

# Chapter I

## LIVING UNDER OCCUPATION

by Diane

*My name is Diane. I was 17 and in my sixth grade when I left to the West Bank with the group. I am 18 now and I am studying Philosophy at university. I was interested in taking part in Taayoush project because I wanted to defend the rights of Man which I felt were flouted in Palestine. I also wanted to meet young people who had another cultural background than the one I know.*

A curious map indeed, that of Israel : a very small country altogether, considering the planet. A kind of triangle on its tip, stretched between the Mediterranean, the Aqaba Gulf (Red Sea) and the Jordan, that seems to have been amputated of strip of land in the West, the « Gaza Strip » and on the East, of a territory whose form reminds us of a nibbled embryo : the « West Bank\* ». Also called « the occupied territories »...

Unless, like with Rubin's vase, you change the point of view and make out the two faces facing each other rather than the vase that separates them...

Who occupies who ? How long for and why ? Who are these « settlers », where are these « settlements » that are in the news ? - NB : the French words are « colons and colonies », both negatively connoted in the western memory. Yet they don't seem to shock anybody in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict...)

Above all : what does this situation of occupation imply for the occupied people in practical terms ?... It was difficult for me to imagine as I am lucky enough to be born in a free and sovereign. It is difficult too to accept what I saw, felt and understood during our trip to Jerusalem and the West Bank, which I'll gladly share with you here.

**- Occupation implies a constant military presence in the “occupied territories” :**

In Belgium and in most part of Europe, we are not accustomed to being surrounded by armed soldiers on a daily basis. In Jerusalem and in the West Bank, Palestinian people are : the military just go around on the streets or in the areas that attract tourists, right in the middle of the civilians as if the country were at war...

Before we took the plane back home, we went to the Haganah Museum\* in Tel Aviv. We had just left the refugee camp of Aida\*<sup>8</sup>. *“The Haganah, we were told there, was set up mainly to protect the Jewish farmers against the frequent attacks by the Arabs”*... We could only be shocked and filled with disbelief when we saw the way the ancestor of Tsahal (the Israeli army) is presented to the visitors : it is quite simply idealised and glorified. We didn't find a hint of doubt or self-criticism regarding any potential abuse of power, breaches of law or of the rights of Man in the course of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over the last sixty years. Nor any objective historical explanation that would have enabled the visitors to understand reality in all its complexity : there was no information as to why these “bad” Arabs were attacking the “good” Jewish farmers, nor as to who the latter were or where they were from...

Yet, what hurt us most was to find ourselves smothered in the middle of several dozens of young soldiers, all of them casually carrying their (loaded?) weapons (machine-guns and bludgeons) during the visit as if it was the most normal thing to do... This offered such a contrast to what we know here in Belgium (or more generally in Europe) and above all to what we had experienced in Aida camp and other Palestinian places we had been to : there was not a weapon in sight there. We were all the more surprised as these soldiers were all about our age : 18 to 20-years old, just like those we had seen at the checkpoints\* in the West Bank<sup>9</sup>...

In Israel, military service is compulsory for everybody, or more exactly for all Jewish Israeli men and women and a condition *sine qua non* on which to get credits for a house, scholarships, financial help to start a business. A stage young Israelis are generally quite proud of : they serve their country, are ready to defend it and ensure its security... But to think that, once their training is over, these young 18-to-20 year olds will most probably be posted to a checkpoint and will take part in a whole system of domination of one people by another is rather hard to swallow...

The fact is everything we could observe during our trip (in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus, Jaffa and Tel Aviv) reinforced my impression that Israel is first and foremost a military state always on its guard, in which ignorance (or distortion) of History and of the other and, consequently, incomprehension and fear are the rule. Above all, I felt how little interested the Israeli State is in finding a fair solution for everyone, Palestinians and Jews.

The speech a Jewish lady made to our group in front of the Wailing Wall\* on our first day in Jerusalem is an alarming example of this. Though nobody had asked her, she reeled off assertions like : *“ One day, all the other people on earth will beg the Jews to accept them as their servant”, or “There will never be peace with the Palestinians. There are all kinds of (Jewish) groups : all say that if one group made peace (with the Palestinians), the other groups are not obliged to follow..”, or “ The Jewish people is the Chosen People, the Holy Beloved people of God, and God is going to resurrect all the bad people who did bad things to the Jewish people and He is going to punish them”, or again “ The (Muslim) fundamentalists are not dangerous only for the Jewish people, they are a danger for everybody”*... Of course assimilating all the Palestinians to Muslims fundamentalists...

<sup>8</sup> See chapter 2 : Refugees in their own country

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 3 : The Palestinian archipelago

The question is, how else could it be ? How can you put things in perspective when, from your tender childhood, you have been drilled to a certain vision of the conflict and when you haven't had contact for so long with the people incriminated ? On this subject, the films by the Israeli film-maker **Avi Mograbi\***, « *Avenge but only one of my two eyes* » and "Z32" say a lot : for the large majority of the Jews (worldwide), the fact that the "territories" (The West Bank) should be occupied goes without saying (these territories belong to them, so the Holy Bible says), and the military presence over there is fully justified seeing the violent resistance the occupied display there...

### - Occupation is the denial of the other

The way I saw and experienced the Wall\* Israel is still busy building, it is clearly not so much a security wall as an imprisonment wall, a separation barrier whose aim is to prevent communication and fraternisation between the Palestinian and the Israeli people.... An open invitation to the stigmatisation of the Other and thus to indifference or fear. I was stricken and alarmed to realise how much the Israelis we came across in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Tel Aviv didn't seem to have the slightest idea of who these people living only a few kilometres away - yet on the "other side" of the Wall - were nor of what their everyday life under occupation could be like.

