A Visit to the Old City of Hebron

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In the 1980s when I was still involved in defending land expropriation cases before Israeli courts, I used to make weekly trips to Hebron. I would leave Ramallah at eight in the morning and be in Hebron by nine. Now it is a different story. Only Israelis can get from Jerusalem to Hebron in fifteen minutes driving through two tunnels dug in the hill underneath the Palestinian city of Beit Jalla. Palestinians are barred from these. They have to circle around expanded Jerusalem going through Wadi Al Nar (the wadi of Fire) where they have to wait for hours at one of the notorious army barriers, called the Container Checkpoint.

Last spring the Israeli Minister of Education Gideon Sa’ar, made a plan for Israeli students to visit the Old City of Hebron. The veteran Israeli journalist Gideon Levy compared these to the annual visits Israeli students make to Auschwitz, which in his view “bring back thousands of teens who have learned nothing about the danger of fascism, who have heard nothing about morality, humanity and the slippery slope on which a dangerous regime might put down a complacent society. Just more and more blind faith in strength, xenophobia, fear of the other and inflamed passions.” He feared that in visiting the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron “during the visit, a curfew will be imposed on the last Palestinians left in the neighborhood…no one will show them what is around them. No one will tell them what happened to the thousands of people who lived near the tomb.”

After an absence of many years I decided to visit the Old City of Hebron. I did so with some trepidation. The Jewish settlement in the heart of the Old City where 400 settlers live under the protection of 1500 Israeli soldiers has a reputation for violence and irrational behavior.

The Old City of Hebron is one of the best preserved Mameluke cities. It was planned according to Islamic tradition and customs. The public spaces were a variety of winding streets and piazzas leading to semi public alleys, often passing through archways underneath dwellings,
to semi private courtyards, sometimes topped by a cupola, leading in turn to private dwellings. It was divided into quarters, each referred to as a hara or mahalla, giving residents a sense of security and belonging. These quarters are traversed by a network of relatively wide main streets leading to public squares, worship places, government buildings, schools and souks. These consist of two or more rows of shops, with a stone platform in front of each for display purposes. Each two rows are separated by a stone-paved street, which was often covered by an arcade with openings set in its roof to let in the sunshine and allow for air circulation. Ceilings are usually vaulted or cylindrical, while roofs are flat with a slight tilt for rain water evacuation. The Market square includes a set of linear bazaars along both sides of the streets. Alleys link the piazza to the main road. Each market has a gated entrance, which would be locked at night and guarded by watchmen paid by the shop owners. For many years it was the commercial center that served a population of 220,000, including Hebron and its surrounding villages.

Market Street in Hebron (Photograph by Léopold Lambert 2010)

Until 1987, Hebron’s old town, where 35,000 Palestinians lived, was a major tourist attraction. What I saw on my visit was a deserted city with eighty percent of shops closed. Some of their shut doors were overgrown with climbers of various sorts. In most parts, over 75 percent of the houses had been evacuated. I walked through its attractive souks, and all I could see were the occasional settlers scuttling about and Israeli soldiers, heavily armed, prowling the streets and manning the checkpoints.

When I got to the gold market, I could see that the gates that had once secured it were now open. I looked up and saw a netting overhead. It was put there to protect the occasional passerby from the missiles of rubbish the settlers who were living on top throw down on
the street. Conspicuous amongst the refuse was a plastic doll, prostrated over the netting, once a play thing that must have belonged to an innocent child, now used as a projectile to frighten and insult those Palestinians who might be walking in the alley, and drive them away. Who would venture here to buy gold from a souk where they might be injured by dirty objects thrown down from the windows of the Jewish settlers living above. Without work, the gold shops, like hundreds of others, began to relocate, until none of them were in this market. I moved carefully, lest the netting with all the debris it was carrying collapse over my head.

But how did it come to this? How did this once vibrant city come to be practically deserted? The deceit began in the spring of 1968, a year after Israel occupied the West Bank when a group of supposed “Swiss tourists” under the leadership of Rabbi Moshe Levinger booked into Hebron’s Park Hotel. This was the beginning of the Jewish settlement inside Arab Hebron. In 1970 the Israeli government gave permission for the establishment of Kiryat Arba north of Hebron. Then in spring 1979 settlers occupied Hebron’s Hadassah Building. Menahim Begin, the then prime minister said “there will be no squatting and no seizing of houses in Hebron, and there will be none in Tel Avi either. they have to be expelled.” But expelled they were not and their numbers increased. The “three islands of Jewish revivalism in the heart of the city,” were described by the journalist. David Richardson, in an article in the Jerusalem Post in 1983, as “the source and training ground for the most uncompromising Israeli drive to reclaim all of Judea and Samaria” (i.e. the West Bank).

The recent history of the city is marred by a number of bloody incidents culminating in the pre–dawn massacre of 25 February 1994 when the settler from the nearby Kiryat Arba, Baruch Goldstein, killed twenty–nine Muslim worshipers and wounded more than one hundred others in the Ibrahimi Mosque.

Over the past decade, the city endured one of the longest most devastating curfews imposed by the Israeli army on any city in the occupied West Bank, lasting for a total of more than 377 days, including a period when it ran non-stop for 182 days with short breaks to enable residents to obtain provisions. During more than five hundred days, the Israeli army imposed a curfew that lasted for a few hours up to an entire day. The justification given for all this extreme action was “security.” The real reason was to help the settlers expand and connect their three settlement points together and with the nearby settlement of Kiryat Arba.

As a result of all these actions, the Old City of Hebron, a vibrant centre for trade and commerce serving a population of 220,000 Palestinians from Hebron and its surrounding villages, has come to be
known as H2, home for 400 illegal Jewish settlers living in 3 points each comprised of a building or small group of adjacent buildings traversing the city and connected to each other by a contiguous road open only to their traffic. This strip, stretching from the Kiryat Arba settlement in the east to the Jewish cemetery in the west, is separated from the rest of the city, and the army controls and restricts entry of Palestinians to it.

H2 is an extreme case of an Israeli settlement. The people living here are not representative of the Israeli public. They are more orthodox, more extreme, more callous and in fact despised by most Israelis. But without the support of the institutions of the state their zealotry would have gotten them nowhere. It is the state that offers them services, subsidies and protection. No defensive claim has ever been made of the military significance of this settlement. Its right to exist is based purely on a religious claim. This is the city where the tomb of the Patriarch can be found. Because of this singular fact the city, as it exists, this ancient beautiful world heritage, must be destroyed and replaced by one exclusively for these orthodox Jews who believe they have a God-given right to “return” to it.

In this sense H2 is a microcosm of Israel itself. Until today Israeli politicians appear to be incapable of conceiving of another way of life for their country in the region of the Middle East than as a fortress state with a strong army living by the gun in an area of millions of Arabs with whom Israel makes no effort to construct bridges, communicate peacefully, learn their language, read and enjoy their poetry and integrate amongst them. The only language Israel knows is that of force, power and violence.

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