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### **Trials and Tribulations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories**

When people think of Israel, many think of Arab extremists waging a war of revenge on Israelis, but few think of the Arabs in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip attempting to live as close to a normal life as they can during an occupation of their homeland. After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the West Bank was controlled by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; the Gaza Strip controlled by the military of Egypt. This political situation was intact until the Six-Day War in June of 1967. After the dust had temporarily settled on the holy land, Israel was now in control of the West Bank and Gaza (CIA Factbook/Israel). The political turmoil led to some ethnic Palestinians fleeing to neighboring Arab nations, while others attempted to restart their lives in an unfortunate situation of unforeseen consequences.

The average Israeli family lives a relatively comfortable life. Out of the nearly 7.5 million people, only 23.6% of the country lies under the poverty line (CIA Factbook/Israel). Although this number sounds very high to many in the Western world, it is very low when one compares it to the nearly 70% of the 1.65 million Palestinians of Gaza Strip (CIA Factbook/Gaza) and 46% of 2.57 million Palestinians currently of the West Bank (CIA Factbook/West Bank) who currently live below the poverty line. Although these figures are quite staggering, they don't take into account the majority of Palestinians who are living barely above the poverty line. Millions of Palestinian people are at the mercy of one or two small details that, if changed, could cause a substantial life change. Nearly 40% of all Palestinians in both areas are food insecure, but an additional 30% are under threat of becoming food insecure in the near future (FAO). A change in curfew or a closing of a checkpoint could dramatically affect how a person not only gets food, but how they make their money in order to buy that food (FAO).

For many citizens in Israel, making a decent living wage is not very difficult. According to the CIA Factbook, the average Israeli brings home \$29,800 USD. In addition to a reasonably sized GDP per-capita, Israel enjoys a low unemployment rate of just 6.7% (CIA Factbook/Israel). This allows many in Israel to live comfortably, and to have little to no concern about food insecurity. This is not the case for Palestinians. The average Palestinian worker only brings in \$2,900 USD a year (CIA Factbook/West Bank). Which is what many in the U.S. bring home in a month. Palestinians also deal with large rates of unemployment; 16.5% in the West Bank, and a shocking 40% in the Gaza Strip (CIA Factbook/Gaza). Many Palestinians earning much less than what is needed to be financially secure, and there are most are, at some point in their lives, prone to times of financial need.

There is also a major gap between Israelis and Palestinians in basic human rights, like health care. The average life expectancy in Israel is 81 years (CIA Factbook/Israel). In the West Bank, it is a disappointing 75 years (CIA Factbook/West Bank), and in the Gaza Strip will live a little over 74 years. Why is it that Israelis will live, on average, six years more than someone who may live just five kilometers away? The health care system in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is, for the most part, at the mercy of Israel. They depend on Israel for allowing shipment and delivery of medical items from outside Palestine into the hospitals, which themselves are in need of updates. When the Gaza War, also known as Operation Cast Lead, broke out in late 2008, Israeli forces damaged 15 out of Gaza's 27 hospitals and either damaged or destroyed 43 out of 110 primary health care facilities (Sturcke). Another blow to the wellbeing of the citizens of the Gaza strip is that the buildings that suffered damage during the military campaign cannot attempt to rebuild; Israel has imposed a ban on construction materials (Sturcke).

Palestinians suffering with health problems like heart disease and cancer don't have access to possible surgeries or treatments, so they have to rely on the Israeli government to grant them an exit pass, which sometimes aren't granted, or they come too late (Sturcke).

Many areas of Palestine are also dealing with a major, physical barrier to their economic and agricultural independence. The Separation Wall, or, as many of the opponents of the wall call it, the Apartheid Wall, has separated many Palestinians in both areas from family, workplaces, and even their own fields. Ever since June 2002, Israeli officials have been working on putting 25 foot tall concrete slabs into place along the border with the West Bank; very little of it following the 1949 Green Line, and cutting off Palestinian access to 38.3% of their own land ("West Bank and Gaza" p.5-6). The 1949 Green Line is the border put in place to separate the predominately Jewish territory, mostly Jerusalem, and the areas under the control of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. This political situation was held in place until the Six-Day War in 1967. After the skirmish between Israel and their Arab neighbors, the West Bank and Gaza Strip were firmly under Israeli control (Holmes). Israel officials decided after dealing with two Palestinian uprisings against the Israeli occupation, called an intifada, that a security wall was needed to greater protect Israeli citizens from extremist violence. The Separation Wall caused an outcry of disapproval from many parts of the world, mostly because 86% of the Wall will be built on land in the West Bank, with the "furthest" 13.6 miles away from the Green Line, into Palestinian territory (Backmann, p.163). The International Court of Justice even stated in a verdict that the Wall was illegal according to international law (BBC). With the erection of the Separation Wall, many Palestinians living in the West Bank now have a much longer, complicated commute to their workplaces, fields, water sources, schools, and some forever cut off from their previous lives. With only 16 miles separating the two occupied lands, another security/separation fence is up, completely blocking off the Gaza Strip on land, and a naval blockade off the shores of the Gaza Strip. In some twisted luck though, the people living within the Gaza Strip don't have to worry about being cut off in their own land, just the rest of the outside world.

