You can’t miss it: the Wall. In the stifling heat. Amidst the swirls of dust. The Wall is the only solid. The only unswerving in the desert sun. Gray and forbidding. It is a Wall that separates, bristling with barbed wire. It is a Wall that limits and a Wall that damns.

This is not Warsaw of 1942. This is not Berlin of 1963. This is the West Bank and the year is 2008. A sliver of land, bordered by the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, and a giant wall that pushes itself up against the sky. This is a land that we, as Americans, are not recommended to travel to. Our government -- and our media -- tells us to fear it: a land of violence and a haven for terrorists. We are afraid of the West Bank: the land known to its inhabitants as Palestine.

I cannot help but stare at this Wall looming before me. I had not even known a Wall existed. I had never heard of such a thing. I see the entrance -- the opening to the very place that my parents did not want me to go to. My friends were wary. My father tried to talk me out of it, even as I was heading to the airport. He reminded me of the violent act that recently took place -- not too long ago, in Bethlehem, when a man used a bull-dozer as a battering ram. I stare at the Wall in front of me, the key to the territories -- thinking of the images on my television and the words of my family as I enter this place the Arabs call Palestine.

The spike-strips retreat into the ground. The security barrier opens. The guns of the Israeli military lower. And I pass forward, into the land hidden behind the Wall.

The Al Aqsa Intifada began on September 28 of 2000. During a time of relative peace, the Israeli leader Ariel Sharon went to the third holiest site of Islam. Sharon, accompanied by 1,000 armed policemen, went to the al-Haram ash-Sharif, the Al Aqsa Mosque -- known to by Americans as the area of the Dome of the Rock, located atop the Jewish Temple Mount -- and entered the compound (Awad 174). In doing so, Sharon sent a message to the world and a challenge to the authority and the order of the Arab community.

The translation of this message: “I stand on your holy place as an invader and an occupier. What can you do to save your holy place from my hands?” (Awad 174).

Even though other prominent Israelis warned against this action, Sharon went ahead and did it. This area on the Temple Mount is one of great significance for the Muslim world as it is deemed the third most sacred site in Islam and believed to be the place where their prophet Muhammad leapt into heaven. There is an understanding here between Israel and Islam: these are divided quarters, with one side belonging to those of the Jewish faith -- the Wailing Wall and the remains of the Temple of Solomon -- and one side belonging to Muslims, with the Al Aqsa Mosque. Here, everything is separated: with the Jewish, Muslim, and Gentile all herded into individual areas. This mosque is an Islamic holy place -- the one place in the holy city of Jerusalem that is theirs alone.

As a reaction to this provocation, some Palestinians on the site protested. Those that threw rocks at Sharon were killed (Awad 174). Within the next few days, there were many protests -- from Palestinian and Israeli Arabs alike. With every protest, there was violence from either side: stones from Palestinians and heavy automatic weapons from Israelis (Awad 174-175).

The state of Israel has maintained the position that they are merely fighting a defensive war against a violent people. However, the first attack by the Palestinians that resulted in an Israeli’s death occurred two months after the Al Aqsa Intifada actually began, when the death toll of the Palestinians had already surpassed 300 (Awad 177).

In the first two years of the Al Aqsa Intifada, over 900 Israelis had been killed, with over 6,000 being injured (Awad 181). The death toll for Israeli children during this time added up to 92 (Awad...
As reported in American news, many of these casualties were civilian.

In contrast, according to UNICEF estimates, 448 Palestinian children were killed within the first two years of Sharon’s reign of the Intifada (Awad 180). In fact, more than 9,000 Palestinian children have been injured thus far, but these statistics are not openly relayed to the American populace, as the United States’ support of Israel has a tendency to be all encompassing (Awad 180).

Between the 29th of September 2000 and the 30th of September 2008, there have been a total of 4,757 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces and 45 Palestinians killed by Israeli civilians (“Statistics”). In total, 951 Palestinian children have been killed by the Israeli military (“Statistics”).

The Israeli forces have also implemented month long curfews to the cities of the West Bank. On March 29, 2002, the people in the cities of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala were imprisoned within their own houses for over 40 days (Avakian; Awad 192-193).

