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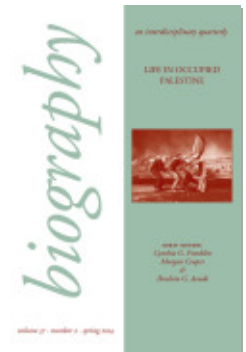
Traveling as a Palestinian

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TRAVELING AS A PALESTINIAN

YOUSEF M. ALJAMAL

Palestinians face numerous problems when traveling, due to the restrictions imposed upon us by the Israeli occupation. Hundreds of checkpoints and border crossings are erected to control our every movement. These checkpoints and crossings are used as a means of collective punishment for our very existence, which makes our lives even harder. Getting a visa is not an easy task, either. Most



Yousef, second from right (all photos by courtesy of the author).

countries around the world, including Arab countries, deal with Palestinian passport holders with suspicion. Palestinians travelling to other countries are guilty until we prove otherwise. Every time we travel, Palestinians have to prepare a load of documents that demonstrate our “strong ties to our country.” Many Palestinians make fun of the words written on our passports that declare “this travel document/passport is of a great value.”

In February 2013, I applied to get a visa to conduct a speaking tour in Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud. Thanks to the help of my friends there, I just barely managed to find out where to apply for this document. Two weeks passed, and I had received conflicting information. “Apply to Cairo,” I was told. “No, you have to apply to Tel Aviv,” an officer told me. “The regional office of New Zealand Immigration is based in Dubai,” another officer affirmed. “Bangkok is where you have to apply to,” a new officer

suggested. I got lost between these various locales. After contacting Immigration in Wellington, I was finally told to apply to Dubai, one destination among the many others I had been directed towards—but this time, I'd been told officially.

I got the sponsorship and the visa application forms filled out. I sent them to New Zealand Immigration Dubai with my Palestinian Authority passport. All went well. Weeks later, I got an email from NZI Dubai which read "Your visa application has been declined because you didn't meet certain conditions." I was told my application included "no evidence of strong ties to get back to my country, no clear itinerary, no financial support, no previous record of travel," and I was also informed that the fact that I live in a war zone makes me a likely asylum seeker. "You can still apply again," the officer wrote to me.

My friends and the organizers of the National Conference on Palestine, who had issued me the speaking invitation, believed that the decision was politically motivated. We all agreed to take up the challenge until I got the visa. Again, I was asked to submit stacks of documents to "explain the purpose of my visit and my intent to return to Gaza." I provided all these documents, including invitations, character references, photos, and tickets—to the satisfaction of the officer, and probably to her surprise.

I was told that I would only get my visa endorsed on my passport if I sent confirmed flight bookings. I did.

In May 2013 I got an invitation to participate in the Kuala Lumpur book launch of *The Prisoners' Diaries: Palestinian Voices from the Israeli Gulag*, a book I co-translated from Arabic into English. My initial plan was to travel directly to New Zealand on June 19, 2013, all the way from Cairo to the United Arab Emirates, then a stop-over in Melbourne, Australia, before finally arriving in Auckland, New Zealand. But I was told that I needed to get a transit visa from Australia to be able to land in Melbourne to get my connecting flight to Auckland. I told the organizers. To my disappointment, it was too late!

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT PLAN B!

"If you travel through Malaysia, you don't need a transit visa," a friend suggested. I changed my flights for the second time. Cancelling my flights cost the organizers 20 percent of the actual price of the ticket, and only after I sent my new booking to the NZ Immigration Dubai was I given a visa.

