

They say that a good traveller is a humble traveller, so that, no matter how many books, journals, magazines, World Service programmes or other second hand understanding one has swallowed, there's no substitute for dusty shoes. This bumpy ride of a tour, is just one class in getting a qualification in seasoned-travelling, and it wouldn't have happened but for The Camden Abu Dis Friendship Association's thoughtful organisation of our small group visit.

First, there's Israel itself, a sort of Wild West with unfixed prices, motorway shoulders flanked with barbed wire, a most desperate attitude toward driving and perhaps the rudest citizenry in any so-called Western country. How to get rich in Israel if you're not thuggish enough to plunder a homestead for yourself by means of a settler militia, you might go legit and start a car braking system replacement service.

The airport, although beautifully-designed and with impressive capacity, was seemingly over-built. When I arrived on Saturday night, *after* the Sabbath and the equivalent to Sunday in Britain, the place was near empty. I'd repeatedly been bemused by this before in the tourist-hungry but also too-optimistic Louis Armstrong Airport in New Orleans, when I used to live. Such termini are a city's face to the world, but 'free' tax-funding and the egos in politicians' pants combine for the erection of these myths. The really busy capitals, like London, have enough to do just coping with air passenger volume.

My passport-window interrogation was brief and un-bothersome, but I'm an over-50 Jew, without any notoriety in my pockets, and the Israelis probably think I want to buy a high-rise flat in Tel Aviv. In a sense, I provide a good face, such as it is, for a visiting CADFA group travelling through God's Chosen Checkpoints.

Mobile telephony etiquette in the West Bank follows an easy rule : if it rings, answer. More than once in meetings, two or three would tug at the sleeves of the locals simultaneously. In a land where travel restrictions are ever-tighter and their specifics unanticipated, where no authority apologises for the inconvenience, and where attack, death, the ol' bulldozer, or merely the military prison commandant might be waiting to pounce, it's natural to use the phones more often. And ya never know what that ringtone will mean.



Sultan Medina 99.7 FM could be called the Fairuz station, for the Beirut singer's classic tracks from as far back as the late 1950s are broadcast every morning. She's become synonymous with breakfast, but her Paris-inspired music works well anytime and her new album is very good too. Her cord's are still squeezing the Arabic quarter-tones out of melody lines, and the music itself isn't slavishly channelled into a four-four rhythm. The BBC won't likely get round to featuring Fairuz, but I suppose that's good. They only recently devoted a half-hour programme to Françoise Hardy but only asked her about recordings made forty-plus years earlier.

It's nice too, that FM isn't dominated by formats for the young. The Israeli stations seem weighted towards talk, while the Palestinian stations more toward music, with mums' and dads' preferences not left out of the frame. The more Western-accepted, four-four rhythm has been widespread, but the accent is on the 'one', the first of the quartet of beats. This is in direct opposition to the African-American's and subsequently Westernised pop music's preference for emphasising the off-beat. So, at first, highlighting the 'one' seemed unnatural to me, if not corny. Sanaa Moussa's CD, popular with our group, reveals foreign influences but still retains Palestinian-ness. Meanwhile, Dalal Abu Amne, a young Arab Israeli, is getting billed as the inheritor of Fairuz and the Egyptian Umm Kulthum.



As everywhere in Muslim society, it's normal in Abu Dis to publicly announce the call to prayer, amplified from the minarets. These invitations are different from mosque to mosque, and when the main one concludes, the others in the chain cease one-by-one. As melodic as the recitations are, they're a bit formal for my taste but serve the purpose of aural public art. Although I was corrected that the calls are not 'sung', they indeed are. I'm struck by their brevity and suspect that such they're not intended to make the neighbours feel guilty if they don't comply. Perhaps in more religious settings, they'd be more commanding. But not in Abu Dis, our host neighbourhood in Al-Quds, itself Arabic for East Jerusalem.



