

ISSUE #2: APRIL - MAY

FROM FALASTEEN NEWSLETTER

A MONTHLY(ISH) NEWSLETTER OF MY EXPERIENCES
AND REFLECTIONS FROM OCCUPIED PALESTINE

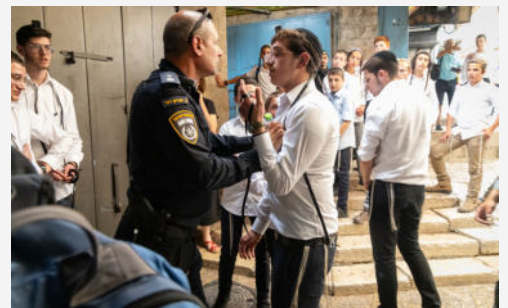


IN A CHAOTIC NUTSHELL

A SUMMARY FOR THOSE SHORT ON TIME

It was a full first month settling into Aida camp and getting out to document the realities of life here. I had a busy Easter scrambling from event to event in Jerusalem; visited a Palestinian Christian village on the northern border with Lebanon to document their story of forced displacement by Zionists in 1948; have published several videos and articles through NZ Anglican newsletters and [AC4PP](#) channels; begun my Arabic language studies at the beautiful and bustling campus of Bethlehem University; documented the continuous displacement of entire communities in the southern West Bank; and the disturbing expansion of illegal Israeli communities that are encroaching ever-further towards farms near Bethlehem; visited old friends and made plenty of new ones; and continue to find pockets of hope which ground me within a reality that feels more insane and surreal every day...

Read on for the full details!



HOLY WEEK IN JERUSALEM

EASTER UNDER OCCUPATION

EASTER in occupied Jerusalem was an overwhelming clash of beauty, hope, horror and fury. I was privileged to attend many events including the pinnacle celebration of the Eastern Orthodox calendar, Sabt al-Nūr, the Saturday of Light. It is a jarring experience when scores of local Christians (many of them indigenous residents of the old city whose families have stewarded these traditions for millennia) were barred from attending, or even entering the city itself; often violently. I was grabbed by the shirt myself and dragged aside at one Israeli blockade without hesitation, several locals were shoved over or assaulted on their way from the Christian quarter, one had a handgun pointed at his head by an Israeli officer for daring to argue back. It evoked parallels of the visceral and traumatic reality Jesus witnessed 2,000 years ago under Roman occupation; restricted movement, assaults on the streets, residents having their autonomy undermined and holy gatherings policed...

I took part in the annual Palm Sunday procession the week prior, journeying from the Mount of Olives down into the old city the way Jesus had done with the crowds. That was a lively and joyful gathering with many different groups, songs and chants. Easter Thursday we marked Jesus' arrest with a candlelit procession from the olive garden at Gethsemane where Jesus was arrested, to the site of High Priest Caiaphas' house where he faced trial. On Friday a large predominantly Catholic

group walked the path of the cross, the Via Dolorosa, with side streets closed off by Israeli police - though less restricted than the following Saturday. In the evening I was privileged to join my friends, the Munayer family, for dinner before the ceremonial funeral procession outside their local orthodox church marking Jesus' execution and death. The tomb inside is then sealed and candles all extinguished ready for the appearance of the holy fire the following day. Entry to all of these was policed heavily, but none so much as Sabt al-Nūr itself.



From early Saturday morning the entire old city is locked down; no pass, no entry. I fortunately scored one from a non-attendee the morning of, which are notoriously difficult to secure. We passed 8 checkpoints just to reach the church, before hours of waiting. I was perched up on a pillar. It's hot, crowded, you're hungry, there's no bathroom access, there is clapping and chanting, then the Orthodox Patriarch arrives. The lights turn off as he performs three laps of Jesus' tomb, and after being checked for no lighter, he enters the sealed tomb to pray. After a while, a yell is heard from within; the holy fire has appeared!



The room erupts as the flame emerges from the tomb, passed on burning torches from person to person and raced out the door with a gleeful urgency to spread the light out into the streets! Locals don't stick around, they carry the flame onwards through checkpoints, across borders, on special diplomatic planes to distant countries - the tomb is empty, the church is in the streets! Miracle or not, it's a truly beautiful and symbolic scene of jubilation and celebration that has taken place for over 1400 years, and reminds me we are made to be out on the streets - seeking liberation, justice, and reconciliation alongside those who are suffering.

I pulled together a couple of videos across the weekend with my Palestinian friends Rafi, a Palestinian journalist and Catholic; and John, a leading voice in several justice, reconciliation, theology spaces who has just completed his PhD on the holy fire ceremony. Taking part in these celebrations was a definite highlight, particularly alongside friends who have championed, stewarded, studied and documented these traditions for many years!

