

And They Go On Learning

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Abstract

This essay examines the difficulties for children and youth in attaining an education while living under Israeli military occupation. It focuses on three Palestinian students in the West Bank who shared their experiences with the author about their trials of getting to and staying in school, their limited opportunities for gaining higher education, and their sense of well-being, to demonstrate the impact of military occupation on their daily student life.

Keywords

Palestine; Palestinians; West Bank; education; school; student; university; Israeli occupation; conflict; tear gas.

“You can’t breathe, you feel suffocated, and your eyes burn so much it hurts to open them. If you’re too close to the [tear-gas] grenade when it explodes, you may become blinded by the gas,” Ayman Taha, a senior at the Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, told me. This is the reality of committing to an education for many Palestinian students living under occupation.

For many students, it is difficult to commit to an education while living under occupation. Of course, there is a long and complex history regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that led to these problems and so many others. Israel’s perceived security needs have been used to justify most of the measures taken in the occupied territories that have made getting an education so difficult for Palestinian students. The Oslo Accords, signed in 1993 between

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Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO,) were an effort to establish temporary governance arrangements that would lead to a final treaty for a stable future for Palestinians and Israelis. But since then, Palestinian land has remained separated into islands segregated as Areas A, B, and C, with Area C making up sixty-two percent of the West Bank. Areas A and B are islands of small areas made difficult to move between, which makes an education more of a challenge (figure 1). The result of this segregation of land and power is further restraint on Palestinian mobility, including denied access to large parts of their land.

Ayman helped me to understand how students in Palestine must commit to difficulties of travel in order to attain an education.¹ Students cannot regularly cross checkpoint borders or circumnavigate the “separation” wall Israel built within the Palestinian territories in order to attend their schools. The Palestinian Authority has had to compensate by developing more schools and universities nearer to their homes. In light of this increased effort to provide education for students, there are now thirteen universities throughout Areas A, B, and C, one in almost every city in Palestine.

Ayman told me how at the Abu Dis campus of Al-Quds University, located near Jerusalem in Area B of the West Bank, Israeli soldiers disrupt students and professors every two to three weeks by throwing tear-gas grenades and firing rubber-tipped bullets. Avoiding eye contact over our video call, Ayman took a deep breath and shrugged, “I don’t know why they did this to us,” he said. From his tone, it seemed that he was reluctant to accept the situation but felt unable to do anything about it.

Just a few weeks before, Ayman’s friend had been shot twice in the back by rubber bullets. He had been running away from the soldiers and trying to take cover when he fell to the ground. “When the army men come to our schools, we go home. Nobody is permitted to stay. All classes are canceled,” Ayman said. The military operations on campus occur regularly, so often that as a student at Abu Dis, Ayman became “used to it.” As Ayman described the visits by the Israeli military forces, it seemed the procedures were meticulously regulated to employ policies of humiliation, arrests, and attacks, all of which seemed to have nothing to do with security. These unannounced procedures happen so often they have become the norm.

Tear gas was first used as a chemical weapon during World War I, for short-term effects rather than permanent disabilities. Since then, it has become widely used by law enforcement agencies as a means for dispersing mobs, rioters, and armed suspects, but often also against non-violent protestors. Ayman and his friends do not take part in “mobs or riots.” They do not go to school armed. They do not try to cause trouble.

Due to the common deployment of gas grenades at universities in the West Bank, faculty frequently warn prospective students that applying to Al-Quds means they understand the risks and the effects of exposure to tear gas, which can cause injuries that result in hospitalization. Kamilah Moore, a Mondoweiss reporter, writes that from 2012 to 2014 alone over five thousand tear-gas canisters and bullets were shot into Al-Quds University, and more than 2,400 Palestinians were injured.² But these injuries are only one way of how students are affected by the occupation.



