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It's the Occupation, Stupid

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

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I'm reminded of how Chinese premier Zhou EnLai [supposedly answered](#) a question in 1972 about the significance of the French Revolution. "Too early to tell," was his reputed reply; and though he may never have said it, how true it is that the major events of our world carom through history in ways that remain unpredictable even hundreds of years later. How then to arrive at an assessment of the Arab Spring — and now [far harsher](#) Summer and [Fall](#) — of 2011, other than to say that it has proven monumental?

Perhaps all that can or should be said is that history's surprises have their joys (as well as horrors), and that the young people who propelled the Arab Spring, toppling some regional autocrats and tyrants, challenging others, and leaving still others shaken, offered genuine hope (Yes, We Can!) in a region where it had been a scarce commodity. Their many and complex uprisings and serial demonstrations have clearly destabilized significant parts of the Middle East that had been in a kind of deadly stasis. Who knows what will shake out from it all? At this early date, however, one of the losers from these cascading events seems to be the ever more right-wing government of Israel which — as its autocratic allies in the region totter or fall — has been left in a state of growing [isolation](#) and anxiety.

The Arab Spring has evidently even offered a kind of confused and bedraggled hope to a Palestinian [not-exactly-state](#), the Palestinian Authority, about as powerless as an entity could be, which is heading this week for the U.N. to do it's-not-quite-clear-what. Its decision signals, at least, the utter bankruptcy of the former "road map" to peace in the region — there are no roads, only checkpoints and obstacles, and as for maps, the Israelis control them. The zombie-style

“negotiations” Washington has long been brokering in the region are now [officially dead](#), no matter how many diplomats rush from one capital to another.

If it weren't so grim, the uproar over such a non-power essentially pleading with the U.N. for membership when it controls next to nothing on the ground, and the scurrying around of everyone from Tony Blair to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, not to speak of the [threats](#) of the anxious Israelis to withhold money and tear up the Oslo Accords, of the U.S. Congress to [withhold](#) yet more money, and of Republican presidential candidates [accusing](#) the Obama administration of "appeasement" or worse would be the material for the Middle Eastern equivalent of a bedroom farce.

Journalist Sandy Tolan, author of a moving book, [The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East](#), is just back from the West Bank. As he makes clear, by anyone's measure the Israelis are winning the war of and on the land. And yet [symbols do matter](#) — and so, in the end, may the kind of isolation the Israelis could, one day, find themselves in, especially in a destabilizing region with potential surprises in store, some [predictable](#), some not faintly so. *Tom*

**It's the Occupation, Stupid
The State to Which the U.N. May Grant Membership Is Disappearing**
By [Sandy Tolan](#)

It's the show that time and the world forgot. It's called the Occupation and it's now in its 45th year. Playing on a landscape about the size of Delaware, it remains largely hidden from view, while Middle Eastern headlines from elsewhere seize the day. Diplomats [shuttle](#) back and forth from Washington and Brussels to Middle Eastern capitals; the Israeli-Turkish alliance [ruptures](#) amid bold declarations from the Turkish prime minister; crowds [storm](#) the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, while Israeli ambassadors flee the Egyptian capital and [Amman](#), the Jordanian one; and of course, there's the headliner, the show-stopper of the moment, the Palestinian Authority's [campaign](#) for statehood in the United Nations, which will prompt an Obama administration veto in the Security Council.

But whatever the Turks, Egyptians, or Americans do, whatever symbolic satisfaction the Palestinian Authority may get at the U.N., there's always the Occupation and there — take it from someone just back from a summer living in the West Bank — Israel isn't losing. It's winning the battle, at least the one that means the most to Palestinians and Israelis, the one for control over every square foot of ground. Inch by inch, meter by meter, Israel's expansion project in the West Bank and Jerusalem is, in fact, gaining momentum, ensuring that the “nation” that the U.N. might grant membership will be each day a little smaller, a little less viable, a little less there.

How to Disappear a Land

On my many drives from West Bank city to West Bank city, from Ramallah to Jenin, Abu Dis to Jericho, Bethlehem to Hebron, I'd play a little game: Could I travel for an entire minute without seeing physical evidence of the occupation? Occasionally — say, when riding through a narrow

passage between hills — it was possible. But not often. Nearly every panoramic vista, every turn in the highway revealed a Jewish settlement, an Israeli army checkpoint, a military watchtower, a looming concrete wall, a barbed-wire fence with signs announcing another restricted area, or a cluster of army jeeps stopping cars and inspecting young men for their documents.

