



Routes: Journeys from Behind the Wall

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Main Street of Shu'fat Camp.
Source: *Jawad al-Malhi*.

Abu Dis and Ras al-Amud Checkpoint

I've been commuting between Shu'fat refugee camp in East Jerusalem and Ramallah for the last six years. For the last two years I've been commuting at least five times a week. If I think back to where my journeys began, and why I commute from Shu'fat camp, I would need to go back to the beginning of the second intifada, when I lived with my husband in Abu Dis, before the building of the Partition Wall there.

At that time, living on the main road into the entrance of Abu Dis meant that the running battles between soldiers and *shebab* occurred at my front door and through my garden. Particularly as prior to the intifada the local town council had knocked down the garden wall in order to expand the width of the road, which meant it was open to the wild dogs who strolled by night and to the

daytime battles between soldiers and the *shebab* who used the olive trees and what was left of the wall for cover.

Along with the day long curfews, commuting to work in Shu'fat camp for my husband meant going through the checkpoint at Ras al-Amud, with the rituals of bearing his belly and having his car checked. The building of the Wall split the main street where I used to buy groceries: the greengrocer on one side, the supermarket on the other. One had to continually find ways of circumnavigating the wall to get into Jerusalem and Ramallah: climbing over concrete blocks with my one year old and pregnant with my second child, going through the grounds of the mosque and the al-Quds University. Close to the birth of my daughter in the summer of 2002 I remember leaving Abu Dis late in the evening. Under the continuous curfew, we walked to the car parked some distance from our small house, our worry was not being able to get to hospital in time in the coming week. With a small bag in hand we left for Shu'fat camp where my husband's family lived. A few days later my daughter was born. Living next to the unused Palestinian parliament building in Abu Dis and with the advancement of the Wall it seemed that there was no other options apart from to move to the camp even though a "temporary" checkpoint was already in place there.

Shu'fat Camp and the Shu'fat - Anata Road

My husband's family house is in the centre of the main street of the camp; they are one of the original families who moved there from the Old City. His family is from the village of al-Malha, whose lands are now the site of an Israeli mall and the Knesset. After the war of 1948 his father and grandmother, moved to Bethlehem and then to the Old City before moving to the camp as part of the clearance of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City after the 1967 war. Each family was given a plot of land 7x11 metres and allowed to build a room 2x3 metres. The family slowly expanded this to several rooms and then to another floor. By 2002 the house could barely accommodate the sons, wives and children, so some family members invested in buying a small plot of land at the entrance of the camp. The dream was to be able to move out of the camp into more modern living conditions. Building on the main road was illegal; it was impossible to get permits, so building would be undertaken as quickly as possible to avoid demolition. During 2003 soldiers and the municipality were active in surveying the area, and the building that was being built next to us, was demolished. At that time there were only a few buildings on the main street. In 2003-2004, the authorities began confiscating cement trucks and imprisoning "illegal" workers in the area, and so building in the area slowed down. However by 2005-2006 the municipality seemed to turn a blind eye. It was presumed it was going to collect hefty sums through fines for building without permits, or it was happy collecting *arnona* (council taxes from the occupants of the new buildings) and since then there has been an unprecedented expansion, with multi-storey buildings appearing within several months.

The road we live on, (Shu'fat Anata Road) leading down to the junction of Dahiyet

al-Salem, now has a shopping mall, the health centres of four Israeli health care companies (serving Palestinian Jerusalemites with Israeli health insurance), butchers, greengrocers, an internet café, second hand furniture stores, new furniture shops, a wedding hall, tiling and suppliers shop, restaurants, a fried chicken fast food shop, hot sweets store, bakeries, photographic studios, sports shops, pool hall, a toddlers theme park, pharmacies, perfume and gift stores, cleaning suppliers, scrap yard, mechanics, car washes and blocks of flats which have between seven and eleven floors. Block after block tower into the sky. In a sense you no longer have to leave the area, or leave the camp for your daily needs. Most places will be opened until late in the evening with health care services opened until 11pm at night. The growth in these small businesses points to the entrepreneurship of the residents and those who predicted the potential market that would emerge with the increased stringency of the checkpoint. In this issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Bulle argues cogently that the changes in the built environment express individual and family initiatives for dignity and decency in the face of policies of confinement. However, this is also a result of there being very few other options. The oft-heard statement from the residents that “We just want to live” also contains the recognition that no one is responsive to refugee conditions; camp residents are left to fend for themselves, resistance bears little results, as at any time the Israeli soldiers with special forces can storm the camp and, with the assistance of informers. Take away anyone engaged in political activity. Hence, “we just want to live” is the desire to be able to go about the day to day without interference from Israel, it invariably linked with the desire to have control over the everyday. It also is a recognition that the community is predominately dependent on work and benefits from Israel and aware that there are very few other options for them. If you have any outstanding fines, for example for your TV licence you’ll be stopped at the checkpoint. The desire, then ‘to live’ is to be able to get through the numerous hoops and red tape that Israel has created for the residents of Jerusalem.