I think it requires a lot of courage - and intellectual honesty - to want to know what is really going on and to open oneself to the Palestinians' daily reality. Some Jews, in and outside Israel, apply themselves to it. Yet, they meet with a lot of criticism from the Jewish community who consider them as traitors. In Belgium, there is the **UJPB\***, the Union of the Jewish Progressists of Belgium or the **Brussels brecht- Eislerkoor Choir\***. Over there, there is for example **Tal Dor**, a young Israeli woman who is a member of *Zochrot\** (a Hebrew word meaning "they remember"), an association that makes a point of providing the Israelis with the knowledge of how the State of Israel was created, as experienced by the Palestinians. There is **Michel Warshawski\***, founder of the *Alternative Information centre (AIC)\** in Jerusalem, which works at spreading unbiased information about the situation of the occupation by Israel. There are many other civil-based initiatives such as **The Anarchists Against the Wall\***, a group of 20-year-old youngsters who regularly organize non-violent demonstrations in the villages of the imprisoned West Bank ; **Yesh Gvul\*** which draws together former soldiers who refused to fight in Lebanon or the Occupied Territories ; **The Shministim\***, high school Israeli students who already claim they will refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories ; **Machsom Watch\***, a group of women who organize sits-ins at the checkpoints, watch and question the young soldiers on their attitude to the Palestinians they check... And of course **Taayoush\***, which Anne-Claire and Tanguy told you about in the introduction

There are actions on the military side too : The **Refuznik\*** are Israeli reservist soldiers who have decided not to serve in the Occupied Territories anymore nor to take part in the repression and humiliation of the Palestinian people (the price to pay is prison for treason). There are also former soldiers who are determined to tell the truth about who the aggressors and the victims actually are : some of

them, for instance, set up an exhibition they called **Breaking the Silence\*** in which they displayed all the keys of the cars they had bulldozed in Hebron while serving there : « *The people of Israel must know that we behaved like real bastards in the Occupied Territories*», they say.

Men and women who refuse to comply with Israel's demand to pretend Palestinians don't exist.

On the Palestinian side, people have understood that it is urgent to find something else than armed struggle to have their rights respected and above all to continue to exist in the eyes of the world - against everything the Israeli State does to wipe them out <sup>10</sup>. Cultural Centres have opened all over the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. They organise different activities to help people find a way out of resentment and to live with dignity in spite of the injustices there are subjected to. In **Al-Rowwad\*** in Aida refugee camp, we had the opportunity to attend rehearsals of the play the children and teenagers of the theatre workshop were going to perform a few days later abroad so people "outside" know about the history of Palestine and the situation it is in now :

*I asked them : where is my country ?  
They said it doesn't exist...(...)  
A foreign people occupies our land  
And forced our people to exile  
They took our lands, built settlements  
Threw people in prison or on the roads of exile  
They control and govern  
Destroy our houses  
Upturn the soil, uproot the trees  
Build new roads, destroy the buildings  
Make our land into a desert  
We have less and less water...(...)  
From here they want to uproot us  
But our roots are deep...(...)<sup>11</sup>*

One of the characters, Riwae, 13, tells about the decision she has come to make :  
“ *On March 8, in 2002, the occupation army came into our camp. The soldiers smashed the walls and bombed the houses to get in. We had heard voices in front of our door. My mother got up to go and open it. That's when we heard an explosion. There was smoke everywhere in the house and my mother was lying on the floor, surrounded by soldiers of the army. She was covered with blood... My father tried to get to her to help her but the soldiers didn't let him do it... He wanted to call for help, but they forbade him to ... They packed us all in one room and went on destroying the walls of the house... After two hours, they let my father call for help. The ambulance arrived one hour later and took my mother. My father went with her to the hospital. As for the soldiers, they continued piercing the wall that separates us from our neighbours and went into their house... My father came back, but my mother never did... On that day, I decided*

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 5 : The Beautiful Resistance of the Palestinians

<sup>11</sup> Extract from « We are the children of the camps », by A.Abu- Srou, director of the cultural centre Al-Rowwad, in Aida

*to fight and resist...But I have chosen a non-violent way to resist and make my cries be heard. I have chosen to take up theatre, to draw and play music to make my suffering be heard in the whole world..."*<sup>12</sup>

The "Pioneers" of Aida have called it their "Beautiful resistance". However, the future of this resistance through art and culture is all but certain. Ribal, 19, coordinator, theatre leader and actor at Al-Rowwad is all too lucid : "No doubt there will come a time when the Israelis will have had enough of us. Maybe then, they will arrest us and throw us in prison, I don't know... The last time I talked to an Israeli soldier at Jericho checkpoint, he said to me : « You won't be able to go on talking about the situation, acting and dancing for another 100 years. We won't let you..." One day, we may be under such pressure from Israel that we may have to stop it all ..." »

**- Occupation is the progressive and organized choking of the other, his humiliation through gratuitous vexations : it is constant and insidious violence**

Humiliation is a word we often heard when speaking with the Palestinians. I witnessed it in action too, in Bethany for example. It is the first Palestinian village we visited, wedged between the Wall and the old city of Jerusalem. The contrast with the modern neighbouring Jewish settlements<sup>\*13</sup> was striking : the villagers survive rather than live, locked in an overcrowded and dilapidated open-air prison. All exports have been banned by the Israeli administration, the only products allowed in must come from Israel and are sold at exorbitant prices to the Palestinians. The economy of the village is severely weakened, most of the little businesses of the village have gone bankrupt and most of the shops have had to close... When we understood that, we didn't hesitate a second : we bought bread and fruit for our lunch from the little hawkers of the strangled village... By the way, there is no Palestinian currency : another sign of Israel's economic domination.

