'damn wall', '*al-mal'oun*' as it came to be called, would interfere with his night-time ritual because the grocery would be on the 'wrong side' of the wall. Still, Amer thought that the wall was designed somewhat fairly. His 'optimistic' character helped him to see the positive aspects of the worst occurrences. "Can you imagine our lives here without the *knafa* of Rainbow Café?" he would exclaim, constantly trying to ease the situation.

As a 'spiritual' Muslim addicted to *knafa*, beer, and *nargila*-smoking, the route of the wall was for him an expression of divine intervention.

I don't know what the correlation is between the wall and *knafa*, but its consumption increased remarkably in the neighbourhood since the beginning of construction of the wall. Almost everyone has gained some kilos. This is the Palestinian custom of celebrating impending destruction, remarked Abu al-Sa'id. Yet even the temptation of *knafa* weren't enough to counter Manal's pressure on Amer to leave the neighbourhood—departure was inevitable.

Hunaida and Ibrahim, who fled the Israeli army's re-invasion of Ramallah to live in our safer neighbourhood, were considering moving farther south to rent a house in Bayt Hanina. But no one could guarantee that there would be no third exile. So they decided to stay, come what may. In the local dialect, this is the 'steadfastness of the poor', when there is no other option. They used the decline in rental fees to move to a larger and cheaper house in the same neighbourhood.

Hunaida, also a Palestinian citizen of Israel married to a Palestinian from the West Bank, had been shocked by the invasion. For several nights their house in Ramallah came under Israeli fire. She subsequently became a news addict; her rapid-fire use of the remote control was driven by more than a need to hear the news. "Switch to al-Jazeera," were often her first words on the phone. In the beginning, she called to tell us about incursions, assassinations of Palestinians and air raids, mainly in Gaza. When they happened in Ramallah, there was no need to call to inform us, as we could hear the explosions from our house. Arafat's residence, a common Israeli target, was only a few kilometres from our neighbourhood. Putting her dissertation aside, Hunaida became the 'Al-Jazeera' of the community (a title in Arab society once named after 'the BBC'). For two years she was almost paralyzed. Concentration was impossible. With some hesitation, she accepted Naila's advice to see a psychologist. Daniela, an Israeli therapist from West Jerusalem, was very helpful. Hunaida shared some of their conversations with us. Sometimes she felt embarrassed about the harsh language she used to describe Israeli brutalities to a Jewish consultant. The decision of a Palestinian woman suffering terribly due to the Israeli occupation to resort to a Jewish psychologist was but one of the many paradoxes of living in Palestine\Israel.

Ibrahim had a different perspective. He viewed life through the prism of money, and saw Hunaida's situation as illustrating the ultimate realities of the Palestinian predicament. A Palestinian client was paying a Jewish consultant more than \$50 a meeting to help her cope with the traumas caused by Israeli soldiers and occupation. In 2005, Hunaida succeeded in finishing her dissertation in the Department of Sociology at Hebrew University. Earning the distinction of *summa cum laude*, she received a generous scholarship to spend a year at Harvard University. This spared her the

dilemma of what to do when the wall was completed, pre-empting the forced move with a 'voluntary' displacement for academic reasons.

Abu Rami, an 82-year-old Armenian Christian, was one of the most veteran inhabitants of the neighbourhood. In 2003, he suffered a stroke. With the news about the wall, he became obsessed with passages and gates, and how long it would take to pass through them in case of emergency. In despair, he too left the neighbourhood, moving into his son's apartment in the Old City of Jerusalem. Jack, his son, will in turn move to a new apartment that his wife inherited from her recently-deceased father, a death that came just in time to spare Abu Rami his anxieties. Abu Rami's daughter Arij, a professor at Bethlehem University, will be leaving the neighbourhood, too. Between the wall enclosing the neighbourhood and that confining Bethlehem, she chose the latter evil. There, at least, she has access to her college.

Abu Musa is a sort of villain in Dhahiat al-Barid. The same age as Abu Rami, he recently recovered from a heart attack. From time to time, his two sons who live in the US send him generous sums of money, fulfilling their filial duty. Like many other well-to-do Palestinians, he expanded his property, erecting a four-story building consisting of eight large apartments. These he rented out for \$480 each, the most expensive apartments in the neighbourhood. He was known for being selective in choosing his tenants. He wouldn't rent to large families or to *khalayla* (people from Hebron), who have an undeserved reputation as troublemakers. He was strict with his tenants. Payment on time was his first rule. No noise and no touching the tasty fruit in his garden were his second and third. He was known to be miserly, not returning change, and his tenants learned to pay him the exact amount. The only currency he accepted was dollars. His renters were small families—a physician, a lawyer, an accountant, a journalist and two people working for international companies and organizations.

