

QPSANZ Report - Cole, occupied Palestine

SUMMARY

The last few months feel like an eternity but have also rushed past! June held the Israel/Iran war which felt like the brink of regional and global war, but stopped as jarringly as it began. New Zealand editors continued to show little interest in stories I pitched them from on the ground, but I managed to publish several op-eds and finally one article into mainstream outlets - others were happily published by Asia Pacific Report. A friend of mine was killed by Israeli settlers in the south, and his community targeted in the weeks following - like many communities in the West Bank their future remains hugely concerning. Amongst helping on summer camps, continuing my Arabic studies, and further work on my long-term video resource project for churches, I've enjoyed building friendships, journalist connections, helping around the place and trying not to let the subtle injustices become normalised in day-to-day life. I cross back to Jordan for a brief visit, attempting to renew my visa for another three months here in occupied Palestine; we'll see how that goes. I can't believe I've been here six months now - what a heavy but incredible privilege. Here's to the next three!

JUNE

My sister visited for a couple of weeks (cut short by the war) and I was able to give some friends tours around Aida refugee camp. Between hosting and visiting friend's homes, I got a real confidence boost in how much Arabic I've learnt and connections I've made in a relatively short time. I spent my birthday evening with Bedouins in the recently razed Khallet a-Thaba'a village (against Israeli military orders); got held and turned back at a spontaneous army checkpoint enroute to Juba village, watching a missile from Yemen fly overhead as we waited in the car; and after an overnight shift with my friend Tariq, we shared the most delicious dish of Mansaaf to mark the end of Eid al-Adha holiday. The meat simply melted off the bone! As Israel unlawfully hijacked the freedom flotilla and took its crew hostage, I published a [letter to the editor in Christchurch's Press](#) on how the apartheid state cunningly twists the narrative in international media, to manufacture consent for such brazen crimes.

After a delicious lunch (which became dinner also!) at my friend Kefeh's house -literally next door to Lazarus' tomb- we were woken at 3am by an emergency phone alert; Israel was at war. We spent the following days mostly at home. I was compiling and sending daily updates to NZ media, with stats and key events across the region - particularly keeping the focus on Gaza and the West Bank as speculations grew of a regional war. I would usually complete these updates by around 2am, only to be woken again at 3am by missile alerts (to the roof!) This led to [a brief interview on Breakfast TV](#) sharing about the situation in the occupied West Bank which at the time had been placed under siege by Israeli forces, with roads and towns cut off from one another, sealing Palestinians in place and creating supply shortages in an already-crippled economy. It was a great opportunity to highlight the long-standing structural context underpinning Israel's violence in Gaza. A small positive from the war was that all visas were automatically extended until September 30th, so my three-month visa suddenly became six months without need to exit/re-enter!

During this period I needed to shift to a new apartment (still in Aida camp), and continued my Arabic lessons Monday to Thursday - scoring a 30.5/35 in my final exam for semester one! Thrilled.

The day after shifting, my previous apartment was raided by Israeli military (along with a number of surrounding homes) with families accused of 'celebrating terrorism' for watching missiles from the roof. Absurd. We had several shared lunches and dinners with friends in Bethlehem during this time.

Finally we made the call for my sister to leave, so I joined her taxi to Jerusalem (one of few ways out of Bethlehem at that stage) to document the curfew of the old city, with only residents and tourists allowed entry; then grabbed dinner with a friend before riding back to the checkpoint which remained open on foot for *entry only* into Bethlehem.

Suddenly the war was over as fast as it began, and our bible study group celebrated with a dinner gathering at Casa Nova restaurant. I finished the month with a visit to Mukhmas village where the nearby bedouin community are facing repeated harassment and attacks from settlers, and fear they will soon be displaced.

