



WOMEN FOR PALESTINE
MELBOURNE - AUSTRALIA

Does It Matter What You Call It?

Genocide or Erasure of Palestinians

by Kathleen and Bill Christison

Counterpunch
27 November 2006

During an appearance in late October on Ireland's Pat Kenny radio show, a popular national program broadcast daily on Ireland's RTE Radio, we were asked as the opening question if Israel could be compared to Nazi Germany. Not across the board, we said, but there are certainly some aspects of Israel's policy toward the Palestinians that bear a clear resemblance to the Nazis' oppression. Do you mean the wall, Kenny prompted, and we agreed, describing the ghettoization and other effects of this monstrosity. Before we could elaborate on other Nazi-like features of Israel's policies, Kenny moved on to another question. Within minutes, while we were still on the air, a producer handed Kenny a note, which we later learned was a request from the newly arrived Israeli ambassador to Ireland to appear on the show, by himself. Several days later, on the air by himself, the ambassador pronounced us and our comparisons of Israeli and Nazi policies "outrageous."

What else? We were not surprised or disturbed by his outrage. We had just spent two weeks in the West Bank witnessing the oppression, and it was a sure bet that, even had he not been fulfilling his role as propagandist for Israel, the ambassador would not have known the first thing about the Palestinian situation in the West Bank because he had most likely not set foot there in any recent year. In retrospect, we regret not having used even stronger language. Having at that point just completed our fifth trip to Palestine since early 2003, we should have had the courage and the insight to call what we have observed Israel doing to the Palestinians by its rightful name: genocide.

We have long played with words about this, labeling Israel's policy "ethnocide," meaning the attempt to destroy the Palestinians as a people with a specific ethnic identity. Others who dance around the subject use terms like "politicide" or, a new invention, "sociocide," but neither of these terms implies the large-scale destruction of people and identity that is truly the Israeli objective. "Genocide" -- defined by the UN Convention as the intention "to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group" -- most aptly describes Israel's efforts, akin to the Nazis', to erase an entire people. (See William Cook's "The Rape of Palestine," *CounterPunch*, January 7/8, 2006 for a discussion of what constitutes genocide.)

In fact, it matters little what you call it, so long as it is recognized that what Israel intends and is working toward is the erasure of the Palestinian people from the Palestine landscape. Israel most likely does not care about how systematic its efforts at erasure are, or how rapidly they proceed, and in these ways it differs from the Nazis. There are no gas chambers; there is no overriding urgency. Gas chambers are not needed. A round of rockets on a residential housing complex in the middle of the night here, a few million cluster bomblets or phosphorous weapons there can, given time, easily meet the UN definition above.

Children shot to death sitting in school classrooms here, families murdered while tilling their land there; agricultural land stripped and burned here, farmers cut off from their land there; little girls riddled

with bullets here, infants beheaded by shell fire there; a little massacre here, a little starvation there; expulsion here, denial of entry and families torn apart there; dispossession is the name of the game. With no functioning economy, dwindling food supplies, medical supply shortages, no way to move from one area to another, no access to a capital city, no easy access to education or medical care, no civil service salaries, the people will die, the nation will die without a single gas chamber. Or so the Israelis hope.

Surrender vs. Resistance

A major part of the Israeli scheme -- apart from the outright land expropriation, national fragmentation, and killing that are designed to strangle and destroy the Palestinian people -- is to so discourage the Palestinians psychologically that they will simply leave voluntarily -- if they have the money -- or give up in abject surrender and agree to live quietly in small enclaves under the Israeli thumb. You wonder sometimes if the Israelis are not succeeding in this bit of psychological warfare, as they are succeeding in tightening their physical stranglehold on territory in the West Bank and Gaza. Overall, we do not believe they have yet brought the Palestinians to this point of psychological surrender, although the breaking point for Palestinians appears nearer than ever before.

