

Behind the Israeli Wall: A Lesson in Reality

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Writers often romanticize their subjects. At times they even manipulate their readers. A book – or any piece of writing for that matter – is meant to provide a sense of completion. Sociological explanations are offered to offset the confusion caused by apparent inconsistency in human behavior. At times a reader is asked to take a stance, or choose sides.

This is especially true in writings which deal with compelling human experiences. In *Behind the Wall: Life, Love and Struggle in Palestine* (Potomac Books, 2010), Rich Wiles undoubtedly directs his readers, although implicitly, towards taking a stance. But he is unabashed about his moral priorities and makes no attempt to disguise his objectives.

As I began reading Wiles' book, various aspects struck me as utterly refreshing in contrast to the way Palestine is generally written about. We tend to complicate what was meant to be straightforward and become too selective as we construct our narrative. And we tend to consider the possible political implications of our writings, and thus compose the conclusions with only this political awareness in mind.

Much of this is understandable. The situation in Palestine is appalling, and also worsening. If our writing is not meant to influence positive change, then why bother? But a hyped awareness of the consequences and over-politicization of narratives and texts can prove limiting and intellectually confining. Worse, at times it provides a particular contextualization of the conflict – with all of its internal offshoots and external outcomes – that does much injustice to other important contexts. It neglects facts and paints an unrealistic picture of a subject already confused in the minds of many readers.

Thus when the conflict is deciphered by a writer, all players take positions. Israel is pitted against 'the Arabs'. Palestinians are often sliced off into two competing parties, while Israel is largely shown as maintaining a sense of political and institutional integrity. Palestinians are radicals or moderates, Islamists or secularists. The 'conflict' is right in the center, and within it are the sub-topics: the peace process, the occupation, the settlements and numerous others. Without such lucid configuration there is no structure. Publishers get frustrated. The writer is urged to revisit and restructure his work.

But real life is not a well-organized academic argument. It can be, and often is chaotic, strange and puzzling, but it is real. Only by understanding reality the way it is – not the way we feel that it ought to be for any reason – can we meaningfully position ourselves to appreciate the subject at hand.

Can we understand the conflict in Palestine and Israel without subscribing to the same

language, confronting the same political and historical milestones? Can Palestinians be understood outside the confines of political and ideological affiliations?

That is what Rich Wiles attempted to do in *Behind the Wall*, and in my opinion, very much succeeded.

Wiles relocated the conflict historically, geographically and sociologically to the side most affected by it: the Palestinians. The book is located in the West Bank, mostly Aida refugee camp, where Wiles spent years dedicating his time and efforts as an artist and a writer to help children share their stories and talents with the rest of the world. The writing is a non-elitist, part and parcel, which is a prerequisite to a factual understanding of the struggle in Palestine. Equally important, Wiles provides a depiction of the Palestinian not as the victim, despite the protracted process of victimization that Palestinians have endured for generations. Wiles' subjects might have been imprisoned or deeply scarred by war, but they are confident and complex human beings.

A chapter entitled "A Child and a Balcony" starts with this line: "'On Friday, December 8, 2006, I was shot.' Miras is unemotional as he tells his story." Miras should be emotional, but he is not, and Wiles doesn't attempt to rectify the seemingly inconsistent behavior. It turns out that Miras, a child (now a promising young photographer, thanks to Wiles' help) almost died when a bullet carved its way through his body and penetrated his abdominal from one end and emerged from the other. He was playing with his siblings and cousins at a balcony in the refugee camp, when an Israeli sniper hit him from the watchtower. The story is short, but rich in emotionally powerful detail: the father's panic and near hallucination, the mother confusion, the sense of solidarity that unifies the refugees and strengthens their resolve even when their situation seems so helpless.

Wiles is not an anthropologist or a detached ethnographer, and he doesn't pose as one. He is part of the story, at times an important character. In "Memories", he accompanies a young Palestinian boy on the journey of his life, from the confines of the small refugee camp to Jerusalem. The boy is visiting his very ill grandfather at a hospital in the Arab side of the city. (No other member of the family was granted an Israeli permission to make the short journey, thus the need for Wiles' intervention). Wiles provides an extremely honest and vivid account, bringing to life the bravery of the boy and the sense of freedom he experiences as he crosses the checkpoints into Jerusalem.

At the same time, Wiles does not attempt to assemble the perfect, heroic and infallible character of the Palestinian. He includes the story of a son of drug user who was mysteriously killed (perhaps by a Palestinian group that suspected him as a collaborator with Israel). The son became involved in the resistance to redeem the family's honor. His impulsive resistance (an attempt to burn a hole in the Israeli wall that surrounded his refugee camp) earned him time in an Israeli prison. Yasser Jedar (known as Yasser 'Wall' owing to his obsession with trying to bring down the Israeli wall) was certainly not a poster child revolutionary. But he is refreshingly real, which is what should matter the most to an inquisitive reader.

Wiles' work is an important contribution to what I insist on referring to as a 'People's History of Palestine'. In order for this genre to endure and flourish, it must remain honest, and duty-bound to the truth – to reality as it is, not how we wish it to be.

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