The ill-fated Oslo "peace process" that emerged from the Oslo Accords of 1993 not only failed to prevent such expansion, it effectively sanctioned it. Since then, the number of Israeli settlers on the West Bank has nearly tripled to [more than 300,000](#) — and that figure doesn't include the more than 200,000 Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem.

The Oslo Accords, ratified by both the Palestinians and the Israelis, divided the West Bank into three zones — A, B, and C. At the time, they were imagined by the Palestinian Authority as a temporary way station on the road to an independent state. They are, however, still in effect today. The *de facto* Israeli strategy has been and remains to give Palestinians relative freedom in Area A, around the West Bank's cities, while locking down "[Area C](#)" — 60% of the West Bank — for the use of the Jewish settlements and for what are called "restricted military areas." (Area B is essentially a kind of grey zone between the other two.) From this strategy come the thousands of demolitions of "illegal" housing and the regular arrests of villagers who simply try to build improvements to their homes. Restrictions are strictly enforced and violations dealt with harshly.

When I visited the South Hebron Hills in late 2009, for example, villagers were not even allowed to smooth out a virtually impassable dirt road so that their children wouldn't have to walk two to three miles to school every day. Na'im al-Adarah, from the village of At-Tuwani, paid the price for transporting those kids to the school "illegally." A few weeks after my visit, he was arrested and his red Toyota pickup seized and destroyed by Israeli soldiers. He didn't bother complaining to the Palestinian Authority — the same people now going to the U.N. to declare a Palestinian state — because they have no control over what happens in Area C.

The only time he'd seen a Palestinian official, al-Adarah told me, was when he and other villagers drove to Ramallah to bring one to the area. (The man from the Palestinian Authority refused to come on his own.) "He said this is the first time he knew that this land [in Area C] is ours. A minister like him is surprised that we have these areas? I told him, 'How can a minister like you not know this? You're the minister of local government!'"

"It was like he didn't know what was happening in his own country," added al-Adarah. "We're forgotten, unfortunately."

The Israeli strategy of control also explains, strategically speaking, the "need" for the [network of checkpoints](#); the looming [separation barrier](#) (known to Israelis as the "[security fence](#)" and to Palestinians as the "[apartheid wall](#)") that divides Israel from the West Bank (and [sometimes](#) West Bankers from each other); the repeated [evictions](#) of Palestinians from residential areas like Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem; the systematic [revoking](#) of Jerusalem IDs once held by thousands of Palestinians who were born in the Holy City; and the

labyrinthine [travel restrictions](#) which keep so many Palestinians locked in their West Bank enclaves.

While Israel justifies most of these measures in terms of national security, it's clear enough that the larger goal behind them is to incrementally take and hold ever more of the land. The separation barrier, for example, has put [10%](#) of the West Bank's land on the Israeli side — a [case](#) of "annexation in the guise of security," according to the respected Israeli human rights group, B'tselem.

Taken together, these measures amount to the solution that the Israeli government seeks, one revealed in a series of maps drawn up by Israeli politicians, cartographers, and military men over recent years that show Palestine broken into isolated islands (often compared to South African apartheid-era ["bantustans"](#)) on only about 40% of the West Bank. At the outset of Oslo, Palestinians believed they had made a [historic compromise](#), agreeing to a state on [22%](#) of historic Palestine — that is, the West Bank and Gaza. The reality now is a kind of "ten percent solution," a rump statelet without sovereignty, freedom of movement, or control of its own land, air, or water. Palestinians cannot even drill a well to tap into the vast aquifer beneath their feet.

Living Amid Checkpoints, Roadblocks, and Night Raids

Almost always overlooked in assessments of this ruinous "no-state solution" is the human toll it takes on the occupied. More than on any of my dozen previous journeys there, I came away from this trip to Palestine with a sense of the psychic damage the military occupation has inflicted on every Palestinian. None, no matter how warm-hearted or resilient, escape its effects.

"The soldier pointed to my violin case. He said, 'What's that?'" 13-year-old Alá Shelaldeh, who lives in old Ramallah, told me. She is a student at [Al Kamandjati](#) (Arabic for "the violinist"), a music school in her neighborhood (which will be a focus of my [next book](#)). She was recalling a time three years earlier when a van she was in, full of young musicians, was stopped at an Israeli checkpoint near Nablus. They were coming back from a concert. "I told him, 'It's a violin.' He told me to get out of the van and show him." Alá stepped onto the roadside, unzipped her case, and displayed the instrument for the soldier. "Play something," he insisted. Alá played "Hilwadeen" (Beautiful Girl), the song made famous by the Lebanese star [Fayrouz](#). It was a typical moment in Palestine, and one she has yet to, and may never, forget.