Mariana Avakian, an ethnically-Armenian young woman who resides in Bethlehem, back behind the Wall, remembers going through this with her family. With Israeli snipers perched upon the rooftops, she and her family had to sleep on the floor and crawl from room to room (Avakian). She looks back upon that time, saying how “At night, [she] used to stare at the sky, trying to find hope in the stars” (Avakian). She used to see red bullets at night, unstoppable: “The sounds still play [over] in my mind,” almost seven years later (Avakian). She tells me that “for many days, [her family] didn’t have bread because no one was allowed to be in the streets or else he’d be immediately shot” (Avakian). The Israeli soldiers gave families but one hour a week to shop for food (Avakian).

Another young woman, Sara Saca, is an ethnic Palestinian who has was born and raised in Bethlehem because she is unable to leave the Wall without Israeli consent. She has seen much violence: her uncle was killed in front of her as he tried to shield them from Israeli bullets (Saca). She had to hide for eight hours with her mother and brother, as the Israelis held her apartment complex under siege (Saca). She has told me the details about this day:

It was on a Tuesday afternoon, after school. I was sitting in the living room, waiting for my mom to finish cooking so we can eat. I hear something outside so I look out the window. I see a big, black, round thing that passed by really fast. Then I hear the bomb go off. I see bullets going everywhere. I pull myself and my brother onto the ground and start screaming: ‘Mom! Mom!’ We crawl to her in the kitchen and she takes us downstairs to the basement. We hid there for eight hours. We heard people getting shot, people screaming. We could smell the tear gas the whole time...my mom had us smell her perfume so that the gas would not affect us that much. The whole house was shaking. My brother was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth. I got sick. I was shaking; I would not say a thing. Just tears would come down my eyes (Saca).

Terrors such as these are not once-in-a-lifetime random occurrences. These are moments Palestinians have to deal with, worry about, and live with as they grow from childhood to adulthood.

It is through curfews and sieges such as this, combined with the destruction of opportunities, schools, and healthcare, that 75% of Palestine has been reduced to poverty, living on less than $2.00 a day (Awad 197). As of now, the unemployment rate in Gaza is 67% and in the West Bank 48% (Awad 197).

Further diminishing the Palestinian quality of life, and done as a form of punishment, the Israelis are destroying the homes in the territories. During the first fifteen months of the Al Aqsa Intifada, over $305 million worth of damage has been done to Palestinian residences (Awad 208; “House Demolitions as Punishment”). In the West Bank alone, more than 720 homes were destroyed, along with 30 mosques, 12 churches, 134 water wells, and 34,606 crops (Awad 208-209). This is illegal according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which it is stated in Article 17, that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property” (qtd. in Awad 334). Though this destruction is illegal, the Israeli military has continued with it, creating a large population of poor, homeless Palestinians.

The soft pink of morning washes over me. I open my eyes. Looking out my bedroom window, I see the darkness of the Wall, encircling all of Bethlehem. I see the homes of refugees. These refugees -- it is their homes that have been destroyed. They live in concrete blocks: limestone cells. Windows indiscriminately cut out like shattered teeth, making a feeble attempt to smile. They are broken buildings surrounding broken lives.

And there is the Wall. The constant reminder.

Article 50 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states that an occupying power must “facilitate the proper working of all institutions devoted to the care and education of children,” yet the Israelis have deliberately attacked the educational system within the Palestinian territory (Awad 335; “Convention IV”).
Over 185 Palestinian schools and universities have been assaulted, with 11 of them being completely destroyed (Awad 201). As of now, 15 schools are being dominated by Israeli troops and being used as army barracks and detention centers for Palestinian arrestees (Awad 201).

In blatant disregard of Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention -- stating that the medical and hospital services of all occupied territories must be ensured and maintained -- even the health care system of Palestine has been struck down (Awad 336; “Convention IV”). During the first three years of the Al Aqsa Intifada, 25 Palestinian medical personnel have been killed, with 425 personnel being injured (Awad 201). The Israelis have raided hospitals and medical volunteers, including those of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief (Awad 201). In 2002, there were more than 197 attacks on Palestinian ambulances by the Israeli military forces (Awad 198). By 2004, 432 incidents have reported being denied access to the use of ambulances, thus resulting in the deaths of over 76 people (Awad 198).

