After Israel's Invasion: An Eyewitness Account from Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel

written by Marie Kennedy | June 12, 2009

Gaza: War on Civilians in the World's Largest Open-air Prison[1]

AFTER THREE WEEKS IN THE WEST BANK, Israel, and Gaza,[2] I returned to Los Angeles in a state of stunned disbelief. I had last been in Palestine in 1995, a time when many were hopeful of a peaceful transition to two states, as outlined in the Oslo accords. Even at that time I was pessimistic about a solution to the conflict — already Palestinians were prevented from freedom of movement, subject to arbitrary detention by the Israeli military, and land seizures for new and ever expanding settlements were rampant. Now, things are immeasurably worse, not only in Gaza (although that is the most extreme), but also in the West Bank and for Palestinian citizens of Israel. I will share a few brief impressions and some facts, starting with Gaza, the world's largest open-air prison — a 140 square mile strip of land in which 1.5 million people are crowded together. Even before the recent Israeli offensive, the people of Gaza had been subjected to a punitive blockade for 18 months.

Massive destruction was evident the moment we cleared the Rafah border from Egypt to Palestine on March 9, 2009. The further north we went, the worse it got. Houses, apartment buildings were shot or bulldozed down; mosques, all police stations, all government buildings, including parliament were destroyed; huge sections of the walls of schools were blasted away, the American International School was obliterated, the United Nations Refugee School was bombed, as was the Islamic University of Gaza; the walls of hospitals were pocked with bullets; lone houses stood in plains of rubble. What little Gaza had of economic infrastructure was re-engineered into swaths of upturned concrete and twisted metal. Olive trees were uprooted and crops bulldozed under. Thousands of people were living in tents, hastily constructed hovels, or in the ruins themselves. These were the things I saw with my own eyes. The stories I heard were even more devastating.

Even though we were there during the "ceasefire," the war continued by non-explosive means. Nothing in — food, fuel, medicines, people with essential emergency skills; nothing out, including people in need of critical medical care not available in Gaza. Of course, it wasn't a total ceasefire — every night we heard loud explosions — we were told that the Israelis were continuing to bomb the tunnels and to fire artillery at fishing boats.

Israel carpet-bombed the 140 square miles of the Gaza strip. Supposedly the attack was to teach Hamas to stop firing rockets into Israeli villages. Of course, wars are never about only one thing and the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is so long and complex that it almost defies sorting out.

But we should note one relatively new factor in the calculus. In 2000 the British Gas Group (BG) discovered 1.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (worth nearly $4 billion) beneath Gaza's territorial waters. While the election of a Hamas government in 2006 put an end to the chance for Israel to profit directly from this find, the Israeli government proceeded to blockade Gaza's waters, not only preventing Palestinians from fishing, but BG from harvesting the reserves. Now, as Palestinians continue to be prevented from fishing in Gaza territorial waters, they wonder if Israel is withdrawing gas by means of nearby "slant pumps."

It's true that Hamas' militia fired rockets at Israel, killing three Israeli civilians and one Israeli soldier and wounding 182 civilians. While it is indefensible for Hamas to fire on Israeli civilians in Israeli territory, it's important to note that their effectiveness was limited. A Gaza journalist put it this way: "The rockets had minds of their own. Some looked around and decided to sunbathe in the Negev desert, others to take a dip in the Mediterranean Sea. Some decided they'd drop on Sderot, some on Ashkelon; many decided to turn around and go back home." Hamas' Katyushas are not smart. They lack the surgical precision of Israel's unmanned drones. In fact, prior to going into Gaza, we met with Eric Yellin, a leader of Other Voices, a peace organization in Sderot. Although Eric emphasized how traumatizing it is to live in a town that has at times seen as many as 50 rockets a day, he also described the Hamas rockets as pretty ineffectual. And, driving around Ashkelon and Sderot, the two communities hardest hit by rocket fire from Gaza, we couldn't see any sign of destruction, whereas in Gaza, no matter where you were, it would be hard to avoid seeing massive destruction. Whatever the finer points, it's apparent to most objective observers that Israel's response to the Gazan rockets was disproportionate.

