

## Hijacked Nations

I have always wanted to visit Israel/Palestine and have long dreamt of understanding, in some way, the conflict there. Kurds have found inspiration for their own movement in the struggles of the Palestinians, which have appeared periodically in our writing, thought and poetry. At the same time, the Israelis have often identified themselves with the Kurds in their historical claim of the land. As a Kurd, a student and a concerned citizen of the world, I decided the time had come for me to visit this land at the heart of the Middle East conflict also as part of group university visit to Ramallah University. Landing at the Tel Aviv airport I had a slight sense of unease. I had heard stories of the security on arrival, and half of me expected some difficulty, holding as I did a British passport, but having been born in Iranian Kurdistan and traveled extensively Still, it was a slight surprise to be given such a comprehensive landing card to complete, requesting everything from my father, grand father even name and date of brief all my siblings to my email address. When we arrived at the passport official's desk, my travel companions and I were escorted to a corner of the arrivals hall, and told by an armed and unsmiling security official simply that we would have to wait.... Five hours of grueling procedure ensued and he never left our side throughout.



*Jewish Arab Locals in Tel Aviv*

All I was told was that they were running checks and that they were waiting for someone coming from Tel Aviv to interview us, I was questioned in the minutia of my life and the UK and my family background in Kurdistan; also why I traveled to Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Indonesia and almost every other country I have been to. I experienced the most humiliating strip search of my life. Given myself come from country been in a center of world conflict, this was quite a feat on the part of the Israeli authorities! During all this, our own requests for information as to why this was happening were met with standardised response of 'security'. Eventually, the intensive questioning led me to grow upset enough to threaten legal action through British embassy. Finally, without an apology, we were greeted, in our first steps on official Israeli land, by a deserted airport where we found our bags still resting on the long abandoned baggage claim belt. "Welcome to Israel", a huge sign at the entrance proclaimed, which to us held a rather ironic note. My first impressions were of a clean and modern metropolis, but our ill-timed

arrival on the Jewish Shabbat meant that no buses were available to get to the virtually empty streets of central Tel Aviv. I was a stranger to the concept of a holy day in which work of any kind, including driving was forbidden. I wondered at the depth of religiosity in this 'modern state'. In the afternoon, having slept off our airport ordeal, we went in search of a restaurant for lunch. With some difficulty we managed to find a restaurant open on a Saturday, and I was surprised to see armed security guards on the door, who periodically searched the bags of diners on entry. It was then that I realised the severity of the militarised presence in Israel. It was odd for me to observe the parallels between the Holocaust in Europe and the Anfal in Kurdistan, and I was keen to go and see another side of this country.

The following day we visited the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora. The dark and rather depressing interior was filled with slogans which seemed designed to indoctrinate the viewers towards the historical victimisation of the Jews. They didn't leave much for the viewers to feel the extent of the Holocaust and the brutality which claimed the lives of millions of Jews.



*Sign at Jewish Diaspora Museum-Tel Aviv*

We then made our way through a chaotic bus terminal to find a shared taxi, or sherut, for the 40 minute ride to Jerusalem. My first impression of this city was that it slept early, being a religious city. I noticed that most shop keepers in the Old City's bazaar were Palestinian Arabs. The occasional orthodox Jew, dressed in traditional black dress, walked the dark, narrow streets of the ancient market. Our initial experience in the city revealed it to be heavily policed by armed security officials, who were very happy to stop and chat about their work, as well as ask what we thought about the Israel/Palestine conflict. When we approached the soldiers to talk, I noticed staring looks from the Palestinian locals, which I experienced as almost angry or resentful. As I took the soldiers' photographs, I began to try and collect their views as well on the whole situation in Israel/Palestine. Two of the young soldiers, who seemed interested simply to chat with foreigners, were less interested in political debate. Their superior officer (who explained that his parents had emigrated from Bombay, India to Israel) however explained the strong military presence in terms of a need for security, which for me echoed exactly the statements of the police during my questioning at the airport.



