



Making the Humanitarian Primitive: Time and Violence on the Eternal Frontier

Peter Lagerquist

Along the route of the West Bank's main north-west trunk road there is a passage of road some 20 minutes south of Hebron where the country's roiling sweep of silver olive groves begins to thin out, and the land grows noticeably more arid. As you descend the penultimate ridgeline before the southern border the concrete carapace of an army post floats by, tight up on a hardscrabble village where dusty farmer's children scatter fearfully on sighting a car with yellow Israeli license plates. At this point clusters of shacks and tents begin to appear on the surrounding slopes, some nearly two kilometers adrift of the shoulder. As you progress past turnoffs for thinly spaced Israeli settlements, red-tiled roofs and agro-industrial cowsheds poised on the surrounding hilltops, these shacks slide in and out of view behind folds of scrubland, until a left turn past the settlement of Susyia takes you up to the edge of the frontier in the southern West Bank.

Warning in Fire Zone 918. Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.



Sighting from the ruins of Kurietein village on the edge of the West Bank's south Hebron hills, across Israeli Defense Forces Firing Zone 918, to the development town of Arad in Israel's southern Naqab desert. *Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.*

Israel's Barrier snakes out of the western horizon here, fence and tarmac separating a last cluster of settler tract housing from a welter of native sheds, before finally dead-ending in a small terminal, comprising two booths straddling the road and a clump of concrete barracks. Looking east across unfenced hills rolling clear down to the Dead Sea one may have the feeling of peering over the brink of another world, and if you read power only in what it constructs, in concrete and steel, you might briefly have the impression that the hold of the occupation somehow attenuates here. If so, you would

be advised to recall those encampments now long vanished from view, bereft of a single place sign, or exit road.

One way to describe the hills wedged in between Route 317 and the West Bank's southern border is to say that they cover approximately four square kilometers, yet can take as long as two hours to traverse. Returning from a 2007 fact-finding visit to the West Bank, South African lawyer John Dugard, then the UN's Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, noted that Israel's segregation of West Bank roads, reserving one network for Jewish colonists, and a more tortuous one for Palestinians, had pushed the logic of separate-and-unequal to a conclusion undreamed of even during his country's apartheid era. Dugard was widely pilloried in the US press for these comments, though he had in fact not told the worst of it. In most parts of the West Bank, there at least *are* Palestinian roads.

Most foreign visitors to the area also known in Arabic as Masafir Yatta are invariably struck by the barrenness of the landscape and the poverty of its local inhabitants. For this reason the area is often evoked as being both physically remote and as belonging to a different time – as seeming to hover, in fact, outside of time. To a *New York Times* journalist who reported from the southern hills in the summer of 2008, the conflict here acquires “a distinctly biblical feel, like the flimsy tent encampments and dank caves in which some local Palestinian farming families dwell.”

The *Time's* interest in the area was occasioned by a video that had begun circulating on the internet that summer. Brief and shaky, it depicts Israeli settlers attacking a local family, armed for their own part only with a digital camera on loan from the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, as part of a ‘Shooting Back’ video documentation initiative. In chronicling the primitive ways of these sudden cineastes – “there is no electricity. Water is drawn from a well, milk is kept in sheepskins, bread is baked in an outdoor stone oven” – the drama mined by the *Times* is not so much one of people clashing as of eras colliding. Indeed, so mired in her mise-en-scene is the journalist that she never thinks to ask the obvious question. Why do these people live in “dank caves”? The curious thing about the south Hebron hills – its primitive mystique so to speak - is that no one else does either.

Like many other West Bank communities, residents of Masafir Yatta have long suffered attempts by Israeli settlers and the IDF to shunt them off their land. Setting the area apart in some respects is both the scale of these attempts and the diverse coalition of local and Israeli activists, rights groups, and international organizations which have mobilized against them. Uniting many of these groups is their shared investments in a distinctly conservationist advocacy narrative, which posit as a badge of ethnographic distinction local living conditions otherwise legible as an index of hardship. “In the southernmost West Bank,” writes B'Tselem, “some one thousand Palestinians have maintained the way of life of their ancestors: living in caves and earning a living from farming and livestock.” “Families forced to move away from southern Hebron lose their traditional lifestyle and means of support,” argues the UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA).

Something of what is missing from these narratives could be teased from the

media's treatment of the video captured here in June 2008. Broadcast a few days later by a number of news networks, its shaky, hand-held footage shows four masked settlers with truncheons in hand approaching by foot across a parched field. An older woman hovers in the foreground, and when her husband steps into view the settlers hurl themselves at him. The woman cries out and the camera begins to veer wildly. There is a glimpse of someone on the ground; truncheons coming down, screaming. Not surprisingly, it is in that brief final blur of violence that media found pathos. The *New York Times* article is accompanied by a video still of the masked settler, club poised to strike.

