

Article from Sultana Begum, Ecumenical Accompanier Hebron,
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Hadha Bayti - "This is my house"

*I come from there and I remember
Born as mortals are, I have a mother
And a house with many windows...*

"I am from there", a poem by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish

My time working as a human rights observer for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme of the World Council of Churches is fast drawing to a close. As I get prepared to end my three-month term living and working in the West Bank town of Hebron on the 8th of May Israelis kicked off with a week of celebrations marking 60 years since the creation of the state of Israel. In contrast to the festive mood in Israel, Palestinians are facing a blanket security closure throughout the West Bank, meaning those with permits to work or enter Israel will be denied entry. This is the third such closure in the three months I have been here.

As I make numerous journeys in shared yellow taxis across the West Bank, I am struck by the sea of Israeli flags, flying high above the West Bank skyline close to blocs of Israeli settlements, such as Gush Etzion near Hebron. I witness new terracotta roofed houses being built in some of these settlement blocs, which are illegal according to international law, and an increased presence of soldiers around settlements. The mood in the West Bank is sombre. Sixty years on, the Palestinians are no closer to a state of their own. For Palestinians the day of Israel's independence is the day of their "Nakba" or Catastrophe.

Whilst Israel celebrates its independence and prepares to welcome important foreign dignitaries such as George Bush and others, I join a silent demonstration through the neighbourhoods of Western Jerusalem. The demonstration is organised by Palestinians who lost their homes in 1948 during Israel's war of independence. Alongside Palestinians, internationals and the media walk silently through leafy, wealthy neighbourhoods lined with large beautiful stone houses. We stop in the neighbourhood of Talbiyeh built in the early part of this century by wealthy Christian Palestinians.

We wait as the name of Beatrice Habesh is called. Surrounded by demonstrators Beatrice stands in front of what was once her family home and describes how in 1948 her father had taken the family away to Tiberias to escape the bombing that was taking place and how when the family tried to return to their home they were prevented from going back. As I watched her dressed in a T-shirt inscribed with Hadha Bayti - "This is my house" and her face full of sorrow, I tried to imagine how I would feel if my home was taken from me and I was forced to become a refugee in my own country.

Through the course of the demonstration we travel through various neighbourhoods in West Jerusalem, making stops in front of former Palestinian homes. In the neighbourhood of Mamilliah, Samia Maroum stands in front of the house that was taken from her family and tells us that her grandmother's brother had built the house 120 years ago and that all her five children had been born there. As we continue to walk through expensive neighbourhoods with impressive properties on display the names of Palestinian

doctors, lawyers and other professionals who used to be the former owners of these properties are called out.

As the demonstration is about to end Baruch Marzel, a right wing Jewish settler from the Tel Rumeida settlement in Hebron turns up and begins to provoke the crowd. The Israeli police hold him back and the demonstrators leave the scene to avoid any trouble. For the Palestinians who have lost their homes the demonstration was an important marker for their pain and loss that they feel is not recognised by the state of Israel. It is estimated that 10,000 Palestinian homes were confiscated by Israel in West Jerusalem in 1948. Alongside this, hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns were destroyed and depopulated by Jewish forces and the newly established Israeli government confiscated refugee land and properties.

Israel is marking its 60th birthday with a week long display of high profile anniversary events celebrating its achievements as a nation state in cultural, social, political, economic and technological fields. On the 15th of May, the Palestinians will also commemorate their own version of history with a national day of mourning which will be held across the occupied Palestinian territories to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Palestinian "Nakba" or Catastrophe. Palestinian and black flags will be raised on the rooftops of buildings. A partial public strike will be conducted in addition to demonstrations in cities across the West Bank.

As I wrap up my last thoughts I have to be honest that the news from Israel- Palestine is bleak. Palestinians are fast losing faith in the promise of a two-state solution. As Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert discuss peace, the friends on the ground I have made in the West Bank are faced with an abundance of difficulties. Despite agreeing to peace talks the Israeli state is confiscating more and more land for the purpose of settlement expansion and the building of separate roads for the sole use of Israeli settlers. The wall/fence, which Palestinians have come to refer to as the 'apartheid wall', continues to be built despite being ruled as illegal by the International Court of Justice. Israel justifies the building of the barrier as vital for its security but for the Palestinians the wall has devastating consequences. It is snaking through the West Bank encircling and imprisoning communities, separating families and cutting farmers off from their land. An intricate network of movement restrictions in the form of checkpoints, roadblocks, other physical barriers and travel permits has all but destroyed the Palestinian economy, a fact recognised by the World Bank in its latest reports.

Three months living in the West Bank under the conditions of occupation has even for an international not being subjected to its full force has felt oppressive and all encompassing. The friends I will leave behind have no choice but to continue to live under the intense pressures created by the occupation. Each day they feel more and more squeezed and strangulated.

But I am amazed by their resilience. I have come to realise that for many Palestinians carrying on with everyday life under these conditions has become an act of resistance in itself. I will end with a question I asked Hashem Al-Azzeh from the Tel Rumeida district of Hebron who has the misfortune to live below the Tel Rumeida settlement established by Baruch Marzel, whom I mention earlier in this article. When I ask Hashem why, after his home and family is physically attacked, rubbish is thrown into his back yard, his olive trees are cut and access to his home restricted, he continues to stay, he gives me a short and simple response: "Because this is my home, I come from here".