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Beyond the Rhetoric: the Human Impact of Settlements ^[1]

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas faces an impossible choice: walk out of the talks with Israel and the chance for a peaceful two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli crisis, or accept the continuation of illegal Israeli settlements eroding even further Palestinian land in the West Bank. The resumption of settlement activity contradicts the very purpose of the talks for Palestinians: to end the state of occupation by Israel in their land. The innocuous name “West Bank” conveys little of the reality that these are the Occupied Territories.

What do the settlements mean in terms of daily life? The old city of Hebron, sanctified by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the burial site of Abraham, has a history of hostilities from both sides. But the routine persecution of Palestinians by the expanding communities of settlers, and the Israeli Defense Forces who protect them, is truly astonishing. Traveling this summer in Palestine, volunteers for *Inspire Dreams*, including the co-author Sam Schneider, heard about and witnessed multiple scenes of violent harassment and antagonism from Israeli settlers.

In the “open-air” market in old Hebron, Israeli settlers inhabit the second and third floors of buildings from which Palestinian families had been evicted years ago. From this vantage point, they hurl everything from rocks and debris to buckets of scalding oil, boiling water, and excrement on the Palestinians and their wares below. The metal grate “roof” constructed by the Palestinians offers some protection from the larger objects, but not the liquids. In early August Sam and other Inspire Dreams volunteers witnessed the Israeli Defense Forces moving in on the marketplace, but not to protect the shopkeepers and their customers. Instead, they beat several of the shop owners and welded the doors to the stalls shut, effectively evicting the Palestinians from their workplaces.

Antagonism begins early in the settlements. Sam and others (including a Palestinian-American UNC Chapel Hill student) were chased out of a settler-inhabited Hebron street by a group of pubescent boys shouting “Visa! Visa!? No Arabs!” Sam and his friends were told by an IDF soldier that, had they continued down the street, they risked being shot at by settlers.

Another incident illustrates the conundrum of the status of settlements. Crossing a checkpoint (Israel has checkpoints entering and leaving every city in the West Bank), an Arab-American Inspire Dreams volunteer was stopped by IDF soldiers. They demanded to see his camera, and when they found photos of settlements, they smashed the camera, notwithstanding the owner’s American passport. Settlements are illegal under international law, and even a few are illegal under Israeli law. Clearly the authorities did not want the settlements photographed, yet these same soldiers protect the Israeli settlers and harass their Palestinian neighbors.

By allowing settlement activity to recommence, Netanyahu is catering to the extreme right, whose views and behavior are not representative of Israeli broad scale public opinion. There are extremists on both sides, including the members of Hamas who ruthlessly shot Israeli civilians in an effort to derail the talks. Nevertheless, we have heard many stories of Palestinians and Israelis living peacefully together for generations.

A tangible sign of hope over the summer was the opening of the expanded and renovated Israeli National Museum, led by James Snyder, the Museum's American director. An editorial in Israel's leading newspaper *Haaretz* dedicated to the re-opening of the Museum noted that "Israel can attain global renown for its cultural and artistic excellence, and not only because of its wars". The editorial further expressed the hope that the open, humanitarian spirit behind the renovation would not become a "museum piece", and that it would help Israel to turn away from "physical expansion, force, and superficial religiosity" to "humility, sense of proportion, and a focus on cultural and spiritual life". Sadly, with the green light for new settlements, the former sentiments seem to be prevailing.

Disappointed by the gap between President Obama's words and actions, Palestinians have become more sanguine about their prospects under this President. When we were shopping in Nablus, a shopkeeper greeted us with a big smile, "Ah, you are from America, land of hypocrisy! Welcome to Nablus!"

President Obama faces his own catch-22: to tolerate the renewal of settlement activity to keep the talks going, and possibly force Abbas to walk; or to pressure Israel to cease building at the risk of turning Netanyahu away from the talks. We hope that the President can keep the talks going and keep his word in the Cairo speech of a "complete settlement freeze". Prove the Nablus shopkeeper wrong, Mr. President: show him that America is not a "land of hypocrisy".

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