Those who watched the video carefully, however, might have noted from its time track that some 30 seconds had been redacted from the feed, disappearing the time following the appearance of the settlers and the first blow. Because the camera shakes wildly the resulting lurch in perspective is almost imperceptible. From a forensic point of view this edit may have been inconsequential; in television time it would have felt like years. Precisely for that reason, however, those lost seconds also point to a divergence in the way things could be told here. This divergence is the difference between the drama of something sudden and almost immediately lost from view, and the chronicle of a tragedy foretold. Scroll back in the video to those men approaching across the field. Approaching. Still approaching. As if they had all the time in the world.

Consider the family, trapped in frame.

Excavating That “Biblical Feel”

The first reliable map of the south Hebron hills to appear in the modern era was published in 1883, being one of 26 sheets included in the *Survey of Western Palestine* produced that year by the British-based Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF). Copies of the *Survey* can be found in the Hebrew University Library in Jerusalem, showing the names and locations of each of the hamlets in the area, the surrounding wadis, some of the hills. Over a century later, these names appear neither on Israeli road maps nor on the first maps of the area produced by the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Planning. Cartographically, Masafir Yatta became over the intervening period a *terra nullius*, the result of a process of effacement inaugurated with publication of that first map, and the concomitant manufacture of what would in later years be described as that “distinctly biblical feel.”

Founded in 1865 under the patronage of Queen Victoria and notables in the Church of England hierarchy, the PEF charged itself with “investigating the archaeology, geography, geology and natural history of Palestine”—a province of the Ottoman Empire which was then garnering growing European attention. Closely allied with imperial interests, the PEF was to play some part in furthering such interest. The British War Office seconded a succession of officers to carry out the organization's survey work on the doorstep of a weakening Porte. Half a century later, as World War I came to the Levant, the maps that Claude Conder, Horatio Kitchener and T. E.

Lawrence had prepared would unlock the southern gates of Palestine for the British army, moving up through the Naqab desert to take the Ottoman garrison in Bir al-Saba—today’s Beersheva—by surprise. Long before that, however, their ground had been prepared also in other ways.

In 1875, London publishing house George Phillip and Son published Lt. Claude Conder’s *Tent Work in Palestine*, an account of his surveying in the Holy Land that tapped deeply into a burgeoning colonial curiosity among contemporary English readers. The book was part of series on “The World’s Great Explorers and Explorations,” also including titles such as *Livingstone and the Exploration of Central Africa*, *Mungo Park and the Niger* and *John Franklin and the North West*—a region where the US surveyor appointed to America’s brief and abortive answer to the PEF, the Palestine Exploration Society, had himself worked, surveying newly pacified Indian Territory. As was the case for the PES, interest in Conder’s bestselling account was leavened by religious curiosity, famously both satirized and reinvested in by Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*, which married the thrill of exploration to the fantasy of faith.

In mapping the Holy Land, a region which unlike central Africa had otherwise already been well-charted by Europeans, the PEF sought to recoup its terrain for the religious imagination, retrieving the original map of the Bible from the place-names of a predominantly Arab and Muslim country. The idea, as American-Palestinian anthropologist Nadia Abu El Haj puts it, was that “contemporary Palestine would ultimately be brought, through mapping, back into a historical geography they already knew.” For the contemporary colonial imagination, however, it was not only geography that needed reanimating in Palestine—a land which like the rest of the non-European world was then considered to have been detached from history—but time itself.

In the organization’s *Quarterly Statements*, essays on “The Royal Canaanite and Levitical City of Debir,” “The Empire of the Hittites” and “Scenes from David’s Outlaw Life,” accordingly commingled frequently with letters on the subject of the “Colonization of Palestine,” in which a diverse array of contributors debated the future development of the country. “The land of Palestine is extremely productive, and were colonies planted here as they are in Australia, New Zealand and the United States, there is no reason to doubt their success,” wrote John. B Hay, former United States Consul General in Jaffa, in 1879. Though contemptuous of the traditional “pauper immigration” of religious Jews to the country, many of whom were Orientals, Hay rendered in vivid detail how the importation of a sturdier European stock “would be a valuable means of regenerating” the country.

Languishing as they were outside of history, Palestine’s native Arabs were not likely contenders for such projects. Yet that very attribute also marked them as subjects of a new proto-ethnographic tradition, rooted in a widespread European belief that Palestine Arabs had not only preserved the place names of biblical sites in their daily speech, but that they were themselves living links to ancient lifestyles. In retracing King David’s peregrinations across the southern Hebron hills, fleeing the wrath of Saul, Conder’s own dispatches sought reference in “the custom of the modern Bedawi, whose tents in winter are on the sheltered plains by the Dead Sea shore, but in



View from Jinba into Naqab. Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.



View into Naqab from Masafir Yatta. Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.

summer on the hills at the verge of the cultivated districts.”