In Bethlehem, the economy is paralysed too : « *"Business is getting worse and worse for all the little shopkeepers"*, Sandra\*, a young 26-year-old French-Brazilian volunteer at Aida told us. *"The tourists come to Bethlehem by coach, are brought as one group to the different tourist sites, then leave, still as a group , without stopping at all at the little shops. The couriers definitely encourage the tourists to avoid coming into contact with the Arabs..."*».

Another example of the insidious violence the Palestinians are subjected : we were invited to take part in a little feast in Silwan\*, another Palestinian village near Jerusalem (see map below). A rather sad feast to tell the truth : on 19 February 2009, 134 families (1500 people altogether) had received an evacuation order telling them their houses were going to be destroyed in order to create an entertainment park for the exclusive use of the Israelis. *"The truth, one of the villagers told us, is that this measure is part of the Israeli government's strategy to "Jewishize" Jerusalem : they are working at isolating the Al-Aqsa mosque from*

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<sup>12</sup> ibidem

<sup>13</sup> In March 2010, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announced new colonies were going to be built in East-Jerusalem. This caused the indignation of many governments as well as the anger of the United States of America

*its Palestinian surrounding and making a Jewish centre in the place of the old town. Wiping Silwan off the map will allow a continuity between the settlements around Jerusalem and the old city...".* Since then, the inhabitants of Silwan, who are determined to defend their houses, have organised weekly cultural demonstrations (music and dance shows by the children) to draw people's attention to their lot.<sup>14</sup>

The Israeli government works at quenching the Palestinians' peaceful resistance : for example they impose arbitrary decisions on the members of the different cultural centres. **Daoud\***, 26, coordinator at the **Nidal Cultural Centre\*** in Jerusalem<sup>15</sup> told us a number of anecdotes that were but other proofs of the many vexations Palestinians have to face. I'm just going to tell you one : the Israeli authorities banned a dance festival at the last minute although it had been announced and prepared for a long time. The soldiers came and interrupted it just as the thrilled kids were about to go on stage...

On 8 August, 2009, i.e. hardly six months later, we got a mail from Daoud telling us the centre had been closed by force on 14 July for at least one year on the pretext that the PFLP\* were using the place for their meetings : *"They didn't even search the rooms, nor the people !, Daoud wrote. They knew they wouldn't find anything. They had already come in 2005. Then they had taken and searched everything : papers, computers, cupboards... They know we organize only cultural and development activities for the children and women of Jerusalem... Closing the Nidal centre is just one of the steps to make Jerusalem the capital of Israel : they want to discourage the Palestinian people, push them to leave the city... And in parallel, more and more settlements are being built and more and more Israeli settlers are coming to Jerusalem..."*

Since the centre was closed, Daoud and his colleagues have had to work outside : the 2010 activities that had been organised for the children in Nidal were held in other cultural centres of the old cities, when they were not purely and simply cancelled. At the beginning of November 2010, Daoud informed us that the Israeli authorities had decided to prolong the closure of Nidal for one more year, i.e. up to October 2011...

One last example : in Al-Rowwad (Aida camp), **Ribal** and the theatre company were kept waiting until the last minute before they at last got permission and passports for their trip to Austria, even though the Israeli authorities had long been informed of the Austrian invitation. A war of attrition and nerves...

### **- Occupation means the deterioration of the other's standard of living and their progressive psychological collapse**

*« There was much trouble here after the second Intifada (2000), Anya\*, our young guide in Hebron (West Bank) told us. The settlers really drove the Palestinians to leave the town, either by forcing them to sell their house or by making their life*

<sup>14</sup> End of March 2010 we were told that several dozens of families had been expelled from Silwan to make room for the building of new houses for Israeli settlers.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago

*hell through constant harassment : armed settlers mounting raids on the town, attacking young girls, shoplifting, letting go off their dogs on children, broadcasting songs and speeches in Hebrew on loudspeakers at full volume at night, poisoning animals (chicken, horses), throwing stones and household refuse at the people, forcing shops to close down, preventing the Palestinians from stocking up with goods (blocked roads and streets) or from rehabilitating their house, putting freshly rehabilitated houses on fire...<sup>16</sup>*”

*“The main victims of the occupation are the children...», Ahmad, the director of the YCC cultural centre\* in the refugee camp of Balata<sup>17</sup> (Nablus) explained to us before he let us go round his refugee camp. They live in poverty, some are handicapped following the Israeli attacks, others are orphans or have one or both parents in jail. Many have seen people being killed and suffer from deep psychological troubles. Or simply, they have no place where they can play : there are no gardens, no parks in Balata, only the street and the problems linked to it, fights, violence...”*

*Issa\*, (30), a theatre-leader for the 8-to-12 year-olds at Al-Rowwad (Aida) told us about the effects of all this insidious violence on the children of the camp : «“They live in a brutal environment due to the Israeli occupation with everything it implies : the presence of the wall and of armed soldiers on the outskirts of the camp, the impossibility of moving about freely, scenes of violence watched or experienced at home or on the streets... Many of them have lost their bearings...”*”

*An analysis of the situation Oussama\*, 31, coordinator at the same cultural centre confirms : «Many children, as well as many adults, have real difficulty expressing themselves, or just talking about themselves. We try to ease that problem in the workshops we organize and through all the work we do here in the Centre but it takes time...”*

