

Nablus Invasion Diary III: Resistance, Hypocrisy, and Dead Men Walking

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After a long wait a mother and her child are finally permitted to enter the Old City with bread for hungry families unable to go outside during curfew.

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What most struck me about the Nablus invasion wasn't the killing of unarmed civilians. It wasn't the obstruction of medical workers and ambulances, or the indiscriminate detention of males, or the occupied houses and curfews. What I will remember for the rest of my life is the steadfast resistance of the people of Nablus.

I came to Palestine to document and intervene in human rights abuses and to support nonviolent resistance to the Occupation. As I delivered bread and medicine with medical relief workers throughout the invasion, I wondered if I was really fulfilling my mission. Wasn't handing out aid simply accommodating and enabling the curfew?

An experienced Israeli solidarity organizer named Neta Golan eventually clarified things for me. She explained, "It's very good to distribute bread and medicine to needy people, but the real power and purpose of what you are doing is something else: First and foremost, you are supporting Palestinians who are breaking curfew. That is nonviolent resistance. And as you move around in spite of the army's indiscriminate imposition of house arrest, you empower others to do so as well. If the army knows there are dozens or even hundreds of civilians in the streets, and that several of them are internationals, they cannot shoot anything that moves, which they have done during curfews in the past."



UPMRC volunteers accompany a mother and her child to an ambulance in spite of the curfew.

Neta was right. Simply being outside was a powerful form of nonviolent resistance. But the Palestinians didn't need much empowering — from the first day of the invasion, I saw various civilians on the streets and in cars driving through the city, defying the army simply by trying to carry on some semblance of daily life.



Israeli soldiers confiscate the IDs of medical relief volunteers and prevent them from

delivering medical services.

Some Palestinians went a step further in defiance. Once when the army stopped me and Firas from UPMRC from entering part of the Old City with bread, Firas waited ten minutes and then said, “Anna, come with me.” He grabbed as many bags as he could carry, and began walking past the jeeps. I grabbed twelve pounds of bread and scrambled after him past the soldiers, who had come out of their jeeps and were yelling, “Hey! Stop! What are you doing? We said you can’t enter!” Firas kept walking steadily and I turned around to the soldiers. “We’re delivering bread to hungry people. What are you going to do, shoot us?” They were speechless and held their fire.

As we walked away, Firas smiled at me and said, “Next time it will be easier.” Indeed, when we returned with more bread, the soldiers told us we could go this time but only for five minutes. “Sure,” we said and kept walking, knowing the 18-year-olds were trying to salvage some power in the situation.

Resistance was creative and ubiquitous: When speaking English loudly to remind soldiers that internationals were around became tedious and forced, one Palestinian girl suggested that we sing her favorite song, “I Will Always Love You,” by Whitney Houston. So we sang together as we came around corners to soldiers breaking into houses, annoyed at us for disturbing the silence of their invasions. I hoped that singing would be both nonthreatening and humanizing in the eyes of the soldiers, while still achieving our objective. When the army prevented medical workers and internationals from entering the Old City, they gathered posters and paint and put together an impromptu demonstration, documented by all the media who were also barred from the Old City. The protesters sat yelling cheers in front of an occupied hospital until jeeps gassed them.



After being released from detention, Dr. Ghassan treats a boy with serious burns. After being detained, Israeli soldiers tried to arrest Dr. Ghassan again at a demonstration on March 7th at Huwarra.

The most powerful demonstration came a week later in honor of Women’s Day. The Women’s Union in Nablus organized a rally and march in conjunction with the Public Committee Against Closure, UPMRC, the Union of Health Committees, and other local groups, for the city of Nablus to reassert their power and rights after a week of invasions. Hundreds of Palestinians, mostly women, gathered and marched to Huwwara — the checkpoint enclosing the city from the South — carrying flags and pictures of sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers who are wanted or imprisoned, or have been killed by the army. Hundreds of women held their ground as soldiers equipped with riot gear pushed the crowd back.

My colleague Nova recognized one of the pushing soldiers from the invasion because our interaction with him had left such an impression. On Wednesday during curfew we were accompanying a doctor on duty when the soldier forbade our group to pass. He explained, “That man is not a doctor. He’s a killer.” We were incredulous, and I prompted him to explain further. “An Arab killed my friend, and this man is an Arab.” I replied, “I’m sorry to hear about your friend, but that doesn’t mean that all Arabs are killers.” He was unmoved. He was also not alone. The soldier holding Firas and me back had also shamelessly pronounced his wrath for Arabs. Certainly there are racists everywhere in the world, but it’s

particularly striking to listen to such hatred from a teenager who has been handed an M16 and near impunity in the land of the people he despises.

Of course, most of the soldiers didn't volunteer such remarks and probably considered themselves charitable to the Palestinians, given the circumstances. One soldier who detained us for half an hour bragged about all the food and medicine he'd allowed through. He couldn't understand what the Palestinians were still complaining about. I asked him where he was from.

"Tel Aviv."



Israeli soldiers occupy the Old City.

"So if armed Palestinians invaded Tel Aviv, shut the entire population in their homes, and allowed aid workers to bring around food and medicine, you wouldn't complain?"