Restrictions on Palestinian Access in the West Bank

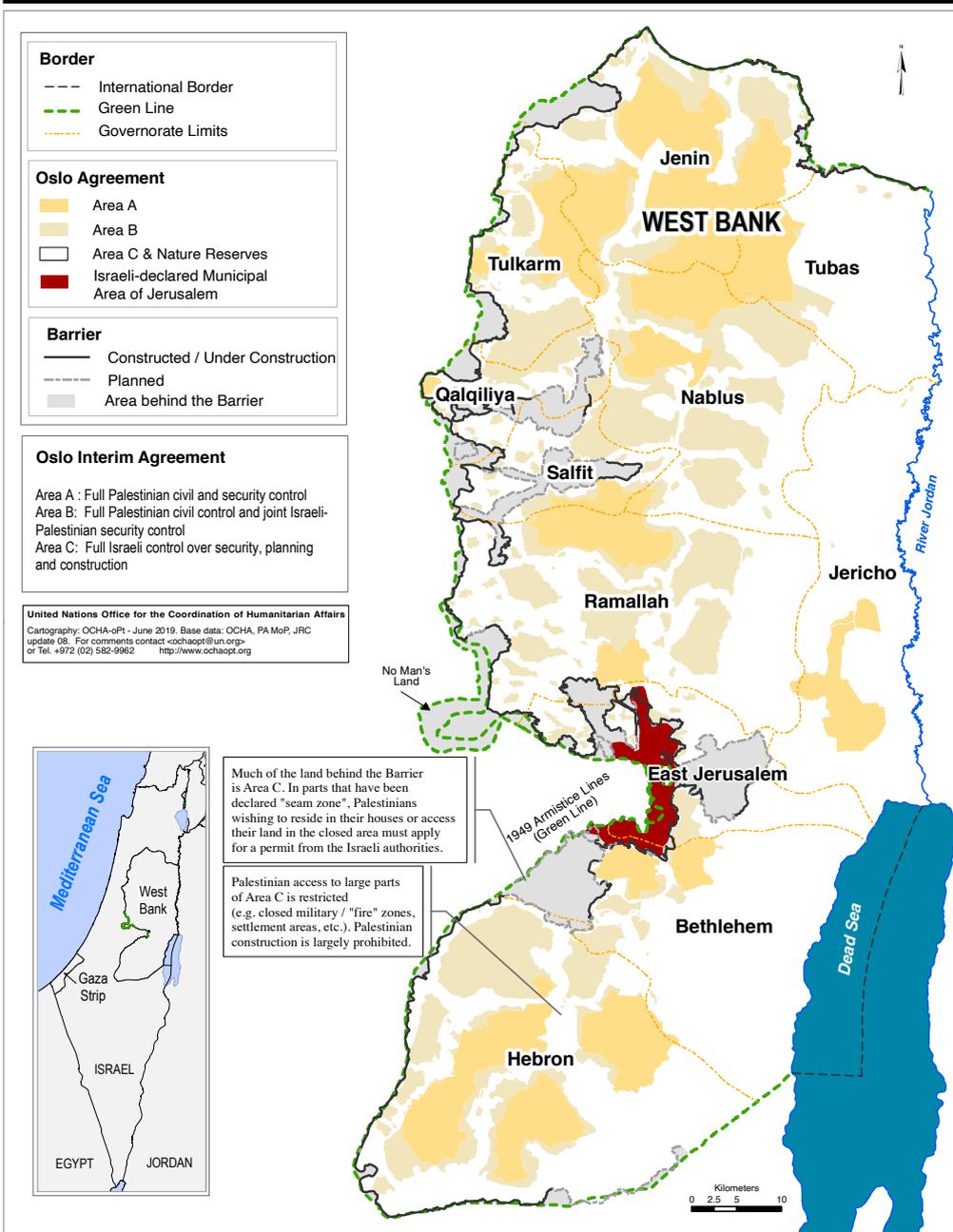


Figure 1. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Restrictions on Palestinian Access in the West Bank," June 2010, online at (reliefweb.int) bit.ly/3iYcMvf (accessed 29 September 2020).

Students who are not willing to risk their lives for school simply drop out of college. Studies have shown that during the 2014 academic year, for example, over one thousand students cancelled their registration from universities. Likewise, over twelve thousand students were forced to leave their campuses at least three times during the course of the academic year due to violence from Israeli military forces.³ Students must ultimately decide to risk their lives in order to receive schooling under occupation or remain uneducated from a schooling system.

Sometimes it is not the violence, but the harassment and humiliation by soldiers that is discouraging. In 2013, Ayman and several friends left Ramallah to go home to Bidya, a flourishing village compared to many others situated in the West Bank. On their way back they were stopped at the Za'atara checkpoint near Nablus, where soldiers searched their bags. They poured all of the clothes and school supplies from their bags to the ground, laughed, and ordered the group of friends to pick up their belongings. After they had picked up everything and handed the bags back to the soldiers for another inspection, they were allowed to leave.

As Ayman told me this story on our video call, he again would not look me in the eyes, as if to distance himself from me, so I could not see the depth of his emotions about what he was saying. I thought about Ayman and his friends: the sight of growing teenagers hunched over to pick up soiled toothbrushes, dirtied laundry, and academic essays at the command of boys their same age, who were pointing weapons at them. I looked at him for a few moments in an effort to show him I understood his humiliation. But when he kept his gaze elsewhere, I thought perhaps only by experiencing such a situation could a person understand the struggle of it.