Jewish Israeli settlers' rooftop view in Jerusalem's Old City

Abed, our tour guide, provided one of the human activities I value most : candidness and insight. According to him, the West Bank saw few hijab-wearing women until 1982's Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in their military's futile effort to eliminate the PLO.

Abed's assistant, Mousa, is a young man who has been unemployed since leaving university with a degree in geography and urban studies four years ago. The Palestinian Authority (PA) don't have any illusions about promot-

ing higher education, for they cannot ignore the tens of thousands of jobless graduates. But keeping young people constructively occupied makes society safer and more focused, and a proper Palestine state will benefit by an educated leadership. Like everywhere else over recent generations, farming communities need not remain so, even where their culture and politics are so rooted in land and the imposed uprooting from it. Admittedly, I have a bias towards civilised urban living. A recent video documentary showed elderly Abu Dis women lamenting the removal of rural landscape, but, 'cept when crudely caused by soldiers, their tank mates, and The Wall, I've little sympathy over this change.

The toilets take some getting used to, each with a powered pressure hose to wash one's bum, and a bin for the toilet paper so as not to flush it through the narrow-gauge water pipes. This system offers superior hygiene, with loo roll used mainly to dry one's self. The hosing habit seems a good one indeed and one could easily have the device installed in any British home, as no doubt many are.



Contemporary Palestinian culture reinforces one's sense of origin, and therefore cultural history. Someone there may have been a resident of camp X or Y for years, but their identity is from elsewhere, often an 'original village' of Sarafand al-'Amar, Saqiya-Yala, al-Qubab, etc. The late poet and author Mahmoud Darwish's portrait is not uncommon on community centre walls and one sees frequent Banksy-like political art on exteriors.

The catchphrase, if not catechism, is "We will return."



Like other communities who've faced ghettoisation, the Palestinians know that health care, education, and rubbish collection are likely to be iffy. There is, after all, no state power willing to make a reasonable fist of these responsibilities. If the PA was more enabled politically and more dedicated to the citizenry, there wouldn't be the need for supplemental UNRWA and NGO work today. As you would expect, cynicism pervades the neighbourhoods, but so does a philosophic attitude.

Much has been written about The Wall and, in Abu Dis, it's caused lots of dislocation, of which some results probably haven't yet been anticipated. Being there for just a week, our CADFA group wasn't likely to need hospital visits or shopping opportunities for shoes or DIY goods.

Abu Dis is a typical, urban, hilly warren of breeze-block buildings, mostly residential but not without pharmacies, dry cleaners, DIY, cafes and food shops, and even an Academic Book Shop. But don't expect European normalcy. We rode down a road with The Wall on three sides!

One night it happened to be the annual celebration of school-leaving exams, which determine whether young students get to advance to university. During the day there were cars and cars of teenagers, often with three of them perching on the window frames, legs in, heads and shoulders above the roof line, like American teenagers after a football match ca. 1962. But the night sky was a sea of fireworks and party music. The succeeding evenings featured ever more skyrockets and music from DJs in the distance as many weddings were squeezed in, before Ramadan.

Because the Israelis took over much of the main road linking Abu Dis with Bethlehem, the UN built alternative arteries, where motorists see roadside advertising for the Jericho Cable Car, Salah Chips, and marah-fm.ps (100.5 fm).

Not being a 'foodie', the subtleties in Palestinian cuisine were lost on me. But the strong and fragrant coffee, especially when finely ground with cardamom, is wonderful, boiled-up when you're not in a hurry. The sage tea is also delightful, as is sprinkling a salad with a bit of Za'atar, a mix of thyme, salt, sumac, sesame and oregano.

There's little alcohol in the West Bank, save in some Christian Palestinian areas, and, 'cept for bottled water, everything liquid is sweetened. Non-alcoholic beer in the pool halls is apple malt that tastes like chewing gum, and a bottle of grapefruit juice is really "grapefruit drink". Of course there are proper puddings. In my limited experience, the most interesting one was "knavee", a sweetened, cheesy dish of semolina, pistachio and honey. Here is the ancient birthplace of type 2 diabetes.