The Israelis have advanced weapons -- supplied by the United States -- and are militarily supported with three billion dollars a year (Awad 297). In contrast, Palestine is stateless with no single organized military, and has half of their population surviving on less than $2 a day: “Palestinians cannot order curfews and imprison Israelis in their homes and cities. Palestinians have no power to establish checkpoints on the borders of Israeli cities. Palestinians cannot employ bulldozers to demolish Israeli homes” (Awad 182). Israel uses U.S.-made Apache helicopters and tanks, along with “sophisticated instruments of destruction” (Awad 293). Palestinians do not have F-16 fighter jets or any other military weapons that could possibly match the forces of the Israeli state. And Israel, unlike Palestine, has “the support of the world’s leading economic and military power.” our country, the United States (Awad 297).

Ariel Sharon knew exactly what he was doing on that day in September of 2000. He would have known how the Palestinians would react and, in turn, how the Israeli military would retort. And Sharon did this in the name of Zionism: “I don’t mind if, after the job is done, you put me in front of a Nuremberg Trial, and then jail me for life. Hang me if you want, as a war criminal. What you don’t understand is that the dirty work of Zionism is not finished yet, far from it” (qtd. in Awad 120).

Zionism is the reason behind it all, so they say. The Zionist movement began in the late 19th century, founded by a Jewish Austrian by the name of Nathan Burnham (Cohen). This movement was aimed at uniting the Jews and settling them all in Palestine, where holy sites such as Jerusalem remain (Cohen). This movement culminated with the establishment of the state of Israel in the year 1948, with the help of Britain and the United States after World War II (Cohen). Many still fervently believe that religious Zionism is the reason why the Israelis do what they do: to go back to their country of old, a land that has not been in their power for over 2,000 years.

There is but one problem with this. Israel is no longer the religious state it used to be. Today, Israel is 80% secular, with only 20% of the Israeli population today considering themselves to be religious Jews (Awad 252).

Zionism has evolved. Today it is an excuse: a justification. Zionism is now the reason why every Israeli youth must spend three to four years in the military after graduating from high school: why young girls carry lip gloss and machine guns, why couples go for mid-afternoon walks with grenade launchers.

In June of 1963, President Kennedy gave a speech in Berlin, when Germany was divided in two by a giant wall, twelve feet high and over 100 miles long, preventing anyone from crossing sides to get to freedom: separating families and creating barriers (“John F. Kennedy”). It was in this speech that Kennedy proclaimed that “real, lasting peace in Europe can never be assured as long as one German out of four is denied the elementary right of free men, and that is to make a free choice” (“John F. Kennedy”). A free choice: a choice to go where one wants, when one wants, without being stopped because one is from the wrong side of the wall.

At the same time, in June of ’63, David Ben-Gurion was the first prime minister of the state of Israel (Reich). Ben-Gurion was a Polish-born Jew and a committed Zionist (Reich). Ben-Gurion was he who declared the independence, and the establishment, of the state of Israel in the year 1948, with the help of Britain and the United States after World War II. This movement culminated with the establishment of the state of Israel in the year 1948, with the help of Britain and the United States after World War II (Cohen). Many still fervently believe that religious Zionism is the reason why the Israelis do what they do: to go back to their country of old, a land that has not been in their power for over 2,000 years.

And while Kennedy was speaking of freedom for all, Ben-Gurion was making very different proclamations. Ben-Gurion has asserted: “We must use terror, assassination, intimidation, land confiscation, and the cutting of all social services to rid the Galilee of the Arab population” (qtd. in Awad 113). This was said by a man whose people have just gone through the terrors of the Holocaust.

David Ben-Gurion had concluded his lectures with: “After we become a strong force…we shall
abolish partition,” that which Britain originally gave to Palestine, “and expand to the whole of Palestine” (Awad 127). Kennedy concluded his speech with: “All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’” (“John F. Kennedy”).

