

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

Civil Disobedience: A Call for Justice from Shu‘fat Camp

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No two days are the same in Jerusalem. Here, life is wildly haphazard. People have to change their routine almost daily, to the extent of not having a routine at all. Men and women cannot go to their workplace every day at the regular time, and sometimes they cannot go at all. Students stay tuned, dusk to dawn, to check the school notifications to see whether there will be classes or not. They might go to school the next day, then have to stay at home the day after.

In Jerusalem, mothers kiss their children goodbye differently from other mothers of the world: they smell the scent of their bodies; they gaze at them as if meeting them for the first time, carving their features onto their hearts. Every day might well become the last day for a morning farewell.

This situation is not new, but there are variable degrees of intensity. Ever since the Shu‘fat camp was established by the United Nations in 1965 (to provide improved housing for the roughly five hundred Palestinian refugee families who were living in Mu‘askar camp in the Old City of Jerusalem at the time!), facts on the ground have moved steadily from bad to worse. The camp has been a focus of continued Israeli repression. Nonetheless, it and its residents have survived and flourished. Almost sixty years later, Shu‘fat camp today is home to around forty thousand Palestinians, but still in an area of approximately two hundred dunams, about 0.2 square kilometers.

Residents of the camp, the only refugee camp located within Jerusalem’s municipal boundary, hold Jerusalem

IDs, a blue Israeli identification card but without Israeli citizenship status. The camp is separated from the rest of the city by the towering apartheid wall erected around the camp two decades ago, with Israeli checkpoints strategically fixed at all its entrances. Only two roads lead to the camp: one from Jerusalem; the other from the West Bank. Closing off the camp is rather easy for the Israeli army and the police, turning the camp into a tightly controlled dead-end pocket by the occupying government.

About one-third of the 140,000 Palestinian Jerusalemites who live in Jerusalem but outside the Wall are estimated to be living in Shu‘fat camp (and an equal number in the crowded adjacent neighborhoods – New ‘Anata, Ras Khamis, Ras Shahada, and Dahiyat Salam). Their living conditions are not unique since all of East Jerusalem, its suburbs and villages, experience many of the same difficulties – on the social, economic, and even the psychological levels.

Early marriage rates in the camp are high (average marriage age for males is 18–22 years, and for females is 15–18 years). Newly married couples usually live on freshly constructed floors atop the building where the young man’s parents live, which means less light and air for everybody. Crowding has been further complicated by the arrival of non-refugees to the camp (usually from within the borders of Jerusalem), seeking low-cost housing in Jerusalem. With the commercial activity in the camp environs relatively well connected to other areas of Jerusalem, the location represents some income-generating possibilities. This attraction led to the building of the colossal neighborhoods for tens of thousands of people at the southern end of the camp along ‘Anata Street.

Such out-of-control expansion has reflected badly on the education sector. There are elementary and preparatory schools up to tenth grade in Shu‘fat camp, one for boys and one for girls, run by UNRWA. To attend eleventh and twelfth grades, the students must travel through checkpoints to reach secondary schools elsewhere in Jerusalem, outside the camp. The situation is no better when it comes to accessing specialized clinics and hospitals available only beyond the checkpoint.

Adding to the continuous stress, the fact that the whole of the camp is under no one’s absolute authority, be it Palestinian or Israeli, has led over the years to the camp becoming a hub for drug trafficking, along with all other kinds of crime – a situation that serves Israeli interests.

With conditions left to simmer for so long, some boiling over is inevitable. In October 2022, a Palestinian youth shot at Israeli soldiers at the Shu‘fat checkpoint leading to Jerusalem – injuring several and killing one. As a result, the access point was closed completely. This collective punishment affected forty thousand camp residents who were then imprisoned in their own houses: thousands of students were unable to reach their schools, and patients were prevented from reaching medical centers outside the camp. Thousands of workers were prevented from reaching their places of employment outside the camp for five consecutive days. Practicing their normal daily routine has been suspended, yet again. At the same time, the camp residents were again facing electricity cuts and shortages of basic foodstuffs and medicines.

