

Damascus Gate

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We meet outside the magnificent Damascus Gate of East Jerusalem in Israeli-occupied Palestine. Noora Baker and El-Funoun were invited to Malta by Inizjamed in October 2004 and we became good friends right away. But now we meet in a different place, and different places have a way of burying or strengthening friendship. It's a bit like reading a beautiful poem in another social, cultural and geographical context – it becomes a different poem, possibly more beautiful because the new context gives it a new richness. Noora is smiling of course. This, after all, is Jerusalem.



The van ride to Ramallah takes about 15 minutes. It's heart-rending. Every minute of the way I hear harrowing stories about how the Israeli establishment is squeezing the Palestinians out of Jerusalem. I've read about this in one report after another but here I can see it happening. That, in itself, is a privilege. Many of my friends in Al-Bireh and Ramallah cannot visit Jerusalem. Israel, the "only democracy in the Middle East,"ⁱ has denied them access to their magnificent city. Khaled Katamish, the director of El-Funoun has never been to Jerusalem, he's not allowed to – it's so close and yet so frustratingly far. I remember him telling me about this in Malta – he seemed calm at the time, but he can't have been. For him, when friends visit Jerusalem they are making a statement for him and his people too. "It's important that you go," he had told me on the telephone. And when Khaled tells you something like that, you know there are so many reasons you can't even start to imagine...

Colonialism

The Israelis have illegally annexed Jerusalem and they are promoting another city, Ramallah, as the administrative and cultural centre of *their* Palestinian territories. "Performing in occupied Jerusalem," writes Omar Barghouti of El-Funoun in *The Daily Star* of Beirut,ⁱⁱ "was normally punished with a three-day closure of the hosting venue, a military order tacked on the door declaring a closure due to 'illegal activities.'" It's a cynical colonialist plan. The Israeli government wants Jerusalem for itself. But it will never work. Israel can never enjoy a city by depriving it of its lifeblood. The Israelis can turn it into a trophy, of course, but it will be as meaningful as trophies locked in a showcase that people may want to look at...

On the right there's the sprawling Hebrew University. It's been in the news lately. Early on Sunday, November 21, 2004, "bulldozers and armed security

guards hired by Hebrew University Properties, Ltd. arrived at the home of Al-Helou family in Jerusalem to announce that their land will be confiscated for the expansion of the university dormitories.”ⁱⁱⁱ Shirabe Yamada describes this sad event as “the latest chapter of the decades-long struggle of these Palestinian families against the silent war of displacement by Hebrew University.”

The behaviour of this leading Israeli university has prompted members of the British Association of University Teachers (AUT) to call for an academic boycott against it. Similar calls for an end to all co-operation with Haifa and Bar-Ilan and to discourage UK investment in them have been approved by the British academics who have described Israel's policies in the Israeli-occupied territories as “colonial and racist.” A decision about the Hebrew University of Jerusalem will be taken by AUT after further investigations are carried out by the union's executive.^{iv}

The closer we get to Ramallah the uglier the road gets. There is rubble and dust everywhere: the Israeli government controls this area. This is Israel's dirty backyard, and you're not meant to come this far – if you do, the sight of armed soldiers and humiliating “security” checks are meant to make you change your mind. An Israeli friend tells me that his compatriots don't want to see this – they're tired of the “conflict” and the “fear” that comes with it so they just ignore it. If they do see it, as they surely must as soldiers, it “isn't there” just the same. The government provides the necessary “mantras” about the Palestinian “issue” being only a question of “terror” and “security” and most Israelis choose to believe.



We reach the Qalandia checkpoint and now it's definitely depressing. You have time to look around at the havoc and question everything you've ever believed in. Everything. From God and justice all the way down to the United Nations and its seemingly useless resolutions. Now I know why the world calls the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories Israel's

“open prison” and apartheid “bantustans.” Noora walks through the dust with the spring of a gifted dancer and the dignity and spirit of a proud Palestinian. Every step in that dust, every glimpse of that hideous apartheid wall, every humiliating security check lodges itself into a memory that will never forget. “Don't be upset,” she tells me. (I'm obviously unable to hide my distress and anger.) My friends love their land more than any Israeli colonialist or North American strategist can ever imagine – even if it is being

stolen at gunpoint piece by piece, well by well, olive tree by olive tree, every single, bloody day.



The hideous upright concrete slabs of the apartheid wall are on my left,^v on the other side of the checkpoint. It's a cynical reminder that we live in a cynical world and that every time we choose to keep our mouths shut in the face of even the most gross violations of the rights of human beings and other living creatures we are as guilty as the architects of this cynical wall of hatred. It separates one side of the road from the other. But it also separates people like you and me from their relatives, from their workplaces, from their fields, from their schools; it separates mothers and fathers from their children and grandchildren, elderly people from their foodstores, an entire nation from its freedom.