*One hell of a mission these young Palestinians have indeed given themselves ! All the more so as Marwa\*, coordinator at Al-Rowwad and a young 26-year-old mother, says : “To dream, you need to believe that there are no borders to stop you. But for us, even when we try to dream, we know that there are many barriers that prevent us from dreaming...”*

*Sandra remembers : «At the beginning, it was simply impossible to work properly with the kids (about 40!) I was in charge of : they were all awfully nervous and didn't obey me at all !... At the beginning, I had a translator to help me but afterwards I had to get by without him... I finally understood why the workshops didn't work : all these kids had completely rotten teeth, some with constant raging toothache which prevented them from sleeping, keeping still or doing any activity, be it drawing, or listening to a story... And I thought : how could children who are constantly in pain learn or work at school, think about themselves and the world, build their personality, defend their country and their culture ?...”<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago, Hebron

<sup>17</sup> See chapter 2 : Refugees in their own country, Balata

<sup>18</sup> Sandra telling about her SMILE Project : “ So one day I took three of the kids to the dentist... He had to take out several of their teeth and I thought I was never going to see them again and that probably they would tell the other children and frighten them away from me too... It was just the opposite ! They had realized that once their

Rima Awad\*, who works for the PCC in Jerusalem, testifies how worrying (and inevitable) the deterioration of people's mental and psychological health is in Palestine.

**- Occupation is synonymous to progressive colonisation : evicting the other, taking over his lands and properties**

There is a long and beautiful fresco on a wall in Aida camp that depicts the painful history of the Palestinian refugees. The colonisation of Palestine by the Israelis, a period the Palestinians remember as the *Nakba* \*, the 1948 catastrophe : Israelis turned up in the Palestinian villages and forced their inhabitants to leave their houses. The latter settled as they could in the fields and under the trees, keeping as close as possible to their native villages, hoping they would soon be able to get back home... but this never came true. The tents of the first camps set up by the UNRWA \* were slowly but surely replaced by permanent but basic structures, such as in Aida, which groups together the refugees of the destroyed villages around Jerusalem, or in Balata where all the refugees of the destroyed villages around Yafa (Jaffa) now live<sup>19</sup>.

Officially started in 1948, the colonisation of Palestine by the Israelis is still going on today : not only has the large majority of the Palestinians been forced to go into exile, abroad or inside their own country, but they have to witness the construction of more and more Israeli settlements around Jerusalem and in the West Bank without being able to do anything against it. These settlements are generally perched on top of the hills, which makes them all the more visible as their modern concrete architecture stands out violently against the otherwise rather rural atmosphere of the Palestinian landscape.

A whole network of modern motorways (for the exclusive use of the settlers and so forbidden to the Palestinians) has been built to link the settlements together and to Jerusalem. To do so, the Palestinian roads were simply interrupted and now come to a halt against heaps of earth or concrete walls... The Palestinians are prevented from coming and going normally. "Their" roads having been cut, they have to make really long detours to get to their workplace or fields, to their schools or visit their family. They are on their lands though : in the West bank... Also called "the occupied territories" where Israeli flags flap in the wind, just like in Jerusalem which, let us not forget, is **not** the capital of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

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bad teeth were out, it didn't hurt anymore and the next day, I had tens of kids at my door begging me : "Sandra, please, take me to the dentist, look at my teeth, look how rotten they are, please take me to the dentist!..." The trouble is I get no allowance for that. So I pay for the dentist with the help of some friends I have at home who, rather than give money to, for example, Médecins sans Frontières, send it to me. But it isn't enough. I'm forced to select the children, I have no other choice but take those in the worst condition. The Palestinians have always had very lax oral hygiene but before at least people ate healthy food : fruit, vegetables ... Today, the kids suck sweets all day long... It is no use taking them to the dentist if they don't take care of their teeth. That is why in parallel I started these oral hygiene workshops in which I teach the children to brush their teeth properly... But it is a never-ending work..."

<sup>19</sup> See chapters 2 : Refugees in their own country, and chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago

<sup>20</sup> Separated from the western part of the town by the April 3, 1949 Israeli-Palestinian armistice line (the Green Line) East Jerusalem was annexed by Israel after the June 1967 Six-Day war. This annexation was declared

*«Up to 1891, our Palestinian guide in Jerusalem told us, Jerusalem was part of the Ottoman Empire. After WWII and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, more and more Jews came to Jerusalem, built themselves houses outside the surrounding wall. In 1950 they declared Jerusalem the "solemn capital of Israel" , which is recognized by 3 countries only, including the USA - embassies are all in Tel Aviv. In 1967, they simply annexed the 28 villages surrounding the town in total defiance of the Green Line\*, so as to make Jerusalem the largest city of Israel<sup>21</sup>.*

Hebron is the quintessence of the colonised town<sup>22</sup> : the settlements there are not outside like in Jerusalem but inside the town. The Jewish settlers have settled in the upper floors and terraces of the Palestinian houses, letting the ground floors occupied by shops to Palestinians. Yet this “vertical” distribution doesn’t mean the “occupied” are better off : the settlers in Hebron are what are called “ideological settlers” as opposed to the economic settlers who have come to the West Bank because the houses are made financially attractive to them (grants are given by the Israeli government). They are fully determined to recover Palestine which, in their opinion, belongs to them by right : settling in a town that is already inhabited and rich with a long cultural history is part of their plan of action.