The anger and depression, even despair, in Palestine are palpable these days, far worse than we have previously encountered. We met two Palestinians so discouraged that they are preparing to leave, in one case uprooting family from a Muslim village where roots go back centuries. The other case is a Christian young person, also from an old family, who sees no prospects for herself or anyone and who feels betrayed by her Catholic Church for having abandoned Palestine's Christians. She would rather just be elsewhere. A Palestinian pollster who has tracked attitudes toward emigration recently reported that the proportion of people thinking about leaving has jumped from about 20 percent, where it has long hovered, to 32 percent in a recent poll, largely because of despair arising from intra-Palestinian factional fighting and from Hamas' inability to govern thanks to crippling Israeli, U.S., and European sanctions.

Nothing like one-third of Palestinians will ultimately leave or even attempt to leave, but the trend in attitudes clearly points to the kind of despair that is afflicting much of Palestine. One thoughtful Palestinian writer with whom we spent an evening feels so defeated and so oppressed by Israeli restrictions that he thinks Hamas should abandon its principled stand and agree to recognize Israel's right to exist, in the hope that this concession might induce the Israelis to lift some of the innumerable restrictions on Palestinian life, end the military siege on Palestinian territories and the land theft, and in general ease the day-to-day misery that Palestinians endure under occupation. Asked if he thought such a major Hamas concession would actually bring meaningful Israeli concessions, he said no, but perhaps it would ease the misery a little. It was clear he holds out no great hope. His village's land is gradually disappearing underneath the separation wall and expanding Israeli settlements.

We met westerners who have lived in the West Bank, working on behalf of the Palestinians for various NGOs for a decade and more, who are planning to leave out of frustration at seeing the situation worsen year after year and their own work increasingly go for naught. Many other western human rights workers and educators, particularly at venerable institutions like the Friends' School in Ramallah and Bir Zeit University, are being denied visas by the Israelis as part of their deliberate campaign to keep out foreign passport holders, including thousands of ethnic Palestinians who have lived in the West Bank with their families and worked for years. The Israeli campaign to deny residency and re-entry permits is a deliberate attempt at ethnic cleansing, a hope that if a husband or wife is barred, he or she will remove the rest of the family and Israel will have fewer Palestinians to deal with. In addition, the entry denial campaign targets in particular anyone, Palestinian or international, who might bring a measure of business prosperity to the Palestinian territories, or education, or medical assistance, or humanitarian assistance.

The campaign against foreigners who might help the Palestinians or bear witness for them became particularly vicious in mid-November when a 19-year-old Swedish volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement escorting Palestinian children to school was

brutally attacked by Israeli settlers in Hebron as Israeli soldiers watched. The young woman, Tove Johansson, was walking through an Israeli army checkpoint with several other volunteers when they were set upon by a group of approximately 100 settlers chanting, "We killed Jesus, we'll kill you too!" A settler hit Johansson in the face with a broken bottle, breaking her cheekbone, and as she lay bleeding on the ground, the settlers cheered and clapped and took pictures of themselves posing next to her. The Israeli soldiers briefly questioned three settlers but made no arrests and conducted no investigation. In fact, they threatened the international volunteers with arrest if they did not leave the area immediately. The assault was so raw and brutal that Amnesty International issued an alert warning internationals to beware of settler attacks. The U.S. media have not seen fit to report the incident, which was clearly part of a longstanding effort to discourage witnesses to Israeli atrocities and deprive Palestinians of any protection against the atrocities.

Palestinian resistance does figure in this dismal story. In the same small village where one of our acquaintances is uprooting his family, others are building, building small homes and multi-story apartment buildings, simply as a sign of resistance. International human rights volunteers are still trying to reach the West Bank and Gaza to assist Palestinians. When we told one Palestinian friend about our conversation with the writer who wants Hamas to concede Israel's right to exist, his immediate reaction was "absolutely not." He is himself a secular Muslim, a Fatah supporter, does not like Hamas and did not vote for Hamas in last January's legislative elections, but he fully supports Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist until Israel recognizes the right of the Palestinian people to exist as a nation. "Why should I recognize you until you get out of my garden?" he wondered.