In re-imagining the land-and lifescapes of Palestine, the archeological optic framing the narrative of the *Survey maps – Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography and Archaeology* – was suggestively prophetic. The sites that the PEF surveyors passed through were living communities, replete with people, sights and sounds. This is an excerpt about the south Hebron hills taken from the archaeological section of the *Memoir*:

Khurbet al Fekhit (L x). — Traces of ruins, and a cave

Khurbet Jedeibeh (L y). — Traces of ruins

Khurbet Kueiwis (L x). — Traces of ruins

It is only occasionally, in lines like “there are many rock cisterns all round *the village* [author’s italics]” that the reader is reminded of a living landscape hovering over this

vast necropolis, if only as an ethereal trace.

It was a way of reading the land that deconstructed as it reconstructed, familiar also from other contemporary Palestine pilgrims. Fond of making meaningful displays of their guns when encountering Palestinians, Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* had patience for the natives mainly when they were felt to evoke biblical stock characters. Mostly, they liked to lunge straight at the hard foundations of Biblical mythology. Twain notes several times that they had a habit of picking apart the places they visited. Having arrived at a Galilee mosque, located an apocryphal Biblical site, "we entered," he writes "and the pilgrims broke specimens from the foundation walls, though they had to touch, and even step, upon the 'praying carpets' to do it." It was the dawn of a new era of discovery, at the peak of which Conder could report that the PEF had "recovered more than three quarters of the Bible names," and were "thus able to say with confidence that the Bible topography is a genuine and actual topography." In that process of recovery, however, much else had also begun to be lost.

Once Were Villagers

In 2004, a man old enough to remember what had otherwise been forgotten about the south Hebron hills took me on a walk around the hamlet of Jinba — a dozen tarpaulin tents and sheep pens scattered over the foot of a craggy, mile-long escarpment overlooking the Naqab desert. "We owned all of that land, all the way to Arad, and the Dead Sea," he said, pointing out across the lower-lying hills, now part of Israel. From a distance they look all but empty. The Jahhalin Bedouin from whom the people here say they once acquired their fields are now gone; most were expelled to Jordan in the wake of Israel's establishment in 1948, some eventually shunted to unrecognized villages and government "development towns" in the northern Naqab. The others live on the margins of a rubbish dump outside the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim, east of Jerusalem.

What happened on this side of the border has been taking more time, and it was that time we were searching for. Trailed by curious children and scurrying fowl, the man led me around the encampment. The downy grass that briefly covers the high Naqab in spring had long ago withered and dust puffed up around our feet as we picked our way around the tents. "Here," he would say, sometimes stomping lightly, and I would bend down to look, readying my notebook. Sometimes, what he had pointed to was only a slight indentation in the ground, other times shallow pits filled in with gravel, a meaningful regularity in that pile of stone. Sometimes there were just his words to go by. Finally we came on the remains of a standing wall, the arch emptiness of a window still set in its masonry.

One historical narrative of Masafir Yatta is that the ancestors of its present-day inhabitants first settled the area in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and that they were farmers from the village of Yatta, today a large town dominating the southern reaches of the Hebron mountains. Their descendants will show you



Jinba. Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.



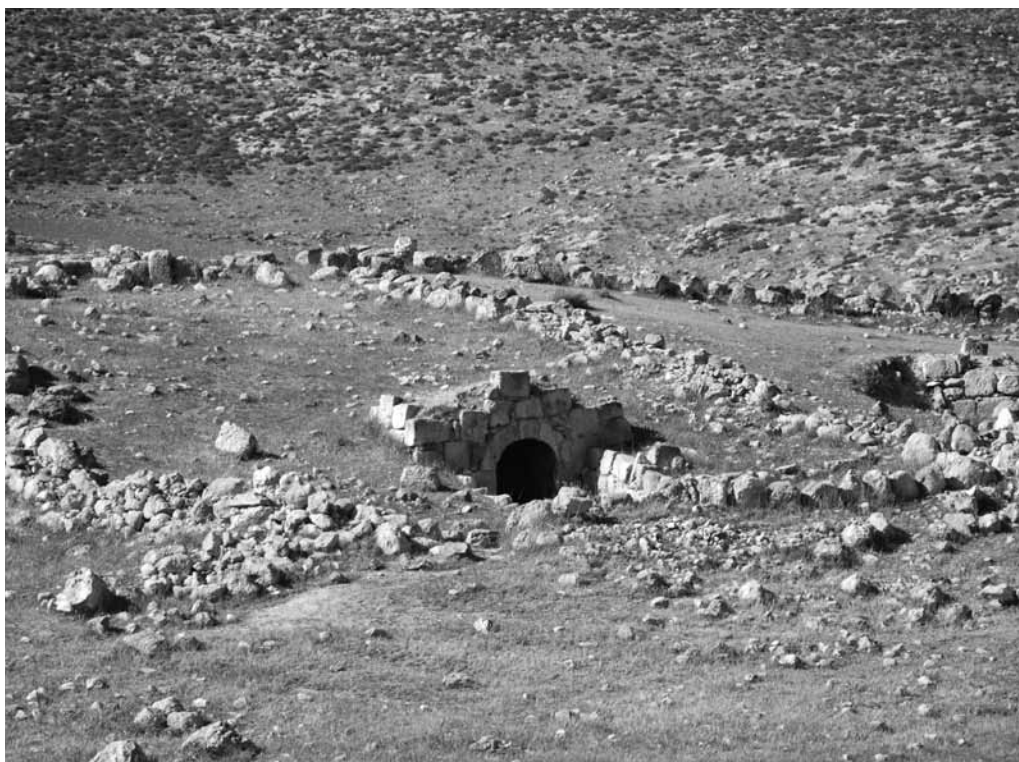
Jinba mosque. Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.