I felt beyond privileged.



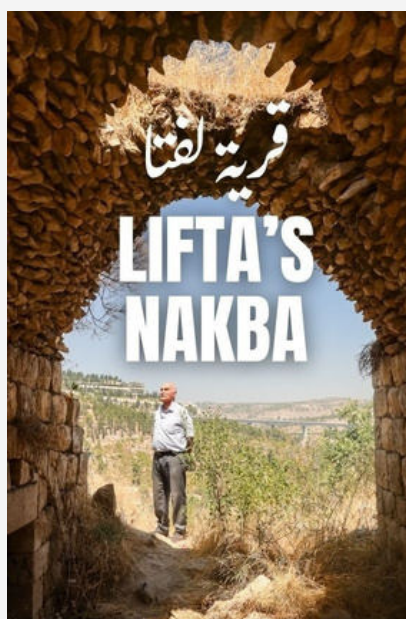


IQRIT VILLAGE & NAKBA DAY

THE ONGOING CATASTROPHE

I also visited Iqrit village, near the northern Israeli/Lebanon border; in sight of several towns like Marwahin which Israeli forces completely flattened in their recent ground invasion. Sobering views. Iqrit is a Christian town whose residents were forcibly expelled by Zionist militia during Israel's violent formation in 1948. The Israeli high court ruled in 1951 that residents should be allowed to return, instead, the military flattened the village with airstrikes and bulldozers on Christmas eve. Iqrit's residents now live in nearby towns, with Israeli citizenship forced upon them, banned from returning for almost eight decades except to be buried in the village cemetery. They call this 'returning horizontal'. The next generation are exercising

their right to return through a reclamation project similar to Ihumātao in New Zealand, coordinating a continuous presence since 2012 and replanting indigenous shrubs and crops. While the genocide in Gaza, and covid before that, have slowed the momentum, they remain determined to continue; they will not lose their connection to the land. I'm developing a short video about their story and struggle, including an interview with 88-year-old Abu Nassar who was expelled at the age of 12. He's a legend.



On a similar note I recently completed a short video I filmed last year in Lifta village, near Jerusalem, with 84-year-old Yacoub Odeh who was born and grew up there before fleeing Zionist militia aged eight. It's one of the largest depopulated villages you can still visit today, with many beautiful houses abandoned and crumbling while residents live nearby, some just 10 minutes drive away, wishing every day to return. Yacoub's rich memories of life before the Nakba really brought it to life, as well as his steadfast dreams of returning and repairing his childhood home.

MASAFER YATTA

UPDATES FROM THE SOUTH

I'm writing this from Masafer Yatta, a collection of rural Palestinian villages in the southern West Bank surrounded by illegal Israeli settlements. They've faced even more settler violence, house demolitions, army arrests, and displacement since I was here last year - and it's only accelerating. In May Khallet a-Thaba'a village was all but erased by the occupation authorities, who bulldozed nine homes and seven caves, water wells, animal pens, and the entire solar electrical grid. This is what apartheid and displacement looks like.

Nearby the village of Umm Al Khair are still recovering after mass demolitions last June, which I witnessed firsthand. Eleven homes were destroyed while families were barred from entering, forced to watch on as their memories and livelihoods were crushed in front of them. Almost one year on and there is still plenty of rubble and corrugated iron strewn around. Similar to the Khallet a-Dhaba' they aren't permitted to bring or operate their own heavy machinery, so have cleared the rubble by hand over months - often chipping it into even smaller pieces so they can shift it in wheelbarrows.

Since I last visited the army returned and demolished their emergency tents, and committed several other rounds of demolition over the previous months - as well as protecting settlers from neighbouring Carmel settlement (illegally built on the villager's own farmland) as they enter the village to harass and assault residents, setting up tents, praying, vandalising property, grazing their sheep on the village crops, cutting olive trees, and even planting their own olive grove in the centre of the village alongside a large flag and security camera. If residents remove any, or resist these incursions, they are attacked by the army, armed settlers, or arrested by the police.

The corruption and injustice is relentless and hard to believe without seeing it firsthand yourself. It's often either absurdly petty or violently sinister.



In nearby al-Rakeez village a farmer's son was attacked by settlers and the farmer was shot by the army when he ran to help. After the ambulance was blocked from accessing him, he finally reached hospital in a resident's car where his leg had to be amputated. No settler or soldier has faced any repercussions for that attack, instead the man's son was arrested and charged a significant fee for his release, despite being ruled innocent based on the undeniable video evidence of the event. This sums up the insanity of the occupation, the absurd injustice, and the total impunity Israelis are granted from the top down. Settlers, soldiers, police - they are all the same, they work hand-in-hand to assault, displaced and steal homes, lands, and even the actual lives of Palestinian communities.



