

Bearing Witness to the Layers of Occupation and Strategies for Resistance



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Last month, Prime Minister Netanyahu vowed to annex the [Jordan Valley](#) and other “vital” parts of the West Bank if he were to win the next election. This week as he struggles to form a coalition government, protests are breaking out in the West Bank in opposition to these aims.

About a year ago, I crossed through the Jordan Valley and Ghawr on my way to the Allenby Bridge border with Jordan. I was leaving Palestine.

My host during my time in Palestine was the incredible, steadfast leader for youth and women’s rights Mira Rizeq, the General Secretary of the YWCA Palestine.

As we drove together through the valley, Mira told me about her mother – how as a young woman she challenged social concepts and patriarchal perceptions. She had to also challenge and ultimately prevail over her own lack of self-belief. It was a compelling story, from the past generation, that led us to reflect on the **dual** occupation that women living in the West Bank and Gaza face still face today – 70 years after the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Palestine has had an active women’s rights movement through much of the 20th century. This took on a new vibrancy as grass-roots women rose up as leaders against the Israeli occupation during the first ‘Intifada’ (uprising) in 1988. However, when it came to negotiating peace through the [1993 Oslo Agreement](#) that established the Palestinian Authority (PA) they were marginalized and their demands reduced to ‘[lip service](#)’.

The dual struggle that women in freedom movements face is far from unique to Palestine.

Time and again, women around the world are at the forefront of freedom and justice movements, and yet their rights are consistently betrayed by their male peers and placed on the back burner when it comes to negotiating peace.

The list is long: Algeria after Independence in 1962¹. Egypt during the Arab Spring Uprisings. The Civil Rights movement in the USA. A few examples where women were central to freedom movements and yet experienced a backlash in the transition period.

Now most recently [Sudan](#), where despite women making up 60% of the street protestors, there are only 2 women in the 11-person sovereign council shepherding the transition. Women’s demands for equality and the removal of some of the most punitive laws, risk being left off the table.

“*We will get to it later*” is the common refrain. Empty promises that leave 50% of the population further disenfranchised.

Bearing Witness

¹ Women were central activists in Algeria’s 1962 war of independence. The Initial impressive gains for women post-independence were quickly dialled back. According to Sherna Berger Gluck, at the height of the [first] intifada, Palestinian women activists chanted ‘We will not be another Algeria’ - vowing they would not allow their interests to be subverted to political processes, as occurred in Algeria following independence.

I had come to Palestine as the General Secretary of the World YWCA, to open the *International Youth Conference on Freedom and Justice* and to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the YWCA of Palestine – a triumphant event recognizing over a century of activism for women’s rights.

To better understand life under Occupation and the movement resisting it, I was encouraged to travel through the West Bank and speak with people. I also wanted to understand the types of strategies for resistance. And so, with this in mind, I found myself at 7am on a bus leaving the Red Crescent Society hostel in Ramallah headed for the Dheisheh refugee camp. My companions were youth activists from Norway, India, Honduras, Australia, Greece, Sweden and Palestine. Their commitment to advocate and support their young Palestinian colleagues in their fight to end the occupation was electrifying.

The Layers of Occupation – The Right to Return

We arrived at Dheisheh camp and jostled into a cramped community centre. Sitting there, nothing prepares me for meeting the father of [Arkan Mizher](#), the 14-year-old Palestinian boy killed during an Israeli raid 3 months earlier.

Dheisheh is not the “tented refugee camp” one comes to expect on the evening news. The population live in very high density, low rise cinder apartments blocks in the middle of Bethlehem. The camp is surrounded by a fence with the remains of a dismantled iron turn-style check point. They are refugees because they fled (or their families were forcibly removed) from Western Jerusalem in 1948 in what is now the state of Israel. Established in 1949 to house 3,000 refugees, Dheisheh is now home to 15,000 refugees and their descendants. A painted map on the wall near the camp’s entrance, shows the 45 villages from where the Dheisheh residents originated. Alongside the map it is a quote from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 13(2) reminding people of the refugees right to return².