*Armed Police parry facing the Holy Well*

The following day, our first stop was in the Old City's Jewish Quarter, one of three sections of the original area. As my travel partner's background was Christian, and I was brought up in an Islamic country, we decided jokingly to be 'neutral' and choose the neighborhood without any personal connections. The famous Wailing Wall has always held interest for me, and I was fascinated to visit it, see Jewish men nodding their heads against the wall in prayer while holding the (holy) Torah. Buying a yarmulke on the way and trying to clip it onto my small amount of recently shaved hair, I was amazed by how respectfully I was greeted by Jewish pilgrims at the site, approaching me in Hebrew and thinking I was a real Jew. Making my way towards the wall, the last remaining bit of the original temple to have survived for centuries, I found it quite empty, save for some patches of green weeds growing from cracks. I started by taking photos and maneuvering between young and old pilgrims.



*Orthodox Jew makes daily journey to Jerusalem in order to pray*

A large group of well armed security forces, led by a Rabbi, were very vocal in the weeping that accompanied their devotions. Getting close to the wall, I tried to speak to a bearded orthodox Jew. In his broken English he tried to tell me about his son who was ill, complaining about the cost of the treatment in Israel. He told me that he made the 1&1/2 hours journey to Jerusalem from his home on a daily basis in order to pray at the wall. Next, I met two young Jewish men wearing yarmulkes similar to mine, who were writing wishes on pieces of paper.

They explained to me that after praying they could stick them among the many other wishes populating the wall, in the hope that they would be fulfilled by God. Their friend told me that the chief Rabbi collects these sheets once a month and burns them in the shadow of the wall. When the smoke rises to the sky, it reaches God and it is then that the wishes will eventually come true. After telling them I was a Kurd born in Iran they were most interested to find out if Iran still considered Israel the ‘tumour’ of the middle east’. In this way, they cleverly avoided my own questions about the Israel/Palestine conflict, instead deflecting questions about opinion back onto me.

Then I encountered a Turkish Jewish man who was there to pray and began chatting to him in Turkish. I was struck by the fact that he was quite understanding about the Kurdish Issue. When I spoke about Israel/Palestine with him, he told me that he believed in dialogue and a two-state solution, going on to say that he felt the same was possible in Turkey with regard to the Kurdish Question. He was then very helpful in informing me about the details of how and when to pray as a Jew, and the accompanying paraphernalia. Prayer at the Wall is gender segregated, with prayer areas separated by a metal fence. Nonetheless, the women could be heard praying and the guardians at the entrance were instructing female visitors to cover themselves with appropriate dress. Afterwards, we visited the four Sephardim synagogues in the quarter, the oldest in Jerusalem dating back to the age of the Second Temple.



*Young Christian prays at tomb of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre*

In the afternoon, under the scorching heat of the sun we made our way through the winding narrow passages of the souk to reach the Christian Quarter and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This is arguably the most touristy and thus neatly packaged area of the Old City. The church itself is said to be the final resting place of Jesus. The tomb is loyally guarded by an Arabic speaking priest who ensures me that the hoards of visitors don't exceed their given time to pray and light a candle, or offend by trying to enter without arms and legs appropriately covered. The tomb is small, dark and dimly candlelit; the interior strongly perfumed with incense. It is simple in design, contrasting to the opulence of the church surrounding it. Later we attempted to visit the church of St John the Baptist, said to be the oldest in Jerusalem and used by visiting knights during the crusades. Unfortunately it was shut and desolate, and we could only view the simple

domed white stucco exterior, accessible through a passageway in the souk so small and unassuming as to be almost, missable.

In order to save my photos to a disc and keep myself up to date with world news I visited an internet café in the souk, run by a young Palestinian man who was desperately trying to score with a visiting Brazilian Jewish girl. We chatted while he burned my CDs and I asked him what he thought of the future prospects for peace in Jerusalem. He told me that as long as life is good and if the Israelis withdraw from east Jerusalem, dialogue was certainly possible but that he didn't think that would happen in his lifetime. "If you ask me," he said, "All the religious people from every religion in this city, are crazy fanatics. It's them that cause all the problems." Later back in the hostel we fell into conversation with an earnest pair of backpackers who spent far more than our brief 10 days traveling in Israel and Palestine. When speaking about the bigger picture, the Frenchman said, "Look, I am from France. I don't understand these things. That kind of hatred. The hate is so deep on both sides. Finally, I decided only to learn and experience. Don't try to understand, it will only f\*\*k you up." I replied, seeing some parallels with the Kurdish struggle, my perspective was different; that I could relate to those sentiments of hatred because of my background. I too have experienced such blind hatred in my youth, when I was more closely connected to the immediate world into which it is born.

