



Sunday

INSIGHT

Opinion & Commentary

August 1, 2004

THIRSTING TO BREATHE

The West Bank city of Qalqilya and its water are a metaphor for Israeli occupation

By Gary Fields

It was 6:30 in the evening when my taxi pulled up alongside a rather unassuming-looking section of metal fencing, its crown of concertina wire the only signal that its purpose was far from benign. Much like the miles of fencing I already had observed intrusively slicing through the West Bank landscape, this barrier mocked the rhythms of the rolling hillsides as it cut to a distant vanishing point toward the east. At this hour, the lines of Israeli-built fencing were beginning to cast long shadows across the silent terrain. "Why had the taxi driver dropped me in this spot," I mused to myself. "What is of interest here?"

I had gotten into this taxi just past the Israeli checkpoint into Qalqilya, the city of walls. Somehow I had managed to convey to the driver, who spoke only in the language of Mahmoud Darwish, my interest in seeing the concrete barrier encircling the city. As he drove me around, we passed numerous sections of the ominous-looking and omnipresent structure. Now I found myself at a much less dramatic looking part of the barrier. It seemed anticlimactic, almost mundane.

I came to Qalqilya from the nearby town of Jayeous where I had been hosted by one of the region's most respected hydrologists, Abdul-latif Khaled of the Palestinian Hydrology Group. Earlier, I was a guest at a special meeting on the water crisis in the area coordinated by Mayor Zahrouf Mahran of Qalqilya and representatives of a United Nations agency.

Jayeous, I learned, receives two hours of running water every three days. The situation is similar in Qalqilya and other localities in the district. As I sipped the steady offerings of coffee proffered up by my Palestinian hosts, I wondered whether the taps were running for the people at that moment in Qalqilya.

Water is a microcosm of the occupation, a metaphor depicting the divergent fortunes of two groups, one with power to control where water flows, the other suffering from an enforced thirst.

Contrary to our image of the region as an arid place, the West Bank is rich in underground aquifers. Historically, Palestinians succeeded in tapping these springs as a source of sustenance and sustainability. Although I was familiar in broad outline with Israel's matrix of control in the West Bank, what I learned in the meeting sharpened my own understanding of Israel's occupation.

After 1967, Israel, upon surveying Palestinian water wells in the West Bank, issued four edicts that would alter the way water would be allocated and controlled.

First, Israeli authorities prohibited Palestinians from drilling any new wells or conducting searches for new locations in which to drill. Second, any subsequent drilling for water was made subject to a permit process controlled by Israel. Third, transfers of water from one location to another were prohibited unless approved by Israel. Finally, Israel gave rights to control water resources in the West Bank, including wells historically owned and used by Palestinians, to its own state-owned water company, Makrot. In a pattern familiar throughout the region, Palestinians are now dependent upon Israel and Makrot for rights to water.

Makrot exercises this control over water rights most forcefully by deep-drilling for water in the areas of underground water reserves which diverts water flows from shallower wells and depletes the aquifers. As a consequence, the shallower wells allocated by Makrot to Palestinians become easily exhausted.

When I asked how many permits Israel had granted to Palestinians for the drilling of new deep water wells, participants in the meeting were momentarily silent. "After the inventory of 1967," one explained, "the Israelis have never issued a permit for Palestinians to drill new deep underground wells. If they uncover a well dug by Palestinians clandestinely, they destroy it."

Many of the most important underground wellsprings are located just to the east of the Green Line dividing Israel from Palestine. These wells, part of the "Western Aquifer," are highly coveted by Israel. Consequently, they have built the wall not only to annex land. The wall also annexes many of these wells in order to divert water both to Israel and to West Bank settlements where per capita water use exceeds allocations for Palestinians by tenfold. "The wall is not only an apartheid wall," insists my friend, Abdul-latif Khaled. "It is a "water wall."

As I approached the checkpoint into Qalqilya and got a panoramic look at the wall surrounding the city, I had an image of a giant levee, a circular dam blocking the flow of water into an encircled and dry interior. I had come to a besieged city.

Now in the taxi, I raced through Qalqilya, which in the early evening was seized with a silent melancholy. Few people were on the street. At the entrance to the city were many shops with shuttered doors, businesses unable to sustain the walled isolation.