I came to the realization that Israel not only occupies Palestinian land, but also Palestinian thought. Israel uses its military to systematically dehumanize Palestinians. The torment inflicted by the Israeli army at checkpoints has nothing to do with security or disobedience. Rather, it seems a matter of everyday harassment delivered to students like Ayman and his friends as a way to make their educational process as difficult as possible. While humiliation is not Israel's official policy, it is an undeniable consequence of the matrix of control that Palestinians must face. It results in a stream of emotional and psychological disturbances among pupils, including functional impairment, that cause resort to coping strategies and trigger posttraumatic symptoms in schoolchildren.⁴ In the case of Ayman, one can see how the Israeli army belittles students and how humiliation can erode a person's self-esteem.

Regardless of the difficulties, some students are convinced to remain and learn. Their attitudes, determination, and perseverance made me respect and admire them. "The occupation doesn't discourage me from my education," said Sally Taha, Ayman's sister. She spoke confidently, fully aware of the poor living standards that she and her brothers' face, as well as the negative impacts occupational forces have on her peers. I sensed in her smile a passion to share experiences.

Sally and her brothers grew up in Bidya. Located near the pre-1967 borders of the state of Israel, now part of Area A, Bidya is much safer than other areas of Palestine. Despite this, there are signs that warn, "Area A is Dangerous to Your Lives and

Entrance is illegal for Israelis under Israeli law.” There is not as much violence in Area A as suggested by the Israeli government, leaving Sally and many Palestinians to feel that these laws are not for security reasons, but rather to disallow Israelis from seeing how the Palestinian people live, and how they are made to struggle.

She explained how the occupation restricted her from opportunities. “The places we could go, our field trips, were controlled. We never went to Jerusalem or the beach because the occupation doesn’t allow us into those areas of our country,” she said. Despite restrictions, Sally feels that her determination and passion to attain knowledge never eroded. “But [the occupation does] not deter us from our education. We’re always ready to learn,” she said. Sally’s persistence to learn in a constrained environment surprised me. She maintains excitement for learning, balanced with a justified fear.

She does not always feel safe going to school: “Of course, every now and then I got scared, but only when political events happened or when a person’s death was publicized.” These times are when settlers enter Bidya. Even then, they only come at night. Sally shared how in mid-October 2014, five-year-old Inas Khalil was run over by a settler vehicle as she walked home from kindergarten. “A car was seen changing direction in order to drive towards Inas; he [the settler] hit her and left,” she said. The image of settlers, each shouldered with weapons provided for by the Israeli government, is a fixture in the Palestinian psyche as a stark threat to Palestinian security.

Tensions have always been high between Israelis and Palestinians, but the placement of settlers on confiscated Palestinian land has brought a tremendous escalation in violence. Many settlers are aggressive toward Palestinians as a means to push them off the land.

In early summer 2014, a month before Israel’s unprecedented assault on Gaza, three Israeli teenagers, Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah, were kidnapped and murdered.⁵ The aftermath became a nightmare for Palestinians. Israeli settlers constantly surrounded Palestinians wherever they found them, and were quick to throw rocks at their cars. The settlers never entered Abu Dis campus, but they were always near the university as Ayman made his way to college each day, instilling a fear in him and his friends that discouraged them from attending summer classes as often as they would have otherwise. In early July sixteen-year old Mohammad Abu Khdeir was kidnapped and killed by a group of settlers who forced him to drink gasoline and then set him on fire.⁶ Referring to the killing, Ayman reflected, “Those days we were really scared to go to our classes because a Palestinian boy had been murdered. We were afraid we would get hurt too if we were spotted.”

Along with physical danger, the dire economic situation for Palestinians limits opportunities. Due to the occupation, there is an inability of workers to reach their place of work because of checkpoints, closure of villages, and complications with marketing products.⁷ With few local work options, Ayman said, “I feel like I have to either work in Israel or abroad to make a living after graduation, so I want to continue in America because I feel like there are always opportunities there.” Ayman said that

he refuses to work in Israel because he does not want to contribute to the oppression of the Palestinian people. Many other Palestinian students who had to drop out of college resort to looking for work in Israel. Sally put it this way, "They have to work there because there is no work here. The [Israeli] government makes sure our economy stays flat so we will continue to need our occupiers." Unfortunately, the reality of an education is that it is often costly and made possible only at the loss of a student's ability to continue living in his or her homeland.