It is impossible, of course, to calculate the long-term emotional damage of such encounters on children and adults alike, including [on the Israeli soldiers](#), who are not immune to their own actions.

Humiliation at checkpoints is a basic fact of West Bank Palestinian life. Everyone, even children, has his or her story to tell of helplessness, fear, and rage while waiting for a teenaged soldier to decide whether or not they can pass. It has become so normal that some kids have no idea the rest of the world doesn't live like this. "I thought the whole world was like us — they are occupied, they have soldiers," remembered Alá's older brother, Shehade, now 20.

At 15, he was invited to Italy. "It was a shock for me to see this life. You can go very, very far, and no checkpoint. You see the land very, very far, and no wall. I was so happy, and at the same time sad, you know? Because we don't have this freedom in my country."

At age 12, Shehade had seen his cousin shot dead by soldiers during the second *intifada*, which erupted in late 2001 after Israel's then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon paid a [provocative visit](#) to holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem. Clashes erupted as youths hurled stones at soldiers. Israeli troops responded with live fire, killing some 250 Palestinians (compared to 29 Israeli deaths) in the first two months of the *intifada*. The next year, Palestinian factions launched waves of suicide bombings in Israel.

One day in 2002, Shehade recalled, with Ramallah again fully occupied by the Israeli army, the young cousins broke a military curfew in order to buy bread. A shot rang out near a corner market; Shehade watched his cousin fall. This summer Shehade showed me the gruesome pictures — blood flowing from a 12-year-old's mouth and ears — taken moments after the shooting in 2002.

Nine years later, Ramallah, a supposedly [sovereign enclave](#), is often considered an oasis in a desert of occupation. Its streets and markets are choked with shoppers, and its many [trendy restaurants](#) rival fine European eateries. The vibrancy and upscale feel of many parts of the city give you a sense that — much as Palestinians are loathe to admit it — this, and not East Jerusalem, is the emerging Palestinian capital.

Many Ramallah streets are indeed lined with government ministries and foreign consulates. (Just don't call them embassies!) But much of this apparent freedom and quasi-sovereignty is illusory. In the West Bank, travel without hard-to-get permits is often limited to narrow corridors of land, like the one between Ramallah and Nablus, where the Israeli military has, for now, abandoned its checkpoints and roadblocks. Even in Ramallah — part of the [theoretically sovereign](#) Area A — night incursions by Israeli soldiers are common.

"It was December 2009, the 16th I think, at 2:15, 2:30 in the morning," recalled Celine Dagher, a French citizen of Lebanese descent. Her Palestinian husband, Ramzi Aburedwan, founder of Al Kamandjati, where both of them work, was then abroad. "I was awakened by a sound," she told me. She emerged to find the front door of their flat jammed partway open and kept that way by a small security bar of the sort you find in hotel rooms.

Celine thought burglars were trying to break in and so yelled at them in Arabic to go away. Then she peered through the six-inch opening and spotted 10 Israeli soldiers in the hallway. They told her to stand back, and within seconds had blown the door off its hinges. Entering the apartment, they pointed their automatic rifles at her. A Palestinian informant stood near them silently, a black woolen mask pulled over his face to ensure his anonymity.

The commander began to interrogate her. "My name, with whom I live, starting to ask me about the neighbors." Celine flashed her French passport and pleaded with them not to wake up her six-month-old, Hussein, sleeping in the next room. "I was praying that he would just stay asleep."

She told the commander, "I just go from my house to my work, from work to my house." She didn't really know her neighbors, she said.

As it happened, the soldiers had blown off the door of the wrong flat. They would remove four more doors in the building that night, Celine recalled, before finding their suspect: her 17-year-old next door neighbor. "They stood questioning him for maybe 20 minutes, and then they took him. And I think he's still in jail. His father is already in jail."

According to Israeli Prison Services statistics cited by B'tselem, more than 5,300 Palestinians were in Israeli prisons in July 2011. Since the beginning of the occupation in 1967, an estimated [650,000 to 700,000](#) Palestinians have reportedly been jailed by Israel. By [one calculation](#), that represents 40% of the adult-male Palestinian population. Almost no family has been untouched by the Israeli prison system.

