SCENES FROM DAILY LIFE: THE VIEW FROM NABLUS

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The city of Nablus has been targeted especially harshly by the Israeli government since the beginning of the second intifada in September 2000. The devastating armored military attacks on the city in April 2002 severely traumatized the population, resulted in the death of 119 people, destroyed irreplaceable historical buildings,[1] and gave way to a long physical siege that isolated Nablus from its hinterland and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories. The now two-year-long military siege has put the economic infrastructure, social fabric, political networks, and cultural life of Nablus and its environs under tremendous stress, and the almost nightly incursions have raised the death toll in this area to close to 600 civilians.

Seemingly irreversible forces of fragmentation—class and generational tensions, political disputes over the role of armed groups, power struggles between and within factions, turf battles between institutions, and deep estrangement between the nearby refugee camps and the city—have taken root in Nablus and threaten to cause an implosion at any moment. At the same time, Nablus is being quickly transformed demographically and physically as a result of three Israeli policies: land grabs for building the isolation wall and expanding the illegal Jewish settlements; the separation of the various Palestinian population areas through severe restrictions on movement between them; and, not least, the separate and unequal treatment of Palestinian cities with Nablus at one end of the spectrum and Ramallah on the other. All this is plain enough to the residents, if not to the outside world.

Much more difficult to grasp are why and how the city and its people have managed to hold together thus far. The short explanation is that historical forms of solidarity and social networks, especially at the family and neighborhood levels, have combined with well-organized popular committees at the grassroots level to provide the minimum necessary degree of social cohesion. There are two other factors: the continued availability of funds for salaries, reconstruction, compensation, and emergency assistance, which keeps tens of thousands just above the waterline; and the Israeli military pressure, which paradoxically has a unifying effect on the population. As of this writing, the Nablus region remains a functioning social space,[2] and this continuity is fundamental to the ability of the population to struggle and survive.

THE CITY AS PRISON

Nablus, the largest Palestinian city in the occupied West Bank outside of East Jerusalem, has become one huge open-air prison. All points of entry into the built-up areas within the municipal boundaries—the city proper; the refugee camps of Balata, Askar, and `Ayn Bayt al-Ma'; and parts of several villages—have been sealed off by the

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Israeli military: some permanently by deep ditches, earthen mounds, and other obstacles such as large rocks; others by military checkpoints that let through Israeli armor but no Palestinians. There are two exceptions: the Hawara checkpoint on the eastern entrance of the narrow valley enfolding Nablus, which serves as the gateway to Ramallah, Jerusalem, and other points south and east; and the Bayt Eba checkpoint on the other side of the city, which leads to Jenin, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, and villages to the north and west.

Actually, the term "checkpoint" is misleading; the military points in Hawara and Bayt Eba are more like permanent border crossings than temporary roadblocks. At both crossings, large areas have been leveled to make way for complex security procedures that control the flow of traffic: pedestrian and car lanes, fortified bunkers, guard towers bristling with heavy machine guns and shrouded with camouflage netting, fences and barriers, and command headquarters and related structures.

The crossings open at eight in the morning and close at six in the evening; absolutely no movement of Palestinians in or out of Nablus can occur outside of this time window. No blue-plated Palestinian vehicles can get into Nablus except for ambulances and those with special permits. Both are thoroughly checked, sometimes held up for hours, and not always allowed through. Virtually all Palestinians going to Nablus, therefore, must take public transportation—bright yellow seven-passenger Mercedes taxi sedans, older Ford vans formerly used by the Israeli police, and the occasional bus—which deposit passengers at a designated area about a hundred meters from the crossing compound. (The only other option for entering Nablus is to go by foot or donkey over footpaths through the hills, but people and animals have been shot at so often that there are few donkeys left and fewer riders willing to take the risk.)

