

# Impressions from a visit to Palestine

by Julian Gore-Booth

**In November 2005 I returned to Palestine for the first time in over a decade. I knew that a lot of things would have changed for the worse. Restrictions on daily life are now even harsher than I remembered but one change in particular left me speechless.**

Israel's so-called Separation Barrier is monstrous, a political and humanitarian catastrophe that threatens any final negotiated settlement, cuts Jerusalem off from its hinterland, separates farmers from their fields, divides families and provides yet another source of humiliation for the Palestinian people.

The Wall reaches deep into the heart of the West Bank. Settlement blocks, rather than being part of negotiations, are clearly expected to expand and the route of the Wall

Bank aquifer which runs close to the surface along much of this area.

## Life in the ghetto

Farmers wanting to work their fields can only cross into them with permits and only at strictly designated 15-minute 'opening times' early in the morning or late afternoon. Permits once given are then taken away, as yet another form of punishment. Villages that used to be viable thoroughfares are now silent. Israelis

All major towns are surrounded by permanent checkpoints. At the entrances to Jerusalem from Ramallah and from Bethlehem, the scene resembles the grimmest of international borders with queues stretching for hundreds of metres under the watchtowers and concrete slabs of the Wall. It can take three or four hours for Palestinians to reach their places of work. The West Bank is now divided into at least five areas with movement between the regions easy for settlers and internationals but frustratingly difficult – and soon likely to be impossible – for Palestinians.

The most famous of the newly created ghettos is Palestinian Jerusalem, and it is perhaps here that the signs are the most sinister. West Bankers can no longer come into the city without endless permits and checkpoints and Jerusalemites are cut off from their hinterland. Palestinians in Jerusalem feel increasingly isolated and increasingly desperate. From 1992-1994 I lived in two different flats in East Jerusalem about 100 metres apart. One of these is now inside Jerusalem; the other, in Abu Dis, is cut off from Jerusalem in the West Bank. Shops and families that I used to visit by crossing the road are now cut off from each other; old men who have prayed at Al Aqsa all their lives can no longer do so; and children cannot reach schools.

As an international I breezed through the checkpoints, pretended I was a tourist or simply waved my passport at incredulous soldiers. As an international I got on a plane and came home. As an international I am embarrassed and ashamed.

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gives them ample room to do so. On the western axis of the West Bank there are areas where the Wall reaches across the Green Line for no apparent reason other than to expropriate some of the most fertile land that the Palestinians had left and, perhaps even more importantly for the Israelis, the water of the West

themselves, including retired army generals, have spoken out against the Wall – and yet construction persists. The Wall, checkpoints, earth barriers and endless permits confine Palestinians to ghettos. Towns have become isolated and villages cut off from their markets, with essential services – such as hospitals – frustratingly difficult to reach.



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