Another surprise is the lack of cinemas. Apparently, you can count on one hand, the total of them in all of the West Bank. So, despite flicks by Elia Souleiman (*The Time That Remains*, etc) and those that seem to get screened at London events, they're perhaps inevitably filmed for export.



We spent one day in the relatively prosperous Bethlehem, visiting, that is, walking through three refugee camp neighbourhoods, a legacy of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA, often pronounced "UN-a-rah"). Although Prime Minister Golda Meir famously said, in 1969, that Palestinians *didn't exist*, the UN was charged twenty years earlier with looking after the expelled's most basic needs. Apparently, UNRWA doesn't officially recognise post-1967 refugees, which numbered about 400,000 in the immediate aftermath of Israel's Six Day War.

Even so, they provide basic housing, school buildings, and medicine, and act as an imperfect shield for these communities against the IDF's worst who are in the mood to go round shooting. In the Aida Camp, bullet holes in the UNRWA school sign itself told a tale of one rampage. UNRWA doctors prescribe painkillers and diabetes medicines only, and the Bethlehem hospital is now on the Jews-only side of The Wall.

The Hoping Foundation (hopingfoundation.org), sponsors the Laje'oon Center's photography and film work. Out of this Aida building, Kholoud Ajarma helps children edit the bi-lingual *Our Voice* (lajee.org). They've made two video documentaries so far. I've posted a catalogue of the British Museum's contemporary Islamic art show of a couple of years back. With any luck, the Israeli mail will allow it through after a few months.



UNWRA-built spectacular school for the Desheisheh Refugee Camp, mid-1950s.

Student numbers are now three times that, making do with the original furniture.

From a rooftop we were shown a house in the middle of a barren landscape, just outside The Wall. The homeowners refused to be moved on and now need a regularly-renewable permit just to leave their doors. When they do step out, or put their heads out of windows, they're in 'Israel'.



We were shown a tiny refugee camp of just 2000 population, built on 20 dunams, or about 5 acres, through which a Dutch marching jazz band of the modern New Orleans persuasion paraded through to entertain. www.liefdesnacht.nl

We happened upon two 15th century stone reservoirs, now empty, because one child drowned there in the forbidden pool. Apparently, it's soon to be re-filled as a sort of leisure area for small boating. A nearby underground spring was being liberated by locals, who were filling their large containers, as I did my water bottle, with the cool stuff.



We also visited Deheisheh Refugee Camp, one of the largest in the West Bank, where the PFLP is still active. We toured a modern-design school, built by the UN in 1955 (shown a bit earlier), but is now run down, with rather broken down three-seat wooden, heavily splintered desks, the originals, for about 400 students, which now total about 1200. Outside of school, football's popularity goes back to the earliest years of the British Mandate, and the many young teams provide talent aspiring to the FIFA-member Palestine National Football Team. Numerous trophies at left illustrate the enthusiasm.

Deheisheh has rather a lot of old PFLP-supporters, although some of the formerly-armed ones have been in Israeli jails for years. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was perhaps the most prominent part of the revolutionary Left that was at odds with Yassir Arafat's increasingly pragmatic, non-militarist approach to Israeli policy.

It was a surprise to find, in a shop, a vintage, framed depiction of skyjacker Leila Khaled, as she was during her two PFLP efforts in 1969 and 1970 (one plane blown up on the tarmac, civilians unharmed). Below, how she is today:



Our young Bethlehem host, Anan Odeh, is a rapper in Tornado Lights (their track *Nakba* can be seen on YouTube). While he no longer lives in the camp, his aunt and uncle still reside there, so he knew the neighbourhood. In the Deheisheh Camp, he pointed out what was considered the very first cement-block home built by the UN ca. 1952, which was when that agency commenced improving the lot of the refugees, who finally, after four years or so, got to leave tent living behind. Keeping in mind the extremes of temperatures throughout the year, this was relative luxury, despite about 6-9 people per tiny, often windowless unit that had had no plumbing.