Immediately upon alighting, the travelers are set upon by the dozen or so Palestinian porters who have obtained permission from the Israeli military to shuttle baggage and belongings through the crossing. After haggling over the fee for this service, the porters load the luggage onto open metal-framed pushcarts and head away from the passengers toward a soldier standing inside a waist-high concrete bunker. Each porter stops a few meters from the soldier and, with an M16 rifle trained at his head, dumps the contents of the bags onto a plastic sheet the color and texture of the dirt it covers. With exaggerated gestures, he lifts each piece of clothing and other items, waves it in front of the soldier, and stuffs it back. Later in the summer x-ray machines were introduced, emphasizing still further the border-crossing environment. Fewer personal items are soiled now, but the wait is longer. After inspection, the luggage is transferred to yet another open framed pushcart and walked to the Nablus side of the crossing. Together these two trips are about two football fields in length, but they cost more than the taxi ride from Ramallah, thirty kilometers to the south.

Meanwhile, the pedestrian traffic enters a fenced-in enclosure that opens into three long narrow lanes separated by waist-high concrete block walls. One lane is for women and children, another is for men over age forty-five, and the third is for those unlucky males between the ages of sixteen and forty-five. These last are routinely herded to the "hole" (*jora*), a wide ditch off to one side, where they have to wait for hours on end, fruitlessly for the many who are not allowed in. In the dry summer heat and the dust clouds kicked up by the bustle of the crossing, the wait is all about thirst, boredom, anxiety, irritation, and anger.

The lines stop about twenty yards from a steel-reinforced concrete bunker with a metal door so thick and heavy that it elicits grunts from the soldiers as they go in and out. One person at a time is allowed to approach the bunker's tiny window to hand over the ID card and submit to questioning. After a few anxious minutes the next person is waved over. The sighs of relief are almost audible once the IDs are returned and the owners cross to the other side. No matter how tired, the pace usually quickens as the pedestrians walk another football field length to the taxi stand on the Nablus side. The ordeal of the checkpoints is over and now it is a quick ride to the town center a few kilometers away. The whole process can take anywhere from one to five or six hours depending on the mood of the soldiers and their orders as well as on the volume of traffic. One of the more difficult aspects of the experience is its utter unpredictability; if people coming from Ramallah face longer-than-usual delays at the three or four checkpoints on the way, they arrive too late to get through to Nablus before the 6 P.M. closure.

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE VALLEY

The feeling of being under direct military occupation slowly begins to fade once the heavily fortified crossings are out of sight. But then, another feeling takes over: that of being constantly watched. No matter where you go in the city, there seems to be no place to hide. For one thing, there are the ever-present drones (or what the Nabulsis call the *zannani* in imitation of the sound they make) flying back and forth taking pictures and relaying information. In one of the best descriptions of the early days of the first intifada, Penny Johnson drew an image of people in Ramallah in 1988 walking with their heads down, eyes cast on the ground in front of their feet, not out of fear, but because they were looking for copies of the communiqués in which the underground leadership set out the aims and schedule of the week to come.[3] These days, people often walk with their heads turned up towards the sky: not because they are proud and defiant, but because the presence of drones over a particular spot often presages a rocket attack.

For another thing, Nablus is sandwiched between two steep towering hills, each of which is surmounted by an Israeli military base hidden from view by small pine forests. You can't see *them*, but they can see *you*. Nablus was long famous for its scenic hilltop views and Thursday picnics and outings. No more. More than once large-caliber bullets have rained on the town from the mountain, and residents rarely venture past the last row of houses on either hill so as not to expose themselves fully to the line-of-sight of the binoculars, cameras, and guns of the Israeli soldiers posted at the military bases.

The only residents of Nablus who can move about freely are members of the Samaritan community. The Samaritans, unique in their religious beliefs and practices and strict about marriage within their own community, believe themselves to be the true Jews of the land. This ancient community is more Arab and Nabulsi in its habits, accent, and dress than any other, and for centuries lived in the Yasmini quarter of the Old City. Over the past few years, however, they have established an exclusive gated residential community on top of Mt. Ebal, next to the Israeli military base. In an historic move and for the first time in recorded memory, they have physically isolated themselves from their Muslim and Christian neighbors. They now drive yellow-plated cars, carry Israeli ID cards and enjoy freedom of movement. Many, in fact, moonlight as drivers for Palestinians who can afford the eighty to one hundred dollar fares to other West Bank towns, to the Allenby Bridge, or even into Israel itself.