Not until Sally went to Birzeit University, about twenty kilometers north of Jerusalem, did she start to feel that the occupation shaped her education more prominently. She noticed that many students were unable to attend college because they lacked enough money for tuition. Unlike other Palestinian students who need to stand an average of two to three hours at checkpoints every day to get to school, Sally had been fortunate that living in Area A meant little to no interference. But when she traveled to Ramallah to attend college, she began to notice that change. "When I went to Birzeit there were always roads blocked. It made us reach campus late. We were almost always late to class, and often missed the beginning of the lectures," she said.

Eventually Sally decided to leave home earlier to allow more time to find a different route to campus. The bus drivers also made it difficult since most drivers will not depart until the bus is full. Sometimes it would take anywhere from one to two hours, making it difficult for Sally to gauge the time to begin her commute. When that solution consistently failed, Sally made friends with a Palestinian woman who drove to Ramallah every day for work. "She was nice enough to give me a ride to campus," Sally said. While reflecting back on the experience, Sally seems far from bitter; she said she misses more than anything else the moments she had with the woman who drove her to campus.

In Palestine the time of *tawjihi*, or matriculation exams, is undoubtedly the most critical time for high school seniors, since these exams determine possible career paths. For Sally, it was a time of excitement as well as stress from the pressure to do well on her exams. What made studying most difficult, according to Sally, was the daily news. Her parents had the news on constantly, so hearing about the day's events was inevitable for Sally as she walked to the sofa or kitchen. "I needed study breaks, but the news would always get to me," she said.

The world around her seemed to be falling apart; Egypt, Syria, and other countries were in turmoil. And there was always Palestine's news. "The news here wasn't any different than usual. We're used to Palestinian deaths, but dealing with it does not get easier," Sally said. It bothered her when her subconscious brought up images of dead children rather than how numbers fit into equations, and it was difficult to constantly shift her focus to her class material. It bothered her that her parents flipped through channels, witnessed war and turmoil, and were incapable of doing anything about it but watch. What disturbed Sally the most was that she knew people worldwide were watching; yet the international community seemed quiet.

When Sally graduated high school with a 97.5 percent on her *tawjihi* exams, the world seemed to change, or perhaps her world changed. She began to feel anything

was possible. In Palestine, the higher the exam score a student receives, the wider the range of future opportunities. “Everyone expected me to be a doctor or engineer, but I wanted to do something related to psychology or human development – I want to help people.” I asked Sally to describe her desire to help people; I learned that while she always envisioned herself reaching out to others, she did not feel she could benefit others while under occupation. She felt that she could best help Palestinians, Muslims, and women by continuing her studies abroad. She shared with me how she planned to marry and move to the United States in December. “I really want to help people internationally when I go there, as a Muslim woman and as a Palestinian. I want to help people so that I can break stereotypes and reach people abroad,” she said. “I never really realized what I wanted to do with my life until the opportunity to go to America was possible.” Smiling, Sally’s gaze was steadfast, her shoulders were lifted, and her spirits high.

Unfortunately, not all students share the emotional strength that Sally has when it comes to dealing with the occupation forces. Depression and withdrawal from social involvement are common among Palestinian youth. Thirty percent of school-aged Palestinian children have developed posttraumatic stress disorder, according to one study by physicians.⁸ Other research has shown that the occurrence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among school-aged children increased during the Second Intifada.⁹ Clearly the politics of the region heavily affects student health. When I spoke briefly to Mustafa Taha, Ayman and Sally’s younger brother, I asked him to tell me about his average day at school, I noticed that he slowly straightened up in his seat and moved his hand to his chin. He took a moment to think about how to express his daily activities and looked me in the eyes. “I don’t do anything,” he said.

School is when he can spend time with his friends, more than anything else. “I reach school after the first bell rings, that’s typical. I’m always late to school, and usually, I go back to sleep once class starts,” Mustafa told me. But two days prior to our conversation, he did not go back to sleep after the first bell because the hallways were in an uproar of students holding back one another from a fight. He was unsure what his peers were fighting about, but they stopped fighting and seemed to get along when the principal came out to end the disruption. “One kid picked up the garbage can and put it over the principal’s head. It was funny, everyone laughed,” he said. When asked if the fight disrupted him from class, he said, “No, I’m used to it.”

What Mustafa could never get used to is waking up early every morning, he told me jokingly. I laughed along with him but Sally shook her head, “Take this [interview] more seriously,” she told him. In the living room behind Sally and Mustafa hung a portrait of Yasser Arafat, the late president of the Palestinian Authority. His image, in the center of the room, a symbol of the aspiration for Palestinian liberation.