Our friend Ahmad's views reflect the general feeling among Palestinians: a poll conducted in September by a Palestinian polling organization found that 67 percent of Palestinians do not think Hamas should recognize Israel in order to satisfy Israeli and international demands, while almost the same proportion, 63 percent, would support recognizing Israel if this came as part of a peace agreement in which a Palestinian state was established -- in other words, if Israel also recognized the Palestinians as a nation.

Surrender is not yet on the horizon.

On the possibility of pulling up stakes and leaving Palestine, Ahmad was equally adamant. "Why should I leave and then have to fight to get back later? Empires never last." He mentioned the Turks and the British and the Soviets, "and the Americans and the Israelis won't last either. It may take a long time, but we can wait." He was angrier than we have ever previously seen him, and more uncompromising - - and with good reason: the separation wall is now within a few yards of his home and demolition is threatened. Ahmad and some neighbors have been fighting the wall's advance in court and succeeded in stopping it for over a year, but construction is moving ahead again. He already has to drive miles out of his way to skirt the wall on his way to work and will be able to exit only on foot when the wall is completed -- assuming his house is not demolished altogether.

But he is not giving up. He thinks suicide bombers are "a piece of shit," but he believes the Palestinians have to resist in some way, if only by throwing stones, and he sees some kind of explosion in the offing. If Palestinians do nothing at all, he said, "the Israelis will just relax" and will feel no pressure to cease the oppression. Palestinians everywhere are keeping up the pressure. *Haaretz* correspondent Gideon Levy described a cloth banner displayed in Beit Hanoun immediately after Israel's devastation of that small Gaza city during the first week in November. "Kill, destroy, crush -- you won't succeed in breaking us," declared the banner.

Palestinians in Beit Hanoun, as well as throughout Gaza and the West Bank, have been putting up resistance to their own incompetent, quisling leadership, as well as to Israel. It has not escaped the notice of the Palestinian man in the street that, while Israel slaughters men, women, and children in Beit Hanoun and continues its march across the West Bank, Palestinian Authority President Mamhud Abbas has been cooperating with the U.S. and Israel to undermine the democratically elected Hamas government. The U.S. is arming and training a militia that will protect Abbas' and Fatah's narrow factional interests against Hamas' fighters, in what can only be termed an open coup attempt against the legally constituted Palestinian government.

Few Palestinians, even Fatah supporters, condone this U.S. interference or Abbas' traitorous acquiescence. "Fatah are thieves," a local leader who is a Fatah member himself told us. " Hamas won because we wanted to get rid of the thieves." He thinks that if there were an election today, "ordinary people" -- by which he means people not associated with either Fatah or Hamas -- would win. In each house, he said, "we find one son with Hamas, another son with Fatah, so how is a father going to support one or the other?" It is perhaps this knowledge that they cannot fight each other without destroying the nuclear and the broader Palestinian family, and that they must not succumb to Israeli and U.S. schemes to fragment Palestinian society, that have motivated the intensive Palestinian efforts to achieve some kind of unity government.

Around the West Bank

In Bil'in, the small town west of Ramallah that has seen a non-violent protest against the wall by Palestinians, Israelis, and internationals every Friday for almost two years, the village leader, Ahmad Issa Yassin, talked about the lesson his youngest son learned after being arrested last year at age 14 in an Israeli raid. "He is more courageous now, more ready to resist," Yassin said. "So am I." We first met this boy a few months before his arrest, a particularly friendly young man with a sweet smile. He greeted us again this year with another warm smile and bantered with us as we took his picture. He gave no hint of having spent two months in one of Israel's worst prisons or of the horror of having been arrested in a Nazi-style middle-of-the-night raid. Perhaps he threw stones at the Israeli soldiers who converge on his village at least once a week and respond to non-violent protests with live ammunition, rubber bullets, teargas, concussion grenades, and batons. This boy was no terrorist. On the other hand, the Israelis may have turned him into a young man willing to fight terror with terror a few years from now.