The size of this historically small community of a few hundred is growing slowly and the material well-being of its members has visibly improved. This is happening precisely at the time that Nabulsis are suffering from a dramatic decline in living standards (63 percent of the population of the occupied territories is now below poverty level). Many Samaritans still carry on an old tradition of working in the city administration; since Oslo, some work for Palestinian Authority offices such as the Interior Ministry. But it is not clear whether day jobs and occasional favors and gifts of *`araq* will suffice to maintain former ties and a sense of belonging to the larger community. If this trend continues, the next generation of this most native of native communities may come to seem more like the colonial settlers from Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and Moscow than their fellow Nabulsis. This is not to say that the Samaritans are of one mind, nor unmindful of the gravity of the situation. Some are Palestinian nationalists and a few have even been imprisoned by the Israelis military.

THE NIGHTLY SHOWS

Every night, Nablus is the scene of a two-act show—the first act uniting the city, the second dividing it. Starting at dusk, Nablus comes together as a single social arena, as people from every neighborhood of the city and camps congregate around the new American-style mall and around the outdoor kiosks and cafés of Gamal `Abd al-Nasser Park, both located at the bottom of Rafidya Street. The escalators inside the small mall do not work and the anemic shops are outnumbered by the empty spaces of failed businesses. But altogether they frame a large marbled interior space the likes of which Nablus has not seen before; hence, its persistent novelty. The park is disheveled, crowded, and overrun by everything except greenery, but it remains Nablus's only open space for outings, a premium activity for people who often find themselves under curfew.

Soon, a thick rope of mostly young people—recently engaged couples holding hands, clusters of al-Najah University students walking three abreast, teenagers from the camps, and new parents pushing strollers—ripples on the northern side of Rafidya Street. Two parallel lines of cars, many bursting with passengers and shaking with loud music, inch their way up and down the mile-long thoroughfare lined on both sides with shops of all kinds: grocery stores and upscale sweets emporiums, modern clothing boutiques and pharmacies, falafel stands and well-lit hamburger and ice cream shops, bakeries and cellular phone outlets, and a couple of Internet cafés. For a few hours, this veritable feast for the senses—the Nablus population's answer to outdoor nightlife—pushes aside the heavy gray fog of the occupation and provides a glimpse of what normal life might be like.

Later, in the eerie silence of the summer night after the crowds have gone home, the nightly show's second act begins as Israeli forces under the cover of darkness descend from the hills and stream through the Hawara and Bayt Eba crossings to raid this or that neighborhood of the city. The distinct sounds of each type of encounter between asphalt, rubber, and heavy metal tracks echo back and forth between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Jerzim. Just by sound, most children in Nablus and its refugee camps can distinguish between a jeep, a Hummer, an armored personnel carrier, a tank, and various sizes of bulldozers.

The days of large Israeli forces invading the streets with guns blazing in every direction and tanks reducing to flat pancakes everything in their way are long over. By the summer of 2004, the civilian population had been cowed: there is virtually no armed resistance and everyone has learned that any public protest near soldiers will be fired upon and can lead to instant death. Cornered militiamen sometimes do fire back, and then all hell breaks loose. The sky is filled with the color and sounds of flying bullets as each burst of Palestinian rifle fire is answered with a deafening roar of armored-mounted heavy machine guns, rockets, and tank shells.