*“The Israeli settlers have either built their houses on historical monuments, Anouar Abu-Eisheh from the Hebron-France Friendships Association\* told us, which is illegal according to international law. Or they have made them inaccessible to the Palestinians as well as to foreign tourists. The same has happened to a number of public buildings that were once used by the Palestinians : for example, the settlers have annexed the school for the children of the 1948 refugees and made it into a museum, the free clinic is now inside one of the settlements, my own primary school has become a religious school for the Israelis (consequently many shops have had to close down, roads and neighbouring Palestinian houses have been forbidden to their owners, and watch-posts have been set up to ensure the security of the Israeli schoolboys and girls). Many houses (among which my grand-parents') are now isolated behind the numerous road-blocks and barricades that cut the town streets.”*

In Hebron, a complete parallel network has been set up so as to avoid contact between the two populations. Whole streets are for the exclusive use of the settlers, others are temporarily prohibited to the Palestinians. Palestinian-owned businesses have to be closed when the settlers come out of their houses.

This together with the omnipresence of the soldiers, the checkpoints, watchtowers and surveillance cameras. This together with the bankruptcy of the little shops and businesses and the poverty of the Palestinian families. This together with the important roundabout ways they are forced to go because of the barred roads. And more especially in Hebron : this together with the wire fencing and nets the Palestinian inhabitants have had to stretch across the streets to hold back the

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illegal by two UNO resolution (2253 and 2254) on July 4 and 14, 1967. Yet, on July 30, 1980, the Knesset adopted a law proclaiming Jerusalem “ the entire and reunified eternal capital of Israel”.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago, Jerusalem

<sup>22</sup> See chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago, Hebron

household refuse and rubbish of all kinds (even stones heavy enough to knock somebody out or kill him !) the Jewish settlers throw on them from the upper floors of the houses they have annexed... All this poisons the everyday life of the Palestinians. The obvious intention is to drive them out and get them to leave. But the Palestinians are attached to their house and lands and cling to them. And they will go and pray at the Patriarchs' Tombs\* even if to do that, they have to pass through three successive checkpoints, as I experienced it in Hebron<sup>23</sup>.

**- Occupation is the implementation of a whole structure aiming at controlling the other' life and preventing his free movement**

The best example I can give of this are the checkpoints inside and outside the cities, sort of security tollbooths, except that you don't pay anything and that the controllers are young, jittery and too often rude soldiers. These checkpoints (between Israel and its neighbours but also between and inside the towns and villages of the West Bank) complete a whole network of modern roads (for the Israelis only) and Palestinian roads, all in a poor state, most of them barred or blocked, and contribute to hindering the Palestinians' free movement inside their own country. The checkpoints are synonymous with enormous loss of time and disgraceful disruptions vexations for the Palestinians (and the tourists moving around Palestine), who have no option but put up with them...

In Hebron only, «*there are 101 checkpoints with turnstiles inside the town (where the Palestinians can be arbitrarily detained for hours, be they pregnant women or students going to sit for an exam) in addition to the 5 big checkpoints that regulate all the non-Israelis' coming in and going out of the town...*», **Abdel\***, a member of the **Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Old Town of Hebron\*** explained to us.

The first checkpoint of my life was the one our taxi-drivers drove us to on our first day in East-Jerusalem<sup>24</sup>: a mere wire fencing, all of a sudden there across our way, watched over by young booted, helmeted, armed soldiers in their twenties who glanced at us with distrust and palpable tension... We watched them from a distance, coming and going, exchanging brief words and smoking, having obviously not much to do but wait... "*On the other side*", our taxi driver told us, "*it's Palestine...*"

After a while, a dusty car stopped on the other side of the fence with two elderly Palestinians on board. They were obviously accustomed to waiting patiently... The young soldiers ignored them for a long moment. Then one of them went towards the wire fencing and, with an infinite nonchalance, pushed it open with one hand, the other one still firmly on his M16 rifle, thereby clearing the road to the Palestinians who drove away without any fuss, completely dependent on these young soldiers' good will...

Another upsetting scene, still in Jerusalem. As we were visiting the old town : **Daoud** (from the Nidal centre) was held back at the checkpoint that leads to the

<sup>23</sup> See chapter 3, Hebron

<sup>24</sup> See chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago, Jerusalem

esplanade in front of the Wailing wall. Whereas our Palestinian guide could go through with us (he had an official badge on), Daoud was coldly put in his place and forced to go a (long) roundabout way up to the entrance reserved for Muslims when they go to the Al-Aqsa mosque\* or to the Dome of the Rock\*. But this is not the end of the story : he'd hardly got back to with our group when two Israeli (civilians or guards in plain clothes ?) came near and addressed him dryly : he had no right to be there !... We all left, sick with it all...

Third experience : to go from Jerusalem to the refugee camp of Aida where we were going to stay for 10 days, we had to go through Bethlehem checkpoint on the outskirts of the town... This was one of the most difficult moments of our trip... This place is a labyrinth of corridors, iron gates and turnstiles in which men, women and children squeeze and wait patiently until the soldiers decide to open the way. This awaits all the Palestinians who have to leave the town for work or to see their family : they have to submit to controls, questions, searching and brutal orders, mostly given in Hebrew by kids in uniforms on a daily basis.

**Mourad\***, the 26-year-old coordinator of the movie workshop at Al-Rowwad centre in Aida has shot a short documentary film called « *Bethlehem Checkpoint, 4 a.m.* »<sup>25</sup> This is a staggering testimony of what happens every morning from before sunrise at this checkpoint that all the workers living in Bethlehem and the surrounding refugee camps have to go through : the long waiting outside in the cold, the squeaking of the turnstiles, all these faces in a cage. This is not fiction, it is reality. It is what the fathers, brothers, neighbours and friends of the young people we met in Aida have to endure everyday of their life... It was mind-blowing, especially for me, a young Westerner, who had only a faint idea of what a checkpoint is like.