Yassin walked us to his olive grove, half destroyed, on the other side of the wall. The Israelis allow the villagers access to lands that now lie on Israel's side of the wall, but there is only one gate, manned by Israeli soldiers who may or may not bestir themselves to open it. The villagers' names are all on a list of Palestinians authorized to pass

through the gate. At this particular village, one of many whose lands have been cut off from the village, protesters have established an outpost or, as they call it, a "settlement" on the Israeli side to stake a claim to the land for the village even though it now lies on Israel's side in the path of an expanding Israeli settlement. The Palestinian "settlement" consists of a small building, a tent where a couple of activists maintain a constant vigil, and a soccer field for a bit of normality.

Yassin took us uphill on a dirt path running alongside the wall, which in this rural area consists of an electronic fence, a dirt patrol road on each side where footprints can be picked up, a paved patrol road on the Israeli side, and coils of razor wire on each side -- encompassing altogether an area about 50 meters wide, where olive groves once stood. We waited at the gate in the electronic fence while Yassin called several times to the Israeli soldiers, whom we could see lounging under a tent canopy on a nearby hillside. When they finally came to the gate, they checked Yassin's name against their list of permittees, recorded our names and passport numbers, and officiously warned us against taking pictures in this "military zone." As we made our way across country to the Bil'in outpost, Yassin pointed out olive trees burned and uprooted by Israelis and, at the outpost right next to the stump of a tree that had been cut down, a new tree sprouting from the old one.

We talked for a while with a Palestinian activist from the village and a young British activist who had both been sleeping late into the morning, after enjoying a Ramadan meal, the Iftar, late the night before. When we returned to the gate, the Israeli soldiers were even slower arriving to open it, obviously totally bored with their duty. The following Friday at the weekly protest, they enjoyed a little more excitement as protesters managed to erect ladders to scale the fence. The soldiers responded with batons and teargas.

The resistance goes on, but so does the Israeli encroachment. We took away with us two striking impressions: the little olive tree being carefully nurtured as a sign of renewal and resistance, and in the near distance the constant sound of bulldozers and earth-clearing equipment working on the Israeli settlement of Modiin Illit, being built on the lands of Bil'in and other neighboring villages.

Elsewhere, signs of the Israeli advance override the continuing signs of Palestinian resistance. In the small village of Wadi Fuqin southwest of Bethlehem, a beautiful village sitting in a narrow, fertile valley between ridge lines that is being squeezed on one side by the wall, still to be constructed, and on the other by the already large and rapidly expanding Israeli settlement of Betar Illit, we saw more destruction. The settlement is dumping vast tonnages of construction debris down onto the village, so that its fields are gradually being swallowed. This was more evident this year than when we visited last year. The settlement's sewage often overflows onto village land through sewage pipes evident high up on the hillside. Israeli settlers swagger through the village increasingly, as if it were theirs, swimming in the many irrigation pools that are fed by natural springs dating back to Roman times.

In the village of Walaja, not far away to the north, nearer Jerusalem, Ahmad took us to visit friends of his. The village is scheduled to be surrounded completely by the wall because it sits near the Green Line in the midst of a cluster of Israeli settlements. We sat in a garden of fruit trees with a family whose house is on a hill overlooking a spectacular valley and hills beyond. Jerusalem sits on another hill in the distance. We commented that, except for the Israeli settlements across the valley, the place is like paradise, but our host responded with a cynical laugh that actually it is hell. Even beautiful scenery loses its appeal when one is trapped and surrounded.