But this happened only once during my visit. Instead, "surgical" operations have become the norm. The usual pattern is for soldiers to arrive unimpeded to their target areas, mostly looking for "wanted" men, whose names have been put on leaflets that threaten severe punishment (such as the blowing up of houses) for anyone who helps to hide them. After surrounding the area, they force their way into the highest buildings and post snipers on the roofs or at top floor windows. The residents of each apartment building are rounded up at gunpoint and stuffed into a single room on the ground floor. The scene is disconcerting: men in their pajamas ill at ease in someone else's home; children crying, whining, or peeing in their pants; women trying to be useful but hardly able even to make their way across the jam-packed room; awkward lines for a single bathroom; furtive eyes on the door locked from the outside and guarded by Israeli soldiers; a young girl crying quietly in a corner; general panic if anyone tries to look out the window. People have been shot for lesser offenses.

Soon there will be a hushed call on a cell phone to a local radio station which carries it live for all Nabulsis to hear on little kitchen radios that are never turned off: "Help us, a sick old man needs his diabetes medicine"; "we're out of baby formula"; and the like. Emergency services send ambulances with supplies and report over the air on their progress in reaching the single-room prison inside the series of other prisons: the apartment building, the neighborhood, the Old City, Nablus itself, Greater Nablus between the two crossings, and, of course, the larger enclave of the northern West Bank.

As the confinement continues and the overcrowding becomes more difficult to bear, the calls from inside the apartment transform it into a transponder that moves the city to a single beat. Its signal activates not only neighbors and relatives, who constitute the backbone of social solidarity within Nablus, but also the largest, best organized, and most effective system of support and emergency services in the West Bank. Staffed mostly by volunteers, rescue crews work in tandem with over three dozen neighborhood committees, which in turn are plugged into both the municipal and the provincial institutions of Nablus as well as a host of nongovernmental, charitable, and religious organizations. The local media offer real time coverage, which turns the tens of thousands of listeners into participants in this nightly drama. These local "late shows" compete for attention with the seductive Latin American soap opera serials and the wildly popular "Superstar," a contest on Lebanese Future television station for the best amateur singer in the Arab world.

A MARTYR AND A WEDDING

As a rule, the nightly raids are limited in space and duration, and most of the time, the soldiers leave before dawn empty-handed. Occasionally, they dig in for an extended stay of a few days or longer, which means round-the-clock curfews on the area or areas in question. Such operations are meant to drive a double wedge to divide the people of Nablus: the first wedge between the "militants" and the civilian population; the second between the "troublesome" and the "quiet" neighborhoods. Thus, the residents of neighborhoods where armed militiamen usually hide are subjected to severe collective punishment on a regular basis in the hope that, eventually, many will have to choose between normal life and support for the militiamen. As for the wedge between neighborhoods, it is true that none has been spared, as was recently demonstrated by the 14 September bombing of the middle neighborhood in Rafidya that killed six Palestinians and injured dozens. Still, the overwhelming majority of raids target the Old City area and the refugee camps where the poor, the young, and the marginalized are concentrated.

It remains to be seen whether Israel's strategy will work. There has always been a certain ambivalence among the better-off classes and the older population concerning the whole culture of armed resistance, both because they do not see it as an effective strategy and because the costs to businesses, homes, and personal security are extremely high. This ambivalence has reached crisis proportions since the spring invasion of 2002, as the militias lost their ability to attack the occupation forces but retained the ability to project their power at the local level, and not always in the most diplomatic of ways. True, some members of the militias come from the best-known families in Nablus. It is also true that many people still see the militias as having at least the potential to do something (and in fact they do play a role in negotiating local problems), especially since the PA is seen as politically ineffective. Still, the fact that Israeli soldiers come and go at will without any resistance is leading more and more people to wonder whether the militias are more a liability than an asset.

Whatever the case, hardly a night passes without Israeli gunfire. Here again, children can tell the difference between the various caliber bullets. They can also tell by the particular way that a mosque *mu'adhin* (caller to prayer) says the opening line "*bi ism allah al-rahman al-rahim*" (In the Name of God the Compassionate the Merciful) whether someone has been killed. "*Mama, fi shahid*" (Mother, there is a martyr), I heard a four-year-old girl exclaim, seconds after loudspeakers sliced through the evening air and well before it was announced that there is a martyr.