Another place yet the same sickening power game : at Howara checkpoint outside Nablus<sup>26</sup>, we watched how soldiers ordered everybody to get out of the coach stopped a few meters ahead of us. About thirty young Palestinian students, boys and girls. The soldiers separated the ones from the others, sent the boys to the left-hand side of the road, the girls to the other side, then reversed the movement and made the girls and boys pass each other, then again... A whole bunch of contradictory orders given by soldiers probably the same age as the people they treated as if they were cattle. But they were the ones who had the M16 rifles and the truncheons, weren't they?... « *They deprive us of our dignity* », Oussama whispered to himself, as he was watching the scene from inside our coach.

After they had humiliated these young Palestinians, the soldiers came towards us and, from far, ordered us to leave the coach and go to the side of the road where they let us wait for a while in the sun. Then, they came up to us and started questioning us while collecting all our passports, taking them away. After a quite long while, they came back to our group and started to go through it all again with a fine-tooth comb until they picked on one of us, Laetitia, who had to follow them to their "office"... A nice little scene of peaceful resistance unfolded then before our eyes : majestically upright and totally unruffled, Laetitia went in quiet, slow strides, smiling... When she came back, she smiled at us : "*They took me for a Jew*

<sup>25</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3b0NVBsPDQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3b0NVBsPDQ)

<sup>26</sup> See chapter 3 : the Palestinian archipelago, Nablus

*because of my long dress and the scarf in my hair. They asked me the same questions again, " where are you from, why here ?", made me repeat my name, my first names, asked again if I was Jewish". And Martine\*, a volunteer in Aida for five years, explained to us that this was considered a crime, punishable by imprisonment : Jews are not supposed to be in the company of Palestinians. This would be "treachery"...*

In Hebron, the young 18-year-old Ayssar from Aida was retained at the checkpoint to the Patriarchs' Tomb, then arrested because apparently he didn't have the right documents with him. As we went closer to try to speak for him and tell the soldiers he was with us, we were brutally rebuffed and ordered to clear off. We immediately understood that the more insistent we'd get with them, the more dearly it was going to cost Ayssar. We watched him being detained then locked into a van with wire netting covering the windows. Later in the day, we learnt that he had been sent to prison in Jerusalem, where his father would have to go and collect him... It was Ayssar's first time in Hebron.

If something is obvious in all this, it is the arbitrary which is the rule. As Martine put it : *"The soldiers at the checkpoints have all the power. They can decide to let them go or prevent them from going back home tonight. They can yell at them, knock into them, rush them, abuse them, hit them : they have their superiors' and government's blessing. The Palestinians are all terrorists, aren't they ?"*

#### **- Occupation is a bridle to the other's social, economic and educative life**

*«The larger part of the population in Balata lives under the poverty line, Ahmad told us. They were not born poor, he made clear : some owned their own farm, others were thriving businessmen. But they lost everything with the Nakba. In 2000, 60% of the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories could still find work in Israel. But the checkpoints (and the consequent endless waiting for permission to pass subjected to the young soldiers 'arbitrary decisions), the untimely curfews and finally the building of the separating wall have reduced their number by half : today, Israel has replaced the Palestinian workers with people coming for the most part from the Philippines (cheap workforce!. The inhabitants of the camp are now out of work and have greater and greater difficulties to live or even survive"<sup>27</sup>.*

I could indeed observe how, on a day-to-day basis, the wall and checkpoints do complicate matters for the Palestinians : they simply make appointments or any social engagement impossible. It's hard to organise a meeting, a wedding ceremony, or simply be at work or at school on time and thus keep your job or complete your studies successfully when you have no control at all on how long each trip will take you.

In Aida, Marwa dreams of getting a Master at university : *"But I simply can't, she told us, because there are no universities here in Bethlehem where I could do so"...*

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<sup>27</sup> See chapter 2 : Refugees in their own country, the refugee camp of Balata.

Judging the journey time to Jerusalem (which is in fact only 15 km away from the camp) is impossible. And now that she has a little baby...

**Ribal** still manages to go to the university in Jerusalem but not without difficulty : *“I am continuously having problems at the checkpoints : sometimes I can’t sit for my exams, or attend a lecture, just because the Israeli soldiers have confiscated my ID card. And I have to stay there and wait for 3 or 4 hours until they decide to give it back to me.... At other times, the checkpoint is purely and simply closed, which means nobody can go to university nor anywhere else.”* The only other option left is to attend the open University and study on one’s own at home. This is what **Salam** and **Masa’a** do...

**Oussama’s** comment : *«Yes, all this is so crazy... Jerusalem is so close to here : if somebody in Aida laughs or speaks a bit loud, he could almost be heard over there!...”*

**- Occupation means risking being put in jail on the smallest suspicion of guilt, whether justified or not**

As I talked with people in Jerusalem and in the West bank, I was struck by the way prison has become such a reality in their life : all of them have been faced with imprisonment directly or indirectly. *«There are currently thousands of Palestinians in jail, Ahmad told us, 80% of whom under 18. They have committed no crime apart from being Palestinian... Nobody here is safe from an arbitrary arrest”* <sup>28</sup>.