According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the Gaza Mental Health Centre, air strikes began at 11:25 in the morning on December 27, 2008, almost at the same time throughout the Gaza Strip.There are two school shifts in Gaza and this is precisely the time at the end of the morning period and the beginning of the afternoon period, when the most number of children are bound to be in the streets. John Ging, the Irish head of the UNRWA in Gaza, stated that the only possible reason for choosing that time would be to kill and injure as many children as possible. For 22 days, Israel dropped bombs from F16 jets and shot rockets from Apache helicopters (all of U.S. origin). Unmanned drones killed many, including a family having tea in their courtyard[3]. Many homes and institutional buildings, including Gaza's UN headquarters, where 700 civilians were sheltering, were shelled with white phosphorus ammunition. White phosphorus ignites on contact with oxygen; when splattered on humans it burns through flesh and bone. We were warned by UNRWA not to go off on our own as white phosphorus was still burning in some places. In several homes that I visited, rabbits that the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee had supplied to women for household and economic use were incinerated by white phosphorus. Physicians for Human Rights is still trying to figure out from the types of wounds that were inflicted and what weapons were used.

Altogether, between December 27th and January 18th, more than 1400 Palestinians were killed. Of these, almost two-thirds were civilians, almost a third of whom were children.[4]More than 5300 Palestinians were injured, many seriously[5] and an estimated 90,000 people are homeless. Of the group of about 80 women in the north (where the damage was most extensive) with whom I met on International Women's Day, at least a third of them had lost their homes and about a quarter had lost a family member. There wasn't one of them who didn't have a dead or injured family member. And yet, they welcomed me with smiles, and when I teared up at their stories, they rushed to comfort me, hugging me and handing me tissues. Then we danced together and ate food they prepared over open fires.

EVERY MOTHER I SPOKE WITH said her children were terrified. They cling, wet and soil themselves, and can't concentrate. Some refuse to go to school, especially since so many of their

schools were shelled or bombed. Those who do go are unable to study. They're unable to concentrate. They're irritable and easily upset. It doesn't help, the mothers said, that their parents are short-tempered too.

The people who try to help, such as the mental health workers at the Gaza Mental Health Centre, have to deal with their own trauma as well as offer psychological help to others. In my conversation with workers there, they estimated that 99.4 percent of Gaza's children are seriously traumatized. A psychiatrist at the Centre told a story about his 6 year old son, Ali: The family was about to take a trip from their home in the north to the middle area to see how their family there had fared. The child wrote a small letter — when asked what his letter said, the child "read" his unreadable scribbles (he didn't really know how to write much yet): "I am Ali. I live in Jabalia. Don't kill me." In response to his father asking what he would do with the letter, he said: "If the soldiers stop the car I will give them the letter." Another mental health worker told of overhearing her niece talking to herself, "I want to hide my father in the cupboard; I want to hide my mother under the bed; I want to hide my brother behind the drapes . . . where will I put my aunt? I don't have any more places." The children feel they must take care of themselves, take care of their family, knowing that their parents can't protect them.

The Mental Health Center is working with school counselors and doctors to help them diagnose and properly treat psychosomatic symptoms, and they are working with men, women and youth against domestic violence which has increased during the war. They talked with us about the psychological warfare that Israel waged. Shelling was 24 hours a day in all areas of Gaza. They bombed urban areas an excessive number of times — as one worker put it, "when two times would have destroyed everything, they came back six times" — in his opinion, this was just to terrorize the population. They dropped leaflets saying that people had to leave their homes and made telephone calls at 2 or 3 in the morning — some were recordings, others were personal, saying "You must leave your house in 3 minutes. We are bombing." In many cases it wasn't true — in others it was. Some received as many as 5 phone calls. As a psychologist said, it was a way of intimidating and terrorizing people, otherwise why give just 3 minutes, why not a half hour or more?

Jabr Wishah, the Deputy Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, described the war as a deterrent war — a war to cause deep suffering so Palestinians would recall the suffering in the future, to punish people for electing Hamas and for accepting resistance to the occupation, so that in the future, they will choose leaders according to the choice of Israel and the United States and will "count to 100 before raising your voice demanding rights." He talked of the pattern of the attack: "War ships shelled people along the coast and heavy shelling drove people from the northern and eastern borders with Israel, forcing people into the city centers. 1.5 million people were confined in the central area where every Hamas facility, every police station, every government building would be a target. Every person was a potential target, whether people supported Hamas or not, they were a target." Nonetheless, human rights workers tirelessly collected direct testimony throughout the war and, using small generators to send emails, they continued to issue press releases every day, particularly important since foreign journalists were prevented by both Egypt and Israel from entering Gaza during the war.