In this sense, the wall acts as a giant exterminator. It kills businesses. Where the wall comes into contact with commerce, it creates drought and suffocation. It cuts off the oxygen and life flow of communication and thus slowly but inexorably dehydrates and asphyxiates economic life. Encircled by the wall, Qalqilya was thirsting to breathe.

The taxi driver took me to several places where the large, gray, concrete barrier loomed silently, perversely over residents' gardens, a boys' soccer game, farmers' greenhouses, peoples' lives. I ventured close to one of the sinister-looking guard towers that form breaks in the barrier and began to take photos of the wall. I wanted to take more pictures.

Yet here I was, staring at what appeared to be a far less oppressive-looking structure. The taxi driver got out of the cab to smoke a cigarette. I walked around the gate area alone in my own thoughts, looking out into the fields and greenhouses on the other side. I glanced once again at the metal fencing quietly extending eastward. Five minutes had passed. It was now 6:35 in the evening.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken by several vehicles that had begun to congregate in the area along with several horse-drawn carts. There were also several people on foot who had begun to gather at the site. Where had these people come from?

In looking once again at the gate, I realized that my being here was far from accidental. Taking advantage of my unplanned but somehow fortuitous timing, my taxi driver had taken the initiative to show me something dramatic in the daily routine of Palestinians in this, the city thirsting for breath.

I was parked at the one gate in Qalqilya that opens for 20 minutes in the mornings, noon and evenings to allow people to pass between the city and their agricultural fields and greenhouses lying outside the barrier, and from their farms and greenhouses back to the city. I was about to witness this sad metaphor of occupation.

With the ominous looking guard towers of the wall looming to the west, with the closed gate before me through which Palestinians would soon be permitted to pass, and with Palestinians readying their telltale green Israeli-issued I.D. cards, there could not have been a more poignant set of historical ironies grafted upon the scene.

At 6:40 a loud low rumble could be heard screaming up the road opposite to where I was standing. An Israeli army Humvee pulled up to the other side of the gate. Three Israeli soldiers emerged from the vehicle. Two of them drew their rifles while a third proceeded to unlock the gate and push it open. With much anticipation, Palestinians, who had appeared so suddenly at the gate and had lined up in the hope of moving from one side to the other, readied themselves to pass.

There were families with children, individuals, and even young boys driving horse-drawn carts, all now passing to the other side of the gate under the watchful inspection and menacing rifles of the Israeli soldiers. I watched this passage continue for 20 minutes.

By 7 p.m., there were no more people in the gated area. The Israeli soldier who had unlocked the gate now pulled the two parts of the gate together. There was no sound in the area except that of a large metal key locking the gate back into place. This must be the sound of a prison door closing. The guardians of the prison then drove off.

The area was deserted. Only my taxi driver remained. I shook his hand and said in a quiet tone, "Shukran." As I thanked him, I wondered what he thought of me, an American, someone whose country incarcerated more of its own people than any other nation, someone whose government was in fact helping fund this perverse form of imprisonment.

This type of incarceration, however, is replete with irony.

"There is a big difference between a prison and what the wall has done to us," my friend Abdul-latif emphasized to me earlier in the day. "In prison, the authorities try to keep you in. Here, the Israelis are imprisoning us to force us out."

I climbed into the taxi and the driver took me back to the checkpoint at the entrance to the city. This was the limit he could travel. Without a permit, he could go no farther. I waved goodbye and strode up to the Israeli soldiers stationed at the entrance to the city. With my American passport, I could escape. For Palestinians in Qalqilya, however, there is no exit short of exile.

As I walked to the other side of the checkpoint after negotiating my way past the Israeli soldiers, I found a taxi with the requisite yellow license plates an Israeli taxi that would take me across the boundary a mere one mile away, to Israel and eventually to Herzlia where I would spend the night in order to leave the country the following day. As I freely made my exit, Qalqilya the city thirsting to breathe, was silent, enclosed by walls, facing another night of troubled sleep.

Gary Fields, author of *Territories of Profit*, is a professor in the department of communication at the University of California, San Diego. He recently returned from Israel and the West Bank as part of a delegation sponsored by Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20040801/news_mz1e1fields.html