**Tareq\***, 26, a young father and leader at Al-Rowwad in Aida told us how on his very first day at university, soldiers had turned up in his little student room, how they had arrested and taken him to the post where they beat him to make him admit he belonged to a communist group. *“I was 18, I had never been involved in any politics”,* Tareq told us. *“In prison, there were 22 of us in each tent, with nothing to do the whole day long. Sometimes, a soldier would come in, point at one of us at random : the chosen victim would land up, bound hand and foot for 24 to 48 hours long in a square-metre-large cell, with nothing to eat or drink, unable to stretch out nor, above all, sleep. I was there too : there was a small control-camera in the room and each time my head and eyelids were about to droop, the soldier would come and kick in the door to wake me up brutally... When they released me one year and one month later, they asked me « so, you are a communist or not ?». I answered that before they sent me to jail, I didn't even know what it meant but that I had time to read and learn a lot...”* In prison, he met up with the boy who had betrayed him, a guy of his own age, whom the soldiers had beaten until he gave names too. How could Tarek hold any grudge against him ?... He is not the one to be blamed.

**Marwa’s** younger brother (18) is still in jail at the moment : *“ Some guys said that he was throwing bombs at Israeli soldiers. So they came to our house and took*

<sup>28</sup> There are about 300 Palestinian children in prison (on a total of 6,000 to 7,000 prisoners – their number varies according to the “season”). For more details, consult the following wensites : *Defense Children International* ([www.DCI-pal.org](http://www.DCI-pal.org)) or *B’tselem* ([www.vtselem.org](http://www.vtselem.org))

him... He had to go to Court each month. After one and a half year, the Court sentenced him to 44 more months... We can visit him twice a month but we need an authorization which must be renewed every three months. We can see him for only 45 minutes. If he needs something (a pair of trousers, for ex) he first has to give us what he has : an item against an item..." It is hard work to get the visiting permits but Marwa was lucky enough to get one : she can go and visit her brother twice a month.

**Mustapha\***, 50, had two brothers. One of them was killed by Israeli soldiers, the other has been in jail for 18 years : arrested at 22, condemned to 99 years imprisonment. His crime ? *"He knew an operation was about to be carried out. He didn't do anything himself, but he knew other people were about to. Yet, for the Israelis, if you know activists are about to do something and don't tell, it is as if you had done it yourself."* At present, only his mother is allowed to visit him. But each time, it is a real ordeal for the 75-year old woman : *«The Israeli authorities do all they can to make it difficult for the family of the prisoners, Mustapha said. Even before you get to the prison, there are all the detours you have to make because the "Palestinian" roads are blocked, then the long waiting and controls at the checkpoints you have to go through across the country, which, I presume, aim at making people lose patience and give up.»*

While talking to us, he was looking at his mother, **Sabha**, so slight in her long traditional dress, which she had embroidered herself : *" My mother usually gets up at 4 a.m. to take the Red Cross bus in Bethlehem. Then she has to travel one hour to Tarqumia checkpoint, on the border to Israel. There they all wait until the Israeli authorities decide to let them go through, which can take between one and three hour, it depends... Then they have to take another bus that takes them to the prison (a journey lasting 1½ hours) where they are all locked in a corridor outside the building, sometimes for five or six hours, sometimes even longer... The soldiers then call the register and send the visitors to another part of the prison, where again, soldiers call and control everybody, check the documents repeatedly as well as the shoes and bags... My mother gets body-searched in case she is hiding something... This again can take 30 minutes to 1½ hours. And only then can she go along the passage that leads to the room where my brother and the other prisoners are. They are allowed 45 minutes together"*.

#### - Occupation increases the likelihood to be wounded or in peril of one's life

In Hebron, everything is organized so the Israeli settlers have no contact with the Palestinian population. *"The only contacts between the two populations, if any, occur during downtown raids by the settlers. Then, they pace up and down the streets in an arrogant way, terrorize the inhabitants and let their children make fun of the Palestinians, Abdel*, from the Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Old Town told us. The Palestinians are better off keeping a low profile : Israeli soldiers keep watch from rooftops, ready to defend the "threatened" settlers (there is an average of two soldiers for each settler). Unlike the Israeli settlers and soldiers, the Palestinian inhabitants don't have the right to own weapons. Of course not...

We talked with a Palestinian family based in Hebron : a little time ago, Jewish settlers had offered a certain amount of money for their house but they had refused the deal. The settlers turned up a bit later and coldly assassinated the two sons of the family. But as the owners of the house still refused to let it go, the settlers came back and set the house on fire. This Palestinian family live now in what is left of their house... Endangered, the settlers?...

Then there are these soldiers everywhere : all so young and persuaded all along their training (which is actually little more than brainwashing, as the excellent film « Z32 » by the Israeli film-maker **Avi Mograbi** shows) that, once in the “territories”, they will be surrounded by (potential) terrorists. This no doubt accounts for their being so trigger-happy : **Youssef\*** (23) told us : *"It was in 2001, I was 16 then... I was standing in front of what was to become the Al-Rowwad Centre. I was with a journalist to show him the Israeli tanks that had come to demolish the houses of the camp. Suddenly, I got injured : a tank had fired at me... I lost a lot of blood... I spent 60 days in hospital. People thought I was dead. They called me a martyr... Strange thing to hear people call you a martyr..."*

But Youssef didn't die. He miraculously recovered from the wound but had his leg amputated. His elder brother wasn't as lucky : he was killed a few days after he had come to visit his little brother at the hospital. Yet, even if he still finds it hard to speak about it all, Youssef (now a muscular basketball player in a wheelchair) doesn't complain about his lot: *« There are far sadder stories than mine. You can check : in every house in Palestine, there is a sad story to be told..."*