Ottoman-era tax receipts and sometimes ownership documents, proving their title to some stretch of land. It is thought that the migration occurred because of pressure on existing land reserves around Yatta; in many instances, it was of a seasonal variety, the farmers setting up camp on their lands in wintertime, sheltering with their families in tents and caves, which they successively built out or improved with stonework.

The lands they settled enjoy only modest rainfall, marking the cultivable margin of the desert frontier, but in their own fashion, with the means that were then at their disposal, the pioneers from Yatta made the desert bloom. After Israel's conquest of the West Bank, wage labor in the Jewish economy came to supplement and supplant pastoral livelihoods, and as of the second Intifada, the aspirational horizons and lives of the generation then coming of age encompassed university educations and professional careers. The ensuing closing of the Israeli labor market to Palestinian labor has preserved an important niche for agriculture in Masafir Yatta, however, revolving around shepherding and rain-fed cultivation of grains, pulses, fodder and olives. In that respect, you might think that little has changed over the past two centuries, barring the addition of tractors and plows. You would be wrong, perhaps not surprisingly so. In the historical accounting of things around here, it is usually the middle bit that's the problem.

A couple of kilometers east of Jinba, similarly situated below the ridge line of the Hebron mountains and the 1967 Green Line, lie a collection of ruins – the remains of modest houses and small built-out caves with masonry doorways still peeking out from underneath folds of terrain. The site is just a hundred yards or so off the road that leads down from the terminal in Israel's Barrier and continues into the towns of the Naqab. Masked as they are by a low rise of land, it is easy to miss the remains of the village of Kureitein. Standing on its ruins, however, you may sight across the military firing range that the Israeli army operates here, marked by a lone rusting tank and concrete slabs spray-painted with warnings to passing shepherds, all the way to the tips of the high-rises of the Israeli town of Arad, and contemplate the alternate future of Masafir Yatta.

“Khurbet el Kureitein (K y). — Traces of a large ruin and caves. Apparently a large town.” The future excavated by the PEF was once a settlement on the road connecting Bir al-Saba' with Hebron and Jerusalem, also founded by migrants from Yatta. According to the people of Jinba, it was destroyed by an Israeli raid just before the 1967 war, a date they remember well, because 13 houses in Jinba were also bombed, Kureitein's fate almost becoming their own. Today, the story of Kureitein endures largely as a folk tale among the people of the Naqab and the south Hebron hills. It is a place about which there is otherwise very little information: on the website Palestine Remembered, which catalogues interviews and information about Palestinian communities destroyed over the course of the conflict, no entry exists under that name. Kureitein was testimony to a diversity of ways of understanding the south Hebron hills that has since been ironed out of contemporary discourse, a diversity of pasts, as well as possible futures. For while it may be the case that the early migration to the area was seasonal, and that those who lived here sheltered in caves, in improving these



Ruins of Kureitein. *Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.*



Ruins of Kureitein Mazadot Yehudaon Hill. *Source: Peter Lagerquist/Emilio Dabed, March 2008.*

shelters, adding walls and, finally, fashioning them into houses, a tipping point was in some places reached. Today, transcripts of such development can be found in nearby towns like al-Karmil, closer inland to Yatta, where the old houses, often surmounting the original cave, serve as feed storage units or animal shelters for families who live above them in modest, but otherwise modern concrete houses. Further south, however, time would not go forward.

Aerial photographs of Jinba dating from 1945 to the present era chronicle the deconstruction of a community and the incipient emergence of a shanty-people. The first image shows numerous houses, clustered together and surrounded by extensive orchards outlined in neat rows. The old man taking me around the hill said that there were some 30 to 40 houses then—many built out of natural caves—as well as two shops and a mosque. In the next photograph, taken in the 1960s around the time of the border raids, the trees are gone, along with a number of the houses. In the final image it is still barely possible to make out a community, some rudimentary structures among the rock and gravel of the otherwise barren frame. In the intervening period, Israel had conquered the West Bank, and a few years later, in the 1970s, established Fire Zone 918 on the lands of Kureitein and Jinba. There, the Israeli air force and army would continue to reenact a conflict that had begun well before 1967 and was now to enter its redemptive phase. The *Innocents* had returned, this time with bulldozers.