The very first night I arrived in Nablus, I heard the rumbling of Israeli armor and the shooting of guns an hour later. Word quickly spread that a sniper had killed a thirteen-year-old boy. Yet another life snuffed out without making a ripple. I expected a moment of pained silence in the crowded room I was in, but instead, a teen-aged girl complained with obvious irritation: "Drat! This means the market will be closed tomorrow." Her cousin, several years older, immediately replied, "No big loss, tomorrow is Friday and the market is closed anyway." At first, I was appalled at what seemed like extreme callousness on their part. They did not even ask the boy's name. I later realized that in Nablus, like elsewhere in the occupied Palestinian territories, there is a desperate search for normalcy, where shelter from the storm and a predictable safe routine have become deeply rooted needs.

That night I resolved to attend the boy's funeral, which was supposed to set out from the Takhasusi Hospital near al-Najah University to the Western cemetery at 11:00 A.M. the next morning. I expected to see thousands of people when I arrived at 11:20, but there was not a soul on the street. The days of massive citywide shows of solidarity with the families of martyrs have long since passed. The daily routine of killings over the past four years has reduced funeral processions from tens of thousands to, in the case of the boy, a few dozen relatives and friends who had apparently left the hospital on time and were by now out of sight. I hurried back into the car to catch up with them and, as I turned around, I ran into another procession, that of a wedding, on the very same street. This would have been unheard of in the first intifada, but now life in Nablus and occupied Palestine is such that people have lost hope of being able to have a normal existence any time soon. Despite the killings, they have to go on with their lives and must thus make room in their hearts for both a martyr and a wedding at the same time.

“WHO WILL REMEMBER THEM?”

Everyone killed by the Israeli military is called a martyr, no matter who it is or what the circumstances of the death. But not all martyrs are created equal. Some die from an Israeli sniper’s bullet to the chest while fixing a leak in a water tank on a quiet, hot summer day. Such was the fate of an eighteen-year-old shot without warning in mid-June. He was an ordinary individual who was not active in the intifada and had no particular claim to fame. Few went to his funeral and his story did not make much of an impression even on the Palestinian newspapers. Like the thirteen-year-old boy mentioned above, only his loved ones will remember him. For everyone else, he is at best a statistic. Both are typical of Palestinian civilians killed by Israeli soldiers: young males from lower class families living in the poorer neighborhoods or refugee camps.

Occasionally, one of the victims turns out to be someone with a high social profile. His or her murder then becomes symbolic: a frequently cited example of the cruel and arbitrary nature of the violence visited upon a civilian population by Israeli soldiers. This happened on 11 October 2002, for example, when a passing Israeli patrol stopped at the entrance of a sumptuous villa and riddled Shaden Abu Hijleh with bullets before the very eyes of her husband and son as she sat embroidering on the porch. “No one is safe” is how most Nabulsis interpreted the killing of a grandmother best known for her philanthropic work.[4] Such was also the case of Professor Khalid Salah and his sixteen-year-old son Muhammad, who were killed in cold blood in front of their family. Professor Salah, with a Ph.D. from University of California, Davis, and an American citizen, was a member of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Committee at al-Najah University, where he founded the electrical engineering department. Gideon Levy’s wrenching article in *Ha’Aretz* on the killing[5] was circulated widely on the Internet and energized many to redouble their efforts in support of Palestinian rights. But in Nablus, and despite the strong outcry of protest and the citywide participation in the funeral procession, the reaction to this incident, precisely because it was seen as typical, was primarily one of sad resignation.