“Ich bin ein Berliner.” Words that I myself have seen, written upon the wall that separates the West Bank from the rest of Israel. The wall that the Israelis have built is one that keeps the Palestinians in a perpetual siege: residents of any city or town within these walls are not allowed to leave without the permission of the Israeli government (“2007: Apartheid Wall”). The wall is a jail. Twice the height of the Berlin Wall, it will be -- upon final completion -- 450 miles long (“2007: Apartheid Wall,” Awad 213).

The Wall towers over the box-like buildings, spanning eight meters in height. It runs as far as the eye can see, blending into the desert surroundings. Picking up my skirt so the hem does not drag in the dust, I walk along the Wall that surrounds the city of Bethlehem. Rocks. Pieces of buildings, ruined. Filth. Poverty surrounds its borders. I look at the Wall’s face, dirty and gray. Covered in words.

I read of words that sigh: “I will always have my dreams” and “Here is a wall at which to weep.” There are angry phrases aimed at myself, being an American. Walking and reading, with the knot in my stomach twisting: “Hey USA! Stop paying for this fucking occupation!” and “Where is the U.S.’ professed democracy now?” These words are written in English, so that I may understand. Feel guilty. And go home and wonder why I never knew.

These are the “voices from the ghetto.”

And the Palestinian’s land has undeniably become a ghetto: six ghettos, to be precise. There is the Northern Ghetto which includes the towns of Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarm, and Qalqilya; the Central Ghetto which includes Salfit and Ramallah; the Southern Ghetto of Bethlehem and Hebron; the Jordan Valley Ghetto; the Gaza Strip as a whole; and East Jerusalem (“Threatened Villages”).

Cyna Glatstein, a Holocaust survivor, knows how it feels to live in ghettos such as these. She was born in Poland and was forced to live within the Sochachev and Warsaw Ghettos (“What Lessons…”). Glatstein was one of the many Jews who were forced to live in specific zones, simply for being Jewish. Much like the Palestinians, who are unable to leave designated areas because of their ethnicity. And Cyna’s plea to the world of today: “…I think that the bottom line has to be that we have to keep reminding the world that inhumane things can happen to people if others just stand by and let them happen” (“What Lessons…”).

The Wall is the reason for the creation of these ghettos as it limits all opportunities that the Palestinians have. The physical restrictions that the Wall has put into place have made it so that towns and cities “cannot expand to meet the needs of their people” (“Threatened Villages”). Movement between the ghettos is near to impossible, as Palestinians have to apply to the Israeli government for a pass -- even if it is as serious as a sudden death in the family. Many times, these passes are not even granted. The Palestinians are oftentimes unable to go to the beach, to a mall, or to even see movies -- because they are all on the other side of the Wall (Saca). Over 60 localities are completely surrounded by the Wall’s borders, limiting educational and occupational opportunities as well as the availability of basic needs (“Threatened Villages”).

The Israeli government has created bypass roads within the walled area of the West Bank for the use of Israelis alone (Awad 140: “Threatened Villages”). It is through these roads that Israelis are able to easily control all traffic at the checkpoints and roadblocks. These roads connect different towns hidden between the Wall, allowing the Israelis to get where they want to be, without having to be on the same roads as the general Palestinian populace.

These bypass roads have also allowed the formation of illegal settlements. These settlements are on Palestinian territory and break international law by doing so (“2007: Apartheid Wall,” “Threatened Villages”). The Israeli government entices its people to take part in these settlements to further their power over the Palestinian people: for example, “in August of 2003, the Israeli government offered a four month incentive aimed at drawing young couples into the illegal Israeli settlements on Palestine Territory by giving away $11,400 grants” (Awad 139). This is but one example of many used by Israel to lure Jews into “internationally condemned settlements” (Awad 139).

To capture and settle on other’s territories is illegal under international law. Therefore, the entire occupation of Palestine by Israel is illegal under the laws made by the Geneva Convention and the Resolutions of the UN Security Council (Ackerman 63; Awad 334, 338). The UN Security Council has repeatedly condemned Israel’s actions and demanded their withdrawal from Palestinian soil, but it has yet to happen (Ackerman 63; Awad 334).

