

# Liberate Palestine, bring down the walls of Israel

Peter Alexander 10 May 2017



Israeli soldiers sit near part of Israel's controversial barrier as a Palestinian walks towards Qalandiya checkpoint near the West Bank city of Ramallah. (Mohamad Torokman, Reuters)

## COMMENT

I have been an anti-Zionist for nearly 50 years, but I did not appreciate how bad the situation is for Palestinians until I recently presented a paper at Bethlehem University.

The conference was very good, the Bethlehem researchers were scholarly and insightful and the students were happy. But this was an oasis.

I was taken to the edge of the city by one of the local academics, to a little olive grove owned by her in-laws. From there we looked down the valley towards Jerusalem, just 10km away, and she pointed to family land taken by Israelis back in 1947. She could see the old farm, but could not visit it — unlike me, a foreigner.

Cars with yellow number plates, those of the Israelis, travel freely through Israel and Palestine, but those with white plates, those belonging to Palestinians, are banned from entering Israel.

Christian Palestinians may visit Jerusalem for a few days at Christmas and Easter, but this petty privilege is not extended to Muslims. One academic reckoned it had taken her 15 years to get a visa for Jerusalem, and then joked that it was quicker to reach New York.

Israel annexed East Jerusalem, its Arab part, after the 1967 Six-Day War, and now exerts complete control. The city's Palestinians are excluded from the country's elections unless they have Israeli citizenship, but they can vote in elections for the Palestinian Authority.

We visited Jerusalem's Old City, which is divided into four quarters. The largest is the Muslim Quarter, and here we came across one case after another where Israelis had used bribes and threats to push Muslims out of their homes. The new owners have guards and many fly Israeli flags over their property.

I asked one of them about the situation. "It's students who live here," he told me, adding that the whole business was ideological and he was opposed to it.

Strolling into the Jewish Quarter, four Palestinian women in our party were accosted by a young Jewish man in clerical garb who wanted to know where they were from. Had the question been addressed to a foreigner it would have been interpreted as intrusive politeness, but directed at Palestinians it carried an altogether different meaning.

Knowing that conversation could easily slide into conflict, my friends simply refused to respond. But the man continued to follow and bait them. I reminded him that Old Jerusalem was a world heritage site that all people could wander around, and although he had a right to pose his question they had a right not to answer. He backed off a little. The story is trivial, but I'm quite sure the man's threatening arrogance was underpinned by recognition that, if necessary, he could call on support from the heavily armed police who patrolled nearby.

I had mistakenly thought that the famous segregation wall was located on, and a little beyond, the borders of the West Bank established in 1949. But it zigzags all over the place, appropriating prime land and dividing Palestinian communities. On one side of Bethlehem two walls come right into the heart of the city, joining each other like the tips of knives. I met a woman who had a three-storey property encircled on three sides by one of these walls.

The political geography of Palestine is much more complicated than official borders and illegal walls.

For a start there are the Zionist settlements — about 200 of them which house about a half a million people. Most are perched on the tops of ridges and peer down on Palestinians below. Sometimes the wall is positioned to protect the settlements but sometimes they are located beyond them — the advance guard. Although there are back roads for Palestinian workers, access is mainly from Israel, and in the case of at least one settlement next to Bethlehem there is an exclusive entry road under the city.

Then there is the eastern segregation zone that runs for about 10km along the frontier with Jordan. This includes the Dead Sea. I learnt that, at night, Palestinians are banished from the area. Taking the eastern and western segregation zones together, Israel has total control over 41% of the West Bank.

But Israeli jurisdiction is still more pervasive. Following the Oslo Process of the mid-1990s, the remaining territory was divided into tracts termed Areas A, B and C. The A areas are supposed to come under the Palestinian Authority, C areas under the Israeli administration, and B areas are a mixture. The A areas are limited to the centres of cities and most of the territory is classified as C. Palestinians, with rare exceptions, are banned from building in C areas, which is where many of the new settlements have been built. The Israeli army goes wherever it wants.

I visited the Cremisian Valley, which includes a Salesian monastery and a winery that has been producing exquisite Palestinian wines for more than a century, and learned that Israel wants to grab land even here.

Talking about the West Bank as if it is Palestinian with a few dots of Israeli presence gives a false impression. A careful look at the map shows Palestinian islands in an Israeli sea. Bit by bit, regardless of United Nations resolutions, Israel expands by occupying more and more Palestinian land. There are fences, walls and checkpoints all over the country. Palestine feels like a concentration camp or, more accurately, a series of concentration camps.

Despite this, Palestinians resist. They maintain a distinct culture and strong national identity. The youth defend their refugee camps and take part in daily and nightly clashes with the Israeli army. There was a successful national shutdown in support of a hunger strike by political prisoners when I was there.

Individuals I spoke to wanted more visitors — as a form of solidarity and a way to strengthen the local economy. It is possible to spend negligible or even no time in Israel.

Palestine has much to offer: the lowest land on Earth, the world's oldest city, the places where Jesus was born and died, and where, supposedly, he and Mohammed ascended to heaven, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, a mixture of religions, a warm and generous people and, most importantly, political education in abundance.

I did not meet anybody with a good word to say about the Oslo Accords or the Palestinian Authority that acts as their guardian. As dissatisfaction increases and pressure to survive intensifies, Palestine may edge towards another intifada. If this happens, much blood will be shed.

A peaceful alternative is still possible. Although pushing Israel back to its legal borders would be a step in the right direction, lasting peace will only be achieved by the creation of a democratic binational state. This can only happen if there is far greater solidarity with the Palestinian people. With our experience of apartheid, South Africans have a particular responsibility to do more.

*Professor Peter Alexander is director of the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg.*