Not so for the rock and roll stars of the second intifada: leaders of armed militias whose favorite instrument is not the guitar, but an M16. Their deaths are occasions for large demonstrations and ritual displays of solidarity, anger, and resolve. On almost every wall and building of the city one finds posters of young, virile, and self-confident men and teenagers, sometimes in groups of four and five and almost always in poses that show off their ease in handling a rifle. All of the young people in the posters are dead. With high-tech precision befitting the fourth strongest military in the world and a leading exporter of military technology, the Israeli army and secret services have declared open season on these young men, who are assassinated with numbing regularity. More often than not they are torn to pieces by rockets and remotely detonated bombs while in cars moving from one hiding place to another.

On the evening of 14 June, a taxi exploded not far from the entrance of Balata, the largest refugee camp in the West Bank. Khalil Marshud, a leader of an armed faction in Balata in his mid-twenties, was killed instantly. His face and brain had been blown away, turning his skull into an empty half-shell. The "collateral damage" comprised the taxi driver, whose body was blackened like that of a miner covered with coal dust except for the metal bits sticking out of this chest, and a passenger in the back seat who was critically wounded.

Within minutes crowds streamed out of the camp and surrounded the twisted metal of the yellow sedan with its hood sticking straight up as if saluting the rising moon. The same questions were repeated over and over again: Who is inside? How were they killed? Was it a rocket from a helicopter or a drone? Was it a bomb planted under the seat? How did they know he was in the car? Who helped the Israelis plan these murders?

There will be no detailed answers to these questions. Neither the United Nations nor any international organization with access to experts sent anyone to investigate this extra-judicial assassination or others like it. The PA does dispatch inspectors, but they have little training and no equipment, offices, or funds to do more than collect basic information by interviewing witnesses and quickly scanning the scene. Of course, the Israeli government is not exactly friendly to the UN or to international legal organizations, and there is not much of a PA to speak of in Nablus. The Israeli military has seen to that through a systematic campaign that destroyed the very institutional and physical infrastructure of the PA. This is symbolized by the abandoned *muqata`a*, a massive steel-reinforced compound built by the British as its administrative headquarters in Nablus and used since that time by the Jordanian, Israeli, and then Palestinian authorities. Like its namesake in Ramallah, it has been bombed and shelled repeatedly and now stands as a reminder of the collapse of Oslo. Nevertheless, the inability of the PA and others to do anything about Israel's assassination policy has caused great alienation and bitterness among supporters of the militias, who feel alone and completely abandoned.

After friends and comrades carried the bodies to the hospital, local volunteers with plastic gloves went carefully over the area where the seats and dashboard used to be. They were not collecting evidence, but pieces of flesh and brains as a courtesy to the dead and their families. Every once in a while, a bystander would be shown the inside of a small white plastic bag slightly bulging at the bottom.

Even before the bodies were identified, most people suspected that the target had been Khalil, who had barely escaped an attempt on his life two weeks earlier in which two of the four comrades in his cell had been assassinated. Yet, the scene at Rafidya Hospital was one of pandemonium, as if nothing like this had ever happened before. Hundreds of angry young men—Khalil's friends, fellow militants, supporters of the armed struggle from town and camp—converge on the hospital grounds and smash their way through the entrance as if conquering enemy territory. The crowd, getting thicker and more tightly packed, undulates like rising water in a rocky inlet at high tide. One man is so upset that he punches his fist through the thick glass window of the swinging doors that open into the emergency room. He cuts a major vein in his arm and is quickly sent off to undergo emergency surgery.

Yet this is not mayhem, but ritual chaos born of countless repetitions over the past four years. The crowd is of one mind: everyone wants to go to the morgue in the basement to see the bodies. Pushing everything out of its way, the crowd heads down the stairs and soon fills the corridors leading to the room at the very end. Many of those who manage to contort themselves enough to squeeze through the narrow doorway and into the tiny room are still unable to peek into the refrigerator only a meter away, because it is waist high and the pressure of the crowd is so intense that no one can move arms or legs but can only crane their necks. The consuming wish to see is borne not of morbid curiosity but of the desire to become one with Khalil so that what he stood for can continue. For many, Khalil was the physical embodiment of their dreams of freedom and dignity in a future Palestine. And just like their dreams, he was violently torn apart. Now, his spirit must pass on to others so that someone can take his place and keep the dream alive. Palestine embodied, disembodied, and embodied again.