His tenants were the first to leave the neighbourhood with the construction of the wall. The whole building emptied out, a very sad change even for those who didn't like Abu Musa. One day I asked him what had happened to his renters. To where did they disappear? He liked the questions and started lecturing me about the importance of *sumud* ('steadfastness'). "We Palestinians shouldn't leave every time we face a problem with the Jews," he told me. "We shouldn't give up quickly. This is how we lost Palestine," he argued assertively. I am not sure he meant every Palestinian or even every inhabitant of the neighbourhood, but for sure he meant those who rented his apartments. It is totally legitimate to wrap an income of \$4,000 a month in the patriotic language of *sumud*.

Two weeks later I learned that Abu Musa himself had just left the building and moved to his house in the Old City of Jerusalem. When we met sometime later, I asked him



what had happened. Why have you changed your mind? What about *sumud*? I teased him.

“They will lock us inside this wall. We will be like a mouse in a trap. Who knows what will happen to us here. I am an old man and cannot stand such conditions. I have just survived a heart attack,” he said, appealing to my emotions. He sounded like a defeated person until, suddenly, he changed his tone and rhetoric. “They are Jews. We cannot trust them.” Linguistic ethics isn’t exactly Abu Musa’s field of specialty. He hardly differentiates between Jews or Israelis, right- or left-wing. For him the world is divided into Muslims and Jews, and additional subdivisions are not relevant. I found it useless to respond to his primitive anti-Semitism. But our neighbour, overhearing our conversation and herself no friend of his, responded sharply, “Nor you, Abu Musa.”

She knew what she was saying. After leaving the neighbourhood, he, like other absentee landowners, no longer cared for its quality of life. He soon lowered the prices of his apartments to \$250, a very attractive fee for those who hadn’t been welcome in his buildings previously. His apartments, and many others, have been rented by large families. It is common to hear among the neighbourhood’s former inhabitants, “the *khalayla*’ are coming,” reflecting Palestinian class divisions, fears, and prejudices.

Now our quiet street is a playground for young children. Noise, screaming, and loud radios have become commonplace. Some cars have been broken into and three have been stolen. Three houses were also robbed. Ours was one of them. Fortunately our second-hand furniture wasn’t attractive to the thieves. Naila’s two necklaces and a valuable antique bracelet, a gift from her mother on our wedding day, were their loot. These new developments are in part due to the neighbourhood’s new demographics. But more generally, the economic and social pressures (poverty, social tension, violence, and political chaos) that Palestinian society suffers from are closing in on us as well, penetrating our neighbourhood and affecting its quality of life.

The cultural feel of the neighbourhood has also changed. Islamic dress—long beards and *dishdashas* [tunics]—have become more prevalent. Even the two young sisters Rana and Sameya, our neighbourhood’s symbols of modernity, have turned to Islamic dress. So has the outspoken feminist, our friend Karam. Manat’s teachers at the nursery school, Mrs. Fayeza and Muna, former activists in the Palestinian Communist party, joined those showing signs of religiosity. Our neighbour Kameela, daughter of a Jewish mother, whose short skirts had been a topic of neighbourhood gossip, has opted for moderate Islamic dress. People such as Abu Yaman (*‘al-batal’*), his brother Ghassan and Jalal the barber now join Abu al-Sa’id in a *jama’h* [congregational] prayer at the famous *saha* of Um al-Sa’id.

## Ritualizing Defeat

The changes that the barber has undergone reflect some of the general changes in the neighbourhood as a consequence of the wall. He was always an observant Muslim, carrying out Islamic rituals in his private, rather invisible way. But in our last months in the neighbourhood, we couldn't help but notice how he began to adapt to the changing atmosphere. An astute observer with a keen business sense, he recognized that his new clientele differed from his previous customers. Now he closes during the Friday prayer. He also pauses from his work during the day to observe prayer time. A copy of the Qur'an is placed on an obvious place on the table. Islamic literature has replaced the daily newspapers that once entertained waiting clients. A large picture of the hundred names of God hangs on the wall. What is '*halal*' ['permitted'] and '*haram*' ['prohibited'] dominate a good part of his newly Islamic-inflected language. In 2005, he and his wife made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

His wife, who shares the business, has also become an observant Muslim. The salon is divided into two separate rooms: one for men, the other for women. Her clients were once neighbourhood and well-to-do women from adjacent areas, including many Christians. But after their pilgrimage, she adopted new policies, no longer dying hair, trimming eyebrows, or removing facial hair, on the grounds that these were against Islamic teachings. Subsequently she took an even more radical step, renaming the salon. The '*Samah*' (her own first name) became '*al-Muhajbat*', or 'The Veiled Ones' after the Arabic word for women in Islamic dress.