We visited the partially destroyed former headquarters of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC) with staff member Nida' Abu Al-Atta. Israeli soldiers occupied the once beautiful building and used it as a prison for 23 days. Upon leaving, the soldiers thoroughly trashed it. As Nida' showed us the trash-strewn room that had been her office and the courtyard now reduced to rubble where the workers used to take their lunch, the emotion in her voice caused tears to come to my eyes. Most of the furniture was destroyed, including 20 computers and printers. The conference room which was equipped with video-communication equipment, their main way of communicating with PARC in the West Bank, was totally destroyed. Trees and crops from their extensive model

urban garden were uprooted. Interior walls were covered with vicious and threatening graffiti, similar to the graffiti found in homes and offices wherever they were occupied. But, here, we also witnessed the incredible resilience of the Palestinian people — an elderly neighbor of PARC and his sons had already re-planted the model garden. He told us that he had done it so that his sons would not lose hope.

As UNRWA's John Ging put it, Palestinians "are very civilized people living in extremely uncivilized circumstances." They are not waiting to be rescued. They're focused on pulling themselves out of the rubble Israel made of their land.They don't want handouts.They just want a reasonable chance to live on their land. But land is constantly being confiscated. The so-called buffer zone along the border with Israel is one example.

According to Ahmed Sourani, the Project Director at PARC, the 300 meter buffer zone established by Israel at the beginning of the 2[nd]intifada has been widened to 1.5 KM in the east and 2KM in the north.This may not sound like much, but when you consider that Gaza is only 8-9 KM wide and 45 KM long, the buffer zone represents a substantial portion of Gaza, land that has essentially been confiscated by Israel.This is the most fertile land in Gaza and, historically, 70 percent of animal production was in this zone as well as much of the agriculture. Orchards and crops have been uprooted, and hundreds of houses, including Ahmed's, as well as industrial establishments have been bulldozed. When we visited this area in the north, we looked from the rubble of former factories across empty fields crisscrossed by tank treads to the green fields and smoking factories of Israel.

A young woman, Iman Al-Najar, told a few in our delegation about the destruction of her village, Khoza'a, east of Khan Younis, in the expanded buffer zone, 500 meters from the Israeli border. Unfortunately, the story is not untypical of what happened in a number of places. As British journalist Jack Shenker said in writing about Khoza'a, "The village's story is significant largely because it is so ordinary."[6]

On the night of January 12th, 2009, the Israeli military began a ground offensive that lasted 12 hours, terrorizing the villagers with indescribable cruelty and violence. After Iman and 10 of her family members woke up to the sounds of bulldozers, rifle fire, and F-16's and Apache helicopters overhead, they rushed to the roof of their home, waving white flags in an attempt to plead with the Israeli soldiers who were seen everywhere in the village. Iman's family were civilians, women, men, and children with their grandparents. They had no weapons. They were not hiding any militants. But their house was under attack from bulldozers below. Iman and her family frantically tried to escape to neighboring houses, as snipers positioned themselves around the village firing from houses they now occupied. Soldiers were separating the men from the women, ordering them to undress and herding them into another structure. The soldiers ordered the women and children, some two hundred of them, to move to the center of the village and to use a certain roadway to reach the center. At the foot of this roadway — a few hundred meters — stood a building and the women were to move towards this building. They carried white flags, and many women held babies and young children in their arms. Others had their children by their sides. Within minutes Israeli special forces opened fire on them from the building.

Rawhiya Al-Najar, a 50-year old housewife, was at the front, begging and pleading for safe passage for the group. A sniper aimed his rifle directly at Rawhiya and shot her from the building which the women had been ordered to move towards. The women started to run back as shots rang out and more women received bullets. Rawhiya lay bleeding, and paramedics who were 60 – 70 meters away, were prevented by the soldiers from reaching Rowhiya and the women and children. The soldiers fired warning shots at the paramedics. It was twelve hours later when the paramedics were finally able to reach Rowhiya and all they could do was to take her body to the morgue.

AS THE CARNAGE CONTINUED with house after house bulldozed into a pile of rubble, the villagers had no place to escape. Some crawled into holes in the debris, while others attempted to hide under slabs of broken concrete and bricks. Villagers made desperate calls from a mobile phone to the Red Crescent pleading to be rescued.The Israeli army refused the rescue and continued their assault, declaring the village a closed military zone, warning that anyone coming near it would be shot on sight.