Observations out of the hat :

- ▶ An all-black flag is not uncommon, fluttering from the top of a car, commemorating the *Nakba*.
- ▶ Children will always love flying kites and one child with sense of humour was sky-sailing a kite done up as an Israeli jet, in camouflage.
- ▶ There aren't many bicycles in evidence, probably because of the steep roads, and they seem to be the province of children.

The landscape's inclines haven't deterred the numerous cinder-block homes being built. Often these are of a large scale, to accommodate large and extended families. At least one Abu Dis resident keeps a camel in the front yard.



Jewish Israeli settlements started clawing land away from the Arabic Palestinians of Abu Dis in 1976, further isolating the inhabitants from Jerusalem. IDs for the Eastern, central part of the ancient city are blue, unlike the green ones for Abu Dis and rest of West Bank. And the Arab population of Jerusalem is forever getting pinched by Israeli policy.

The Wall is problematic everywhere, but in Abu Dis it has made a visit to a Jerusalem hospital not very likely. An ambulance needs to get a permit to transport a patient and this can take a few hours, rather late for medical emergencies.



Silwan is a vertical slice of the map just south of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. Approx 1800 people are to be moved so their houses can be knocked down in 2013. This development plan, for Jewish Israelis only, will eliminate a Palestinian children's cemetery, to make an "Ancient Jewish Safari Park," illustrated by a nice-looking boy in baseball cap. This deprived neighbourhood was the most squalid I'd seen, with many homes deemed in violation of building permits, which almost never get issued to the Palestinians, despite them paying council tax. If a homeowner improves property, the 'illegality' gets noted until an Israeli bulldozer gets the green light for demolition.



Our Jerusalem host for the Old City was the well-spoken Obay Odeh, who is currently studying public administration at Birzeit University and who works in a Jerusalem hotel most evenings. He spent three-and-a-half years in prison from age seventeen, for aligning himself with the Communist-secular PFLP.

We visited a Jerusalem family centre, established 1991, with a focus on projects for poor women and children. Despite this being small scale, with under 200 beneficiaries, they were targeted by urban settlers, who covet the centre's property. From the adjacent building they've threatened staff and in fact smashed through a connecting wall. Like their rural, land-grabbing brethren, Jerusalem's settlers have guns too, many are scowling ex-Army.

Even those Palestinians residing in the Old City cannot obtain permits to fix their structures in any way, from roofs to interiors to electrical infrastructures. Zionists will leap on flats when any owner finally dies. But the settlers' modus operandi is to build on top of Palestinian houses (no permits required), taunting their neighbours.

The urban settlers hire private security guards, shown at right, who are not uniformed but with prominent guns barely tucked into their jeans. Immune from prosecution, many are reported to be Russian and Ethiopian immigrants, but this lot seemed fresh from their service in the IDF.

The Jewish Quarter is clean, with lots of electricity and space. One shop sells large, sofa-sized, photo-realist 'paintings' of the Wailing Wall with the Al Aqsa Mosque simply edited out! In Cardo Market there is a public convenience that used to be a mosque.



Four Jerusalem-residing candidates in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections should've been lucky – they won seats. Their body, the Change for Reform Party, received 62% of the vote, 78 out of 130 seats. But the Israeli government didn't appreciate their Hamas sympathies, and so they were each threatened with removal of their Jerusalem residency status – the blue ID – if they didn't renounce their electoral victories. They were each shopped by an Israeli military court to serve about four years, with the legal right to residency removed afterwards. So, they've taken sanctuary in the Swiss Red Cross building, for over a year now.



We met with elected MP Ahmad Attoun, who explained that the Israelis typically took everything away from them via governmental bureaucracy, even their driving licences. They didn't try to appeal to Jordan for help as that would be disloyal to their Palestinian residency claim. Ahmad's daughter has no ID because he's now without one. His wife's own ID cannot translate to status for their child, unlike the matrilineal requirement for Jewish Israeli law. He has spent 12 years total in the joint, but then, more than half of Palestinian males have done time.