The following morning we headed for the last big sights in the city, in the Muslim Quarter. The Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are some of the holiest of sites in Islam.



*Time of mid-day pray in Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock where Men & Women pray side by side*

They lie just above the Western Wall and must be reached via the lengthy footbridge that crosses over the Jewish prayer area, and after comprehensive security checks including bag searches and metal detectors. Entering the main square, one is taken by the beauty of the Golden Dome. However, I was more struck by standing on the spot by my childhood memories of the sometimes violent protests of Palestinian Muslim youth throwing stones; to which Israeli soldiers sometimes replied with bullets, that's got worse when Ariel Sharon ignoring all sides calls not to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque which become main reason for start a new Antafza (up raising). I had viewed these images many times on the news while growing up. I decided to go inside the mosque. The guard outside the door

informed me that it was open only for prayer, and refused to believe that if I was a ‘Muslim’. He asked to see ID and then referred me to his superior to be ‘examined’, during which I was asked to recite verses of the Quran! I hesitated for some time, trying to remember the few lines I could resurrect from my childhood.

I stumbled through two lines and was just about to falter when he suddenly seemed satisfied and decided to let me through. After all, they didn’t believe me anyway and an escort was sent to follow me at every step through the building. They said they didn’t trust me, that entry was prohibited for Jews and Christians as they fear bombings or attack. They showed me part of the mosque hit by live ammunition, including a blown out window, where they claim tear gas was used on praying devotees by the Israeli army. I felt a bit as though the entire complex was under siege, as every point of entry was manned by armed Israeli soldiers, who checked the ID of a young couple coming in as we left, to ensure that they were in fact ‘genuine Muslims’.



*Entry and Exit doors to the Mosque are controlled by Israeli police.*

Later that day we met up with Gabriel, an Israeli poet and intellectual who I had been put in touch with through my neighbor back in London. He was quite critical of the Israeli government, pointing out that there were many who felt as he did and that the entire conflict and peace process had, he felt, been hijacked by a small but vocal contingent of conservative militants, Ariel Sharon chief among them. Having said that, he added that without such firm authoritarian politics, events such as the recent Gaza disengagement would never have been possible, since a nervous and fractious Israeli population sought reassurance in his conservatism. A more liberal government undertaking such action, Gabriel felt, would surely have seen the country disintegrate into civil war.

The next day we departed for Ramallah, our first real experience of Palestinian life in the West Bank. Riding on the bus, we suddenly saw the massive concrete wall raising on both sides, covered in graffiti in Hebrew, Arabic, English, Spanish and other languages, some of it pro-Hamas, some written by peacenik backpackers. The atmosphere around the wall and the checkpoint was total chaos. Noisy, dirty and dusty and filled with taxis and buses unloading and seeking new passengers to and from all points in the West Bank and Israel. My companion likened it to the atmosphere of a mercenary planet of misrule from a Star Wars film; in other words, completely otherworldly.



*Kalendia, is one of the largest checkpoints controlling lifelines to the West Bank but is only open to those who have travel permission from Israelis.*

This spot, known as Kalendia, is one of the largest checkpoints controlling lifelines to the West Bank, through extensive security. As such, it quickly becomes infamous in the vocabulary of even short-term travelers to Palestine. Those wishing to cross are forced to walk a long tunnel of chain link fencing resembling a prison. Going in the other direction, into Israel, the conditions are closer to livestock corrals, with extensive security checks given to those lucky ones with permits to cross, who are moved en mass through the metal gates. On the other side, the entire procedure repeats itself, with taxis and hawkers of every imaginable item seeking customers. The striking difference is that on this, the West Bank side, there is a notable absence of security forces, even from the Palestinian Authority. From this side of the wall, an imposing watch-tower is revealed to be splattered with paint, a colourful show of dissent from a population with few other channels to speak its voice.