The village was surrounded by 8 bulldozers and several tanks. When the soldiers discovered that some villagers were inside cave-like holes in the collapsed buildings they began pushing the rubble and wreckage. “They were intending to bury us alive,” Iman said.The children were screaming with terror. The adults prayed for a miracle. Some people, who had been wounded by bullets from snipers, were bleeding profusely. The white flags which they had used were now applied as bandages. Some women got their elderly parents to crawl out on their hands and knees, fearing that they would suffocate or be buried alive. A blind boy was separated from his mother. A paralyzed man was dragged from his wheelchair by people in an attempt to get him out of the path of a bulldozer. Traumatized villagers huddled wherever they could, as the soldiers proceeded to kill their goats, sheep, and chickens and threaten that they would kill them in the same way. Many people narrowly escaped being crushed to death as they crawled through small openings in the wreckage. Iman described how the soldiers began to fire gas missiles, filling the basements, “caves” and holes where villagers were desperately seeking shelter from the shelling. The smoke filled these cavities and Iman’s mother and sisters began to vomit. They could barely breathe.

What was once a peaceful farming community lay in ruins — hundred year old olive and citrus trees uprooted and smashed, fields of grain and newly planted vegetable crops now sculpted by bulldozer and tank treads. And a whole village of people were now homeless, without the resources to rebuild. For most of these villagers, constructing a house is a lifelong undertaking. Even acquiring a farm animal poses a financial burden.

Fourteen villagers were killed during the 12-hour siege. Fifty villagers were eventually evacuated to hospitals with several succumbing to their injuries. Dozens were treated for gas inhalation, shrapnel injuries from missiles fired from unmanned drones, sniper bullets, bulldozer and tank attacks, and chemical burns from white phosphorus.

As one villager explained, “They wanted to send a message to our village: ‘Leave, leave your land behind.’ But this was the land of our fathers and will be the land of our children, so we stay. We sleep in tents in the rubble rather than finding shelter elsewhere. And although there is no armed resistance here, amid this violence the act of staying becomes a resistance, and that is why they are afraid of us.”

Today, as before the war, the Palestinians of Gaza are trapped in an Israeli made prison. They can’t fight or flee; neither can they develop an economy which will sustain them. Today, they can’t even get a piece of glass to repair broken windows. Although Israel is letting some humanitarian aid enter Gaza, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported in the middle of March that, among a long list of banned items, “no livestock, industrial/electrical appliances, vehicles/transports, packaging applications, or construction materials were allowed entry.” Perhaps most peculiarly (and punitively), “Items banned by the Israeli authorities . . . included jam, biscuits, and tomato paste, resulting in 398 boxes of USAID cargo and 2,488 boxes of World Vision cargo stopped from delivery to Gaza. . . . food parcels containing these foodstuffs, as well as tea, sweets, and date bars, will be rejected in the future.” Gaza, indeed, continues to be a prison, including nonsensical prohibitions of anything that might give a feeling of normalcy to the people stuck there.

The recent deaths in Gaza came from modern machines of war and the brutality of an army

encouraged to see all Palestinians as terrorists, even unborn babies.[7] In the West Bank, I might compare the situation to “the death of a thousand cuts.”

The West Bank: The Death of a Thousand Cuts

MANY OF THE DEVICES TO SEPARATE ISRAELI and Palestinians and to protect illegal Israeli settlers were already in place when I visited in 1995: Here are a few excerpts from what I wrote in at that time: “Movement is severely and unpredictably restricted for Palestinians. On roads, checkpoints are frequent — some are permanent and others are thrown up and taken down at the whim of the Israeli authorities. Different colored license plates on cars determine who sails through checkpoints (Israelis), who is pulled over, and who will be turned back.There are now numerous roads in the West Bank and Gaza from which Palestinians are banned altogether. . . .Searches and arrests without charges or appeals are still common. . . .The issue of land and the continued expansion of Israeli settlements remains central to the struggle for real peace and a viable Palestinian state. . . .Water, a precious resource in this arid climate, is also stolen from the Palestinians. According to a 1993 World Bank report, 80-85 percent of all the available water of the West Bank and Gaza has been diverted to Israel and the settlements.”[8]Today, each of these problems has intensified beyond what I had imagined possible in 1995. In addition, the separation wall which cuts deeply into West Bank land, with water resources conveniently located on the Israeli side, is nearing completion. When completed, Israel will have seized more than half of the West Bank land for the wall, restricted roads, and settlements.[9]

Grassroots International focuses its program on Resource Rights — the right to land, water, and food sovereignty — and in the West Bank, we met mostly with farmers who shared with us the problems they have in securing their rights to land and water. Those whose land has been severed by the separation wall or, in some cases, fence, talked with us about the problems they face in continuing to farm their land on the other side.