My travel party peers seemed to romanticise Hebron and Nablus, but, the Old City centres aside, I found those locales to be pretty much what I imagine Indian cities are like, sans the political repressions which are easily encountered in the West Bank. While one's home may be a castle, the streets are barely breathing under the weight of inactivity. If you live in the Occupied Territories you're likely not to work at all, despite a degree. And if you are employed it's probably running a tiny store selling packaged household goods, toiling in an auto repair shop, keeping the respiratory-challenged cars and vans operational, or, if you have access to money, building homes, either for your extended family or for renters.

I was an odd duck here, confessing that I never wanted children. While Islam doesn't forbid birth control, it would be a social violation here to openly prevent procreation.

The Askar (UNRWA) Camp, on the Southeastern edge of Nablus, was truly the back of beyond, where the IDF forced closure of a recently-built clinic because they claimed it had had Hamas connections. A shame because this community is in extra need of health care due to the Israeli military's sport of shooting children who play in the olive grove.

All over the West Bank there are vocal, thin cats about. Large canines of no fixed address seem to roam at IDF checkpoints - dogs-of-a-feather. The lone, lamped rat was flattened as a dried shingle, somehow a metaphor for these desert ghettos.



We toured the village of as-Sawiya, a Southeastern suburb of Nablus, determined under the Mandate to be in the very centre of Palestine. Its 3000 inhabitants will soon be reduced by 600 because the Jewish Israeli settlements that surround them on the hills do insist, even to the point of taking a few meters from each of several houses. The six Zionist communities encircling the hamlet from above serve as a storyboard for the blockbuster Settlement Story. The evolution begins with shipping containers-as-shacks for those courageous pioneers, followed by electricity cables solely for the deserving Jewish, followed by nice, uniform housing blocks for any self-righteous, colonising Jew, followed by new and night-lighted dual carriageways for the sole access of God's Chosen Motorists, and then, the cherry on top : IDF guard observation towers to undertake proud sniping of any wayward sub humans within range.

Ramallah is a new, relatively prosperous city, with no old city centre. This disappointed my colleagues but I felt it livelier, safer, cleaner, and more modern in the Western sense, which is what most of the world wants to be. The question I couldn't ask was, "Does anyone from a village want to leave for Big Town or emigrate permanently to Europe or the USA?" Yes, the culture is different and extended families mean much more to many than they could ever to me. It may have been superheated July, but I can't see anyone wanting to live their life in a valley village, even if all the settlers evaporated in the sun. Not when they've had greater cultural choices and the heightened social opportunities of urban life.

Despite my preference for the metropolitan over the village landscape, much of Palestine is still the latter. We visited Bil'in, perhaps the most famous of the anti-settler protests in the West Bank. Indeed, the International Solidarity Movement has been active in Bil'in for six years, assisting the weekly protests against The Wall. Bil'in's population is about 6000, which is considerably increased during the ISM's annual conference.



It has taken that long for legal challenges to actually get The Wall moved closer to the Israeli Settlers' estate, a rarity in the so-called Jewish state's judicial system. While walking this area amongst the olive trees, stepping over a few remaining Israeli grenades, which must have been duds, we were apparently observed on CCTV cameras. And so one settler came into view and yelled, in Arabic, "Go Home!" God's Chosen Settlers don't do irony.

At left, a memorial to slain protester in Bil'in

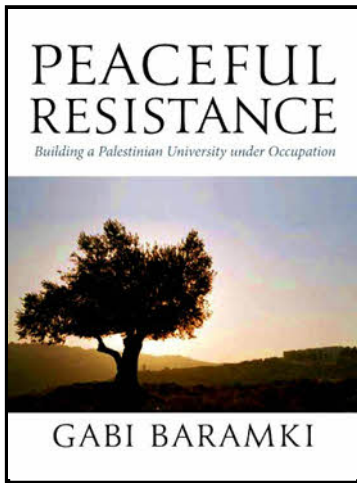
We visited the Mandela Institute for Human Rights (mandela-palestine.org), which offers legal help to the incarcerated. This NGO was established in 1994, at the time of the Oslo Agreement, but really got going in 1998. They have a special-cases emphasis, focusing on prisoners held in isolation, those who are not allowed visitors at all, and, sadly, children behind bars. There are currently 45 prisoners who've had more than two-dozen years inside. Most of the wheelchairs are broken; families willing to pay for new ones are denied permits to have the chairs sent.