Eventually, the corridor walls are lined with spent bodies. Having made the connection, most are now sobbing or have collapsed in stunned silence. The only animated expressions of grief now come from mothers, sisters, and wives of the dead men. No one can hold back their anguish and anger. Theirs are the only voices with words. Over and over again they cry: “Who will remember them?”; “They only kill the clean ones!”; “May God punish the collaborators!”

These phrases express the political culture and worldview of a large segment of Palestinian society. Theirs are the “clean ones,” and the rest of the world is an impure space filled with corruption, greed, malice, and wanton violence. A deep sense of victimization is mated with an even greater desire for resistance and revenge. For the family, friends, and comrades of Khalil, the months and years of living on the edge of a precipice trying to protect him from almost certain death are over. He has been hunted down and the world has become a very small place. Now they stand alone and across their mental trenches they see the United States and Israel and, as if that were not enough, the Arab governments, the PA, and even many Nabulsis who, for years now, are no longer welcome in the camps, just like the camp residents are not really welcome in Nablus.

The funeral march the next day is almost totally dominated by young men who can easily visualize their own dead bodies being carried on the shoulders of mourners. Most of the population does not participate in this particular drama. The energetic crowd briskly completes the long walk from the western part of the city to the eastern outskirts of Nablus and, as in a wedding where the bride is delivered to the groom, the city crowd delivers the bodies to the camp residents amassed by the hundreds at the entrance. Inside the camp, there is prayer, a eulogy, and then burial in the cemetery. The voice delivering the eulogy is familiar: it is Khalil’s. He had himself stood at that spot two weeks earlier and in a moving speech bid farewell to his two comrades. A recording was made of that eulogy and now his voice rings out again over his own body. Two weeks later, the fourth and last member of the cell that Khalil led was assassinated.

THE *KNAFE* HAS LEFT NABLUS

Nabulsis are proud of their city’s epithet, the “Mountain of Fire,” an appellation deriving from a local legend that Napoleon, upon approaching Nablus, met his defeat when the inhabitants set forests and olive groves ablaze, burning the French soldiers. The legend speaks to one of the traditions for which the Nablus region is famous: as a center of resistance to outside control. The seminal moments in popular memory for the modern period, aside from the encounter with the French troops during Napoleon's ill-fated adventure in Palestine, are its leadership of the 1834 rebellion against the invading Egyptian troops of Muhammad Ali Pasha, its role as the beating heart of the Great Revolt against the British (1936–39), and finally its centrality in the two intifadas against the Israeli occupation. But to most outsiders, Nablus the city is best known for two quite different traditions: soap made from olive oil and *knafe*, a sweet made from cheese and shredded dough. Both commodities are so well-regarded for purity and taste that no matter who makes them and where, they are marketed to shoppers from Damascus to Cairo, and from Chicago to Kuwait City, as Nabulsi soap and Nabulsi *knafe*. Both testify to the reach and power of Nabulsi merchants and artisans who have long made Nablus the economic backbone of the West Bank. And both testify to the organic relationship between the city and its rural hinterland, two parts of a whole that simply could not exist one without the other.

But today Nablus is a broken city. For the first time in hundreds of years, it has been forcibly separated from its hinterland for an extended period of time. And never in memory have so many of its merchants, historically the very people most involved in the construction of the Nablus region as a culturally and economically discrete social space, abandoned their cherished city in droves and moved their businesses to Ramallah, Amman, and elsewhere. The *knafe*, one now hears, has left Nablus. And so have the sheep market and the *hisbe,* the largest fruit and vegetable market in the entire West Bank on which hundreds of families depended for their livelihoods.