In another encircled village that we visited last year, Nu'man, the approximately 200 residents are also trapped between the wall, now completed, on one side and the advancing settlement of Har Homa, which covets the village land, on the other. Although last year, with the wall incomplete, we could drive in, this year we were denied entry at the one gate in. With Ahmad, we tried to talk to four obviously intimidated young Palestinian men waiting across the patrol road from the gate to gain entry to their homes, but the Israeli soldiers told them not to talk to us; one of them said a few words to Ahmad but never took his eyes off the Israeli guardpost. We drove off and left them to their plight. We could have tried to get to the village with an arduous cross-country walk, but we did not.

"Grand" Terminals

With the near completion of the separation wall, the Israelis have systematized the West Bank prison. Since August 2005, the number of checkpoints throughout the West Bank has risen 40 percent, from 376 to 528, according to OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which carefully tracks the numbers and types of Israeli checkpoints, as well as other aspects of the Israeli stranglehold on the Palestinians. As part of the systematization, a series of elaborate terminals now manage the humiliation of Palestinians at major checkpoints, particularly around Jerusalem. The terminals are huge cages resembling cattle runs, which direct foot traffic in snaking lines that double back and forth. At the end of the line are a series of turnstiles, x-ray machines, conveyor belts, and other accoutrements of heavy security. Any Palestinian entering Jerusalem from the West Bank to work, to visit family, to pray at al-Aqsa Mosque or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, to go to school, or for medical treatment must have a hard-to-obtain permit from Israel. The turnstiles and other security barriers are controlled remotely by Israeli soldiers housed behind heavy bullet-proof glass.

The cages are currently painted a bright, cheerful blue, but it's a fair bet that when they are older and worn, the paint job will not be renewed. Adding to the false cheer, the Israelis have erected incongruous welcoming signs at the terminals. Most egregious is the giant sign at the Bethlehem terminal. "Peace be with you," it proclaims in three languages to travelers leaving Jerusalem for Bethlehem. This is on a giant pastel-colored sign erected by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, as if travel through this terminal were the ordinary tourist lark. At the Qalandiya terminal between Ramallah and Jerusalem, a large cartoon-like red rose welcomes Palestinians with a sign in Arabic. Early this year when the terminal was opened, the rose was on a sign that proclaimed, in three languages, "The hope of us all." Apparently embarrassed at being caught so red-handed in their hypocrisy, the Israelis removed the sign, preserving only the rose, after a Jewish activist stenciled over it the words that once graced the entrance to Auschwitz, "*Arbeit Macht*

Frei" -- work makes you free. There is still a sign saying in three languages, "May you go in peace and return in peace." The Israelis still don't really get it.

Nor do the Americans. The terminals, advertised as a way to "ease life" for Palestinians by prettying up the checkpoints of old and making passage more efficient, were paid for out of U.S. aid monies designated originally for the Palestinian Authority (before the Hamas election) but diverted to Israel's terminal-building enterprise -- helping Israel make Palestinian humiliation more efficient. Steven Erlanger in the *New York Times*, among others, fell for the scam, noting when the Bethlehem terminal opened in December last year that the terminals were aimed at "easing the burden on Palestinians and softening international criticism." He labeled the Bethlehem terminal a "grand" gateway for Christians visiting Jesus' birthplace -- not acknowledging that Christians had been visiting for two millennia without benefit of turnstiles and concrete walls.

The burden on Palestinians has not been significantly eased as far as we could tell. We spent some time watching at several of the terminals -- feeling like voyeurs of Palestinian misery. At Qalandiya, about 100 people stood waiting to pass through three locked turnstiles. A young Israeli woman soldier sat in a glassed-in control booth barking commands at them. Our friend Ahmad speaks Hebrew as well as Arabic and could not even make out which language she was speaking in. There was no reason for her anger or for her decision to lock the turnstiles. When she saw us observing, carrying a camera, she shook her finger in an apparent warning against taking pictures. They don't like witnesses. Immediately after this, she unlocked the turnstiles.