As a result, the residents declared an open strike and a civil disobedience campaign

for several days (later to be the first of two). Everyone stayed at home and refused to go to work or school, or anywhere else; all shops in the camp were closed. The people of the camp were sending a message of fury to the whole world: “We do not accept to lead such a life of humiliation.”

The residents’ efforts to denounce the “policy of harassment and aggression carried out by the Israeli authorities,” received wide solidarity. The full strike was observed across Jerusalem’s neighborhoods – Qalandiya camp; Kufr ‘Aqab; al-‘Isawiyya; Silwan; Bayt Hanina; and neighboring ‘Anata – and farther in the West Bank – Dahaysha camp in Bethlehem; al-Fawwar camp in Hebron; Bayt Ummar, north of Hebron; Nablus; and parts of Ramallah all joined in.

Under popular pressure, Israel was forced to lift the sanctions and ease the blockage. Everything went back to “normal”; or so it seemed.

Several months later, in February 2023, a thirteen-year-old boy from the camp was accused of a stabbing attempt. Israeli soldiers began shooting and things went out of control again. Soldiers brutally pushed students back and banned them from crossing the checkpoints to their schools. Media outlets as well as social media platforms were filled with scenes of women being mistreated on checkpoints and soldiers harassing schoolchildren wearing their uniforms and backpacks (envisioned as “weapons” by soldiers).

This round of crackdown involved, among other collective measures, the demolition of at least seven buildings, the arrest of a hundred people, the setting up of dozens of roadblocks and checkpoints, the confiscation of money and property from former and current political prisoners, and revoking the Jerusalem residency of the families of attackers. Everyone was, once again, under continuous threat of being either beaten up, detained, or even unjustly shot dead. Anger and frustration brewed in the hearts of the camp residents. Another civil disobedience action campaign was declared.

Loudspeakers in the mosques of Shu‘fat, ‘Anata, al-Ram, Jabal al-Mukabbir, and al-‘Isawiyya called for joining the uprising and the strike in rejection of the crimes and policies of the occupation. Activists tweeted using the hashtag #القدس_تنتفض (*al-Quds tantafid* – Jerusalem rises up) as civil disobedience took over parts of occupied Jerusalem. Everyone is rejecting the measures of the new far-right occupation government, which aim to displace the indigenous population and empty the city of its Palestinian Jerusalemites. Shortly after that, the National and Islamic Forces, as well as the Jerusalem governorate, joined in rallying against the growing Israeli crackdown, describing in a statement how Palestinians, especially in Shu‘fat, have been subjected to “retaliatory measures, abuse, torture, humiliation, and daily oppression” since the attacks.

Young protesters burnt car tires and set up barricades overnight at entrances to different neighborhoods. The civil disobedience campaign called upon commercial and public institutions to remain closed, workers to abstain from going to work (especially to Israeli workplaces), the use of cars to be restricted after ten at night, and finally, the refusal to pay taxes to the Israeli-run municipality and other state agencies. Large numbers participated in protests near checkpoints and wherever Israeli soldiers

were stationed. Once again, the civil disobedience campaign bore fruit: Israel reduced several restrictions; and again, things seem to be moving back to “normal.”

However, this normality does not remain for long. Every day of life under occupation has its renewed humiliation and dangers. The never-ending abuses of human rights accumulate, and with it grows the Palestinians’ will to seek justice. The nonviolent action is meant to send a strong message to Israelis that we, the people of Shu‘fat camp, will not remain quiet nor submit to being collectively punished. We have a rather simple quest: to go to work to gain our daily bread; for children to go safely to schools. Is this too much to ask for? A simple question, yet too difficult (and costly) to answer.

Hasan ‘Alqam is a Jerusalemite activist who leads the Best of Jerusalem Youth collective. His family is from Bayt Thul, a village west of Jerusalem depopulated in 1948. He has a BA in nursing and an MA in business administration, and is currently working toward a doctorate in administration. He is a volunteer international boxing coach in Jerusalem and Shu‘fat camp with the aim of keeping children away from the dangers of tobacco and drug use.