*West Bank well that U.N Assembly condemns saying it is illegal*

Ramallah, when we finally reach it, is a noisy, crowded city, being the most populous in Palestine. There is a considerable presence of PA (Palestinian Authorities) security forces in the streets, especially as evening falls. They are armed, but with only outdated equipment (AK47s). We stopped for a chat with some of these officers on the street, who

seemed keen to interact, but only one of whom had even broken English. When we asked about the presence of Israeli military in the West Bank, he explained that for the most part, the PA was now responsible for security in Ramallah. He qualified this however by saying “Sometimes in the night they come, make arrests. We stay quiet. This is peace.” He finished with a resigned shrug.

Walking through the city we met a guy who was wearing traditional Arab dress in the style of Arafat. He was determined that we should visit his home, which he claimed was destroyed by Israeli forces and occupied because of his and his father’s political activism. He assured us that his home was only 300 meters away, which proved to be much longer. He explained that he was running for the local elections and claimed that as a former school teacher his pupils and the community fully supported him. He described his plans to improve the city. Pointing out the piles of rubbish littering the streets, he told us that when people live in conditions without hope or power over their own lives, they cease to look after their surroundings, their lives, ‘even sometimes their physical body’



*Saddam Hussein and Osama Ben Laden's picture in a street of Ramallah awaiting costumers*

He expressed some strong views on women, declaring them all ‘fools’ who only care about makeup. He declared any form of peace between Palestine and Israel ‘impossible’; he neither liked nor trusted Israelis. He went on to tell us that he believed Saddam Hussein to be a ‘good man’, and that in a divisive society such as Iraq, his form of rule was the only one available. When I tried to challenge him by describing the atrocities committed against the Kurds and Iraqi civilians such as Halabja and Anfal, he simply countered by saying that ‘the fool’ Bush had also killed in Iraq, and that ‘no one is all honey’. After a cup of black Arab coffee in his home, during which his wife seemed unwilling to meet or speak with us, we bid our farewells, and wished him luck in the upcoming elections, more than a little worried for the future of PA leadership. The following morning before leaving our hotel for our first visit to the university we received a phone call from our new friend inviting us to travel to Nablus with him. I declined, explaining we had other plans.



*The tomb of Yasser Arafat, a man widely held to be an obstacle to peace by many, the same place in which he was under siege for more than a year.*

We then made our way to the tomb of Yasser Arafat. It was clean, made of shining new slabs of marble and glass, in striking contrast to its decaying surroundings, and manned by two PA soldiers who seemed to perk up and take a more formal stance at our approach. During our visit we encountered the only foreign travelers we were to see in the West Bank. They included a small group of Japanese visitors. The tomb itself is housed in the infamous compound where Arafat, a man widely held to be an obstacle to peace, was under siege for more than a year. Whatever his image outside Palestine, he can be seen to have mobilised the resistance of the Palestinian people, with his familiar picture, always wearing the now popularised Palestinian scarf. I had a long discussion with Anuz, a young but high ranking member of the PA security forces who had also served in the Algerian marines. He felt that the PA had ‘a lot of work’ ahead of them and only limited resources, but that with the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank, both peace and the necessary, short-term management of Hezbollah and Hamas militants, were achievable goals for their determined forces.



*Supporter of Palestine president Abo Mazan at Gaza Freedom Festival*

Then traveled to Hebron, a city noted for bloody battle land between Israelis and Palestinians living there. We visited the Israeli controlled Old City, home to the tomb of Abraham, an important figure in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, and to approximately 700 Jewish settlers. On entry, we faced heavy security checks involving

our ID being passed through a drawer to an unseen official. When we were allowed through, we were met by eerily empty streets, silent but for the heavy but hidden presence of armed soldiers on virtually every street corner. Here we encountered the ultimate absurdity of the Israeli regime: we wondered how a people who had themselves experienced such atrocities as the Holocaust could turn around and inflict conditions which seemed so similar to the WWII ghettos on others. A heavily armed and alert convoy of soldiers marched along the street, only meters from where two small boys, seemingly oblivious to the violence around them, played. We headed toward Hebron's single tourist sight, the Tomb of Abraham and Sarah which after the 1995 massacre by a militant settler that killed 29 Muslim worshippers, was divided into a mosque and synagogue. To gain entry, we again had to pass through security checks and metal detectors, which this time included questions about our religious origins. We resentfully opted for the relatively neutral Christian label. The tour of the mosque given by a middle aged Palestinian man soliciting some small cash was very political, pointing out repeatedly the bullet holes in the walls but offering little in the way of historical detail. Afterwards, I spent a long while talking with a young Israeli soldier who was very open in expressing his feelings.