Celine stared through the blinds at the street below, where some 15 jeeps and other military vehicles were parked. Finally, they left with their lights out and so quietly that she couldn't even hear their engines. When the flat was silent again, she couldn't sleep. "I was very afraid." A neighbor came upstairs to sit with her until the morning.

Stories like these — and they are legion — accumulate, creating the outlines of what could be called a culture of occupation. They give context to a remark by Saleh Abdel-Jawad, dean of the law school at Birzeit University near Ramallah: "I don't remember a happy day since 1967," he told me. Stunned, I asked him why specifically that was so. "Because," he replied, "you can't go to Jerusalem to pray. And it's only 15 kilometers away. And you have your memories there."

He added, "Since 17 years I was unable to go to the sea. We are not allowed to go. And my daughter married five years ago and we were unable to do a marriage ceremony for her." Israel would not grant a visa to Saleh's Egyptian son-in-law so that he could enter the West Bank. "How to do a marriage without the groom?"

A Musical Intifada

An old schoolmate of mine and now a Middle East scholar living in Paris points out that Palestinians are not just victims, but actors in their own narrative. In other words, he insists, they, too, bear responsibility for their circumstances — not all of this rests on the shoulders of the occupiers. True enough.

As an apt example, consider the morally and strategically bankrupt tactic of suicide bombings, carried out from 2001 to 2004 by several Palestinian factions as a response to Israeli attacks during the second *intifada*. That disastrous strategy gave cover to all manner of Israeli retaliation, including the building of the separation barrier. (The near disappearance of the suicide attacks has been due far less to the wall — after all, it isn't even finished yet — than to a decision on the part of all the Palestinian factions to reject the tactic itself.)

So, yes, Palestinians are also "actors" in creating their own circumstances, but Israel remains the sole regional nuclear power, the state with one of the strongest armies in the world, and the occupying force — and that is the determining fact in the West Bank. Today, for some Palestinians living under the 44-year occupation simply remaining on the land is a kind of moral victory. This summer, I started hearing a [new slogan](#): "Existence is resistance." If you remain on the land, then the game isn't over. And if you can bring attention to the occupation, while you remain in place, so much the better.

In June, Alá Shelaldehy, the 13-year-old violinist, brought her instrument to the wall at Qalandia, once a mere checkpoint separating Ramallah and Jerusalem, and now essentially an [international border crossing](#) with its mass of concrete, steel bars, and gun turrets. The transformation of Qalandia — and its long, cage-like corridors and multiple seven-foot-high turnstiles through which only the lucky few with permits may cross to Jerusalem — is perhaps the most powerful symbol of Israel's determination not to share the Holy City.

Alá and her fellow musicians in the Al Kamandjati Youth Orchestra came to play Mozart and Bizet in front of the Israeli soldiers, on the other side of Qalandia's steel bars. Their purpose was to confront the occupation through music, essentially to assert: *we're here*. The children and their teachers emerged from their bus, quickly set up their music stands, and began to play. Within moments, the sound of Mozart's Symphony No. 6 in F Major filled the terminal.

Palestinians stopped and stared. Smiles broke out. People came closer, pulling out cell phones and snapping photos, or just stood there, surrounding the youth orchestra, transfixed by this musical *intifada*. The musicians and soldiers were separated by a long row of blue horizontal bars. As the music played on, a grim barrier of confinement was momentarily transformed into a space of assertive joy. "It was," Alá would say later, "the greatest concert of my life."

As the Mozart symphony built — *Allegro*, *Andante*, *Minuet*, and the *Allegro* last movement — some of the soldiers started to take notice. By the time the orchestra launched into Georges Bizet's Dance Boheme from Carmen #2, several soldiers appeared, looking out through the bars. For the briefest of moments, it was hard to tell who was on the inside, looking out, and who was on the outside, looking in.

If existence is resistance, if children can confront their occupiers with a musical *intifada*, then there's still space, in the year of the Arab Spring, for something unexpected and transformative to happen. After all, South African apartheid collapsed, and without a bloody revolution. The Berlin Wall fell quickly, completely, unexpectedly. And with China, India, Turkey and Brazil on the rise, the United States, its power waning, will not be able to remain Israel's protector forever. Eventually, perhaps, the world will assert the obvious: the *status quo* is unacceptable.

For the moment, whatever happens in the coming weeks at the U.N., and in the West Bank in the aftermath, isn't it time for the world's focus to shift to what is actually happening on the ground? After all, it's the occupation, stupid.