With the erection of the West Bank Separation Wall, many farmers and families found themselves on the opposite side of their farms and olive groves. When Israel started the construction of the Wall, they assured farmers by saying that they would be able to cross over the Wall to tend to their crops ("Israel's Security Fence, Questions and Answers"). Unfortunately, less than 20% of people who applied for a visitor's permit had their request accepted ("Humanitarian Impact of the Barrier..."). With such extreme restrictions, many farmers have been forced to either grow much less than they used to, or even give up farming entirely. Even if a farmer is a part of the lucky 20% who was granted a visitors permit, even then they might not be able to cross the wall. In Rene Backmann's book, "A Wall in Palestine", Backmann interviews the mayor of the West Bank town of Qaffin, Taisir Harashi. Harashi reported that, "An 'agricultural gate' is open for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening." He later went on to say, "...the farmers cannot go through the agricultural gate with their tractors and trailers. And so, for example, in 2004 the olive harvest was only a quarter of what it used to be. This was once a prosperous village. We now have eighty percent unemployment" (Backmann p. 83).

With all the growing problems native Palestinians face every day, the fact that many Israelis are living a fairly comfortable life with little government intervention is a very strong representation of how unjust the Israeli government is in dealing with native Israelis and native Palestinians. Throughout the borders of Israel, citizens don't have to worry about missing work because of a closed checkpoint, not making it to the market because of a military curfew, having dependable employment, or receiving government aid if necessary. Nearly all Palestinians have at least one of those problems popping up in their everyday lives. They have endured and witnessed much conflict throughout their lives. The fighting between the Palestinian area's and Israel have been almost nonstop for 62 years; nearly 90% of Israelis and 97% of Palestinians weren't even alive when the State of Israel was formed, thus starting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The citizens of these areas only know wartime and constant fighting, and the political climate of

the region has spawned an “us-versus-them” sentiment in many of the areas youth and adults. This is a large problem in the future of food security for many Palestinians, because Palestine will need Israeli help in order to become more food secure and less aid dependent.

Along with apartheid-like government policies, Palestine is facing a growing problem with feeding more people with fewer resources. The current population growth rate is 2.1% in the West Bank, whose rate is the 42nd largest in the world (CIA Factbook/West Bank), and the growth rate in the Gaza Strip is a whopping 3.2%, the 7th largest in the entire world (CIA Factbook/Gaza). More children are being born each day, with a dismal future of war, arguing, lack of free movement, and lack of resources.

Water, a substance many of us in the Western World take for granted, is an example of just how some Palestinians are lacking basic needs. In the Gaza Strip, many of the children are consuming much less than the recommended minimum of 20 liters of clean water a day (“Palestinians cope with water scarcity in Gaza”). The water conditions in the Gaza Strip are becoming worse and worse because of salt and sewage seeping into the coastal aquifer; thus giving more and more impoverished Palestinian children water-borne illnesses and infections. Just across the security fence in Israel, the water quality is much better. According to the Israeli Ministry of Environment, 97.9% of all drinking water is acceptable to consume. Another blow to the water resources in the Occupied Territories is the fact that Israel uses 85% of the water available from the mountain aquifer under the West Bank and 82% of the water in the coastal aquifer under the Gaza Strip (WaSH).

The solution to food security and better treatment of all people in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a difficult, but necessary problem to contemplate. The first major barrier to the future for equality for all in the area is to take down the walls and fences that separate the West Bank and Gaza Strip from the rest of Israel. Not only are the physical barriers to the areas a perfect symbol of just how Palestinians are treated in their homelands, but it also shows how the Israeli forces and people don’t tolerate their neighbors. While the Wall is being taken down, the Israeli military force should stop the military occupation of all the Palestinian areas, and hand over power to the Palestinian Liberation Organization and their leader, Mahmoud Abbas. With the end of the military occupation, many Palestinians will feel that they are in control of their nation, and may no longer feel the “us-versus-them” sentiment. This would halt some people from looking into membership into extremist groups, thus ending some of the violence against the State of Israel from the Palestinian areas. During the deconstruction of the Wall in the West Bank, the security fence gating off the Gaza Strip should be taken down as well, and the naval blockade of Gaza should be terminated, allowing the free movement of goods and aid to the needy of Gaza. The removal of Israeli settlers from the West Bank would also be started, and follow the process that was taken in removing Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005 under the rule of Ariel Sharon. Also, both Israel and the Palestinian territories should make sure that the UN resolution 194, making sure Palestinians who fled their homes in the 1948 war can return, and that the holy areas of Jerusalem should be under United Nations control until an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian areas is mutually agreed upon to not infringe on the religious freedom for all people to visit their holy places. To make sure that all people throughout the area feel safe in their homes and workplaces, a United Nation’s peacekeeping force would work with both the Israeli Defense Force and the Palestinian police force in order to keep all areas secure. Being free from terrorist threats and extremist violence should be a major goal for both sides.