What of non-*muhajbat* Muslims or Christian neighbours? Most of them have gone or will leave soon. They are no longer an important factor in her and Jalal's considerations. This exclusivity of practice is completely new in a previously pluralist, open and tolerant neighbourhood. It reflects the invisible consequences of the wall that has destroyed the social fabric of a peaceful and well-to-do Palestinian neighbourhood.

I have known Jalal the barber since Naila and I moved to Dhahyat al-Barid. I have been a loyal client for six years. In that time, I can hardly remember him raising a religious issue while he cut my hair. We talked about the checkpoints, the wall and politics, and gossiped about other neighbours and clients. I knew he was an observant Muslim, and he knew that I was not exactly religious, married to a Christian, and that our daughter is being raised both as a Christian and a Muslim until she chooses her own religion. As far as I know, my un-Islamic practices hadn't bothered him, or at least he never expressed any reservations about my way of life (even if he did gossip behind my back, just as he and I did about others).

When we met in the *saha* of Um al-Sa'id, I cautiously tried to raise the issue. He denied that there was a correlation between commercial considerations and his new

religiosity. The renaming of the salon (a move that had angered many inhabitants of the neighbourhood), he said, apologetically, was proposed by the clients themselves. “He is responding to demands of *al-sha’b* [the people],” remarked Amer sarcastically.

Jalal must have been aware of the neighbourhood gossip and the tone of the questions somewhat provoked him. So he changed tack, first trying to delegitimize my comments by challenging my nationalist credentials.

“You,” he addressed me, “are from the Galilee and have Israeli citizenship. Many others, especially the Christians,” he added, separating us by religion as well, “have foreign passports, too. All of you have other options and can get out of here any moment you want,” he said, tying these issues to class. “Only the *ghalaba* [wretches] will be staying behind. And Islam is a comfort to them.”

This was a legitimate criticism of all those who had left or were capable of leaving. But Jalal flies the Islamic flag to profit by it. He presents himself as spokesperson of the *ghalaba*—he isn’t one of them. He was wearing the mantle of Islam for economic reasons, to speak for the cause of the *ghalaba* and win them as loyal clients, remarked Hassan, another neighbour.

“But will Islam solve the problem of the wall?” I tried to press the issue of religion further.

“Yes, of course it will.”

“How?”

“God is bigger than the Jews and the Americans.”

“Yes, but meanwhile the *ghalaba* are locked behind the wall and it seems that this is not going to change soon.”

Um al-Sa’id didn’t like Jalal’s manipulations to veil his religious opportunism (this is called, in the Palestinian dialect, a *muzawada*—cheaply claiming greater commitment to the national cause). She intervened: “Neither Islam nor Muhammad the Prophet can do anything about the wall.” This may sound like an unorthodox answer for an old Muslim woman, but it is not unusual in the Palestinian *baladi* [popular, local] dialectic.

“The people here,” she continued, “will be locked behind the wall. No one will come to their aid and they cannot help themselves... All they can do,” she said, trying to conclude this deadlocked conversation, “is to wail over their destiny.”

Much has been said since 2002 about the wall in Palestine. Its illegality, human cost, violent colonial dimensions and racist manifestations have been described in detail. In the drawings of Palestinian children it is portrayed as a ghetto, a prison and a snake encircling Palestine and poisoning Palestinians. Graffiti expressing young Palestinians' anger and threats against the occupier covers considerable portions of it. But the association of 'wailing' with the 'wall', as aptly suggested by Um al-Sa'id, is one of the most intriguing associations I have heard. In the twentieth century, Palestinians lost nearly everything. Beyond the enormous daily human price it exacts, this wall symbolizes (and equally constitutes) the culmination of the persecution that Palestinians have experienced. In our state of powerlessness and the totality of the national defeat, one cannot dismiss Um al-Sa'id's gloomy prophecy that this wall will become a site where Palestinians ritualize their miseries, cry for a lost country and pray for divine intervention.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an enlarged version of a lecture given at Knox College, Galesburg Illinois 2005. I want thank Professor Penny Gold and the Knox community for inviting me to lecture and co-teach with my colleague Professor Howard Adelman about life in Palestine\ Israel.

<sup>2</sup> The names of some individuals and some details have been changed to respect the privacy of those who didn't want to be identified here.