Walking me across his hilltop 40 years later, the old man from Jinba had little trouble tallying the names of the people to whom the rubble had belonged, most of them being his uncles or cousins, many of whom were still living here among their own ruins, now telling the history of their community through epochs of particularly extensive demolitions: “1982–1984,” “before the 1980s” or “the early 2000s.” Because of intermittent repairs, a single structure had sometimes taken time to erase, requiring several demolitions over many years. Sometimes it had become something else. “We built that from the remains of the house,” he said, pointing to a rocky poultry pen covered with tarpaulin and chicken wire. We spent the better part of an afternoon on the hillside and during this time I made 32 entries in my notebook; testimony to what would have been houses, in what was once a village, now mounds of stone and sand seeking a form.

Old Facts on the Ground

Danny Tirza is a congenial man, with the persuasive, pedagogical diction of a high-school teacher, little betraying his reputation as a champion of Israel’s settlement project, and the self-described architect of its West Bank Barrier. Unlike his avowedly secular father he had been religious in his youth, he said, with a penchant for Bible history, but it was not until he joined the army that this fascination had found purchase. “It was in 1981,” he recalls, “and I was sent to settle the Nahal [the settlement division of the Israeli army] camps in the Hebron area. There were no settlements in the area then. So I came to the commander of the Nahal. He said to me you will have a tour

in a helicopter with the Director General of the Ministry of Defense. When I came to the airport, he was there also, and said, ‘I want to come too.’” The Director General’s name was Ariel Sharon.

The colonization of the southern hills began over a decade into Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Sharon, who that year went from being Agriculture Minister to Defense Minister in the government of Menachem Begin, was its chief architect. As in many other locations around the West Bank, settlements were established on sites commandeered by the settlement brigade of the Israeli army. The mythical cartography from which they worked had been made legible long beforehand, however. “We talked about Jewish history,” recalled Tirza of his time with Sharon, “the archaeological sites, the Bible stories everywhere. I was very knowledgeable about that.” And like everyone else he had a favorite story. “There was the one about King David, the time that he was fleeing King Saul....”

In narrating what happened in the years following that helicopter-borne reconnaissance, one could, in taking one community as an example, say that the hamlet of Susiya, situated north of Route 317, had the misfortune of being close to some Byzantine ruins made familiar from the *Western Survey of Palestine*. In 1971, a team of Israeli archaeologists decided to conduct excavations there, which unearthed the remains of an ancient synagogue. This is what followed:

... the settlement of Susiya was established in 1983 about two kilometers southwest of the synagogue. The area was declared as a National Park in 1985 and the community was evicted from their original caves in 1986. The evicted Palestinians settled in an area south of the original village. When the IDF built an army base near the synagogue in the late 1990s, the villagers found themselves trapped between the base and the settlement. A series of demolitions took place beginning in 2001 prompting a series of legal proceedings.

This paragraph is culled from a brief on “vulnerable communities in the south Hebron hills,” prepared by the West Bank UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and is easily obtained by any journalist seeking information about the area. It is necessary to mention this because in June, the *New York Times*, in covering the videotaped attack on the village of Susiya, would tell the same story as follows: “Ancient Susiya contains the ruins of a synagogue dating from the Roman period, attesting to a long and robust Jewish presence here. Jewish settlers started moving in again after Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967.”

It was not just the *Times* that developed a habit of pasting over the middle bit. As Zionist history was welded together across the southern hills, with new roads, houses, electricity pylons, water pipes, and Egged bus routes, something very different happened out in Masafir Yatta. Between 1985 and 1987, the IDF demolished 40 caves, 20 houses and one mosque in the place known once, and yet again, as “Khubbet Janbah (L y). — Traces of ruins. Foundations and heaps of stones.” Government

policy and the vigilance of local settlers ensured that it would remain thus. In 1991, Jinba and its surrounding hamlets invested some 120,000 shekels to pave a road that would connect them with Yatta. Settlers closed the road the following year and remaining work was aborted.

The 1993 and 1994 Oslo accords afforded the Palestinians new autonomy in the urban population centers of the Occupied Territories, but left most of the West Bank as a specially designated zone – Area C – in which the IDF maintained full control, and where Palestinian construction required permission from the army’s civil administrative branch. Following a tightening of military closures on the area after 2001, erstwhile 30 minute trips from Jinba to Yatta began taking up to two hours, requiring the use of a tractor. As a result, such trips were made more rarely. Needing to keep their children in school, or maintain jobs to keep them in university some families took up more permanent residence in Yatta; families dispersed, communities attenuated, and became more isolated.

“Yasser Arafat used to call me Abu Kharita, Father of Maps,” Tirza likes to tell journalists. “It is a joke because there is another Arabic word which sounds similar which means ‘nonsense.’” What this was to mean for the residents of Masafir Yatta would be inflected by the work of another kind of anthropologist-cartographer; a young Israeli reservist who while serving in the southern hills in the 1980s had conducted research for a master’s thesis on the ethnography of the area. Published in 1985 by the Israel Defense Forces, which had by then taken an anthropological interest in the area, or perhaps only thought it worthwhile that someone did, Ya’acov Havacook’s *Life in the Hebron Caves* featured an English bibliography composed nearly entirely of PEF *Quarterly Statements* reports, as well as contemporary travel classics like Robert Barr’s *The Unchanging East*. Assured of its staying power, the text would gather dust on the shelves for the next 15 years. At this time, however, its readership picked up.