It was June 2, my passport was still in the office of New Zealand Immigration Dubai, and I was running out of time. Once I learned that my visa was endorsed in my passport, you can imagine my delight. I asked to get it back in early June through an international shipping company which has an

office in Gaza. With difficulty, I booked to travel through Rafah Crossing on June 11, 2013. I had to contact the shipping company in Dubai to rush the shipment. My passport arrived from UAE in Jordan on June 4, 2013. I had to contact the shipping company's office in Amman to rush their delivery to Gaza. The passport finally arrived in the other part of Palestine, the West Bank (Ramallah) on June 6, 2013. It was a holiday that day, which meant I would not be able to get it before Sunday: Friday is a day off in Palestine, the Israeli crossing connecting the West Bank with Gaza is shut on Saturdays (the Jewish Sabbath), and the shipping company wasn't working on Sunday because the Thursday before was a holiday and thus they didn't have enough documents to justify a shipment on Sunday. I organized with another shipping company to deliver before Sunday, but to no avail. I got the passport on Monday, a day after my booking at Rafah. Again with difficulty, I managed to change the booking to Tuesday—keep in mind that not having my passport with me made it almost impossible to book my travel. However, all went well, contrary to my expectations. The Kuala Lumpur event where I would speak was set for June 17, 2013.

Rafah Crossing is the only gate out of Gaza. Travelling through it is unpleasant for Palestinians, as we have to wait long hours, be ready to be sent back, and be prepared to hear that we are not allowed to travel. Nowadays, Rafah is closed most of the time by Egypt, and this has left thousands of Palestinians stranded, many of them students and patients. The suffering of Palestinians, especially patients and students, merits the world's attention.

On Tuesday, June 11, after waiting ten hours and after having my passport stamped at the Palestinian side of the border, an Egyptian officer told the Palestinian liaison officer that the number of passengers who crossed that day was "enough," and that those who remained must wait until the next day.

The next day was reserved for those travelling to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah, thus the "next day" really meant Thursday. My flight was supposed to be on Thursday noon, so I had to change it for the third time. I managed to cross to Egypt on Thursday, June 13, 2013. My flight was the next day; I spent a night in Cairo before heading to the airport.

ARRIVING IN KUALA LUMPUR

I arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on June 15. I spent five days there, participated in some Palestine events, and visited a number of places. Malaysians are welcoming, hospitable, kind, and well aware of the situation in Palestine. I attended the book launch for *The Prisoners' Diaries*, which I co-translated. Held in Putra Jaya, the launch was attended by former Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Mahatir Mohammed. I enjoyed my time there, where I met my

friend Miko Peled, the author of *The General's Son: Journey of an Israeli in Palestine*, for the second time (the first time was in Gaza early last year).

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF PALESTINE, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Miko and I flew together to Auckland, New Zealand, to participate in the National Conference on Palestine, which was held in New Zealand for the first time in more than twenty years. I visited the National Museum in Auckland, where I saw my country's name written on the wall of the Museum. Fallen soldiers in Palestine were remembered. Palestine 1916–1918, Rafah, Gaza, and Beer Alsaba among other Palestinian towns were written on the wall. There was no Israel at that time. At that time, Palestine and Aotearoa were both under colonial rule by Britain, “the Great Empire” as it's usually described. Palestinians and Māori were subjected to the same brutality. Britain, again, was there to “share” their lands with them, to “enlighten” the backward people of Palestine and Aotearoa, to make them civilized, and most importantly, to make us feel grateful to the white man for doing all of this. There, I saw Māori performing their culture in their language, on their land. I felt associated with people whom I never before had met. I felt one of them. They were colonized by Britain, the white man of the empire back in 1840. There, I imagined how “backward” Palestinians and Māori looked in the eyes of their colonizers before being exposed to the “civilization of the white man.”



Speakers panel at the National Conference on Palestine held at Auckland Town Hall.

A nationwide Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement was established in Aotearoa. After a day full of workshops, put together by the organizing committee of the conference, which included the Palestine Human Rights Campaign, Kia Ora Gaza, and Students for Justice in Palestine at Auckland, Waikato, and Wellington universities, I spoke about my understanding of Māori solidarity with Palestine, the idea of their being shoulder to shoulder

with us, and never imposing any orientalist point of view on us (Aljamal, "Colonization"). I spoke about the necessity of taking action through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, initiated in 2005 by Palestinian civil society and large sectors of Palestinians, and how New Zealanders can be a part of this rapidly growing international movement to bring an end to Israeli apartheid. I urged them to support the BDS campaigns against G4S, Veolia, Super Fund, and Soda Stream, as a way to exert non-violent pressure on Israel to end its occupation of Arab lands, give Palestinians equal rights, and allow Palestinian refugees to return to their villages in present-day Israel.

