

The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine

Review of Ben Ehrenreich's Book

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A small town in Palestinian West Bank, north of Jerusalem, Nabi Saleh, essentially the hometown of the Tamimi clan, has like all other Palestinian towns suffered under the occupation of Israeli military forces and settler villages. Ben Ehrenreich's book "The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine" documents his many months in the town and in surrounding areas. The title derives from a spring, 'Ein al Qoos (the Bow Spring), that was the main water supply for the farmers/herders of the village. The nearby settlers blocked access to the spring and subsequently, on Fridays, the people of the village accompanied by international witnesses marched in protest towards the spring, always to be met by Israeli military forces protecting the settlers access.

Within that, "*The Way to the Spring*" highlights the tactics and politics of subjugating the indigenous people of an area under military and settler occupation. It is a book that speaks at times poetically, at other times in the simple basic descriptions given by the villagers/Palestinians of the West Bank; that speaks also of the political scenarios – within an historical context – at the time of the author's visits and the ramifications throughout the region; that speaks with empathy of the pain and suffering endured under occupation.

It is a hard book to read, not for language or context, but for the overall tenor of the stories rising from this encounter between militarized occupiers and the indigenous people. The anger, humiliation, anguish, and physical and emotional pain create a somber sad atmosphere from which little hope rises, leaving only existence and steadfastness: the knowledge that there is no where else to go and that conditions have deteriorated over the span of Israeli settlement building.

Apart from the expected tales of violence, torture, imprisonment, intimidation, and humiliation, there are other points that are strongly represented in the work.

Collaboration

Most directly is the Palestinians attitude towards their own 'leaders', the Palestinian Authority (PA) under Mahmoud Abbas. In the summer of 2014, from where Abbas was ensconced in Saudi Arabia, "he defended the PA's continuing security coordination with the Israeli military as "in our interest and for our protection." In a demonstration against a security crackdown in Ramallah:

The crowds descended on the police station, attacking it with rocks and chunks of concrete, helling "Traitors!" and chanting "The PA is a whore!"

The Israelis were shooting from one direction and the PA from another, the two security forces acting in concert against the same opponent.”

Two messages were left in the wake of the riots, “First to the PA: you are ours and everyone knows it....And second to the Palestinian people...your leaders take their orders from us.”

Funding has never been cut to the PA. A U.S. official cited in Haaretz said,

Israeli security forces remained in constant cooperation with their Palestinian counterparts...It is against our interests – and Israel’s interests to cut ties with and funding to such a PA government.” There was probably no single policy so hated by his own people as the PA’s ongoing collaboration with the occupying army.

The war in Gaza that followed, not directly, but within the same violent continuum, demonstrated the state of hatred fostered by the Israeli government towards the Palestinians. It was fostered by the Israeli bureaucracy but “whatever force was pushing those bureaucratic processes forward was not rational at all. It was merely murderous, rooted in fear and a rage that flowed beneath the ground in hidden channels, secret and unmentionable conduits that had been there all along and were only now erupting.”

Media

Another point is emphasized within these stories, not by its presence, but by its absence. Western mainstream media is very good about highlighting Palestinian attacks against Israel as the work of a demented terrorist population. Seldom is heard anything about the ongoing daily/weekly/monthly criminal acts of the IDF occupation forces in the West Bank, actions that work against international law and what could be perceived as customary common law.

By labelling all Palestinians as terrorists, by classifying them all as ‘snakes’ or other vermin, this demonized other becomes a forgotten target of western settler atrocities, matching the processes of all colonial settler countries before hand. That daily oppression and humiliation is never reported in the mainstream media, perhaps because it reflects sadly back on our own government’s complicity with Israeli war crimes and, above all else, does not support geopolitical interests, foreign policy, nor domestic policies.

The economy

I have heard arguments about the Palestinian economy – at least in West Bank – and how well it is doing – at least in Ramallah. Ehrenreich presents a short dissertation on the wonders of economic construction in Ramallah, an area called Rawabi. In association with other development projects in the West Bank, Ehrenreich’s research revealed that “with any major development in the West Bank, the same groups and individuals keep coming up, the same bewitching haze of associations among supposed enemies.” It is in essence the power of money that lifts a few of the elite cadre above the others, above where “distinctions could no longer be seen.”

Occupation

It remains that the military occupation and the settlements are the core of the stories and events within “*The Way to the Spring*.” Taking land and pushing people away from their

homes is the visible surface of the occupation,

but overall, with its checkpoints and its walls and its prisons and its permits, it functioned as a giant humiliation machine, a complex and sophisticated mechanism for the production of human despair....The land mattered to everyone, but despite all the nationalist anthems and slogans, the harder fight was the struggle to simply stand and not be broken.

Operating behind a mainstream media curtain, over-shadowed by other events in the region, ignored by most westerners as they are entertained by another created spectacle or another game to distract their thoughts – willingly – from serious consideration of the significance of events in Israel or the greater Middle East, the occupation continues its slow painful destruction of Palestinian land, culture, and spirits of the Palestinians.

"The Way to the Spring" is a powerfully evocative work, one that needs to be front and centre in presentations to the citizens of the west, perhaps to disturb them as a simple historical recounting of events or misrepresented and contorted legal arguments might not.

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