A Unique Way of Living

In October 1999, the Israeli army evacuated the entire population of Masafir Yatta over the span of a few days; men, women and children were herded onto trucks, some 700 people in all; caves were sealed and belongings and sheep packed off, some dumped as far the northern Jordan valley. “We had to pay 50 shekels per head to ship them back,” said the old man in Jinba. Not since the villages of the West Bank’s Latrun salient were emptied after the 1967 war had so many people been forced from their homes in the West Bank, and if the army had had its way, the outcome would have been equally permanent. Yet though further evacuations were carried out in November, the residents kept sneaking back across the hills. “The soldiers said we are like rats,” related the old man, grinning. By then, however, another appellation was also swinging into fashion. The “cave dwellers” of the south Hebron hills had emerged into the public light.

The first petition to allow the residents to return to the area was filed on behalf of four local families by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) in January 2000, and never has the road back to a dark, dank place been paved with better intentions. ACRI's lead lawyer for the petition, an Israeli Jew of self-described Arab descent, she had "been involved in the issue of cultural rights inside Israel," and was seeking to humanize her clients in a way that would resonate with the Israeli Supreme Court. "Israelis never think of Palestinians as having culture," she said – a form of condescension she had herself long suffered.

Going by the record, the odds were stacked against ACRI. Lawyers and human rights organizations had been petitioning the Israeli Supreme Court for decades after Israel began settling the West Bank, and the fact that some 400,000 settlers had nevertheless been implanted there by this time, expropriating vast tracts of land, was ample testimony to the court's historic leanings. According to ACRI's lawyer, the ethnographic argument "was a decoration" on the core of the petition, grasping for whatever straws were on offer. "There are so many violations, you want your case to succeed, so you have to make it special." The choice of what narrative to join in this plea would ultimately prove consequential, however. Recalled the lawyer: "We could have said 'some Palestinians were deported' or 'look, a poor people, living in caves.'"

Legal proceedings ensued, involving cases also brought by other lawyers and rights organizations. In expelling the residents of Masafir Yatta, the government argued that they were clearing an area that had been a closed military zone since Fire Zone 918 was established. The petitioners were not permanent residents, but lived there on a seasonal basis, and could therefore be evicted. Ya'acov Havacook's *Life in the Hebron Caves*, which came to serve as a standard reference for the legal debate, proved of limited use in combating this logic. "It wasn't so good for us, because he wrote that they only lived there part of the year," recalled the ACRI lawyer. "But what was great is that you could see that the people were there from before; they didn't just arrive there two years ago." Meanwhile, however, the affirmation of the residents of Masafir Yatta as objects of ethnographic interest was also to strike a deeper resonance.

In the tradition established by Conder and earlier Bible travelers in Palestine, a number of prominent Zionist figures had during the early years of Jewish settlement in Palestine picked up the notion that its rural Arabs might be living links to Old Testament lifestyles, as discussed by amongst others Palestinian historian Salim Tamari. Early speculations that the country's fellahin were indeed direct descendants of ancient Israelites, advanced perhaps most prominently by Yitzhak Ben Zvi and David Ben Gurion, were ultimately ideologically unsustainable. Attendant to the post 1948 dismantling of the Arab urban modernities of Jaffa and Haifa, however, the country's remaining Palestinian citizens were extensively re-interpolated as ethnic "Israeli Arabs," and, as rustic backdrops to Israeli tourist brochures or nationalist commemorative events, found a fraught niche in the Zionist imaginary not as competing claimants to Israel's exegetical landscape, but as features of it.

As the battle over the south Hebron hills spilled over into the court of Israeli public opinion, local residents amply spoke to such imaginaries, explicating the emotional

significance of the caves for journalists and their organic embeddedness in the land. “In the summer, it’s as cool in here as if it were air-conditioned, and in winter it is warm. I’m used to this, and I’m not comfortable anywhere else,” explained one Mr. Hamamdeh “who raises sheep and goats and farms land in the valleys among the hills,” to the New York Times. “My grandfather opened this cave... was born here. My children were born here. My wife gave birth here. This was our hospital and clinic. If we were sick, we went out to the field, collected herbs and made medicine.”

Many liberal lights in Israel were soon moved by the plight of the cave dwellers. First into the fray was writer David Grossman, who accompanied then-Knesset speaker Avraham Burg on a visit to the southern hills, a pilgrimage of conscience all the more notable because Grossman would, two years later, along with writers Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, sign a letter to the Palestinian leadership in response to the outbreak of the second Intifada, which vowed that Palestinian refugees would never be allowed to return to their homes in what is today Israel. In Israel’s emerging understanding of things, however, the people of Masafir Yatta were not just “some Palestinians who had been deported.” “It is a unique way of living,” the lawyer emphasized several times, and everything suggested she believed this as she also added, “unique enough to get to the heart of the judges.”