*Old city of Hebron which has been cut out from the rest of Hebron by the Israeli army*

He told me that it was his duty to protect his country, and that there was no possibility for peace between Israel and Palestine, nor did he want any. He said he personally hated and distrusted all Palestinians. He had six close friends killed. "It would be the same for anyone. If you take a Palestinian child like me, he will tell you the same. Maybe he has six friends who were killed. We all want revenge." However he advised us not to stay in Hebron that night especially in an Arab hotel if we want to wake up alive the next day. As we walked past another heavily armed checkpoint near the exit to the mosque, we saw two young men with their hands folded in front of them and heads bowed as if in shame. They were standing facing a wall, as you see young children punished in old fashioned schools. The soldiers had their guns casually pointed at the men's backs. Later, walking through the now deserted streets of what was once a thriving marketplace, we encountered members of an observer force made up of six European governments. They told us that such sights were commonplace, and claimed that it was a way for young soldiers to 'feel tough' and exert their power over the Palestinian residents of the Israeli occupied area. On our way back through the settlement that evening we met a Palestinian

man who invited us into his home to drink coffee. From his point of view, the conditions we observed in the Old City of Hebron now were, relatively speaking, good. He told me that a year or two earlier, during the Intifada, the conditions and regular retribution attacks from both sides had been so bad that there were times when he and his family didn't leave their home for as many as five days in a stretch. Late at night we left the (Israeli part of) Hebron through the gates and check points and booked in one of the only two hotels in town before waking up alive to leave Hebron for Jericho.



*He said he personally hated and distrusted all Palestinians. Six close friends mine killed. "It would be the same for anyone. A Palestinian child like me, will tell you the same.*

Back in Jerusalem I met a Kurdish-Jewish shop keeper who said he was originally from south Kurdistan (Iraq). He didn't speak any Kurdish but we did chat in Arabic, Jalil said in Israel there are large communities of Kurdish Jews mainly from Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. However he was careful not to get into politics. He was not keen to talk or ask about Kurds either.

Throughout the rest of our stay, I heard many similar stories repeated, including at a rather strange and cavernous hotel where we spent a night in Jericho. The owner told us of his friend who had died in that garden, shot dead by Israeli soldiers after a six hour stand-off in which 300 soldiers had surrounded the hotel following reports that he and his armed friend, both supporters of Al-Aqsa, had been inside plotting. He showed us the 4 bullet scars that remained on his own body. The next day we crossed the famous check point (Kalidaya) again to attend a rally by the Palestine president Abo Mazan (Mahood Abbas marking the disengagement from Gaza) held in Ramallah beside the tomb of Yasser Arafat (Abo Omar), also attended by some foreign diplomats and religious leaders; there the tone was much more celebratory, though not well attended.



*President Abbas delivering speech at the Ramallah Festival:  
West bank and Jerusalem are next to be free*

By the time of our departure, I felt no more certain of the situation or details of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, as perhaps had been my initial aim. However, on recalling my treatment by security forces on entering and again leaving the country (where my bags were kept after my flight departure and had to be couriered to me three days later), I perhaps felt some small part of the anger and humiliation that Palestinians must face daily. At the same time I tried to understand the feelings of ordinary Jews, particularly the fear of getting killed simply for being Israeli, and their government who like Gabriel, my Jewish contact said, has been 'hijacked' by a small but vocal contingent of conservative militants who are getting the army's backing. The same could, of course, be argued for the Palestine side in regards with Hamas and Hezbo Allha. Back in London, I discussed the matter with a British (Jewish) acquaintance who told me she could never feel comfortable visiting Israel. I was still shocked as I described my experiences on the journey, and likened them to my past experiences traveling throughout other Middle Eastern security regimes. She recommended that I capture the anger that I felt while it was still fresh; to give a better reflection of the lives led by people there, and the reality of the conditions. This is what I have tried to do; however, no written piece can ever do justice to the things I saw and experienced in Israel and Palestine, or even to my own sense of amazement that these things can continue to occur without a larger outcry from the world.

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