It is not a 'conflict' here, and I'm tired of people using that phrase - it is willfully misleading. Those on the frontlines of peacebuilding and reconciliation work here have repeatedly outlined that their work means nothing while the system is still actively harming and oppressing people. It is not a matter of two groups who don't see eye to eye, it will not be solved by simply bringing people together to 'dialogue'; because Israel is upholding an active system of injustice, displacement, imprisonment, assault, destruction, and murder. You cannot discuss peace while these crimes take place. Any attempt at reconciliation on the ground is worthless until the international community forces Israel to end these practices and come to the table with genuine intentions to address the injustice.

The problem isn't a lack of peace, there is no peace because there is no justice. Sanctions and other forms of international pressure are urgently needed, and the refusal of world leaders to support such non-violent pathways for decades is what has led to forms of armed resistance; how could it not? We are hypocrites if we condemn violent resistance and yet make no effort to get behind non-violent pathways like sanctions, divestment, boycotts, travel bans, etc. In my opinion, anyone still denying the urgent need for the strongest possible sanctions against Israel as a state is either utterly blind or wholly racist.





FLAG MARCH

SUPREMACY ON DISPLAY

I was back in Jerusalem to document the vitriol of Israel's annual 'Flag March' procession; a state-funded event celebrating the city's illegal annexation in 1967, which sees tens of thousands of ultranationalists parade through the ancient streets, assaulting Palestinians and vandalising property in a pogrom of domination and supremacy. Stores were closed and homes barricaded from midday, bracing for violence as teenage settlers descended on the Muslim quarter. Locals required accompaniment from activists to safely evacuate the streets.

I saw a woman shoved and sprayed with soft drink because of her hijab; an elderly man had his mobility scooter kicked; I helped a stall-keeper gather his goods after they were thrown across the cobbles; two women beside him were struck on the head; an elderly father and his son were assaulted while collecting pizza. I saw people spat on, kicked, and shoved. Last year a Palestinian journalist was mobbed in front of me, before being clubbed from behind by an Israeli police officer.

The crowd wave flags, chanting and thumping on doors with songs invoking ancient biblical massacres; "death to Arabs", "may their villages burn". Police reported several people were detained, but none arrested - a stark contrast to our Easter festivities that were met with violence and restrictions.

This year's parade comes off the back of recent polls by Pennsylvania State University, published in Israel's Haaretz newspaper, which found a staggering 82% of Jewish Israelis support the forced expulsion of Gaza's residents, 53% think that Israel should not allow humanitarian aid into the enclave, while 56% support the expulsion of Palestinian Citizens of Israel. The extremes here are very much mainstream.



TENT OF NATIONS

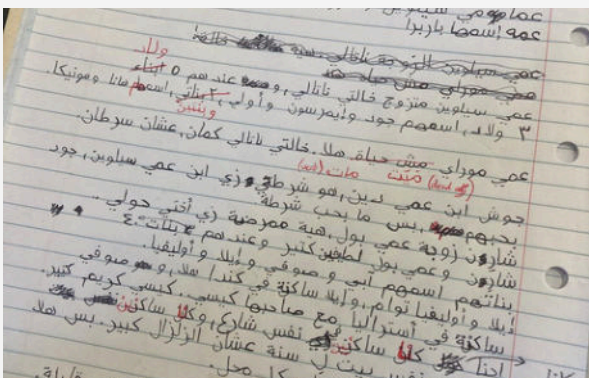
AND SETTLEMENT EXPANSION

I visited my good friends, the Nassars, a Palestinian Christian family who live just south of Bethlehem on a hilltop farm surrounded on all sides by settlements. They've faced attacks, death threats, vandalism, the bottom ⅓ of their farm is no longer safe for them to access, and they've been in a 35-year legal battle to maintain ownership of their farmland against the Israeli courts. Last year a caravan was parked metres from their fence, the beginning of an 'outpost', an Israeli community established in violation of both international law and Israeli law, which is supported fully by the Israeli state regardless. In the last year it has grown, developing a road, several prefabricated container buildings, and electrical lines to floodlights, with CCTV being installed soon for 'security' which will put the Nassar family and volunteers under 24/7



surveillance. This outpost will continue to grow, until the Palestinian family living next door become a 'security risk' and are displaced. This is how settlements expand.

Maghayer al-Deir, a bedouin village east of Ramallah (central West Bank), were forced to dismantle their homes and leave after years of increasing settler violence fuelled by Israeli authorities. Even as they cleared their homes they were assaulted by a dozen settlers throwing rocks and wielding sticks. I fear Tent of Nations could be next, despite their steadfast motto "We refuse to be enemies", they face a relentless colonial machine set on expanding and expelling the Palestinian communities. Watch the short video I filmed with them last year.