He said that was different. I asked how. He changed the subject. I asked him how long he was going to punish my colleague and me by detaining us on the street. He said he wasn't punishing us, that we just had to wait a little while, which was normal. I asked:

"So if armed Palestinians stopped you outside your house, demanded your ID, and prevented you from going to work, you would consider that normal?" He changed the subject again.

The Occupation and invasions have been happening for so long that soldiers forget they are illegal occupiers with no legitimate authority in the area. It's as if the Mafia took over New York City; it may be beneficial to obey at certain times, but it's certainly not the law. The Occupation itself is illegal according to international law. But even according to agreements signed by Israel, Nablus is in Area A, the 12-17 percent of the West Bank where Israelis are forbidden according to Oslo II. This is the same Oslo II that is among the agreements Israel and the rest of the world are demanding that Hamas recognize in order for the Palestinian population to regain the lifeline of economic support that was pulled a year ago.

It's always illuminating to switch the pronouns around. Israel arms teenagers and sends them into Palestinian cities, where they consistently kill unarmed civilians. What happens when Palestinian armed teenagers enter an Israeli city? Israel violates Oslo II every day, but the Palestinian government will not be recognized or returned its own tax dollars until it fully accepts the same agreement. (The agreement, by the way, falls vastly short of international law and full human rights for Palestinians.) Israel is justified in planning major offensives against Palestinian fighters. What about attacks against Israeli fighters, the soldiers themselves? It's worth noting that the soldiers are the very targets of the wanted men, not Israeli civilians. Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade plans attacks against armed fighters illegally occupying and confiscating their — Palestinian — land. It would seem the hunter and hunted in Nablus are guilty of the same crime: attacking the enemy's soldiers. Except that armed struggle against illegal occupation forces is actually protected under international law, whereas Israel's occupation is not.

I met some of the hunted the day before I left Nablus, including a leader of Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, whom I'll call Moussa. An acquaintance led a colleague and me to where a group of them were sitting and drinking juice in the Old City. They welcomed us and brought us

sweet coffee. Moussa was a soft-spoken man not much older than forty, while most of the other wanted men were mere teenagers, curious and excited to meet foreigners. Moussa raised his voice just once during our conversation, to yell at one of the boys for trying to take my picture on his cell phone. He said it could be extremely dangerous for soldiers to find evidence of our meeting if/when the men were caught or killed, and refused my business card for the same reason.

After some time, I asked Moussa if he had a message to the people of America. He thanked me for the opportunity and began to speak:

I am from the Palestinian armed resistance to the Occupation. I am opposed to violence against any civilians, whether they are Palestinian or Israeli, Muslim or Jewish. I hate fighting, but when soldiers invade our homes, our land, and our lives, it is our duty to resist them, to resist the theft of our water, our self determination, and our dignity. We are human just like you. We want to live, to have families, a normal life. But if we must fight to our death to protect what is ours, our land, the future of our children, we are ready to do so.

I invite you to look at maps and statistics of this conflict over time. I lament the killing of innocent people on both sides, but the tremendous disproportion of land and water rights, civil liberties, and civilian casualties on the two sides is undeniable. The international community calls us terrorists, but we would welcome any objective international presence to bear witness to what is happening here and come to their own conclusions. Is beating unarmed children, medical workers, and even internationals not terror? Is taking advantage of lulls in violence — when the press isn't watching — to accelerate expansion of settlements in land and water rich areas not a crime?

Palestinians have coexisted harmoniously with Jews in the past, and we are ready to do so again. After all, Jews are our brothers and sisters, people of faith just like us. As our party Fatah has said many times before, we are ready to live in peace with Israel if there can be a just and viable resolution to the issues of borders, distribution of water, settlements, Jerusalem, and the refugees. These are our conditions, and they are also our rights.

Moussa is a dead man walking, but he will continue to resist as long as he can, as will all the people of Nablus in their own ways. I relay Moussa's message not to defend violence, but because I believe his perspective has a right be heard. Different sides of any conflict deserve to have a voice, but the mainstream media is unlikely to pick up Moussa's speech, just as they haven't picked up anything but the most sensationalistic aspects of the invasion. They haven't mentioned the way beautiful old houses were destroyed by soldiers looking for nonexistent tunnels. They haven't mentioned the walls of the Old City broken down by Israeli hummers too wide to fit down the narrow streets, and the water pipes along the walls that were busted and sprayed throughout the curfew, costing the city tons of its precious clean water supply. They haven't mentioned the 400-year-old Turkish baths that soldiers used as a military base between operations, and then destroyed from top to bottom. Several families were dependent on the cultural jewel, which we found in ruins, playing cards all over the floor left by soldiers next to the benches where they would have slept.



Israeli Army vehicles damaging buildings and roads in the Old City.



The media haven't mentioned the house burned from the inside, or the families of wanted men who were beaten and detained, or the 15-year-old boy shot in the wrist with a rubber bullet while he was out buying bread for his family. They haven't mentioned the way the jeeps returned every night, even after Israel announced that the operation was over. I would like to tell you about each of them in detail, but to be honest, with every passing hour there are new tragedies to report and attend to. I also know that this report is already longer than most busy Americans will have time in their daily lives to read. If you did make it this far, thank you, and until the world stops silencing Palestinian tragedies and voices, please help me let these stories be heard.

All images by [Anna Baltzer](#).

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