The real story of the Israeli siege is not the violence and killings, though that is unbearably painful for the loved ones of the many shot by Israeli soldiers and for all who witness the destruction of the cultural patrimony of an historic city. Rather, it is the slow and cruelly systematic asphyxiation of an entire social formation. The aim is to make the small routines of everyday life—such as working, going to school, visiting friends and relatives—so difficult as to precipitate major demographic shifts that, in turn, would break the Palestinian will to resist and make the colonization of their lands inevitable and irreversible.

The Israeli government for sure, and perhaps some in the PA, international organizations, and NGOs, are keeping close tabs on the external and internal demographic shifts generated by Israel's military and bureaucracy, but no reliable numbers are publicly available. There is no doubt, however, that these shifts are directly affecting one-third to one-half of the population of the West Bank. Tens of thousands of Palestinians who can afford to leave, and who are able to make it through the nervous legal blockade set up by the Jordanian authorities at the Allenby Bridge, have already left. Most were driven by the need to live a secure normal life and to put their children in good schools where they can have a future. Most are from the middle and upper classes, and this has seriously affected the already collapsing economy of the West Bank.

Tens of thousands more have embarked on a wide variety of internal patterns of migration, the consequences of which are as great as they are yet unclear. For one thing, only those with a dire need to travel even bother to brave the checkpoints these days. Those with jobs outside of Nablus, for example, have either had to give them up or move out of the city altogether. Nabulsis with jobs inside Nablus—or, more to the point considering the enormously high unemployment rate, those who have no jobs anywhere—rarely leave the city. Literally tens of thousands in Nablus and its refugee camps have not ventured outside the municipal boundaries since the outbreak of the second intifada in the fall of 2000. To fully appreciate the meaning of this confinement, it is well to remember that driving across Nablus from Hawara to Bayt Eba now takes only ten minutes.

The sense of claustrophobia is even worse among residents of villages in the countryside, most of which are completely cut off. To these must be added the tens of thousands whose lives have been made impossible by the isolation wall. Those among them who must have access to the schools, hospitals, jobs, or other services typically found in large urban centers are leaving their villages and towns in droves. Thousands of them have been lured into the one place that the Israeli government has allowed a semi-normal life: Ramallah, the de facto "capital" of Palestine. The building boom in the twin cities of Ramallah/al-Bireh over the past few years is nothing short of extraordinary.

It is not much different in Nablus. The economy may be in deep freeze, but the building activity is red-hot. The internal migration from little prisons to larger ones that drives this expansion has created a feeling among Palestinians that they are being herded into reservations. One after another, apartment buildings with the characteristic stone facades are sprouting haphazardly up the slopes of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Jerzim, creeping ever upwards. The tall new buildings are interconnected by everything from new main thoroughfares to dirt roads freshly cut through the limestone hills like so many wounds. For decades, the green of the luxuriant olive groves, fruit orchards, and vegetable gardens that virtually hid the city from a distance has been fading as the city has expanded. But now, it seems to be finally giving way to dust clouds swirling among huge stone pillars dispersed over a surreal rocky landscape. One wonders what will happen when this place is filled to capacity and, like Gaza, there is no place else to go.

POSTSCRIPT

My almost-nine-year-old daughter, Tala, wants to make sure I mention that when act two of the nightly show begins, people first turn off the house lights to keep Israeli soldiers from firing at them, and then peek out their windows. Often, she adds, children go to sleep and wake up to the sound of bullets. Sometimes, the adults sit outside smoking cigarettes and watching the night show from a distance. And occasionally, a bullet or two visits their houses. It is also important to know, she says, that people now like to keep pets, especially birds, to keep them company when they are trapped at home.

NOTES

1 See "Settlements and the Destruction of History" in the Settlement Monitor section of this issue.

2 See Amira Hass, "There is Order in the Anarchy," in the Hebrew Press section of this issue.

3 Penny Johnson et al., "The West Bank Rises Up," in Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds., *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 30.

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4 See www.remembershaden.org

5 Gideon Levy, “Death in a Cemetery,” *Ha’Aretz*, 23 July 2004.