ARABIC STUDY

دراسة عربية

Alongside all of that, I'm well into my Arabic study at Bethlehem University, with hour-and-a-half classes Monday to Thursday. It's daunting but plenty of fun. With so few foreigners around, I'm the only beginner, meaning my 'class' is just private tutoring - pretty ideal really! It's a bustling and beautiful campus, I'm really excited to get involved in the student scene, and have already made some wonderful friends - though everyone has just completed their final exams and gone on holiday for the summer, so it's a lot quieter now. Hopefully I'll still be here in a few months when the next semester starts up again!

FINAL REFLECTIONS

FEELINGS ON THE GROUND

Otherwise I'm keeping busy - I've been working on several short video projects, travelling, filming and photographing various violations, writing and pitching articles, visiting old friends and making new ones, planning advocacy campaigns and trying to be social amongst all of that - while getting my homework done...

I have a few long-term projects underway which I'll share about in a future update once they're more developed, but I'm very excited about them! And my sister Holly arrived recently for a few weeks' visit, which I've been excited for - sharing these realities with others feels like a refreshing insight into everything here all over again, and is a special experience.

It's heavy, surreal, and frustrating here. Gaza is present in every conversation but rarely spoken, and each day this whole reality feels more absurdly surreal than the last. Everyone here is functioning, but mostly on muscle memory - I think many would simply vanish if it was humanly possible to cease existing, but instead life continues with a jarring normalcy.

For example, I often forget my friends can't travel freely like I can. From campus we see cranes expanding Jerusalem's suburbs, but I'm one of few who can actually go there. As a foreigner I can visit far more of this land than those whose families have lived here for Millenia. Most don't even leave Bethlehem nowadays because even travelling between Palestinian cities in the West Bank has become too impossible and unpredictable.

Everyone here seems normal until you realise the ongoing trauma of being trapped within small pockets of the West Bank, surrounded by one the world's most powerful and well-funded military, with no self-determination, low employment, a crippled economy, and the impending threat of further annexation. Many don't even travel outside of Bethlehem now because of how precarious the journey is, facing checkpoints, roadblocks, military zones, and unpredictable closures that can trap you at any time - and do.

My friends in the south were stuck outside of their village two weeks ago when settlers and soldiers blocked the only road to and from their area - cutting off families from one another, totally isolating several remote villages beyond, and barring urgent medical access. The placement of settlements, and installation of checkpoints and roadblocks has divided the West Bank into rural ghettos like South Africa's bantustans, by which any Palestinian town or city can be siloed in an instant.

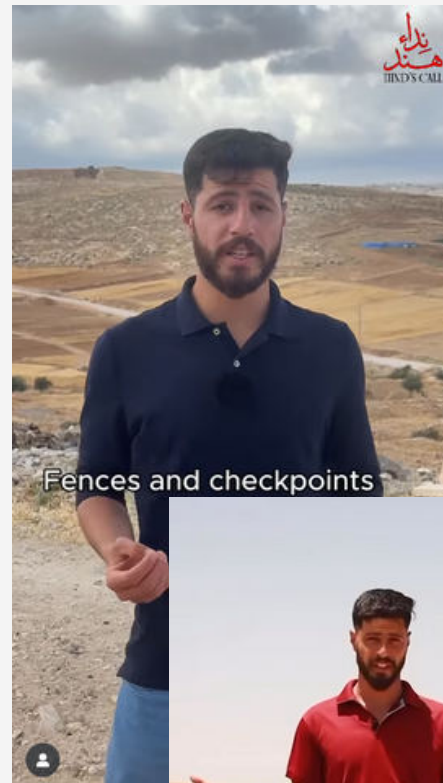
This has accelerated hugely while the genocide rages in Gaza, much like settler attacks, military raids, and house demolitions. This is undeniably apartheid, and it frustrates me that so many people, particularly leaders, refuse to call it that.

It's heavy stuff. But with relentlessly lovely people.



VIDEOS AND ARTICLES

THIS MONTH(S) WORK



I helped my friend Hamoudi script and film the dialogue for some of his educational videos



ASIA PACIFIC REPORT:

OPINION: Why Israel's 'humane' propaganda is such a sinister facade

ANGLICAN ELIFE ARTICLES:

April 16 - Palm Sunday in Jerusalem

April 23 - Al Masih Qum - Christ is risen!

April 30 - Holy Weekend in Iqrit

May 7 - The continuous displacement of Umm al Khair

May 21 - Erasing a Palestinian village

May 28 - Witnessing Israel's Flag Day: Supremacy on display

PHOTOGRAPHY FT IN FRENCH MEDIA:

J'ai l'impression qu'on nous a ramenés des décennies en arrière