In 2000, Israel’s Supreme Court finally granted the residents a temporary permission to return, pending the outcome of further arbitration between their lawyers and the IDF. “It was an unbelievable decision,” said the lawyer, “I never expected it to happen.” However, it may not be so difficult to see how it could have. Two months after the attack on Susyia, Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish died, laurelled in state with countless international awards, but more tempered accolades in Israel. “Of course there were poems that were very much aggressive,” noted Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua, “but it’s important that we know what they are thinking – you have to know your enemy because your enemy is your neighbour and future friend.” For all of Yehoshua’s hopefulness, it may accordingly not be incidental that the culture on display in Masafir Yatta was not Darwish’s aggressive stylings, but caves. As the lawyer put it. “I think we explained to the judges who these people were.”

A Living Museum

The success of the first south Hebron hills petitions marked the beginnings of a more protracted if also energized struggle. As the court-enjoined arbitration process entered deadlock and the Israeli army and local settlers sustained their assaults, shoulder-to-shoulder demonstrations became a regular routine in the area, locking a growing number of activists and local farmers into a grinding, if also wildly uneven battle of attrition with the occupation. By the early years of the second Intifada, well before the West Bank village of Bil’in gained international fame for its anti-Wall activism, the southern hills had accordingly incubated a distinctly diverse, cross-border activist coalition, enlisting a range of progressive but often also squarely Zionist groups, like

Rabbis for Peace. To many, this itself seemed to offer new hope for a joint Israeli-Palestinian peace-front, as chronicled perhaps most prominently in recent years in *Dark Hope: Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine*, by Hebrew University professor David Shulman.

Glowingly reviewed in US publications like the *New York Review of Books* and the *Nation*, *Dark Hope* is both an account of and an accounting for Shulman's advocacy work during the second Intifada, extensively told through his experiences in the south Hebron hills. Like many local activists, Shulman is a self-avowedly committed, if also introspective Zionist, wary of siding with national Palestinian claims writ large, yet also moved by the particularly stark injustice on evidence in the area. He is also charmed by the Biblically picturesque society that he encounters there and the humble claims of its inhabitants – as he understands them – to maintain this way of life. While Shulman confronts and disowns in the most theological of terms the “human evil” of local settlers, these charms accordingly also reanimate his underlying Zionism, naturalized in *Dark Hope* through a heady pastoral romanticism. Recounts Shulman of one of his stays in the area:

It is two weeks before Shavuot and, as for Ruth and Boaz in the Bible, the wheat harvest is overdue. The Palestinians of the caves have given us a short lesson in harvesting....City dweller that I am, I have never stood so close to the mystery of wheat.

Lost and then recuperated, innocence is a central theme in Shulman's testimonial. That the residents of Masafir Yatta have not taken up armed struggle against the occupation, nor participated in outrages against Israeli civilians, is a central precondition for his solidarity with them. “They have hurt nobody. They were never a security threat. They led peaceful, if somewhat impoverished lives until the settlers came. Since then, there has been no peace.” Betraying a momentary historical myopia, the imputation that earlier decades of occupation, border raiding, and Zionist settlement can be characterized as peaceful, though otherwise belied by *Dark Hope's* broader narrative of the southern hills, is in this instance telling. For the author, and many of the advocacy narratives advanced in the southern hills, innocence elides extensively with ahistoricity.

Though Shulman's Palestinian interlocutors are frequently offered opportunity to buttress such sensibilities, their testimonials also invite questions about the price of living down to them. Comments one: “Even if you offer me a villa in Paris, I want to be here in my home. This cave is where we were born and where we grew up. We prefer to die here rather than leave our land.” Left subtly ajar by this formulation is the question of why the Palestinian in question should have to face a choice between living on her land and enjoying modern amenities. “What if you were offered a villa, *on your land?*” Shulman never poses this question in his book, though it abuts both the central quandary confronting the residents of Masafir Yatta after 2001, and the limits of the advocacy mobilized on their behalf.

A temporary stay of eviction, the 2001 High Court ruling did not confer rights on the southern hills residents – to repair previously demolished houses, build new ones, construct schools, or lay down roads. And though local re-construction – furtive, piecemeal and quickly concealed with tarpaulin – have continued out in the hills, the destruction has too, with wholesale demolitions of entire hamlets resuming in late 2010 and early 2011. Unable to confront such violence with more than rhetorical condemnation and humanitarian palliatives, human rights and development organizations have progressively accommodated themselves to it. Inadvertently, some have come to reproduce the area's primitive mystique materially as well as rhetorically, exemplified by small-scale British-funded projects to furnish water tankers to local herders and refurbish caves with basic amenities, providing urgent and much valued support to local residents, but as such also retro-fitting their pre-modernity.