In some places the wall is a massive concrete barrier, in others it looks less impenetrable, being a fence which one can see through. But, looks can be deceiving — these fences are electrified and covered with razor wire. The sign on one that we saw read:

MORTAL DANGER — MILITARY ZONE ANY PERSON WHO PASSES OR DAMAGES THE FENCE ENDANGERS HIS LIFE

The farmer whose land is on the other side of this fence must be careful to not farm or graze livestock too close to the fence and he must travel a long distance to reach a gate through which to pass to his land on the other side.

Mohammed Othman, a youth organizer with the Stop the Wall Campaign, accompanied us to his town of Jaayyous so that we could talk with local members of the Campaign .The village was one of the first to protest the wall, but stopped demonstrating after the wall was completed in 2004, in order to help farmers get permits to access their land on the other side of the wall, where the 6 village wells and nearly 70 percent of the village’s land are located. But, when Israel decided to re-route the wall, confiscating even more land, they started demonstrating again in November of 2008. Now demonstrations occur every Friday and interrogations and arrests are frequent. Four youths have been shot by Israeli forces responding to demonstrators and many have been arrested. Only a few days before our arrival, the army had searched every home in Jaayyous in the middle of the

night and arrested 16 youths after rounding up a much larger group for interrogation at a local school.

With the construction of the wall, farmers need permits to access their land on the other side, but permits are hard to get. We spoke with Mohammed's father who has had to work his farm land and tend to his sheep single-handedly for the last three years. Although he has been able to obtain a permit to access his farm, none of his five sons have been granted a permit. He also noted that frequently the guards aren't there when they're supposed to be to open the gate. Other times, access isn't permitted at all, supposedly for security reasons. But, it's critically important that he keep farming his land because, under various laws, land that isn't worked is considered state lands.

As it turned out, we had the opportunity to share a common plight of Jaayyous residents when a curfew was called while we were visiting at the home of Boudour Shamasni, a member of the Jaayyous Women's Committee. Suddenly, scores of Israeli jeeps were zipping around town shooting and throwing "sound bombs" (bombs that create a deafening sound but no shrapnel, designed to terrify people, drive them out of their homes and scatter demonstrators). Sharpshooters on rooftops scanned the village for any violators of the curfew and we resigned ourselves to sitting out the curfew for what turned out to be about six hours. We were told that curfews are at least weekly, usually on Fridays, the holy day for Muslims. As we chatted and ate with the amazingly hospitable women in the house, we learned about the difficulties Boudour's mother faces in order to visit two of her sons, who, as a result of earlier demonstrations, are imprisoned, one in the northern region of the West Bank and one in Israel. Sometimes she makes the 7 hour trip to the prison only to be dismissed after a visit of a few minutes. We were told that 90 percent of the young men of the West Bank have been jailed at one time or another.[10]And, if you have been jailed, you cannot get a permit to pass through the wall.

Lutria Halat, a spokesperson for the Women's Committee, summed up the spirit of resistance in Jaayyous: "We will continue to demonstrate until the occupation has ended. . . . They can hit us with bullets, run us over with bulldozers, but they will never kick us off this land."

Protecting farmland from seizure came up Since then, Kuf Ein farmers have gone on time and again as we talked with farmers to plant many almond and fruit trees. One of throughout the West Bank, even when the land their main focuses right now is access to water. has not been closed off by the wall. One of Israel controls access to the water coming into GRI's partners, the Unions of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), has been providing education and seedlings to local farmers' committees in many parts of the West Bank and Gaza. We visited a few of UAWC's sites in the field, including Bait Bait Reema and holds authority over who can dig wells. Permission is almost never given. Water is very scarce, usually coming only once a week. While a few residents have water catchments, most have to purchase water from Mekorot, the Israeli water company.