Despite Dheisheh camp being under full Palestinian control (an ‘Area A’), Dheisheh is subject to frequent raids by Israeli Defense Forces. As you walk through the narrow streets of the camp, the faces of those killed have been painted on the external walls of houses and alley ways. The images, mainly men, are everywhere.

Now, standing before me is Arkan’s father, mourning deeply, trembling, sharing his pain and suffering with us - strangers. People he will never see again. “*Like any father I taught my son to be a good boy*”, he starts. “*We missed things like playgrounds, proper schools, reliable electricity and water. But we do not need these things. In the aftermath of one of the raids, after the siren had sounded to say, ‘it’s over’, I sent my son to check on the family shop and he was shot from a roof by an Israeli sniper*”. Here he pauses. It is a long pause to gain composure. Then he continues, “*We do not need food. We do not need money. We need hope. Do something for Palestine*” he bears his soul and tells his story in order to get a message to the world, and then, visibly shaken he quickly leaves. Will Arkan’s portrait will soon be painted on the walls outside? What you see on TV you can forget in a few days. What you see with your own eyes and the touch you feel on your skin you will never forget.

² The number of [Palestinian refugees of the 1948 war](#) is estimated at 800,000 with another 350,000 [refugees from the 1967 war](#) and the subsequent expansion of territory. During these events two of Palestine’s three major cities, prime agricultural land and 77% of territory had been forcibly removed. Today, the estimated number of Palestinian refugees and descendants exceeds four million.^[17] The right of return has been of great importance to Palestinians since and has been upheld in multiple UN Declarations UN Resolution 194, 3236 etc.

Arkan is by no means the only child killed. A UN report released last month shows that 59 children were killed by Israeli forces and 2,700 injured last year alone. In addition, around 600 Palestinian children between the age of 12-17 are currently held in military detention centres, most for throwing stones.

I will be honest, I thought I ‘understood’ the occupation. After all, I am in my 5th decade on this planet and have been interested in this cause for almost 3 decades. I support the Boycott Divest and Sanction (BDS) movement <https://bdsmovement.net/> and have refused to buy a Soda stream or Satsuma’s from Israel because both are produced on occupied land. The World YWCA movement also supports BDS affirmed through its World Council Resolution and refuses to buy from companies on the list.

But, for a long time, that was the extent of it. Over time, influenced by the dominant media and the social media algorithms that mean some “news” get seen and others doesn’t, I began to buy into the notion that “it’s complicated”. “It” (the Palestinian occupation and the millions it affects) was overshadowed by Syria, Iraq, Libya. The world’s longest standing occupation, with of millions displaced people becoming forgotten.

In Dheisheh, where people lack economic, social or political rights the Sustainable Development Goals promise to *leave no one behind* seems empty. To the contrary it seems that some people can be purposefully left behind if it is politically inconvenient to bring them along.

The Layers of Occupation: Territorial fragmentation and complexity

Territory in Palestine is divided into three categories with different movement restrictions and laws governing each. **Area A** has full civil and security control by the Palestinian Authority. **Area B** has civil control by Palestinian Authority and joint security control with Israel. And **Area C** has full civil and security control by Israel. Sixty-one percent of the West Bank is categorized as Area C. This fragmentation comes with a dizzying array of passes and policies.

The centre of **Hebron** is referred to as Arba – the ancient Canaanite name –by the Jewish population who have settled here. While it is in the West Bank, because it is an Area C designation the Israel Defence Force are everywhere. As I move through Hebron, I face check point after check point. There are 103 in the old city alone and watch towers on every hill. A staggering 1,500 Israeli soldiers – they look so young – for a population of 30,000 Palestinians and 700 Jewish settlers. Watching the soldiers interaction with the people that pass it is clear that they are here to protect the Jewish settlers. I breeze through the check points but those in our group of Arab appearance are stopped. A Palestinian resident is moving about his daily life with his son, when he is humiliatingly searched and questioned at length. What is the impact on those children as they watch their parents demeaned? Soldiers demand the young women in our group removed their chequered black and white scarves (the Keffiyeh) that has become a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. We are in Palestine and I am confused. It’s like asking Canadian’s to remove their flag from the pole.

