

Israel offers Palestinians day shoppers, not statehood

Jenin's model of 'economic peace'

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JENIN. The reality of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's promises of "economic peace" for the Palestinians is nowhere under greater scrutiny than in Jenin, the northern West Bank city being aggressively promoted as a potential model of co-operation with Israel.

Once known as the City of Martyrs for the high number of suicide bombers it despatched into Israel, Jenin was the site of a savage fight in 2002 as the Israeli army reoccupied much of the West Bank.

Israelis find it hard to forget that this was where they suffered the biggest loss of life in a single battle — 23 soldiers killed retaking the city. Palestinians find it hard to forgive the bulldozing of Jenin's large refugee camp, and the killing of 56 inhabitants in a few days.

But today Jenin, the first Palestinian city to be sealed behind Israel's separation wall, is being feted — at least by Israel — as a successful experiment in peacemaking.

The Palestinian gunmen who once roamed the streets are gone, replaced, by day, by lightly armed Palestinian security forces trained in Jordan by a US general, Keith Dayton.

Israeli soldiers, meanwhile, have unfettered access to the city between midnight and dawn, though nowadays, say local people, the army rarely makes incursions.

For Mr Netanyahu, Jenin represents his best hope of persuading Washington that an "economic and diplomatic peace", as he referred to it at the cabinet meeting on Sunday, rather than full statehood, will satisfy the Palestinians.

The process of easing restrictions began before Mr Netanyahu's tenure in March. Last year, Ehud Barak, then as now the defence minister, called Jenin a "great success" in what was widely interpreted as a test of Palestinian readiness for limited statehood on Israeli terms.

Palestinian security forces were allowed into the city in May last year. Since then Israel has removed several of the checkpoints that cut Jenin off from the rest of the West Bank in a bid to boost trade.

Last week, Israel extended that policy by announcing that the King Hussein Bridge, the Palestinians' only connection to Jordan and the Arab world, would be open 24 hours a day.

In addition, the Israeli government has backed the creation of a German-sponsored

industrial park next to Jenin that could one day provide thousands of jobs. Four more such parks, all foreign funded, are planned for other West Bank cities, which are supposed to follow Jenin's lead.

And a few hundred men from Jenin are being given permits to work inside Israel, most of them as manual labourers, while a handful of entrepreneurs have permission to do business in Israel.

But the most immediate effect on Jenin's economy — even if a relatively minor one — has been felt from the decision to allow Israel's own Palestinian citizens to cross into the West Bank on day trips.

Israeli estimates suggest that on Fridays and Saturdays, when Jewish towns are closed for business, hundreds of Palestinian citizens of Israel — or Israeli Arabs as they are called by the government — make the journey through Jalameh crossing to Jenin.

Nonetheless, business is not exactly booming, concedes Khaled Rabaya, the sales manager of Herbawi, a five-storey department store that opened in May on the hopes of an improved economy.

"Jenin is not being suffocated like it was before," he said. "Things are getting better slowly and we hope they will get better still."

But even Mr Rabaya had to admit that the number of shoppers wandering the aisles of European imported goods, from sofas to dinner plates, were easily outnumbered by the sales assistants.

Most people in Jenin cannot afford luxury items, while Israel's Palestinian citizens, even if attracted by cheaper prices, are constrained by restrictions that allow them to enter only on foot.

Ali Kmaid, a taxi driver shuttling Israeli Arabs the two kilometres from Jalameh to Jenin, said the city was desperately hoping that the crossing would be open to cars from October, as has been promised.

The most obvious change in Jenin is to the refugee camp, which is no longer the devastated space of a few years ago. It has been rebuilt with funds from the Gulf, though the Israeli army insisted on planning constraints: the roads are wide enough for a tank to navigate them.

If few of Jenin's inhabitants question the financial benefits of Israel's more liberal policy, there is a widespread belief that "economic peace" is being tailor-made for Israel's benefit in much the same manner as the rebuilt camp.

"If Netanyahu thinks we'll be satisfied with a few more Israeli shoppers, he's kidding himself," said Mohammed Larool, a melon seller. "Our rights as a nation are more important than my selling a few extra melons."

Khaled Hamour, 26, who runs the Mankal restaurant in Jenin, said the prosperity felt by businesses was relative. "Things have been so dire here that just a little relief feels like a major change."

But “as long as the settlements are still here, our farmers are being shot at, and we have no control over our borders, then economic peace is hollow”.

Shir Hever, an Israeli economist based in Jerusalem, said he was sceptical Jenin’s industrial park would ever open, or that the fruits of economic peace would be more than temporary.

“Netanyahu has no long-term plan for peace,” he said. “This is a delaying tactic and an attempt to improve Israel’s image internationally without making significant concessions.”

He added: “There is also a political message for Jenin and the rest of the West Bank in this policy. It says: remember you’re lucky not to be in the same situation as Gaza. Don’t resist or you’ll end up like them.”

A decade ago, Jenin was packed on weekends with thousands of Israeli Arabs and Jews. But the long waits, intrusive security checks and need to pass through endless metal turnstiles — all too reminiscent of Israel’s treatment of Palestinian workers in the days when they were able to leave Gaza — may be putting off many Palestinian citizens.

“Israel is counting on Palestinians inside Israel being prepared to help Palestinians in the occupied territories,” said Tareq Shehadeh, a tourism official in Nazareth who has been invited to Nablus this week to lecture on co-operation across the Green Line.

“But they won’t go into the West Bank if they are treated like terrorists every time they do so.”

Samia Ziadat, from the Israeli Arab village of Mqeibleh, was waiting her turn to pass through the security checks with her five young children, after a brief visit to see her sick husband in Jenin.

“I have no choice but to go to Jenin, but it surprises me anyone is willing to endure this humiliation unless they have to.”

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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