THE STORY OF MY FAMILY

And there too, I spoke about the two Omars, my brothers, the older and the younger. The older, who was killed by Israel in 2004, and the younger, named after the older, who had to live in his shadow. I spoke about my great grandfather, who was killed in 1948 defending the village of Aqer, the biblical Kingdom of Ekron, where he belonged and was buried. I spoke about my grandfather on my mother's side, Ismail, a personal friend of the late Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat, who spent six years in Israeli jails. I spoke about my refugee camp, inhabited by 85,000 Palestinian refugees who were displaced in 1948 as a result of the ethnic cleansing that accompanied the creation of the state of Israel. I spoke about the smiles of the kids, despite the very crowded living conditions that allow them no spaces to play. As I spoke, I thought of the narrow alleys separating rusty houses, the nine square kilometers, and the ever-crowded "home." I spoke about the unfit-for-human-consumption water they drink; the sewage that makes it all the way from the border through the Gaza valley and



ends up in the Mediterranean. I spoke about death. I spoke about hope. I spoke about life and the future.

The first thing a Palestinian does, I claimed, is to compare life “here” and “there.” There, in Aotearoa, I saw the beauty of Mother Nature. There, life seemed different; people smile “a lot,” compared to refugees here. There, lakes, mountains, hills, which are mostly occupied by forty million sheep, are declaring the beauty of nature. The Pacific is so calm. The sun is so strong, and people seem to me so “happy.” There, there is no electricity shortage, no occupation, no borders, no tunnels, no polluted water, no limited landscape, no man-made loss, no fear of tomorrow or separation. I felt peace of mind. However, even as I experienced this sense of contrasts, so too I noted the similarities. The indigenous people of Aotearoa have suffered imprisonments, night raids, land confiscations, village demolitions, harassments, and institutionalized discrimination. And again, here and there, even when I looked upon such beauty in nature, I saw Britain and the ongoing effects of colonialism, where Māori are still struggling to keep their land and cultural heritage alive.

While there, I remembered my fellow refugees back home. The whole experience reminded me of how deprived we are. Occupation has stolen our beautiful environment and thrown us in flat refugee camps that look like concrete jungles.

There, I also saw Palestine in the faces of Palestinians I met at the Conference. I saw Palestine in the faces of Ahmed and Ibrahim, who were born in Iraq and whose families were kicked out of Palestine in 1948. They spoke about their village in 1948, Bit Ijzim, near Haifa. I met Naji, whose mother’s family lives in my refugee camp in Gaza. I met Nabih, the Palestinian chef from Shaab, who made us falafel—how tasty to eat falafel in the Diaspora! I met Shahd. I met Shaymaa and Hela. I met Mohamed. I met Omar. I met



Ahmed (left) and Ibrahim (right) from the village of Ijzim.

Tuma. I met Nadia. I saw Palestine in their eyes. They were eager to listen to me and talk about their stolen homeland. I met Ruth, Ali, Tali, Martin, Mike, Lois, Lauren, Natalie, Alastair, Don, and John, all working for Palestine, there, on the other side of the world.

SPEAKING TO THE MĀORI

Miko and I were interviewed for the Māori TV show *Native Affairs* (Lee-Harris). We spoke about occupation in Palestine, to the shock of Annabelle Lee-Harris, the journalist who interviewed us. There, Roger Fowler and his wife Lyn Fowler took care of me. My Auckland mum, Lyn, told me about the struggle of Māori in Aotearoa. It's different when you learn about it from Māori themselves. That's what owning narrative is.

ROTORUA: HEAVEN ON EARTH

Then Billy (Nabeel), the ever-helpful Palestinian, who has the most wonderful family, showed us around. Rotorua, the Māori word for “the two lakes,” was our destination once we finished the conference. It took us a four-hour drive with the extremely excited Billy. I was sitting in the back with Esther, his Mexican wife, Billy driving and talking to Miko, and the kids sleeping on the middle seat.