Throughout the West Bank, particularly in Hebron and East Jerusalem, occupation is bold and visible. Huge Israeli flags are draped out of the windows of illegally occupied houses and shops, but our group is asked to remove their scarves? The message is clear. This is not your home. You have no rights here. I take a few pictures as this unfolds and a young woman soldier at the check point calls me over. She takes my phone and deletes my photos.

While walking toward Al Shouda street in Hebron we stop in front of a house that was confiscated 3 years earlier. A large Israeli flag hangs across the front. A settler emerges from the house with a sub machine gun slung over his shoulder and 8 children. That is not a sight I am use to seeing. What is the impact on those children?

The Al Shouda street check point marks an invisible border with a Jewish settlement. There is no gate or fence. It is just a road. A road that some people are allowed to pass and others are not. I am allowed to cross the road into the settlement but all those on Palestinian identity papers are refused passage. I look back at my Palestinian hosts, lined up at the invisible dividing line on the street. It is surreal. We cross into a world of only Jewish settlers. Segregated buses and a road system for settlers only.

As we start to cross the street into Al Shouda, Fedela and Haneen, sisters from Greece³, are pulled out specifically. They are of Palestinian descent but have Greek passports and therefore they are allowed to pass. As we walk, they tell me they were born and raised in Greece. Their grandparents fled from Palestine to a Lebanese refugee camp in 1948, before eventually uprooting again for Greece. Their parents and grandparents are denied the right to return to Palestine. They cannot even visit the country of their birth. For Fedela and Haneen this is their first time in Palestine. There was great excitement in their family, and they travel with the original key to their grandparents' home which they go to visit. When they get there, the house had of course been rebuilt and is occupied by Israelis. Travelling with the key is symbolic. When people fled, they left with nothing but their children and the key to their house. They intended to come back.

The Layers of Occupation: Territorial Expansion and Making a two State Solution untenable

It is in the Bedouin village of *Al Khan Al Ahmer*, a few kilometres from East Jerusalem that the deep and multiple impacts of occupation begin to hit me. Just a few months before our visit, the Israeli courts upheld the right of the state to demolish the village. The village is in the West Bank but is in an Area C under full Israeli control.

It is here that I am beginning to see how the fragmentation of territory into A,B and C zones agreed under the second Oslo Accord signed in 1995 is exploited to forcibly remove Palestinians and Bedouins from areas to make way for expanded Israeli settlements and the wider annexation of the West Bank.

We are seated outdoors on wooden benches. Woven mats above our head provide shade. We are surrounded by goats, sheep, dust, and very simple living. Almost directly overhead are electrical wires that go to the Israeli settlement of *Kfar Adumim*. This settlement, which is visible in the distance is surrounded by trees and has piped water, shopping malls and schools. Meanwhile Al Khan Al Ahmar has no electricity. The solar panels installed with the support of donations were confiscated by the state. The building permits for Bedouins have been refused for decades. There is a school built using tyres to circumvent the building permit issue - with teachers provided by an NGO. This village is the only place where Bedouin girls can go to school. Its demolition will remove those opportunities. The *Al Khan Al Ahmer* area provides many things for the Bedouin community including the last access to grazing land, but

³ Not their real names

it is also very close to the *Jerusalem – Dead Sea highway* and that makes this patch of land strategically important.