I ask about the large construction site on my right. Noora smiles: "I have no idea what this is. Sharon must have dreamt up some new project." The excavation works, or whatever they are, are moving fast. "The sad thing is that those must be Palestinian workers. Working for Israeli contractors, of course. Palestinian contractors aren't allowed to get contracts like these." A few days later, back home, I read about this new illegal construction on the Electronic Intifada, an excellent not-for-profit, independent publication.^{vi} In "The Making of an Israeli Factoid" (5 May 2005), Rima Merriman writes about how the new construction at the Qalandia checkpoint "is taking shape irrevocably as a permanent bottleneck and border crossing that cuts off the

illegally annexed East Jerusalem along with some 28 Palestinian villages from the rest of the West Bank.”

Merriman anticipates that soon, what until now has been known as a checkpoint or roadblock “will be transformed into a respectable, legitimate-looking border crossing, a fact on the ground as solid as the long concrete wall it faces.” While the Israeli government continues to buy time by talking about the need for the Palestinian Authority (created by the ill-fated Oslo Agreements, not by the Palestinian people) to “rein in fighters by making arrests and confiscating weapons,”^{vii} it continues to violate everything under the sun by stealing more and more Palestinian land from which it was ordered to retreat by the UN after the meticulously planned Israeli Six-Day war of 1967,^{viii} and carrying on with what psychiatrist Samah Jabr calls “the social destruction of the Palestinian people and the genocide of our nation.”^{ix}

“In the scene unfolding at Qalandia,” writes Rima Merriman, a freelance writer and a communications specialist who has written a lot about Palestine,^x “there is absolutely no indication of a solution with justice. This border, the face of the annexation of East Jerusalem and environs, is the face of an imposed problem, not of a solution.”

Israel wants peace

In Israel everyone seems to talk about peace. It’s a wonderful thing, and perhaps bodes well. But “the Israelis claim that they want peace after separation,” writes Samah Jabr, a Palestinian psychiatrist who is militantly non-violent and passionate for Palestinian rights.^{xi} “They are establishing a wall between us for security reasons. They want separation, a separation that will ensure that Palestinians are denied access to the land of their immediate fathers and forefathers, while Israelis continue to traverse their secure bypass roads to settlements lying in the heart of the Palestinian territories.”

Even here in Malta I realize that those who do not want to say anything about the real issues in Palestine (control over water, land, trees, homes, people, refugees, security) talk about “peace,” about “coexistence,” about “fighting violence on both sides,” “negotiations,” “building bridges,” and “concessions.” But peace is hardly what this is really about. The real issue, I suppose, is justice. The dispossessed Palestinians want their land back, their water resources, their trees, their freedom. They don’t want to live in “peace” behind an eight metre prison wall,^{xii} or in the shadow of another illegal settlement perched on a hill, like the Psagot colony that occupies some of the best lands of Al-Bireh, with settlers/colonialists gunning them down with impunity or bullying them off “their” bypass roads. The Palestinians want to give birth in decent hospitals not at checkpoints or in dilapidated clinics.^{xiii}

"Israel wants peace, yes, but entirely on its own terms," writes Merriman. It is the "peace" that bullies impose on the victim after having taken all that they fancied. Bullies don't want to be bothered by their victims forever so they settle for "peace," not justice. As one of my friends, who is an Israeli Jew, tells me, the Palestinians and Israelis cannot negotiate in a situation of "imbalance," when one of the parties keeps stealing land while holding its hand out to offer "peace" and "painful concessions." It is a peace that some may choose to settle for, but that the majority will never accept. The scars of colonialism on the colonized (and on the colonizers) are far too deep.^{xiv}

The further we get from the dust and rubble of the Qalandia checkpoint disgrace, the nicer the surroundings become. It's a bit of a relief, and that is what the "only democracy in the Middle East" wants it to be since it wants Ramallah to replace Jerusalem in the Palestinian cultural and national imaginary. In the building that houses the offices of El-Funoun in Al-Bireh, a town next to Ramallah (the two are practically one in the same thing), I really feel at home. El-Funoun and the Popular Art Centre it founded in 1987,^{xv} are dynamic grassroots organizations and somehow, the "brutal and ugly regime of oppression,"^{xvi} as leading Israeli peace and justice activist Uri Avnery calls the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, seems far removed from the hustle and bustle of these dynamic cultural organizations.

In reality, they are constantly faced with the obstacles imposed on their activities by the Israeli occupation establishment: visas, permits, checkpoints, roadblocks, intimidation... travelling, both within and beyond the Palestinian occupied territories, is more often than not a gruelling experience. Performing in Nablus may mean having to wait for 5 hours in the sun at a checkpoint while soldiers from the "only democracy in the Middle East" consider whether they want the dancers and their equipment to go through.^{xvii} No colonial force has ever appreciated the ultimately subversive and liberatory nature of art and culture.