The Palestinians are being denied the inalienable rights of all human beings: to be regarded as human. It was during the Holocaust that there was also mass dehumanization -- but of the Jewish people. As the Minister of Public Enlightenment...
and Propaganda for the Nazi party, Josef Goebbels further enforced a very negative view of the Jewish people, already made popular by anti-Semites ("Dehumanization of the Jews"). The propaganda used by Goebbels was used to “remove [the] human characteristics” of the Jews so that the death and violence would “not seem like murder at all” ("Dehumanization of the Jews"). The Nazi party also implemented the Nuremberg Laws which forcibly removed Jews from jobs and restricted their daily lives, increasingly isolating the Jews from the rest of society ("Dehumanization of the Jews").

Yehuda Shaul, a former Israeli soldier and founder of the organization Breaking the Silence -- aimed at enlightening the public of the military’s behavior through the use of anonymous testimonies -- speaks openly of the ways in which the Palestinians have indeed become dehumanized. Shaul acknowledges that “over time, the Palestinians stop being people and simply become objects” (Heywood). Shaul speaks of all of the ways in which Palestinians become assaulted, stolen from, beaten, and detained. Shaul has declared that Israeli soldiers have “[grown] accustomed to abusing Palestinian civilians” and how, though many see the abuse, nothing is done to stop it (Heywood). Shaul has openly admitted that the Israeli military continues to needlessly harass and exploit the Palestinian people -- and in making these reports, Shaul and his organization have, in turn, been abused and banned from reaching out to, and talking to, the general Israeli populace (Heywood).

And then there is the media: the reporters, news-teams, and television channels that we trust to give us reliable information on the actions of the world around us. The media, in all its forms, helps to shape our perceptions of facts and opinions on many world-wide issues.

In regards to the Al Aqsa Intifada, the U.S. media provides a narrow view of conflict, all through a skilled use of rhetoric. We always hear of Israel’s “retaliation” against Palestinian violence, but seldom the other way around (Awad 307). We never hear our news reporters use the term “occupation” in regards to the presence of Israel on Palestinian land, though “occupation” was always used regarding the conflict between Iraq and Kuwait (Ackerman 62). In fact, “90% of [American] network TV reporting on the occupied territories has failed to report that the territories are [indeed] occupied” (Ackerman 62).

Civilians like Sara Saca and Mariana Avakian have never committed a crime, but they cannot freely leave the West Bank. For the residents of Palestine, every entrance and exit is blocked by Israeli military jeeps and machine-guns. The gates do not open for them, regardless of their innocence. They are continuously surrounded by the Wall and by weapons.

Yet the ways in which American journalists report on the Al Aqsa Intifada is nothing but a “daily catalogue of seemingly unprovoked Palestinian aggression” (Ackerman 62). There is no equilibrium between the reporting on the two sides. There is no illustration of Sara and her family’s hiding for hours. There are no words that reflect the hunger of Mariana’s family when they have no bread to eat.

On October 9, 2001, Jim Wooten, a reporter for “World News Tonight” stated: “What began, as usual, with rocks and bottles soon became a genuine gun battle. [This is but] one more example of how the young Palestinians’ anger is turning more violent and more deadly” (qtd. in Ackerman 63). It is through statements such as this that all of Israel’s “grievances are visible,” and that of the Palestinians is nonexistent: grievances against people who fight for their land with pebbles and stones, in the face of armored tanks (Ackerman 63).

The October 2001 issue of Time magazine featured two interviews about the Al Aqsa Intifada. One small article spoke of an interview with Palestinian Ehud Barak, under the headline “We Are a Tough and Small People” (Ackerman 74). At the same time, Ehud Barak’s words were balanced by an interview from a fighter from Hamas, the Palestinian extremist organization (Ackerman 74). The headline over this interview: “I Shot an Israeli” (qtd. in Ackerman 74). To choose to speak with Hamas, an extremist organization with values hardly representative of the Palestinian people as a whole, again shows the unwillingness of the U.S. to see the conflict as it really is.