The removal of the Bedouin people will allow for the massive expansion of the nearby settlements and the implementation of a development plan known as E2. A bi-pass road network is being finalized inside the West Bank to connect illegal settlements. In the future, it is widely thought that Palestinian registered vehicles will not be allowed on these roads. I have already witnessed this in Hebron where Palestinians vehicles were refused entry onto key roads and where buses for Jewish only passengers were loaded bound directly for Jerusalem. ‘Green licence plates’ and ‘yellow licence plates. In this world Palestinian registered cars and Israeli registered cars have different coloured licence plates, making it easier to restrict access to Palestinian vehicles.

If the demolition and development plan go ahead it will prevent Palestinians in this area from having reasonable access to Jerusalem. Worse still, it will effectively cut off contiguous access among Palestinian controlled areas of the West Bank making the two-state solution increasingly untenable. One man I spoke with likened it to “a bullet to the peace process”. It seems crazy but it’s true.

(photo Al Khan Alahmar school made of tyres)



There are 385,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank in 135 settlements and 100 outposts. While the word ‘settlement’ provides a vision of peace and tranquillity it represents an often-violent take-over of both public and private premises and agricultural land. It is illegal both within the Oslo agreements and international law. But it persists.

The settlements push the old adage that possession is 9/10ths of the law to the limit. Taking back control in the future would require incredible discipline and international political will.

Fragmentation of existing Palestinian territory into itty bitty pieces makes any future state ungovernable and this is already a territory with its own fair share of issues.

This is occupation

And this I see is occupation. It is sitting here, on the wooden benches in the shade, that life in an apartheid state, and the physical and physiological impacts of occupation begin to hit me.

The most obvious physical symbol of segregation is “the wall” with its 60 gates (20 of which can be accessed by Palestinians). Then the physical expansion of settlements and the finally the overall fragmentation of the West Bank. This is not an occupation in one foul swoop that would lead to international outcry. In some cases, it is quick and deliberate. In other cases, slow, and hidden to the outside world. The international community can’t act every time a house or shop is illegally taken can it? House by house, shop by shop. It is the long game.

But Occupation is more than just a geographic land grab. It is violence, intimidation, the military presence, the dizzying array of ABC zones and special passes, buses and roads, different voting rights, laws that allow unoccupied homes and shops to be taken over and the refusal to allow refugees or Palestinians living in other countries the right to return.

Occupation is how language is used to rename cities and territory and lay claim. Occupation is hard living conditions, high unemployment, unbearable intimidation – things that force families out. It is pernicious and corrosive. I’ve been here for one week. For most Palestinians, occupation is all they have ever known.

Layers of occupation – women’s voices

But I am still only seeing part of the occupation. In my time visiting and witnessing, all our guides, interlocutors and the tellers of stories were men. There were very few women in the public spaces. In a region and country with some of the worst gender equality measures globally this absence was troubling.

So, I reach out purposefully, stopping women shop keepers, speaking with women in the mosques. Many of the women I spoke with talked about a double burden, being held back both by the violence and discrimination in their own society and the Occupation. *“We have some of the highest levels of violence against women in the world”* I was told, *“...and a political system that has not had elections since 2006. There are only 17 women out of 132 representatives in the Palestinian Authority and little attention to the laws and policies we want passed”*.

Like many other freedom and resistant movements around the global, calls for women’s rights and gender equality as central to resistance movements have often been silenced in the “interest” of nationalism and freedom. *“This is primarily a national freedom struggle we are told, and we will get to your ‘rights later’”*. In the past even the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) took the stand that women suffer the occupation like all other Palestinians, and do not demand special attention.

However, women recognize that isolating the call for women’s rights and equality independent of the freedom struggles fails to recognize that their engagement in resistance movements is intimately bound with the future society they seek to build. A sterile call for peace, of freedom,

devoid of women's social and economic contexts will only reaffirm existing conservative male power structures.

Where next?

What was clear to me as I spoke with men and women alike was that while many were tired of day to day struggles, no one was just sitting back and "letting occupation happen". Young people in particular were breathing new life into the movement.