"El-Funoun's efforts to portray the roots of Palestinian dance and song," writes the intellectual Omar Barghouti, a trainer and choreographer with el-Funoun, "was considered a dangerous form of subversion and punished accordingly." Several el-Funoun dancers and managers suffered various measures of persecution, including "prolonged detention without charge, torture during interrogation and travel bans. Clandestine dance rehearsals were not uncommon for el-Funoun at times of military crackdowns."^{xviii}

"Nevertheless," writes Barghouti with typical eloquence and resolve, "with oppression came recognition." After 25 years of hard work, El-Funoun has become a role model of independence and artistic and cultural engagement. On the roof of the building that houses its offices, a television crew is interviewing Khaled Katamish, founder and director of El-Funoun and an extraordinary man, for a feature about the troupe on BBC television. This is

the latest in a long series of features that have appeared on major international TV stations, from Al-Jazeera to Al-Arabiya and Dubai Television.



Khaled, Noora who is translating from Arabic, and the crew take a break while the two muezzins of the nearby mosques call the faithful to prayer in this religiously mixed area. So I take a picture of Khaled, focusing on his unassuming but determined eyes, with the illegal Psagot settlement in the background, from where, over the years, “delirious” settlers (as former Knesset member Uri Avnery of Gush Shalom calls the settlers) have repeatedly shot at his kitchen and other parts of his home. Despite “the unrelenting oppression” carried out by the Israeli Occupation Forces and the Israeli establishment in general; despite the “daily fear for our safety and deliberate humiliation that targets our dignity,” as Jabr describes it in her often harrowing clinical analysis of the situation,^{xix} it will take more than all the cynicism and firepower the only Middle Eastern nuclear superpower can muster to break the resolve of Khaled, Noora, Husain, Najeh, Maher and so many other extraordinary women and men in this land.

Back to the Gate

At the end of a hectic day of hard work, my friends of El-Funoun find the time to take a friend from tiny Malta out to eat. The television crew is there too. We have a wonderful time, just enjoying the company. I know that it cannot last long. On my way out of this open prison, I will have to tell the

young occupation soldiers manning the checkpoints of this “free country” where “everyone can say what they wish” and everyone “wants peace,” that I never visited “the territories,” that I only went as far as Damascus Gate.

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ⁱ “What future for Israel's Palestinian citizens?” Jonathan Cook, *The Electronic Intifada*, 19 March 2005, <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article3696.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Omar Barghouti, “Dancing Tragedies and Dreams,” Wednesday, October 27, 2004, *The Daily Star*, Lebanon. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=10&article_ID=9618&categ_id=4

ⁱⁱⁱ Amply documented by human rights worker Shirabe Yamada in his photostory, “Hebrew University to displace Palestinian families,” 22 November 2004, <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article3361.shtml>.

^{iv} “Academics back Israeli boycotts.” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4472169.stm>

^v Read “The Psychological Implications of Israel’s Separation Wall on Palestinians” Report, Palestinian Counseling Center, 18 February 2004. <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article2430.shtml>.

^{vi} <http://electronicintifada.net/>

^{vii} Quoted from Ken Ellingwood’s article “Sharon Ends Prisoner Release, Tells Abbas to Curb Militants,” in the *Los Angeles Times* of May 9, 2005.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-mideast9may09,1,5923873.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>

^{viii} Uri Avnery, “Death of a Myth”(14-5-2005). <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1115987772>

^{ix} Samah Jabr, “A Palestinian Woman Psychiatrist and the Occupation.” This was a talk given at the Convento Santa Sabina in Rome on 28 April, 2005, and organized by the International Commission for Justice, Peace and Care of Creation of the Order of Preachers and the Dominican Sisters International.

^x http://www.middleeastwindow.com/modules.php?name=Stories_Archive2&topic=69.

^{xi} Jabr, “A Palestinian Woman Psychiatrist and the Occupation.”

^{xii} Glenn Bowman, “About A Wall,” *The Electronic Intifada*, 9 July 2004.

<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article2872.shtml>.

^{xiii} Samah Jabr deals with this issue at length in “A Palestinian Woman Psychiatrist and the Occupation.”

^{xiv} Samah Jabr deals with this issue too in “A Palestinian Woman Psychiatrist and the Occupation.”

^{xv} www.el-funoun.org/ and www.popularartcentre.org/

^{xvi} Uri Avnery, “Death of a Myth.”

^{xvii} For an important recent non-violent action by Palestinians, members of the International Solidarity Movement and Israeli activists to open an important road to Nablus see “‘Drive, Drive, Drive to Nablus.’ Two roadblocks removed in Asira al Shamaliya-Anna,” by Ray Smith (a pseudonym) at http://www.geocities.com/toi_billboard/road_unblocking.htm and <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article3837.shtml>.

^{xviii} Barghouti, “Dancing Tragedies and Dreams.”

^{xix} Jabr, “A Palestinian Woman Psychiatrist and the Occupation.”