I was exposed to a new level of the beauty of Mother Nature. I enjoyed my time in the hot springs. It was a day to remember, with Billy. I watched the Haka, the traditional Māori dance. I ate and “sold” corns. “Yalla Ya Dura—I am selling corns,” I announced.



"This is a nice country, everything is available, why don't you stay here," Miko kept telling me jokingly.

We drove back to Auckland on the same day. Miko flew to the United States, and I stayed in Auckland. The next day, Roger and I drove to Hamilton, to the south of Auckland. Students for Justice in the Middle East at Waikato University organized a talk on Palestine (hats off to Shayma'a Arif, a strong Iraqi-Syrian activist who leads the group, for organizing the talk).



I drove to Hamilton Airport soon after I finished the talk. I said farewell to Roger and Hamilton. And the plane took off to Wellington.

WELLINGTON, NADIA, AND OMAR AGAIN

The long white cloud accompanied us all the way to Wellington. Omar waited for me at Wellington Airport with his very active little girl Reem. As I arrived, he was running after Reem, trying to catch her. Moments later, Richard Mayson arrived. Richard has a sense of humor very few men have in this world. I enjoyed every single moment with him. I learned a lot from him. We drove together to Omar's house where Serena, Omar's wife, was waiting for us.

Omar, Serena, and Reem were very warm and welcoming.

"Did you miss Yousef?," Omar asked Reem repeatedly after I stayed outside the house for two days. "NO! NO," she would respond. Omar's knowledge of the Middle East in general and Palestine in particular was remarkable. Despite leaving Morocco in 1996, he is still up to date with the Middle East's politics.

The view of the Pacific from Omar's house's window left me amazed. I felt a sense of peace, though it was interrupted by the sound of the planes taking off from the nearby Wellington Airport. They reminded me of F16s back home. They probably wanted to tell me that I couldn't enjoy the trip fully; there must be a reminder, an ugly one, of the occupation.

Wellington's activities and talks were to my satisfaction, thanks to the organizers there, namely Don Carson and Nadia Abu Shanab. Richard and Nadia took me around for meetings and talks. Nadia, who gave one of the most powerful speeches at the National Conference on Palestine in Auckland (Abu Shanab), has a strong character and a lovely smile. Richard was there to teach me to smile through his jokes and sarcasm. He was a Labour MP in the 70s and ended up working as a taxi driver.

Richard awakened my sense of humor, almost lost in Gaza after endless tragedies, and made me laugh, just as I cried many times, from my heart. And Nadia, who always makes me speechless, gave me hope that Palestine is still alive on the other side of the world. "It's time for concrete actions," she addressed the conference attendees, confidently and eloquently.

I started my first day by meeting the desk officer of Palestine/Israel in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I described the ordeal I had gone through to get the visa. She took many notes, which will contribute, I hope, to the adoption of a more "balanced approach when it comes to Palestine and Israel," as she put it. That day concluded with a talk, "Decolonizing Narrative: Solidarity, Voice and Social Media," that I gave in the Wellington City Center, hosted by Nadia of Students for Justice in Palestine.

Dr. Dougal McNeill, a lecturer on post-colonial literature, gave an amazing speech. He spoke my mind. The event was attended by dozens of activists.

I did a radio interview with Freedom Radio Aotearoa about Palestinian prisoners, to shed light on this important issue that very few people know about there.

I met some Palestinians in Wellington, too. Mohammad is a PhD student at Victoria Univer-

sity. He is a good cook, and staying with him reminded me of home. He introduced me to Joseph Azar, a Palestinian originally from Lod, in what is today Israel. They both grew up in Jordan. "Our neighborhood in Gaza is full of Lidawis," I told him, using the Arabic word for people who are originally from Lod city. I met Shahd El-Matary, a Palestinian from Jaffa, living



Mohammed (left) and Nadia (right) at the Wellington City Center.

in New Zealand. Palestine was all over the place. One does not realize the struggle of keeping identity in the Diaspora except after travelling abroad, and seeing how hard Palestinians have to fight to keep their mother tongue and culture.