In prison sentences of five years or more, fifteen-to-twenty days per year were generally reduced for 'good behaviour'. But of the many Israeli laws enacted to inflict collective punishment, "Shalit's Law" now eliminates these discounts. There are few prison libraries, but privileges are frequently removed, collectively.

There are currently thirty-five women in two jails and four of them are in 'administrative detention', that is, no trial and no evidence presented against the accused. Over eight-hundred prisoners, including five women, are serving life sentences. One woman prisoner needed private care, and this was approved on the condition that she was willing to be transferred to an isolation cell. She refused and so hasn't had any treatment for over a year. Another woman lost fifteen kilos in one month but the prison authorities simply claimed that actually she'd gained weight.



The Palestinian Medical Relief Society, est. 1979, operates in all the West Bank, Gaza too. It's preventive care mainly, the best they can do. 30% of Palestinians haven't any insurance cover. Certified 1948 refugees are covered by the UNRWA, although not to a great standard. Government staff get Palestinian Authority health coverage, which is better, but private care is best. GPs treat about one-hundred patients in 3-4 hours. The PMRS clinics are open 8am-2pm, six days per week; the PA clinics run the same hours, for just five days.



At Birzeit University, we didn't get to see the library but met with their public relations staff who unpacked their Right to Education Campaign. We were joined by first year students, some foreign. Birzeit is the best-funded of the Palestinian universities and co-founder Gabi Baramki is still working as a trustee. His recent book, *Peaceful Resistance – Building a Palestinian University under Occupation* (Pluto Press) is dignified idealism itself, but not uncritical of BZU. Student IDs no longer indicate one's course of study. This is because, in the First Intifada, *anything* noted resulted in arrest. In the Second Intifada, only those claiming enrolment in a science programme were arrested. Nobody has yet found logic in the Israeli policies of mixing their open-ended military occupation with higher education.

Al-Quds University is host to several growing departments, including medicine, law, and gender studies, history, and literature, and they're building a new campus library. Hakim ===== has great plans, stemming from his work at Harvard and Dubai, and they'll improve the university immeasurably if the chancellor has both heart and will. At this point I'm struggling to come up with a way to send printed academic materials in the above-mentioned categories. Two posted packets did not make it through the Israeli postal system, which is disheartening if not unexpected.

AQU has a unique museum and archives, dedicated to the incarcerated, and founded, and now run, by a man who learned to read and write behind bars many years ago. The exhibition space is dignified, for when the story is strong, the setting need only be neutral. A case in point is the set of images below, depicting smuggled writings.



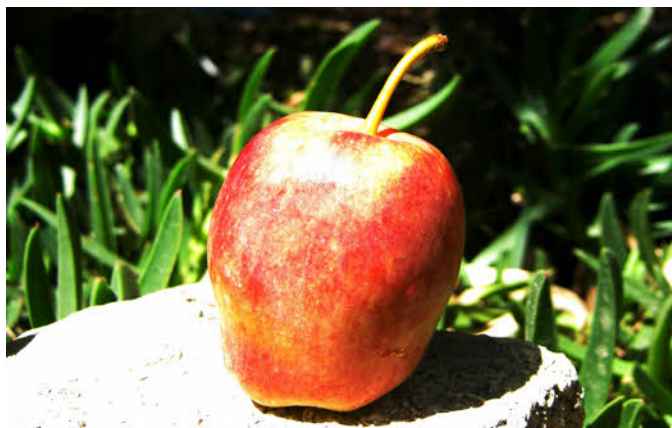
The letters on the right were wrapped in tiny pieces of plastic, shown left. Any prisoner about to be released would swallow it, like a drug mule, and the eventually emerging correspondence would be then handed over to family.