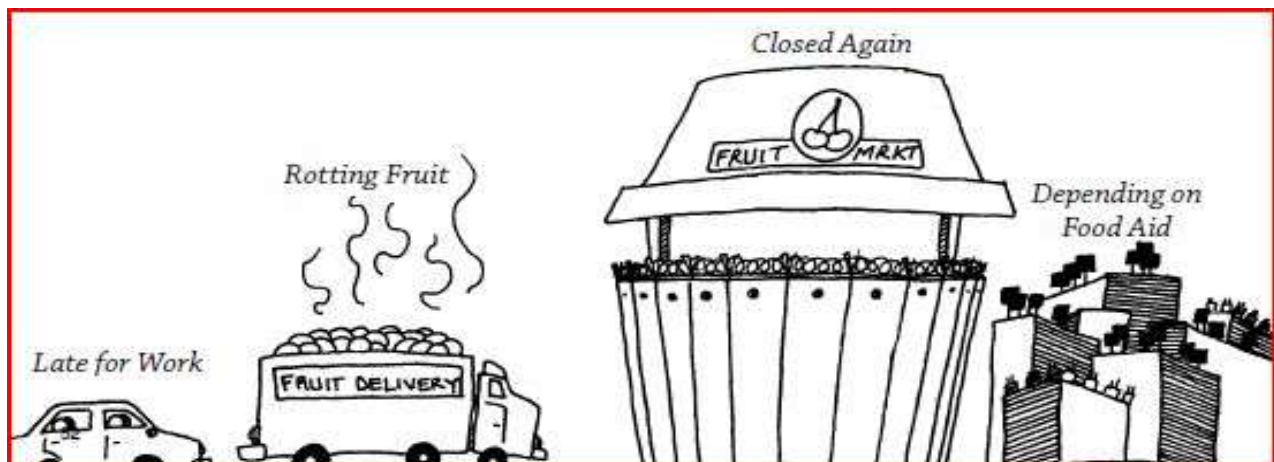
With the physical barriers now gone, the major focus should be the mental and emotional tolls the occupation has taken. Since the construction of the Wall, many people lost land and groves that had belonged to their families and villages for generations. After the destruction of the Wall, the olive groves and farming land should be returned to their owners, so that the farmers can start to produce the much needed food for the area, and thus start to wean the population off of international aid. The return of

farming land also would allow the farmer to make an income again. With the feeling of freedom, Palestinians might start wanting their own independent State of Palestine. The future of the State of Palestine should be decided by a referendum vote in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with heavy involvement of third party watchdog groups to make sure voting is fair and just, and a heavy blessing from Israel, much like the referendum Sudan had on the independence of South Sudan.

Because this would be a large project to complete, international organizations would be encouraged to help along the side of Israel and Palestine. The United Nations would allow for a Palestinian representative to first gain non-member observer status, much like that of the Vatican. If the establishment of the State of Palestine is created after the referendum vote, the United Nations Security Council must not veto its application and allow for the swift membership in the international body. The Red Cross and UNICEF would be invited to help improve living and medical conditions for the Palestinian poor. The Peace Corps would also be encouraged to help station members in the Palestinian areas, helping out with education, youth programs, health issues, and much more. If Israel or the Palestinian territories decide that they need financial help in implementing these changes, they could receive help from the World Bank.

In conclusion, the food security problems facing Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are a very complex situation, but can be solved with some easy solutions, in theory of course. Both the State of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories need to make a strong commitment to the protection of human rights and mutual respect of cultural differences. The solutions, although filled with emotion, are necessary in order to improve justice and real democracy in the Middle East. It will require an approach that demands peace throughout the land, and justice for all people throughout the area.

This political cartoon perfectly shows how the Separation Wall affects delivery of food to the local market, and people who need to buy food at the local market. When the markets are closed off from a population, they then must rely on aid in order to stay adequately nourished (the Wall).



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