SEEING SNOW FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE

My last stop in New Zealand was in Christchurch, where I saw snow for the first time in my life, thanks to Natalie and Lucas, who showed me around. “Canterbury in one day,” Lucas told me, concluding the ever-amazing trip with the ever-amazing driver, Nathalie, after they had shown me snow for the first time in my life.



I stayed with two “seniors,” Martin and his wife Lois. Both attended the conference in Auckland and visited Palestine. They were warm and welcoming as they affirmed the importance of my time in Aotearoa. “Edward Said, the great Palestinian intellectual, said Palestinians are always told about by Israelis or westerners. It is important to have a Palestinian voice,” they said to me.

I met Fathi Hassneiah, a Palestinian originally from Gaza. Over lunch, we talked about his efforts to raise awareness about the situation in Palestine. We talked about home. I could tell from his eyes how much he misses home, although he has never been there.

On the second day, I had an interview with CTV, a local TV station. Then I had a radio interview with Lois and Martin on Plains FM about Palestine. I was asked by a journalist if I felt worried. “Why would I? War

criminals should feel worried because they will be brought to justice one day. The occupiers and oppressors should feel worried, not me, not Palestinians, not the occupied and oppressed people,” I answered.

The Christchurch visit concluded with a talk I gave, which was attended by almost fifty people, including four Israelis. “We are sorry, we have relatives in Israel, but they don’t do such things,” one of them, who introduced himself as an Ashkenazi Jew, told me.



The questions raised and the discussions were fruitful too, thanks to the organizer Lauren, my new hero. Lauren started a new group called “Canterbury for Justice in Palestine,” to my thrill and satisfaction. “I am in,” shouted one of them.

At the talk, I met Rami Dawwas, a Palestinian from Gaza living in Christchurch. Soon after the talk, we had ice cream and coffee. His younger brother Emad joined us. Time for good-byes came, hugs.

BACK TO AUCKLAND

The next day, I flew back to Auckland. To my surprise, Maram, a Palestinian who I got to know through Facebook and had not met while I was there days ago, was waiting for me at the airport. Billy, his wonderful family, and the Fowlers were waiting for me too. Maram and I talked about Palestine, home. I enjoyed talking to a Palestinian about home from a perspective of someone who grew up outside Palestine. Maram enjoyed recalling the memories of Gaza years ago before she and her family left.

An iconic photo was taken at the airport, in which Maram held my books and Tame, Tawera Fowler's son, looked at me.



BACK TO MALAYSIA FOR MY TRANSIT VISA

On July 3, 2014, I flew back to Kuala Lumpur. Auntie Azrua, the most professional cook I have ever met in Malaysia, picked me up from the train station. I stayed in her house for three days. The warm reception I got made me feel at home. In addition to the many visitors and guests the family had, the food was another attraction!

Visiting the Egyptian Embassy was the first thing I did, thanks to Ahmed, a Palestinian from Gaza who took me around. I got my visa a day before Rafah was shut down. On my way to the airport, the Egyptian authorities closed the Rafah Crossing, the only way in and out of Gaza. As I arrived in Cairo, the Egyptian officers asked me and other Palestinians to wait for a few minutes. We were taken to the deportation room to join dozens of Palestinians who were stuck there. Hours later, all of us were deported back to the countries from which we had flown to Cairo.

BACK TO MALAYSIA AGAIN

After paying the airfare (even though the officer in Cairo had told me that the airline would cover it), I finally went to the Immigration Office in the airport. The Qatar Airline officer talked to the immigration officer and left. I was asked to sit and wait.

The officer called upon me. I answered several questions about deportation and staying in Malaysia. I got my passport back. I was allowed to enter the country. Satisfied and exhausted, I picked up my luggage. Again, Auntie Azrua came to the train station to pick me up. Faheem, her son, helped me put my luggage in the car. She drove to her home.

I slept.

I was stuck in Malaysia for twelve days, during which time I enjoyed the hospitality of Auntie Azrua in particular and the Malaysian people in general. Arabic food was present, thanks to the ever skilful and professional cook, Azrua.

This was the first Ramadan I ever spent away from my family. I missed Gaza so much. Gaza, during Ramadan, looks very special. Markets are full of Ramadan items that were missing in Malaysia.