Reema where, as part of land reclamation and economic development efforts, the UAWC farmers' committee has distributed lemon, orange, and almond tree seedlings to the surrounding community. The Farmers' Committee of Bait Reema was started with 20 members a year ago and has since more than doubled in size, and includes both men and women. When asked what the advantage of having such a committee is, one member explained that, besides increasing solidarity and facilitating the fair distribution of resources, "when we work together it provides a good example and helps to defend against the occupation. We are stronger together to stand up for our rights and to defend against the occupation."

The bottom-up planning that is a hallmark of the UAWC was vividly demonstrated by the Kuf Ein Farmers' Committee. The first project that they chose to undertake was not the planting of productive trees, but rather 320 shade trees in the cemetery — not at all what the central UAWC

staff would have chosen. But, it turned out to be a brilliant choice and demonstrates the power of local knowledge. By providing something for the whole village, the farmers' committee won the community's trust and grew from 5 to 23 members in just six months.

Our last field meeting near Kuf Ein was with Afeet Said Barghouti, who had discovered Israeli settlers picnicking on his farm land at night — the first step to occupying the land. As a result, he is building a house on the land and has already moved his family from town to the half-finished house to better protect his land. With UAWC's help he has also intensively planted his land to prevent its seizure.

Altogether, between the two villages, over 2500 UAWC seedlings have been planted in the last year. In addition, UAWC has provided training to farmers in improved planting techniques, how to produce export quality olive oil, and how to advocate more effectively for their rights.

We also visited with the Palestinian Farmers Union, a secular and non-partisan organization with more than 9,800 members in Gaza and the West Bank. It was started by GRI's partner the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC) to advocate for the rights of farmers. They have recently applied to join La Via Campesina, an international farmers' rights organization with members in more than 60 countries. They hope that through Via Campesina they will be able to build international support for Palestinian farmers who unite with Via Campesina's demands for equitable access to land, water, and other resources within a universal human rights framework.[11] This seems to express the desires of all the farmers with whom we met in Palestine, as well as the Palestinian farmers who are citizens of Israel.

Second Class Citizens: Palestinian Farmers in Israel

I WAS SHOCKED TO LEARN that Palestinian farmers who are citizens of Israel face many of the same problems that are faced by farmers in the West Bank. GRI's newest Middle East partner is the Ahali Center for Community Development. Ahali has initiated a nationwide project aimed at promoting Arab agriculture, rural development farmers' rights with a specific focus on women in the Arab farming sector in Israel. Their goal is to build a stronger, more productive community of self-reliant farmers and citizens who can actively work to attain equal rights. The project uses a grassroots approach based on the principles of community mobilization, organization, and development, and aims to establish the first national organization of Arab farmers to serve the interests of Arab farmers, raise their issues in front of the Ministry of Agriculture, and ensure their representation in Israeli farmers' organizations.

In a meeting with staff at Ahali's office in Nazareth, we were told a story all too familiar from the West Bank. After 1948, there was a gradual confiscation of Arab land, and the Arab farmers who were left found it difficult to compete with Jewish agriculture which developed on a basis of irrigation, advanced technologies, and capital intensity. Jewish farmers benefited from the allocation of low cost government owned lands, subsidized inputs, and subsidized capital. In 1948, an estimated 90 percent of the Palestinian population was employed in agriculture. Today, it is estimated that only about 7 percent of the 1.5 million Palestinians living in Israel continue in agriculture.[12] Arabs have about 17 percent of Israeli agricultural land, but only 2.5 percent of the water. Only 10 percent of Arab land is irrigated, while 90 percent of Jewish land is irrigated.

From Nazareth, we went with staff member Sobhi Sghiar to visit farmers from Sakhnin and Arabe near the Batouf Valley. This is the most consolidated area of Arab ownership of farmland in Israel — a total of about 3,200 acres of fertile agricultural land, spanning a large valley. But there are many

problems here. Cutting through the center of the valley is the National Water Carrier, which brings water from the Galilee in the north of Israel to the Negev desert in the south to be used for irrigation and settlement usage. Nine meters wide, the canal is surrounded by fences, creating a zone that is actually 100 meters wide.The farmers in the Batouf Valley are not permitted to use this water. Bridges crossing the canal are built in only four places, creating long and unnecessary trips for many farmers to reach their land. Further, the area suffers from a lack of drainage in the rainy season and a lack of irrigation in the dry season. For years, the government has promised to develop a drainage system that would collect water in a reservoir for use in the dry season. This is one of the projects that Ahali is pressing the government for.