After a while Sally left the room and Mustafa opened up to me. He told me that he loves school, he loves to learn and he wakes up excited to take part in an intellectual environment. The problem is that he feels discouraged. Almost no other students Mustafa’s age show enthusiasm for learning. I asked him why he thought that was true and he said that there is a lack of motivation. He believes that his parents do not

pay as much attention to his own schooling as they should. “I can’t wait until it’s my turn to go through tawjihi, then I’ll show my parents and everyone that I am actually smart,” he said. It was apparent that he needed encouragement. I tried to assure him that his parents already do think he’s smart, that everybody who knows him does.

When I told Mustafa that his family cares greatly for his success, he shook his head as though I did not understand. He explained how school is perhaps his favorite time of day, because of his friends, of being away from home, and most of all because of the opportunity. He feels that if one day he woke up and, for whatever reason, was unable to attend school he would feel lost because he would remain where he is. “I want to move forward, I think most students do. Our parents want us to as well but it’s difficult to stay on track here because nobody asks,” Mustafa said. He looked sad and hesitant to say more. He moved his hands up in the air, placed them behind his head, and took a deep breath: “There’s too much going on here for anyone to ask.”



2020: Six years have passed since my interviews with Ayman, Sally, and Mustafa. Ayman graduated from Al-Quds University and now has his own law clinic in Bidya. Sally found a home in the United States, where she worked for some time with the Pennsylvania Immigrant and Refugee Women’s Network (PAIRWN), realizing her efforts to help others, and Mustafa, who earned an 89.6 percent on his tawjihi exams, graduated from Al-Najah University and is now studying to apprentice at a law firm. He says he will never stop studying.

Hadeel Salameh is a Palestinian-American writer with an MFA in fiction from Bowling Green State University and BA from the University of Pittsburgh. Her work has appeared in Torrid Literary Journal, Drunk Monkeys online magazine, Apogee journal, Anchor (Still Harbor) online magazine, Muftah online magazine, and the publication SLAB: Sound and Literary Art Book, ed. Morgan Cahn (Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, 2012). She is working on finishing a novel about the Palestinian diaspora.

Endnotes

- 1 The author conducted interviews in person in 2014, with follow up on Skype in 2014 and in 2020.
- 2 Kamilah Moore, “Israeli Attacks on Al-Quds University Give New Meaning to ‘Academic Freedom,’” *Mondoweiss*, online at www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=2618 (accessed 29 September 2020).
- 3 Moore, “Israeli Attacks.”
- 4 See Ziad Abdeen, Radwan Qasrawi, Nabil Shibli, and Mohammad Shaheen, “Psychological Reactions to Israeli Occupation: Findings from the National Study of School-based Screening in Palestine,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 32, no. 4: 290–97, online at (journals.sagepub.com) bit.ly/3dmkYnU (accessed 29 September 2020).
- 5 Jodi Rudoren and Said Ghazali, “A Trail of Clue Leading to Victims and Heartbreak,” *New York Times*, 14 July 2014, online at (nytimes.com) nyti.ms/2GVnFuH (accessed 29 September 2020); and “Murdered Israeli Teens Mourned in Joint Funeral, as Israel

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- 6 “Palestinian Boy Mohammed Abu Khdeir Was Burned Alive, Says Official,” *Guardian*, 5 July 2014, online at (theguardian.com) [bit.ly/33V5sfY](https://www.theguardian.com/bit.ly/33V5sfY) (accessed 14 October 2020).
 - 7 See World Bank assessments at the time, “Palestinian Economy in Decline and Unemployment Rising to Alarming Levels” World Bank, 16 September 2014, online at [worldbank.org](https://www.worldbank.org/bit.ly/2H1m3FC)) [bit.ly/2H1m3FC](https://www.worldbank.org/bit.ly/2H1m3FC) (accessed 3 October 2020); and “Gaza Economy on the Verge of Collapse, Youth Unemployment Highest in the Region at 60 Percent,” World Bank, 21 May 2014, online at ([worldbank.org](https://www.worldbank.org)) [bit.ly/2H1m3FC](https://www.worldbank.org/bit.ly/2H1m3FC) (accessed 3 October 2020).
 - 8 Brian Barber, “Palestinian Children and Adolescents During and After the Intifada,” *Palestine-Israel Journal*, 4, no. 1, online at www.pij.org/articles/497/palestinian-children-and-adolescents-during-and-after-the-intifada (accessed 1 October 2020).
 - 9 Samir Qouta and Jumana Odeh, “The Impact of Conflict on Children: The Palestinian Experience,” *Journal of Ambulatory Care Management* 1 (January–March 2005): 75–79, online at pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15682964/ (accessed 29 September 2020).