Though the outcome manufactured by such accommodations is starkly bounded, it was also not unanticipated. Toward the end of our conversation, ACRI's lawyer said she had had concerns about pushing a culture-centered legal strategy to its logical conclusion. "I talked to anthropologists and they said this should be declared a UNESCO site," she recalled. "I didn't pursue it because you know what happens if you put people in a site like this: they will be unable to live there. It becomes a reservation." In many respects, this may well be an apt analogy for the kind of common ground staked out by colonial imaginaries and humanitarian politics in the south Hebron hills, if not the only one. In the penultimate analysis, the Palestinians of the area have been assured of communal survival, after a fashion, by being cast as museum exhibits.

Narrative Impasses

Grasping for poignant closure, a BBC reporter on the scene in 2008 offered a final commentary on the shaky video feed that had that summer emerged from this remote corner of the West Bank. "Violence against Jews as well as Palestinians has long scarred this place. Video may now be giving us a new and raw view, but for most people here, the only answer, a political deal, remains out of sight." In one sense, he need not have grasped. One closing line of sorts curves conspicuously over the hillcrest that overlooks Susiya. Tirza would have drawn the line of the Barrier deeper inside the West Bank, he said, and at first he did. In 2004, a proposal was made to transfer the inhabitants of Masafir Yatta to a small plot on the other side of the anticipated route of the fence, summarily rejected by them, and ultimately shelved, as Israel scaled back its early ambitions for the Barrier.

Other ambitions proved more persistent, however. In lieu of outright expulsion, the government's standing offer to the inhabitants of Masafir Yatta is to regulate the time they can spend on their land, allowing them to work it during planting and harvesting season and Jewish holidays. If they are not yet nomadic, in other words, the state intends to make them so. Not incidentally, this way of eviscerating the meaning of

being-in-place in the Occupied Territories was after 2004 also exported to the “closed military zones” sheared off by Israel’s Barrier, taking to their starkest conclusion Israeli movement restrictions institutionalized since 1991.

In showing up the quotidian impossibilities of inhabiting both place and time under colonial rule, moreover, the struggle in southern hills also continues to refract the larger, enduring impasses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As bruited since the signing of the Oslo Accords, a two-state solution to this quandary designed foremost to ensure that Zionist claims to history will prevail in Palestine, that Israel must remain an ethnocratic state, in and of itself re-stages Palestinians as contingencies of Zionist redemption narratives, forced to pawn for very limited space claims on their past, as well as future. The impossibility of reconciling such narratives, liberal and less so, with Palestinian ones, is ultimately also why an otherwise admirably lucid, cautionary note in the opening pages of Shulman’s *Dark Hope* yields more than irony. Reflects the author:

Political activism, in general, is riddled with the ambiguous. Hence the fanaticism that sometimes characterizes die-hard activists. It is not easy to contain the nagging sense that dependably arises from this work, that we are reducing complexity to some kind of manageable, operative slice of reality; that our ideas and plans impinge, at best, rather obliquely on that reality; and that tremendous displacements and surreal reconfigurations are taking place at every moment. Everyone brings his or her own world to politics, and we inevitably project our own cosmology onto the shadowy externalities with which we are engaged... We read the world as best we can, and often we are wrong.

Whatever his own “surreal reconfigurations,” Shulman also serves as a reminder that every political terrain requires something to which narrative can begin to adhere. Claude Conder knew as much. “Quite recently allusion has been made by one writer to ‘imaginary contours’ as the work of Palestine explorers,” he notes in *Tent Work in Palestine*, “as though there existed some kind of contours which were not imaginary.” As Shulman’s book immediately retreats into familiar certainty, such introspection accordingly veers from irony, to a tragedy of sorts. “Occasionally, however, things can be remarkably straight-forward. Such is the case in Jinba and Twaneh and the dozens of other small khirbehs in the hills south of Hebron...” Far from testing the narrative impasse of the conflict, the activist at this points concedes to the limits of its governing imaginaries, and the bounds of the politics they can entertain.

That a number of other Israelis who came of political age in the southern hills have over time become engaged also in anti- or post-Zionist activism, as reported by Stanford University Professor Joel Beinin, may suggest that such impasses may not be terminal. Yet that very fact also continues to throw into sharper relief the poverty of the politics cultivated by what is otherwise left of the Israeli left. Commenting in closing on the success of his organization’s Shooting Back video project, a B’Tselem

spokesman interviewed by the BBC in 2008 introduces the protagonists as people “who all the year were used to being attacked and trying to avoid trouble, trying to go around the corner because they didn’t want [inaudible].” The viewer never learns what they don’t want and in a sense it does not matter. It is something modest and apolitical, that is clear. Staged as humanitarian primitives, bearers of a culture outside history, one that is neither a product of nor reproduces national politics, the demands of the residents of the southern hills have for now been retrofitted to their people’s ever shrinking, ever deferred political horizons.

When they ‘Shoot Back’ *The New York Times* will be on hand to put it in context.

Peter Lagerquist is a writer working extensively in Israel and Palestine, and will as of fall 2011 also be a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. An earlier version of this article was first published as “In the Labyrinth of Solitude: Time, Violence and the Eternal Frontier,” Middle East Report, no. 248, Fall 2008.