

# You have to see to understand life in the West Bank

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Around 150 years ago, Mark Twain wrote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts." Twain was reflecting upon his own travels through the Middle East, as chronicled in his *Innocents Abroad*, wherein he criticizes his fellow American travellers for having a caricatured, megalomaniacal perception of the people and politics of the region. Sadly, sometimes it seems that not much has changed in the past century-and-a-half -- at least not when it comes to the American approach to the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

Consider the recent upsurge of discussion by American politicians and pundits about the contentious issue of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Settlements? The term itself appeals to the romantic proclivities of the American national consciousness, conjuring up historical memories of pioneers who pushed bravely, indomitably into the very heart of darkness, expanding the domains of civilization where before existed only nothingness, or perhaps only savagery. When the political discourse is dominated by such latent symbolism, it is little surprise that the popular conceptualization of the Israeli-Palestinian situation is one where the Israelis become the cowboys; the Palestinians, the Indians.

But does the reality match the rhetoric? Perhaps if Mark Twain still walked and wrote among us, he would testify that certain truths can only be experienced by travel, by the act of heeding the ancient invitation, "Come and see."

One place to start is in the village of At-Tuwani, in the South Hebron Hills of the West Bank. Far removed from the bustle and confusion of the larger Israeli and Palestinian cities, At-Tuwani is a rural community of only 250 people. It is a dry and thirsty landscape -- the kind that lends itself to a lazy, hazy lifestyle. The heat hangs heavily and the view never changes: always rocks and flies and shrubs and nothingness.

The Palestinian inhabitants of At-Tuwani are simple people, or, perhaps more accurately, they are simply people. They are not interested in the intrigues and nuances of international politics: they are interested in farming their land, shepherding their flocks, and raising their

families. It is a village whose form has been touched by modernity, but whose spirit seems to have remained largely unchanged since Biblical times.

But not all is idyllic. Because two Israeli settlements have been recently established near At-Tuwani, this seemingly insignificant village encapsulates the realities of the much broader Israeli-Palestinian situation. The settlers here are driven by an ideological and territorial expansionism that perceives the West Bank as rightfully belonging to Israel, promised to Abraham long ago by God. The Palestinians are therefore perceived as encroachers and usurpers whose very existence in villages like At-Tuwani frustrates the divine dream of a Greater Israel.

The Palestinians here experience treatment at the hands of these settlers that is rarely discussed in the mainstream media. Flocks are poisoned, shepherds are assaulted, and even children on their way to school are chased. The object is the same: to make life so difficult, so disruptive that the Palestinians will choose to leave their homes in search of greener, quieter pastures.

Yet At-Tuwani is still there. It has actually attracted a considerable amount of international attention and affection because its villagers have committed themselves to embracing only non-violent forms of resistance. Two young Italian girls, for instance, representing a Catholic humanitarian organization -- Operation Dove -- have chosen to call this place home for two years in order to contribute to community development in At-Tuwani. These girls are not crazed activists; they simply wish to live out their solidarity with the Palestinians who suffer the indignities and hardships of occupation. One girl, who wished to be identified only as A.R., put it this way: "I want to be with the children when they are afraid, when they are tired. If I can make the life of one child or one shepherd better for just one day, it's worth it. It's enough for me to know that they are not alone."

Some days the girls accompany Palestinian children as they walk, singing and laughing, through the hills to school. Other days the girls rise at the crack of dawn to accompany the shepherds into the hills. In the event of an altercation, they try to prevent attacks on sheep -- and sometimes even shepherds -- by staying between the Palestinians and the settlers, hoping the presence of an international with a camera will be enough to prevent an ugly situation from becoming uglier. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it does not.

One shepherd the girls accompanied was Kamel, a 26-year-old who constantly worries he will never have enough money to marry. He reflected stoically upon his experience with a settler assault that left several of his sheep dead:

"Israel is strong. But God is stronger." When asked why he thought he was attacked, he admitted he did not understand: "I don't know. Maybe they think God wants me to leave the land. Maybe they want to scare me."

In Washington, politicians and pundits on both sides continue to ignore the complex simplicity that is the beating heart of the problem: the Israeli occupation of the West Bank is the most egregious impediment to the establishment of a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Palestinians are forced to witness their dreams of a better future slowly turning to ash due to the cruel, unforgiving truth that, to quote Thucydides, "the strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they have to accept."

The ultimate tragedy is that the influence of the United States would be sufficient to pierce the devastating cycle of violence and hopelessness if only American leaders could see past the shroud of bloody terrorism that too often dominates the discourse. Who among them has actually been to the West Bank, to Gaza, to see the degrading and dehumanizing realities of the occupation?

But maybe Mark Twain was right: maybe travel can be an antidote to the innocent ignorance that, unfortunately, defines popular and political perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Maybe if more American citizens travelled to these areas, to see the situation for themselves, maybe their elected leaders would finally start paying attention, too.

Meanwhile, in the South Hebron Hills, two young girls carry out their thankless tasks in the Negev sun, armed only with a camera and a conviction. And for Kamel and his little flock of sheep, that is a good place to start.

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