GENERATOR IN KL

As I walked through a popular market along with Azrua and her youngest son Shakeel, an alarming sound was heard! The sound of a generator was coming out of the crowds who came to purchase food for breakfast. I recognized it. I felt at home, one more time.

I spent all twelve days at Auntie Azrua's house, got invited out by some friends, who did their best to reduce my frustration after I was sent back, after I was told I couldn't get home.

GOOD NEWS

Between July 5 and 17, 2013, I spent much of my time contacting the Palestinian Embassies in both KL and Cairo, asking them about the possibility of opening the borders. I was finally told that the border would be open for a few days. Airlines were given instructions not to allow any Palestinian to board any flight heading to Cairo. Opening the border meant nothing.

Once new instructions were given to airlines, I booked the first available flight on Egypt Airlines from KL to Cairo. It was Wednesday, July 17 at 10:00 pm. I arrived in Cairo by dawn the next day. The moment I arrived at the airport, authorities were taking Palestinians out of the deportation room to be deported to Gaza. Palestinians travelling in and out of Gaza through Egypt are taken in the "deportation bus," which is guarded by Egyptian security, and are sent directly to Cairo Airport, while their passports are kept by the officers. The conditions of the "deportation room" are appalling. Dozens of Palestinians have to stay there for long hours waiting for their flights. The room is too small to have many people, but those in need have no choice but to go through this experience. Those who are travelling back home have to wait until the border is open so that they are taken directly from Cairo to Rafah, and experience the same measures, the same suffering. I joined them. Thank God I arrived on time. Had I arrived minutes later I would have had to stay in the deportation room two more days, since the next day was Friday, which meant the Rafah Crossing would be shut.

Almost seven hours later, I arrived at Rafah. It took me three hours to cross to the Palestinian side, since the Egyptian arrivals hall was full of Palestinians who had been trapped in Saudi Arabia for eight days. Those Palestinian worshipers got stranded there because no plane was available to board back to Cairo. Palestinian authorities in Gaza and the West Bank exchanged accusations of responsibility.

SURPRISE

Because of my bad experience with deportation, I preferred not to inform my family I was arriving back in Gaza. As I arrived on the Palestinian side, I called my father and asked him to keep it a secret. Because I had been sent back the first time, I didn't want my family to worry about me, given the possibility of being sent back again or facing danger while travelling in the Sinai Desert, which has been witnessing unrest because of the situation in Egypt.

It took me five minutes to leave the Palestinian side of the crossing into Gaza. Forty minutes later, I arrived at my family's house in Alnusierat refugee camp. I started pushing my luggage into the house. As I went back to pay the driver, my mother saw my luggage! She started running towards me in shock and surprise. We hugged each other. I had returned home.

I thought getting back to Gaza and staying for two months until my MA program started in Malaysia was a good idea. Rafah Crossing proved me wrong. I got back to Malaysia on October 10, 2013, after weeks of struggling with borders. In my article "Waiting in Gaza, where nothing makes sense,"

you can read the full story about how I got stuck for two months trying to get back for my school.

This ordeal Palestinians have to face when we travel continues to be the same, and it gets worse every day. To Palestinians, experiencing all of this is "normal," for we were born under such circumstances and they have not yet changed. It worries me that we live in a state of normalcy with such extremely abnormal conditions. To quote the famous Palestinian novelist Ibrahim Nasrallah in his mind-blowing novel *The Time of White Horses*, "It worries me that a noble idea like freedom cannot be realized except through the beauty of your death rather than the beauty of your life. It worries me that we became a chain to a heaven that is under our feet. It saddens me when a mother of a martyr gets holier when she gets another son of hers killed."

When injustice is the law, Palestinians grow up to cherish the old memories; to those displaced and separated, a picture or a letter may mean the elixir of life, the irreplaceable love, the memory. In Palestine, as we seek beauty under the ever-ugly occupation, we grow up to cherish what many people across the globe consider normal. But to us, it is the irreplaceable love, the legacy of occupation and injustice, that makes us perceive things differently, that makes us hold on to our memories, lest we forget, lest we betray.



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