What is noticeable is that the systematic discrimination of Israel towards Jerusalem residents has closed their horizons, and in doing so has created an isolated community in the camp, whose sense of belonging has become rooted in this place. This is most evident when you look at the activities held in the city; Shu’fat camp residents are not participants in the cultural scene, art centres or sports centres, nor part of the “other” Shu’fat beyond the checkpoint or Beit Hanina. This is a contained community. When it does engage with the city, it is either for religious feasts, or prayers, visits to banks, post offices and sometimes to shop, although Ramallah is increasingly becoming the destination to buy goods providing variety outside of the Shu’fat - Anata Road described above.

I’m still considered an outsider in the camp and school children will call to me in Hebrew, as though all foreigners are Israelis. Over time, fewer young people seem to have ambitions of going into higher education, the popular view is that they will eventually end up in manual labour positions in Israel. I’m always encouraged when I see young women in the services to Ramallah carrying their books from Birzeit University. Complaining about the changes to the camp and the main street, the

economic and political situation and the changing values of community seem to be part of the daily routine of those over forty, this collective fatalism and depression also confirms their resignation to dig in where they are. The effect of this is the constant development of each individual space that Bulle observes, although gardens are perhaps more confined than she suggests. The main greenery comes when trucks come in to sell trees and plants, which stop at the main entrance of the camp. Most important, there is no other space than home where there is a measure of control or freedom. Hence the constant building, adjustment and transformation; everyone works on their own individual space, rather than a collective public space. The interior space being more significant than exterior. Indeed, public spaces are encroached; everyone tries to acquire a part of the main street by building on the street, building on the grounds of UNWRA, and even building under high voltage electricity pylons (recently a builder was electrocuted). Shu'fat residents carve out their existence, creating a precarious guarantee for the unknown future.

The Partition Wall is now creeping around the back of the high-rise flats and it curls all around the camp. I watch as the fencing, the watchtower, wire compounds are all being put in place, daily transformations, which you notice in minute detail, you are left in a constant state of anticipation and of not knowing, wondering what will be the final fate of this area, and where to move to next. Rumor is this will become West Bank, what will happen to Jerusalem ID holders? Different scenarios circulate, the most worrying being that they will revoke the Jerusalem ID for those who hold refugee status, other say those IDs will remain but they will not allow the registering of the next generation. Rumor also has it that next to the checkpoint, a post office, banks and government offices will be opened, so that the residents of this area will not have to go into Jerusalem, slowly completing the unraveling of the city's fabric.

The bulldozers and lifters work by day and late into the night the dust from digging and leveling, blocks the mosquito screens on the windows, in a daily layer of choking grey dust, layer after layer. With space continually under construction nothing is complete, everything here is in a state of flux, impermanence and construction as the inhabitants eek out their spaces and daily lives and while Israel constructs its permanent gateway to the city.

As residents of the main street, many are obliged to pay *arnouna* (municipal council tax) on properties they own or rent. However the municipality provides very limited services in return, rubbish is rarely collected, it takes ages to get a fire engine into the camp: fires are therefore normally put out by the community and ambulances need a military escort into the camp, while the family requesting an ambulance has to ensure it will not be pelted with stones. I've been on the phone several times, begging ambulances to come into the camp hoping somehow my British accent might make some difference; it doesn't really I've discovered. My brother-in-law died in 2006 at the age of 43 from a stroke needing an ambulance, leaving behind him his wife and seven children, the oldest 18 years old and the youngest 6 months. An employee of Bezeq phone company, he diligently would leave the camp every morning to work in East Jerusalem.

While the residents distinguish between different neighbourhoods in the camp and the main road, those on the outside see the whole area as the camp and prefer not to cross the checkpoint. This has become increasingly evident to me over the last two years. For example coming back from the Allenby Bridge the bus dropped us off in front of the Rashidiyeh High School, the taxi wanted fifty shekels to take me into the camp, an exorbitant price for the short distance. Taxis in Jerusalem in general will not normally enter the checkpoint. While it is practically impossible to get the school buses from Shu'fat or Beit Hanina to enter the camp, the only buses are those organized by the municipality's schools which await children at the entrance of the camp. This means that in order to catch school bus my children have to be up at 5:30 and across the checkpoint by 6:30 to be picked up by their school's bus and then I'm back there at 4:00 pm. I am still reluctant to let them walk through the checkpoint alone, although tens of the camp's children do. At 6:30 am hundreds of workers cross the checkpoint, the manual labourers who work in Israel cleaning streets, hospitals, stocking supermarket shelves, cleaning cars, washing dishes - the invisible mass. The traffic jam reaches the nearby bakery and the drone of horns ring out at 6:30 am. Nine soldiers man three lines of backed-up traffic. After dropping the children off to take the bus, the soldiers often ask me where I am going, 'back home' is my reply, which seems incomprehensible to them.

