

Friends, I'm in!

Salam and warm greetings from the beautiful Falasteen.

My border crossing was shockingly uneventful (to the surprise of several friends), and on the bus to Jerusalem I met *Hissam Obeidi* - a friend of my friend Yacoub. His parents were displaced from Yacoub's village Lifta, in 1948. He was taken aback I had been there, and even knew his family's very house! Palestine is a small place.

I arrived on the final Friday of Ramadan, Jerusalem's shops and streets closed as crowds gathered for prayer at Al Aqsa mosque. But after sundown the streets came alive with families and food, so I treated myself to a kebab-pita and a piece of knafeh (sweet cheese covered in a crisp tangle of wispy pastry and soaked in sugary syrup - if you know, you know)

The situation has deteriorated and the mood is a lot heavier here than last year. Several key aid workers I know, already restrained to three-month tourist visas, have been officially barred from re-entry. Israeli forces are occasionally policing *entry* to the West Bank; and the crippled economy has continued to decline - particularly with lack of tourism and movement restrictions.

On Saturday I arrived in Aida refugee camp, where I'll be based for the months ahead, as I study Arabic at Bethlehem University and continue doing journalism throughout occupied Palestine. I was welcomed by Musa who runs the local *Lajee community centre* (I met his wonderful brother Saed in Nelson, who put us in touch - go visit his food truck!) and was invited to join their family for Iftar dinner celebrating the final evening of Ramadan. A delicious meal and warm hospitality.

AIDA CAMP

Aida camp (pronounced 'eye-dah') was established in 1950, following the [violent expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians](#) to establish the modern state of Israel in 1948. Almost eight decades later they're still refused their legal right to return under international law, and what began as a temporary centre for residents fleeing Zionist militia, has become a permanent suburb of Bethlehem. [Aida houses over 7000 registered refugees in just 0.071 square kilometres](#). Being partially surrounded by the apartheid wall and so densely populated, residents can only expand upwards; resulting in tall buildings, narrow streets, and limited infrastructure. Alongside this, the Israeli occupation forces commit frequent incursions into the camp -often training exercises at night time- using live rounds and rubber bullets, raiding homes, vandalising property, and beating or arresting residents. The local community centre and kindergarten has been occupied five times in the last eighteen months. A [2018 report](#) found that Aida camp is the most teargassed location in the world.





I could go on - Aida alone reveals much about the settler colonial nature of the Israeli regime, and dismantles the false narrative that this is a mere 'conflict' of two groups who don't see eye to eye. There are 19 camps like Aida in the West Bank alone. Dozens more in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria - and of course Gaza, where over 80% of the residents are refugees from 1948. Hence the widespread rejection of the modern Israeli state, which was established on *and in* their homes and farms, developed with the stolen wealth of their industries and possessions, at the cost of 15 000 Palestinian lives, in over 100 massacres, and the ethnic cleansing or destruction of over 530 towns and villages.

I share this as important foundational context from which I will be telling stories and events as they unfold here over the coming months. Accurate journalism, and theology, cannot cover modern developments in 'Israel/Palestine' outside of this ongoing system of displacement, colonialism, and genocide.

The apartment which I'm renting feels like a little 'penthouse' on the fourth floor of a family home, with sobering and well-positioned views of the camp. One window faces a series of densely-packed rooftops covered in water tanks (Israel controls the West Bank's water, only turning it on every 15-20 days, so families store it up when they can) and the local mosque which roused me at 4:30am with the call to prayer! Another window looks towards the football turf and cemetery, overshadowed by the looming apartheid wall and watchtowers that wrap around the camp. The next window features more wall, this stretch has a huge steel gate installed solely for military raids into the camp. The final window features *more* wall in the other direction, winding out of view up the hill, past another watchtower.

No doubt there will be many telling scenes from this little apartment over the coming months - particularly as leading Israeli ministers openly discuss plans, with the US, to annex the West Bank this coming year. Over 40,000 residents have been displaced from northern refugee camps in the last few months, over 3250 housing units [made unlivable](#) by Israeli military bulldozers and even several airstrikes. With the month of Ramadan over, we entered the



holiday of Eid - which means most places are closed for four days as families gather to celebrate the end of their fasting; feasting, praying, and remembering those who've died. For families in Gaza this marks the second Eid under Israel's genocide, with [dozens killed by airstrikes since the holiday began](#). The [Palestinian Red Crescent recovered 15 bodies in Rafah](#) (southern Gaza) - 8 Red Crescent paramedics, 6 civil defense members, and 1 UN staff member, targeted by airstrikes on a convoy of clearly marked emergency vehicles. Adding to the 921 people Israel have killed since abandoning the ceasefire, and well over 50,000 killed since October 2023. For many Palestinians this is not an Eid of celebration, but of continued devastation.

In some ways it's an isolating time to arrive; things are quiet in the morning and I speak very little Arabic (though I've been pleased how quickly I'm able to read the written script). But the streets of Aida are bustling by afternoon and evening, and I've been meeting neighbours and trying to remember names, enjoying many (limited) conversations around the camp, finding the best kebab and shwarma shops, and the local bakery where tasty flatbread costs just 50c a piece! One young guy offered me a "slow" ride on the back of his motorbike which (as expected, and much to his friend's amusement) became a white-knuckled high-speed joyride! Type two fun. I finished yesterday playing football in the street near my apartment with some kids.

It's very different *residing* here instead of just travelling - I periodically have moments of "what on earth am I doing here? What use am I with my stupid camera?!" but equally beautiful highs of joy, connection, and trusting that as I learn more Arabic and navigate the balance of study, journalism, and building community; that things will work out.

My studies begin in May, until then I hope to cover several stories in the leadup to Easter, with some promising freelance contacts in NZ media, and plenty of great connections here to help amplify important perspectives and community initiatives. I'm deeply thankful to be here at last, and eager to get grounded in the community - it's not lost on me what a privilege it is to be here, and I'm so glad to be back.

From Falasteen, Cole



(Left): The empty streets of Bethlehem's usually bustling markets, on Eid holiday. **(Right):** The entrance to Aida Camp; many families still hold the key to their pre 1948 homes and it has become a symbol of the Palestinian right to return.