We walked through after everyone else who had been waiting, and Ahmad took us to the waiting area on the other side where Palestinians from the West Bank apply for permits to enter Jerusalem. About 50 people were waiting. A middle-aged man walked up to us and began telling his story. He was scheduled for neurosurgery at Maqassad Hospital in East Jerusalem in two days, according to a certificate from the hospital, written in English and clearly intended for Israeli permit authorities. He had already been

waiting for six days -- three futilely sitting in this waiting area and a previous three when the Israelis had closed the terminal altogether for Yom Kippur. He was beginning to fear he would never get his permit and, as he expressed his frustration and desperation, he began to cry. He asked that we take his picture holding the certificate and tell the world. We did, but we will never know if he obtained his permit in time, or at all.

At another terminal, leading from al-Azzariyah, the biblical Bethany, into Jerusalem, a soldier screamed at us -- quite literally, his face red, blood vessels standing out on his neck -- when he saw us taking pictures of his soldier colleagues questioning Palestinians before they entered the terminal area, a pre-screening for the screening at the terminal. We told the soldier we thought pictures would be all right; this terminal was run after all by the Ministry of Tourism and so must be a tourist attraction. But our flippancy didn't go over well. He pushed us toward an exit gate, screaming that this was the "Ministry of Gates" and that we had to get out. We managed to remain inside until Ahmad, who was talking to another Israeli soldier, finished and exited with us. Maybe we saved one or two Palestinians from scrutiny by distracting a couple of soldiers -- or maybe unfortunately we just delayed them further.

At a third checkpoint, this a makeshift one set up temporarily at an opening in the wall where the concrete barrier is still incomplete, we watched as a growing crowd of Palestinians wanting to enter Jerusalem to pray at al-Aqsa Mosque tried to negotiate with two young Israeli soldiers. It was a Friday in Ramadan and, although these Palestinians had permits to enter Jerusalem, their names were not on the authorized list at this particular checkpoint. They had to go, according to Israel's administrative fiat, to the main terminal from their area into the city. As the crowd gathered, more Israeli soldiers arrived. The crowd included women as well as men, and several children. Being watched by a couple of Americans who probably appeared more patronizing than helpful clearly did not improve the mood of most of the crowd.

One little boy of about five, dressed neatly in a tie and pressed white shirt, stood looking at the commotion for a few minutes, standing slightly apart from his father, and suddenly burst into tears. A few minutes later, the soldiers exploded a concussion grenade, and most of the crowd dispersed. It's the Israeli way: make them cry, run them off in fear. We left, embarrassed by our own inadequacy.

Terminology

Is it genocide when a little boy is made to cry because belligerent armed men intimidate him, intimidate his father, and ultimately run them off; when they are forbidden from performing their religious ceremonies because a belligerent government decides they are of the wrong religion; when their town is encircled and cut off because a racist state decides their ethnic identity is of the wrong variety?

You can argue over terminology, but the truth is evident everywhere on the ground where Israel has extended its writ: Palestinians are unworthy, inferior to Jews, and in the name of the Jewish people, Israel has given itself the right to erase the Palestinian presence in Palestine -- in other words, to commit genocide by destroying "in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group."

As we debate about and analyze the Palestinian psyche, trying to determine if they have had enough and will surrender or will survive by resisting, it is important to remember that the Jewish people, despite unspeakable tragedy, emerged from the holocaust ultimately triumphant. Israel and its supporters should keep this in mind: empires never last, as Ahmad said, and gross injustice such as the Nazis and Israel have inflicted on innocent people cannot prevail for long.

Kathleen Christison is a former CIA political analyst and has worked on Middle East issues for 30 years. She is the author of Perceptions of Palestine and The Wound of Dispossession.

Bill Christison was a senior official of the CIA. He served as a National Intelligence Officer and as Director of the CIA's Office of Regional and Political Analysis. They spent October 2006 in Palestine and on a speaking tour of Ireland sponsored by the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

Web link

<http://www.counterpunch.org/christison11272006.html>