JULY

July held several landmarks; I published an [op-ed in the Otago Daily Times](#) about the range of non-violent peacemaking efforts from communities here on the ground, tying in damning insights to highlight how critical global action is for a just peace. I also published an [opinion piece with The Spinoff](#) in response to the embarrassing and empty statement from Winston Peters and 33 other nations that hinted at action without any substance - I had to hold back a significant amount of cynicism, but ultimately think it got the point across in a direct and challenging manner.

My Arabic lessons continued, the campus near-empty with most students on holiday; and on the weekends I would venture to visit friends or communities facing various manifestations of Israeli settler-colonialism. I reported on [the funeral of two young men beaten to death by settlers](#) near Ramallah, as well as [targeted attacks on the Christian village of Taybeh](#). I also lent a hand with Musalaha's annual summer camp in Beit Sahour, which I helped on last year - knowing just a little more Arabic made a disproportionate improvement to the level of interaction I was able to have with the kids this year! We had a pool day, farm animals, traditional Dabke dancing, and my personal favourite were several bouncy castles and inflatable pools which turned the Lutheran School yard into a water park for the afternoon - we were soaked! I was having dinner with the family of one friend, up on the rooftop of his house when suddenly a missile sailed across the night sky above us. We all froze and rushed to our phones in horror that the Israel/Iran ceasefire had collapsed; thankfully it was "just Yemen".

I reconnected with Mazin Qumsiyeh and Jesse at the Palestine Natural History museum; attended the joyful 'inter-faith' wedding of my friends (a Belgian Christian and Palestinian muslim); watched in despair as Israel's governing Knesset passed a symbolic 'non-binding' vote in favour of West Bank annexation with little outcry or coverage from Western media and governments; two teens were shot dead by Israeli military in southern Bethlehem and their bodies taken; I woke to explosions one morning only to realise it was the standard fireworks that grace the day graduation results are announced (a BIG deal in Palestine which is one of the most educated societies). Kids at Aida's community centre nearby marked summer camp with a course on how to respond to tear gas and do first aid on your friend if they are shot; and settlers attacked Taybeh village right outside the home of one of my friends - burning cars and painting threats on their fences.

Then came devastating news - on July 28, my friend Awdah was shot dead in his village by an Israeli settler. Awdah was a father of three, human rights defender, and teacher. He was documenting illegal excavation work as Israelis sought to establish a new outpost in the centre of Umm al Khair, filming from a distance when sanctioned extremist Yinon Levy fired two shots, one hitting Awdah in the chest. He died enroute to hospital where Israeli authorities seized his body. Under instruction from his killer, soldiers arrested 21 of Awdah's family members over the coming days - including his brother Tariq and cousin Eid who I'm closest with, having filmed repeatedly with them over last year. His killer was sent home within 24

hours and released without charge just five days later; returning to continue excavations just metres from the mourning family were gathered still awaiting Awdah's body.

I returned to the village and was there when two more boys from the village were taken around 1am, we raced across the valley to where two army vehicles had parked, and were barred entry by several masked soldiers, standing in the cold darkness as they entered homes further down the hill and arrested my friend Ali's younger brothers.

Awdah's body was finally returned after 10 days, following a week-long hunger strike by over 60 of the villages' women. It was a sudden agreement, and despite heavy restrictions barring many from attending, he was buried in a nearby village with hundreds in attendance. Without official press credentials I had to take a hidden journey down through the valley to get around police checkpoints - I was the only journalist there to begin with. Many finally got through, but my images managed to break through the impenetrable wall of New Zealand media indifference and finally I had [my first official news story published thanks to Whakaata Māori](#). The tale of Awdah's death highlights Israel's structural violence and the inadequacy of New Zealand's response to these systemic injustices that create a vacuum of complete impunity.