There is much on display of prisoners' art. Some show inmates *reading*, while other works, like the fabric oud on the right, is indicative of what a particular person missed. He may have been a musician himself.

Having certain competence joining up guitar and old swing jazz, I tried an oud in a Ramallah instrument shop, but the instrument, while not a toy that they'd sell to tourists in a souk, wasn't much better than the artwork at right.

But the Archive holds a few thousand prisoners' diaries, mainly of the exam notebook type. Most are since 1997 but some are earlier and range the entire military prison network. My head almost hit the floor upon seeing them and the curator said she felt the same too. The Israelis probably felt that Palestinian thought wasn't important enough to censor, but these narratives of the struggle are now being digitised for future generations.





Clockwise from above right :

Hebron Old City - a Palestinian dwelling entry after the IDF blocked the front door.

A model for travel books and the only one on Palestine in English
www.interlinkbooks.com

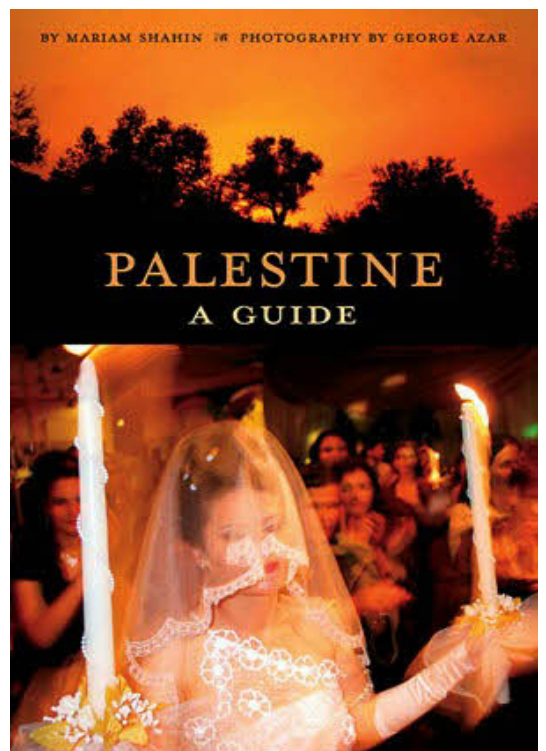
Lovely, narrow apples in the WB.

Eternal love for Greater Israel, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, Jerusalem.

Abu Dis, The Wall.

Urban settler's door decoration for imprisoned Zionist American spy

Prison diaries archived at Al-Quds



What's a Palestinian to do?



As said, one can get married and build a house. Indeed there are unfinished homes to be lensed in every direction. And many are of a large scale to accommodate fulsome family size.

As Abu Dis happens to have a university, there is further need for weekday student housing. Typically, five students (I met one here from Jenin, who makes the four-hour journey back to his family just on the weekends) each paying 30+ Jordanian dinars per month, which is about 150-180 per unit. A building on, say, one-quarter or one-half a dunam (a dunam = 1000 square meters) with seven units would bring in a bit of income.

The exchange rate for pounds or dollars is only relevant for foreign visitors and it's obviously to their great advantage; most locals make very little money.



As our group left to return to Britain, Israel was commencing its own public outcries for more affordable housing. BBC Radio 4 might as well have ignored the story, for they trivialised it as one of public anger over “the high cost of cottage cheese.”

Gideon Levy, author of *The Punishment of Gaza* (Verso Books, 2010), wrote in *Ha'aretz*, describing these street protests as being a “light unto nations”. So Jews are endowed with an assumed moral advantage in showing the world how protesting ought to be carried out?

But sadly, the real ‘remedy’ was put forth in the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*: the building of more and more settlements! And as the Israelis look closer to Jerusalem to accommodate their urban settler movement, the Camden Abu Dis Friendship Association will give even more of a voice to

Justice in East Jerusalem



www.camdenabudis.net