

## I am sorry...

When an Israeli soldier asks you to stop in the occupied Palestinian territories, the vocabulary he uses will very likely be a rather limited one. The phrases “give me your ID!”, “passport!”, or “where are you going?” seem to feature high on the list of possible ways to addressing strangers. We were the more surprised when we were stopped at the checkpoint that separates Hebron’s closed off Shohada street from the rest of the city: “I’m sorry, but I’ll have to ask you for your passports”. In the ten weeks I have spent in Hebron, having crossed what feels like a thousand checkpoints and many more soldiers, I have never before heard the words “I am sorry” from an Israeli soldier.

What is true in a literal sense for the soldiers in Hebron, is also true in a more profound sense for Israel’s society at large. Many of the Israelis I have met over the years don’t see the need to apologize for what their country is doing in the occupied territories. After all, “it is purely defensive” – an understanding of the political situation that echoes widely all over the world. This version of a collective understanding of Israel’s relation with its Palestinian neighbors is being summed up in a sentence by the unusually friendly soldier who stopped us earlier: “The day we put down our guns, they will kill us. The day they put down their guns, there will be peace”. *They*, it needs to be added, are those Palestinians that live in the West Bank and Gaza and have not been given Israeli citizenship. Those Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, about 20 percent of the country’s population, are not being considered in this otherwise neatly constructed line.

But something else is fundamentally wrong with this perception. It is its underlying assumption that Israel’s actions in the occupied Palestinian territories are driven by its security needs. It is the assumption that Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are reactive in nature, the only possible option, and constitute a static situation, which only changes in reaction to security threats to Israel. Nothing could be further from the truth.

All it takes is a closer look at the facts on the ground to realize the false promise of the above stated sentence. A closer look at the daily realities of Palestinians living in the West Bank, and the will to scratch the surface and look beyond Israel’s rhetoric of defense. Yes, Palestinians living in the West Bank have targeted civilians in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. These attacks are despicable acts and are not justifiable in any way. The occupation is said to be necessary to prevent such attacks and the separation barrier that Israel has erected mostly on Palestinian land is being presented as a measure to stop them. But all it takes is a day trip to one of the many well-known places where the barrier is a little less high, or a whole has been cut into the fence, to see the hundreds of Palestinians crossing into Israel each day without a permit; often under the eyes of Israeli soldiers. To go to the job they need to do in order to feed their family, to visit family, or to pray at one of the holy sites of their faith – not to carry out attacks. One is left to wonder what, then, is the use of the almost 30 checkpoints along the separation barrier. Industrial style ID-checking

complexes, that force thousands of Palestinians every day to queue up at 4 am, while the barrier is wide open to those willing to cross it illegally.

The situation of the West Bank at large is being replicated in the complex microcosm of access restrictions, checkpoints of all different sorts, and the all justifying dogma of “security reasons” in Hebron, the West Bank’s largest city. Following the massacre of 29 Palestinian Muslims in Hebron’s Ibrahimi mosque by the American born Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein in 1994, the city’s main road, Shohada street, was closed to Palestinian traffic and later also to Palestinian pedestrians by the Israeli Army. Security reasons. In the course of the following years over 500 Palestinian shops were closed upon military order and about a thousand more left due to the complete standstill of business. All this was done in the name of the security of about 700 Jewish settlers, who choose to live in 4 settlements along Shohada Street. After a Jewish settler killed 29 Palestinian Hebronites, not to forget.



Checkpoint 56: One option of many to enter Shohada Street. The only featuring a metal detector and regular bag and body searches. (Photo: S. Brunner)

At the checkpoint that separates the small part of Shohada street on which Palestinians are allowed to walk from the rest of the city, the unusually friendly soldier tells us about attacks in which two settlers were killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber on this very street. This checkpoint is necessary, so he explains to us, to protect the settlers from such attacks. If he would have taken the time to take a closer look he would have taken note of the little set of stairs that lead down from a Muslim cemetery onto Shohada street. From here anybody residing within the West Bank can simply walk on to the settler frequented Shohada street, without ever having to cross a checkpoint or even a single soldier, while

the container checkpoint at which we have are having our conversation subjects about 150 children on their daily way to school and every Palestinian resident of the area to the radiation of a metal detector and regular bag and body searches.



Stairs leading from a cemetery, open to everyone, to closed off Shoada Street.

While those are just two small examples, they serve to illustrate a fact that becomes the more obvious the longer one spends time in the occupied Palestinian territories and the more one gets to know the life of its people: Many of Israel's activities in the territories it occupies do not make sense from a security point of view. Their main purpose can simply not be the security of the state of Israel or its citizens. It is a sobering conclusion and begs the question what else drives the countless restrictions of movement, displacement of people, closure of economic opportunities and a general imposition of hardship on everyday Palestinian life.

Israel's society is no monolithic bloc and there are certainly various interests shaping the country's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories. But Israel's society will sooner or later have to face the fact that the continuation of its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, and the means that are employed to carry it out, are not a necessity driven by security needs, but rather a deliberate choice taken by those in decision-making positions. A choice that is denying a people its legitimate right to self-determination, that humiliates and collectively punishes people on a daily basis and that leaves one wonder what the underlying motivation really is.

The words "I am sorry" might be a rare occasion at Hebron's many checkpoints, but they are completely absent in Israel's political vocabulary when it comes to the occupied Palestinian territories. The country deliberately chooses to implement a policy of separation and imposed hardship on a whole population

and sees no need whatsoever to apologize for its actions. Many of today's most prosperous countries have made similar choices in their past and had to come to the bitter realization that at some point in time the only thing left to do is to apologize for what can not be reversed anymore. Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories is about to go into its 48<sup>th</sup> year this summer, with no sign of the political will to end it anytime soon. If there is no fundamental shift in the Israeli society towards an understanding of the realities the occupation creates, and its underlying reasons, at some point in history "I am sorry" will be the only words Israel has left to say to the Palestinian people.

Stefan Brunner, Hebron, April 2014

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