On October 14, 2000, Dan Rather, CBS’ news anchor at the time, spoke of the Palestinians, proclaiming: “Hatred now has live ammunition” (qtd. in Ackerman 64-65). What is interesting about this statement is that Rather neglects to mention that the Israeli forces have all had live ammunition and advanced weapons -- thanks to the United States -- and were, at one point, most likely “motivated by hate” (Ackerman 64-65). To make such a statement as Dan Rather did is to say that “hatred” is personified in Palestine: that the two words are synonymous. This is to say that the whole of the Palestinian ethnic group is one of hatred, but to look into the eyes of young women like Sara Saca-- and to hear their story -- is to see only a want for equality and recognition.

On January 4 of 2005, National Public Radio (NPR) featured an article about the upcoming elections for a Palestinian Authority president,
written by reporters Peter Kenyon and Steve Inskeep (Abunimah). Inskeep and Kenyon neglected to mention the fact that many Palestinians are actually unable to vote because of their status as a refugee and because they are not allowed to travel to the area necessary to make a vote (Abunimah). Instead, the reporters honed in on Palestinian candidate -- and now president -- Mahmoud Abbas. Kenyon and Inskeep said that Abbas “described Israel as the ‘Zionist enemy,’” but refrained from mentioning the context, or full statement, of this quote (Abunimah). What Abbas actually stated was as follows: “We came to you today, while we are praying for the souls of the martyrs who were killed today by the shells of the Zionist enemy in Beit Lahiya,” speaking of the seven children -- all under the age of eighteen -- who were killed by Israeli forces while farming their land in the Gaza Strip (Abunimah). Americans do not hear of the children who are abused on their way to school -- in the Gaza Strip or in the city of Hebron. America does not see the young children of Palestine, with machine guns pointing at them while they walk home from class.

It is rare for one in the United States to see the Intifada as a means to end the military occupation on Palestinian territory because of the way in which our media portrays the conflict (Ackerman 74; Awad 307). Instead, Americans only see “outbursts of hatred” (Ackerman 64). We see only the actions of Hamas: the suicide-bombings of buses and cars, the deaths of innocent Israelis. We see violence from one side, and pragmatic defense actions from the other (Ackerman 64). We do not see Sara Saca or Mariana Avakian. They do not exist in America.

The Al Aqsa Intifada is not over. It continues today -- as I speak. As you read. The fear and injustice continues.

I look back, into the city of Bethlehem. I look up, up to the Wall rearing into the sky. I have been behind this Wall -- learning from the people who spend the entirety of their lives behind this enormous barrier, some never seeing past the gated checkpoints and barbed wire.

I see the Israeli military -- laden with weapons and malice for the Palestinian people. I hear them swear at my bus-driver, Abu Ali, a Palestinian man: a father and a son. They spit derogatory words at Abu because they can, and he can do nothing but take it, sitting still as they check the validity of my American passport.

The gates close behind me and we drive out of Bethlehem and the West Bank, out into the open land of Israel. The farther from the West Bank, the greener the land. Soon I can see the open water: the Mediterranean Sea blinks golden as we head towards Tel-Aviv, where a plane awaits me. A plane that will take me home: back to the United States.

I know that when I get home, everyone will want to hear how it went -- how I survived Palestine. They will want me to talk about my time in the Middle East, and all that I have learned. But I know that some will be upset with me. Some people will not like hearing that Israel is at fault for crimes against humanity -- or that there are Palestinians who are innocent.

I look out the window, seeing the airport in front of me. The sun is beginning to set. I can no longer see the Wall.

Before, I had only heard the Israeli side of the story -- the side that America speaks of. It was not until I was literally here that my eyes began to open. There are faces behind the Wall. There are families: people.

It is not that the Israelis are wrong or that the Palestinians are right. They both have committed terrible acts against one another. But they both have innocent people who are in pain -- innocent people who are being dehumanized and penalized for simply being who they are.

There are always two sides to a story -- and in the United States, we only see one. It is imperative that, for the betterment of all, we become educated of both the Israeli and the Palestinian perspectives. As the late Jewish journalist I.F. Stone had voiced: “How can we talk of human rights and ignore them for Palestinians?” (qtd. in Awad 195).

There is much work to be done. There have been too many silent ears, too many mouths afraid to speak. It is up to us -- as free men and women -- to educate, illustrate, and speak out.

I cannot forget those faces.

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