AUGUST

Following inaction from churches, I had some very direct conversations with Anglican leadership about our failure to name Israeli Apartheid and Genocide, or to support sanctions - which led to coordinating [video interviews with ++Justin Duckworth and various Palestinian Christians](#), to help educate fellow Anglicans and amplify Palestinian voices to the communities that have remained jarringly inactive. I've been clear this doesn't substitute action, and have continued [writing for Anglican eLife](#) (though with less energy after two of my pieces were rejected for 'sufficiently impaired objectivity' when I referred to Israel's 1948 establishment as 'violent').

This follows a pattern of responses from mainstream outlets which include "not having enough budget", "this story is too provocative" and commonly "we only publish syndicated sources (BBC, CNN, Reuters, AFP) but good luck finding an outlet for your important work". Meanwhile these publications continue to uncritically publish Israeli officials and baseless claims without seeing a shred of evidence or critical analysis. I've often questioned what use my journalism here is when NZ media remain so unashamedly complicit in rationalising and downplaying this violence, prioritising Israeli suffering over that of Palestinians, and ignoring structural violence and historic context; or at the very least muddying the waters and failing to hold our government to account. I was [interviewed about this by Asia Pacific Report](#) who've been a consistent outlet for publishing my work when larger outlets do not.

After Awdah's funeral I took a break to help at a summer camp with Palestinian teens from Nazareth; a tiring but joyful change of scene! This provided plenty of Arabic listening practice and further insights into the unique experiences of Palestinian citizens of Israel, who live with greater rights than those in the West Bank and Gaza, but still as third-or-fourth class citizens in their own country. It was an absolute joy and privilege, just what I needed after a heavy few weeks.

I returned to Bethlehem for a small ceremony graduating from level one Arabic, and enjoyed a traditional meal of Jerisha with local friends - a dish unique to Christians in Beit Sahour, only made once a year to mark the assumption of Mary! Later that week I joined my friend Duraid at the checkpoint around 5:30am - he had a permit to visit Jerusalem for the day as part of Mary's Assumption holiday. Crowds packed tightly in line to get through and make the most of their mere hours beyond the wall - they must be back in Bethlehem by 12am, signing in again on biometric scanners at the checkpoint. Duraid got through, but I was refused crossing because my "visa had expired". I explained the visa extension and even showed them their own government website, but they refused me passage. Odd that they simply sent me back to

Bethlehem rather than deporting me - indicates they're just creating hassle for the sake of it, but definitely makes me a little on edge for my exit to Jordan soon...

SEPTEMBER

Returning to Bethlehem and Aida camp, I've been really knuckling down on editing this video resource for churches, [Beyond Pilgrimage](#), which has been in progress for over a year now. I'm desperate to complete it, as it will be a powerful and useful resource to educate and mobilise churches towards action - and I'm eager to focus on other projects without the looming burden of this task. [You can watch a teaser of the resource here](#), I hope to complete it in the next month or two.

I returned to Umm al Khair to visit friends and deliver the cash from a fundraiser I had held (asking people to donate towards either keeping/shaving the mullet - mullet lost). I met two other kiwis in the village! Small world. The settlers recently laid prefabricated housing units in the middle of the excavated village land, so we took shifts on nightwatch near the power supply as residents suspect settlers will cut that any day soon... (update, it was cut last week, the village is now without electricity *and* water) We marked the traditional 40-day mourning period after Awdah's death with a memorial; entry was again restricted by Israeli military.

I am now into the final week of my visa, juggling an accelerated Arabic course (2 hours daily, four days a week) and aim to spend a short time in Jordan before attempting to return to Palestine on a new tourist visa which will tide me through to the end of 2025! In response to growing global recognition of a Palestinian state (an empty and performative action) Israel has today (23.09.25) closed the main border crossing to Jordan, trapping residents in the West Bank and meaning I'll need to use a crossing further north instead. Punitive and harmful - they're suffocating the West Bank the same way they suffocated Gaza for 17 years. The future really does feel very unknown. Next year, next month - even next week.

Here in Palestine, a lot can change overnight.

(UPDATE 26.09.25 - the border is open again today, case-in-point)