**- Occupation is the organized isolation of the « occupied », shrouding them in silence or lies**

*"Our problem is that the journalists, the media, the whole world is on the side of the Israelis, and that we can do nothing about it because Israel controls everything..."*, **Ribal** told us bitterly. ... Apparently Israel has set up an extremely well oiled system of communication with the foreign journalists

Israel controls everything indeed, and particularly those who want to go to the West Bank, those who stayed there for a while and want to go back : **Sandra**, the young Brazilian volunteer who was working in Aida told us about the problems she always meets to get her visas as well as about the intimidation she is subjected to - with the obvious aim of deterring her from coming back : *"I have to leave Israel every three months. Each time I come back, it's more difficult than the previous time : the soldiers detain me for hours at the airport, ask me the same questions again and again : why I am coming back, where I am going to, what I am going to do... I get a proper body search, naked and the rest of it..."* She smiled then showed us her passport : *"Look ! On that occasion, they gave me a visa for one week only !"* Indeed, the date on the printed stamp had been crossed out and the soldier had written "one week" in the place of "three months". When we asked her what the point of this was, Sandra was clear : *"To bother me, put me off, discourage me from coming back..."* Fortunately, she told us, she has a friend at the Brazilian embassy in Tel Aviv who got her a visa for six months. But it is not renewable. *"Which means, Sandra told us, that in exactly 5 days, I have to leave*

*Aida... Knowing there is nobody to take on my project and go on with my work here with the kids <sup>29</sup>... I don't know when I'll be able to come back".*

As for us, going through Tel Aviv airport on our return journey to Belgium was no piece of cake ! We were first questioned as a group (*who, what, where, how long and why*), then two of us were ordered to follow each a security guard. They were isolated from the group and from each other and thoroughly questioned (*< Who are you? Where do you come from? Where did you stay? How did you travel? Did you have your own driver? Who did you meet? Did the members of the group always stay together? Did you get presents from people? Why did you go to Hebron? Dangerous city, don't you think ? Do you all come from the same school? Who speaks English in the group? How long have you known each other? Did you like what you saw in Israel? Will you come back?... >*), while the rest of the group watched the two parallel scenes from a distance with a tiny bit of stress. When they are at last "released", we all watch the two uniforms compare the answers they had got... Butterflies in the stomach but... It's OK !... Yet, before finally letting us move to the scanning machines, the security guards asked the whole group again in English : *"Did you get presents ? Did you keep your bags with you all the time ?* Anne-Claire translated the questions into French since we were all poor monolingual. The whole group answered: non, oui, in French, angel-like... Ok, we could now move on, one by one and keeping our distances, up to the scanning machine that swallowed our bags before spitting them out on the other side...

But that was not the end of it yet ! The agent at the scanning machine had seen "things" in three of our bags and their owners were asked to step aside, then follow a security guard called by walkie-talkie, who took them to another check-desk where their bags were going to be opened... Fortunately, this time the soldier was a nice young woman. They explained to her that the problematic the problematic pile of documents *"is nothing but my school notes to prepare my exams"*, the unidentified object is *" in fact my water-flask"* and the suspicious box *"the present for my parents"*, i.e. a set of plates and mugs in ceramics. The young lady apologized but said she had to check the bags. We just couldn't refuse her anything : she was indeed the very first person we met who was sorry for what she was doing (or had to do), and who did it courteously, as a service to the customers... Everything was Ok and the ordeal finally over but it didn't exactly made us want to go though it all again in the future. Whether this was the Israelis' aim ?...

The fact is we had no option but to keep silent about the actual reason and details of our trip if we didn't want our Palestinian friends to get into trouble, find our names on a blacklist and never be able to come back to Palestine or Israel. So there we were : a group of nice and neat monolingual students from a Belgian catholic school who had come to celebrate Easter in Jerusalem... Sort of true, all in all...

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As a way of conclusion and summary, I would say that living under the Israeli occupation is for the Palestinians, as well as for their visitors and friends, no more than being in a state of permanent aggression that ruins the chance of the Palestinians and Israelis of ever being able to live together in peace. This situation creates a power-based relationship in which the occupiers subject the occupied to constant gratuitous frustrations and humiliations that literally poison the latter's life. Who in our country would accept to be submitted to any of the aspects of colonisation I have described above ?... Who here sometimes thinks that we might not have had such a lucky escape and could have been under German occupation since 1945 ?

The Jewish woman who had approached us in front of the Wailing wall in Jerusalem had told us : *"We need the help of all the countries, of everybody... Because all the crimes that are committed here !... God won't forgive anyone who just sits there, watching what is happening without reacting, saying : I don't want to interfere !... If you help the Jewish people - with your propaganda, with your money or physically - then you are going to get a reward from God."* However, considering what the Palestinians have to go through every day of their life, there is reason to wonder who indeed needs help and recognition from the international community...

Be that as it may, since I came back to Belgium, what I want to remember is the courage, the determination and the greatness of the peaceful resistance of all the people we met in Aida, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nablus and Hebron : a treasured memory that is much stronger than that of the soldiers, checkpoints and the wall of shame. The Israeli military policy of oppression hasn't and will never manage to prevent people from meeting, learning to know each other and appreciating each other : Ribal, Daoud, Anya, Ahmad, Issa, Oussama, Maroua, Abdel, Mourad, Ayssar, Masa'a, Salam, Tareq, Mustapha, Sabha, Youssef, Mazen, Jamal, Samira, Abdelfattah are for ever in our hearts and thoughts. And we are determined to make the people here aware of their existence...