We experienced directly the swampy conditions in the valley — after driving close to one of the bridges over the Carrier, I got out and walked, but gave up when the mud came up to my ankles. It's definitely impossible to have more than one short growing period without proper drainage.

Ahmed Waked has another set of problems. As we sat and had tea on his patio, Ahmed and two other farmers from the area told us an almost unbelievable story. Ahmed's land is up the hill from the Batouf Valley. Long ago, the government told him that he could no longer live in the stone house in which he had been born, he was forced to leave his house and let it fall into ruin. Ahmed raises sheep and cattle, and until last month, his family for generations has grazed their sheep on a hill up from the houses. But a month before our visit, the government put a fence up and said that the hill was state land and that it was being given for grazing cattle to a Jewish settlement at some distance from the hill. Ahmed was forbidden to use the hill. Another hill, where his family had also historically grazed their livestock had been given some years ago by the Israeli government to a U.S. based Jewish organization which designated the land for Jewish use only, saying that no non-Jew could even step on the land. Now Ahmed has nowhere to graze his livestock, and must buy feed for his 2,000 sheep, which means he can no longer make a profit from them.

The fencing off of his grazing land is only the most recent in a long series of problems Ahmed has faced. A few years ago, he was building a barn for his animals, when the government told him he had to tear it down as he had no permit for raising livestock. He was told that the permit would also give him access to water and electricity at the lower agricultural rate. So, he and a number of other farmers applied for livestock permits. Ahmed alone received a permit and he prepared to pipe in water from the nearest source, only to be told that that source was only for Jewish use. So, at his own expense, he had to pipe water from a source that was much farther away. He still hasn't gotten electricity — when he requested it for his barn and out-buildings, he was told, "You Arabs steal the electricity at the lower rate for your residential use, so we aren't going to give you electricity for your livestock."

As we were leaving, the farmers told us that they are jealous of the West Bank farmers, because, "They have hope of having their own state, while we have no hope." Of course, the West Bank farmers told us just the opposite. I would say that both are up against some pretty heavy obstacles.

What Can We Do?

BEFORE TURNING TO WHAT I THINK WE should be doing as U.S. citizens, I want to address a common American viewpoint that evenhandedly says "both sides attacked each other; both are to blame." I think that any objective look at what has happened reveals not just a quantitative, but a qualitative difference. One side uses high-tech weaponry to flatten whole communities and obliterate economic activity; the other side uses crude rockets that inflict little damage. One side has steadily seized more and more land and water from the other, in violation of international law. One side

reserves the right to send its military into the other's territory, to detain the other's civilians without trial, to impose curfews and blockades.

One thing that is true on both sides of the Green Line that defines the border between Israel and Palestine is that there are pockets of hatred and intolerance, but also widespread yearning for peace. But here, too, things look different on the ground than they do filtered through the U.S. media. While Israel's public stance is that they want peace but the Palestinians won't accept their existence as a country, what I heard from dozens of ordinary Palestinians on this visit, as I had in 1995, was the exact mirror image: they, the Palestinians, want peace, but Israel won't accept their existence as a nation. In fact, though the Palestinians I met were uniformly angry at Israel, I encountered surprisingly little hatred and intolerance, given the suffering inflicted on them by the Israeli government. Mohammed Othman in Jaayyous matter-of-factly commented, "We accept to live with them [the Israelis], but they don't accept us."

But whether or not you agree with this viewpoint, there are more basic issues for us as Americans about how our government's actions and aid are fueling war and destruction. As U.S. citizens, we should be very concerned about our government's role in the recent tragic events in Gaza.

We U.S. taxpayers need to question the use of our tax money for military aid to Israel. In FY 2008, Israel received $2.4 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF).This represents over 20 percent of the overall Israeli defense bud-get.The agreement signed by the Bush Administration in August 2007 calls for incremental annual increases in FMF to Israel, reaching $3.1 billion a year by FY 2018.

Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. aid in the Middle East and has been doing both the U.S.'s and Israel's bidding, keeping the Rafah border closed. The United States is in a good position to pressure Egypt and Israel to open the borders and to let needed goods and personnel flow into Gaza.

While it's good that Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has spoken against the demolition of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem and the continued expansion of settlements in the West Bank, she has also refused to enter into dialogue with the democratically elected government of Gaza. Peace won't be found without dialogue with all parties concerned.