The Bus number 7 goes into Jerusalem from Shu'fat camp. Fights will often break out on the bus between soldiers, who enter to check IDs, and passengers as people try to bluff their way into Jerusalem having forgotten ID cards begging soldiers to let them pass. It eventually becomes too tiring and you slowly build a wall around yourself of non-involvement to preserve yourself, to preserve your ability to continue these daily rituals. But I am not alone, the bus drivers from the camp refuse to carry anyone with a West Bank ID and will ask the passengers which ID they hold before leaving the camp's depot. The soldiers would always take a little extra time to look at my passport because I was obviously a foreigner holding a tattered passport, my children got used to it, "pull out your passport Mum," they would say as the soldier got on to the bus; "pull out your ID Dad." At four years old, they understood the difference of this paperwork.

Shu'fat to Ramallah

There is no connection from the main Shu'fat road down to the camp, the only way is to take the 20 minute walk into or out of the camp, walking in the street as there are no pavements. So then here comes the dilemma: which route into Ramallah, out of the checkpoint on the number 7 Bus and then catching Bus 18 and through Qalandia or to take the service taxis though Anata, Hizma and Jaba. Whichever way I chose it seems to take me at least an hour to get to work. Coming home is somehow harder the choice to go through the rituals of the Qalandia checkpoint and then walk down to the camp, or to take the winding dizzy road through Jaba and Hizma. Riding in service (shared)

taxis, I've been in four accidents on this road which is why I don't drive myself; the accidents have put a dent in my confidence.

Perhaps for myself the hardest thing about commuting is the absence of any control over time and movement. The speed of vehicles, the reckless driving, the errands the drivers run to pick up things, stop and talk to friends, buy coffee, or even drive against the ongoing traffic. If they don't have enough customers they decide to turn around and drive through Anata again, or hand you over to another service at Qalandia. The whole journey is unpredictable and bumpy: broken chairs, seatbelts that don't work, and in general too many depressing stories, there always seems to be someone talking about an illness, fight, politics, and you get an hour of this collective depression even before you reach work, and the checkpoint at Jaba is always unpredictable. The frequent playing of Quranic verses bring a silence to the car and in the afternoon heat puts people to sleep. The less religious drivers play radio Ajjal, where Maysoun, greets thousands of listeners, celebrating and promoting Jawal, encouraging one to think of how others are worse off than you. Her positivism doesn't always sit too well when you are speeding at 140 km an hour around the curving roads between Hizma and Jaba. A woman shouts at the driver about how expensive the ride is, and that she has to get down at Amari camp and then walk into Ramallah, the price of the journey is unaffordable for her. I notice she only has six shekels in her purse and her hands and skin are worn from work.

Traveling by public transport alerts one to the unpredictable changes in Israel's "border" regime, this up until spring foreign passport holders, pregnant women and the elderly could remain on the bus as it went through Qalandia checkpoint, this 'concession' has now been revoked and now everyone has to go through the checkpoint, which also has new sections for those with West Bank IDs, Jerusalem IDs and for those not carrying bags. The loud speakers shout out as to which gate is open, and we all run about like mice in a cage desperate to get through the electrically controlled turnstiles while my groceries and laptop pass through the scanner

While the rules changed about the buses going through Qalandia, the location of the services to Anata and the camp also changed, while up and until the spring I could pick them up from in front of the Kamel Abdul Nasser Mosque, they were moved to the car park next to the Water Authorities which meant about a 25 minute walk from al Bireh, with little guarantee of finding a service, eventually after a month of negotiation the drivers were moved to the 2nd floor of the *mujamma'* which houses routes to numerous locations around Ramallah, and there is often a tension in the building between the service drivers. Thursday is the worst days for commuting the traffic jams at Qalandia caused by the absence of any traffic regulations, means endless queues pile up and traffic moves in every direction. In commuting from Ramallah to Jerusalem, I have walked from Qalandia to Beit Hanina, and from Samiramis to al-Ram, on days when traffic seems to stand still. While the Shu'fat Anata Road also grinds to a standstill on Saturdays with traffic as the young men of the camp who work in Israel parade their cars playing loud music - their daily humiliation in the service industries in Israel manifests itself in exaggerated bravado and machoism, along with

wedding processions, shoppers and deliveries to the busy shopping street.

I've tried to read, make lists or work while commuting they do that in the UK on the trains and underground making good use of their time, I can't seem to here though, its too bumpy perhaps, too distracting and I am unable to transform the journey into productive time, I think for those commuting back and forth from Jerusalem through several checkpoints each day, in which time is wasted waiting, queuing and being questioned time takes on a different property, having to get through checkpoints creates a kind of tension and different comprehension of time. Slowly there is not only geographical separation, but also a separation of time between those living in Ramallah and those who commute between the two cities. Indeed, when the Palestinian Authority turned back its clocks in Ramadan of 2008 and Jerusalem institutions and schools stayed on Israeli time, you had to change your watch everytime you went through the checkpoints.

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