In a country where young people are the largest segment of the population and an entire generation of girls and boys have grown up knowing nothing, but occupation, youth have been emerging as powerful voices of change. Young women in particular are defying tradition and occupying spaces.

The 17-year-old young women Palestinian activist Ahed Tamini is a personification of this. Placed in military detention for 8 months at the age of 15, she remains a relentless activist and has revived the hope in many Palestinians that ending occupation is possible. **(photo Ahed Tamini)**



For the young people I spoke with, it is not just enough to have a seat at the table – they want to define what's on the menu.

How different might the Oslo I and II accords of the 1990s been if women and young people had been at the table? In 1995, there was not a single woman among the Palestinian or Israeli negotiators and the average age was 50 years old. They are now in their 70s. They are no longer the ones called upon to uphold the peace. Kamal, now a former minister and senior figure in the left-wing FIDA party, [recently described](#) women who were the engine in the uprising, and arguably more connected to the needs and realities were expected to step aside once the exiled PLO men returned. The Oslo agreements that followed were negotiated predominantly by those PLO members, sidelining the grass-roots Intifada activists who had effectively pressured Israel to the negotiating table in the first place.

Maybe a youth voice would have been more ambitious and “gone for the big stuff first”. Maybe the voice of women in the negotiations would have laid the framework for a Palestinian Authority that had a stronger commitment to women’s rights and gender equality. In the words of Sama Aweidah “We can’t be free as women unless we are in a free country and even if we are free of the Occupation we can’t know freedom as long as we are subjugated in our own society.

While Ahed has become an international symbol of hope, there are hundreds of women and young women activists refusing to separate women’s rights from those of ending the Occupation.

[Amany Abu Awad](#)⁴, a 25-year-old young woman activist from the YWCA of Palestine is one. In a society where running or riding a bike is not ‘a girls thing’ she is a member of a running club called ‘Right to Movement’. *“I am restricted”, said Amany, “not only by the Israeli occupation but by patriarchy dominating my society”. I will defy these restrictions. I’ll run for my right to movement as a Palestinian living under Occupation and my equal right as a young woman”.*

There are hundreds of examples. Ordinary young women doing extra-ordinary things to advance change in women’s rights even as occupation continues and there has been some progress. Women’s activism has lead to the Palestinian Authority to [adopted](#) in 2016 a National Action Plan for implementation of [U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325](#) that recognizes the importance of increasing women’s participation in resolving conflicts and building peace, particularly at decision-making level.

Whether it is Palestine, South Sudan, Sudan or any number of countries, protestors and resisters are reminding power holders that women are on the street calling for freedom, not at any cost, but on their own terms. It is clear that women’s groups are tired of waiting.

Palestinian women took to the streets 4 days ago in a powerful protested called “طلعات” (went out/took out) protesting violence against women – from Beirut to Haifa, women are murdered in the streets and at home they chanted.. Under the slogan “free homeland, free women” demonstrators called to married firmly the fight for gender equality with the national struggle pushing hard for the adoption of the Family Protection Bill by the male dominated authority.

Without a doubt asking for changes in regressive laws, policies and societal practice needs to go hand in hand with demanding more space at the table in peace talks. More space is not just symbolic. It’s not just for equality. It is for the chances of success of any peace and end to the Occupation.

⁴ Watch Amany’s brilliant video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OCP5m43GRg>



Malayah Harper Addressing the International Youth Conference

Malayah Harper is a SheDecides Global Champion, Chief Advisor Fair Share Women Leaders and the former General Secretary of the World YWCA. This post coincided with an event hosted by the Arab Institute for Women on the Impact of Higher Education on Palestinian Women.

Malayah is a passionate advocate for gender equality and the leadership of young women. These are her incredible personal reflections of the multiple layers of occupation following her visit to Palestine in late 2018 to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the [YWCA Palestine](#) and to engage with youth activists at the International Youth Conference on Freedom and Justice.



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