I traveled to Palestine bracing myself for what I knew would be very hard sights and stories from a fresh war zone. Even so, I was completely unprepared for much of what I saw. In Gaza, I was staggered by the scale of seemingly deliberate assaults on civilian populations and infrastructure of all kinds, from homes to schools and peaceful NGOs, from rabbit cages to factories and farms, including targeted attacks on women and children. I was shocked to learn that selective Israeli bombardment is continuing despite a Palestinian cease-fire. In the West Bank, I was shaken by the nightmarish web of arbitrary, constantly changing restrictions that make daily life and making a living nearly impossible. Within Israel, I was saddened to learn of Israeli authorities using a series of Catch-22s to confiscate land from Arab farmers, much like in the West Bank. But very importantly, I was also deeply moved by people's resistance to violence and despair. I was moved by the resilience of Palestinians in Gaza, replanting gardens, comforting their children, even comforting me when I became upset by all that they had lost. I was moved by the grassroots organizations that are patiently rebuilding in Gaza, trying to support agriculture in the West Bank, and documenting Israeli human rights abuses in hopes that someday, somebody will listen. And I was moved by meeting with Other Voices, an Israeli organization housed in one of the two towns that have received most of Gaza's rockets, that is dedicating itself to working for peace and opposing the Israeli government's war-making. So I want to close on that note: there are lots of people and organizations in both Palestine and Israel who are doggedly working for peace, for human rights, for a secure livelihood for all.These are the people and organizations that we as Americans should be supporting.

You can see a few of my photos of Gaza at: www.flickr.com/photos/mariekennedy/

Footnotes

1. I wish to thank Code Pink and the United Nations Refugee and Works Agency in Gaza for arranging our delegation into Gaza. I would also like to thank delegation members Hanna Hadikin and Amal Sedky Winter for contributing stories as told to them to this article.
2. I traveled as a representative of Grassroots International (GRI), a human rights and development aid organization on whose board I serve. Salena Tramel, the GRI Middle East coordinator, and I joined the delegation to Gaza organized by the women-led peace group Code Pink at the invitation of the United Nations Refugee and Works Agency. Salena and I visited GRI partners in the West Bank, Israel, and Gaza and much of the information in this essay came from these partners. For more about GRI Middle East partners, visit http://grassrootsonline.org.
3. See "Cut to pieces: the Palestinian family drinking tea in their courtyard," www.guardian.co.uk/world/ 2009/mar/23/gaza-war-crimes-drones
4. According to the careful records of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 1,417 Palestinians were killed. Of these, 236 were combatants and 926 civilians, including 313 children and 116 women.
5. According to the Ministry of Health, 5,303 Palestinians were injured in the assault, including 1,606 children and 828 women.
6. See http://jackshenker.blogspot.com/2009/01/ khozaa-anatomy-of-massacre.html.
7. See Uri Blau. "Dead Palestinian babies and bombed mosques-IDF fashion 2009." Haaretz.com. 3/20/2009; Amos Harel. "Shooting and crying." Haaretz.com. 3/ 20/2009 and "Testimonies on IDF misconduct in Gaza keep rolling in," Haaretz.com. 3/22/2009; Ethan Bronner. "A Religious War in Israel's Army," *The New York Times*. 3/22/2009; Richard Boudreaux, "Rabbis criticized for Gaza stance." *LA Times,* 3/25/2009.
8. Marie Kennedy, Lisa Bevilacqua, and Nuhad Jamal, "Between Occupation and Autonomy," *CrossRoads.* March 1996.
9. Marie Kennedy, "Israel's War for Water," *Progressive Planning*, fall 2006.
10. According to the *Palestine Monitor 2009 Factbook* (available from www.palestinemonitor.org) at the end of 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross was following up on roughly 10,500 Palestinian prisoners, while the Israeli Prison Service estimates that there are "only" 9,493 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. In addition to "regular" arrests, the Israeli military can put anyone into "administrative detention" and detain them for 6 months without charge or a trial, which can be (and often is) renewed for many years, 6 months at a time.
11. For the Via Campesina: Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy, and ecologically sustainable production. See Nikhil Aziz, "Resource Rights and Wrongs," *Progressive Planning*, fall 2006.
12. While it's true that the percentage of the overall Israeli population working in agriculture has reduced, the Jewish population was never as concentrated in agriculture as were the Palestinians. Overall, the percentage of the population of Israel working in agriculture has decreased from 18 percent in 1960 to 2 percent in 2002.