



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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## As the UN Vote Approaches, Life on the Ground is the Same as Ever

BY RANA B. KHOURY

Palestinian and Israeli diplomats have recently been descending on foreign capitals, appealing, respectively, for the conception of a state and the contraception to prevent it. Civil servants around the world are thus confronted by the Arab-Israeli conflict as the Palestinian Authority's September 20 bid for full membership in the United Nations General Assembly draws near. If one wonders why *al-qadiya al-filastiniya*, the Palestine problem, refuses to go away, events occurring during a typical week for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation might provide at least part of the answer. Arabs and Muslims may be more familiar with these miserable conditions than people in Asia, Europe, or America. And now that Arab publics across the region are re-assessing their conceptions of self-determination, it is important that the world renew its attention to the situation on the ground in Palestine. The week of [27 July to 2 August](#) in the occupied territories provides an illustrative snapshot.

Palestinians in the Qalandiya refugee camp north of Jerusalem were up before dawn on the first of August, sharing breakfast among relatives. Their food and water would need to sustain them until sunset on this first day of the holy month of Ramadan. At the same time, a group of Israelis in the Defense Forces were conducting a raid in the camp. It was one of 84 "search and arrest operations" that week, fewer than the weekly average of 100 during 2011. Met with the resistance of [young men throwing stones, the Israeli soldiers](#) responded with live fire. They shot dead two young Palestinian men.

Elsewhere in the West Bank, civil society organizers continued to lead hundreds in weekly demonstrations against the [West Bank barrier and other barriers erected by the occupying power](#) to restrict the movement of Palestinians. Thirty-six demonstrators suffered injuries in this week alone.

Gazans know something about barriers and restrictions. When Palestinian fishermen were angling for a catch on 28 July, they themselves became prey to Israeli naval boats, which fired on them. No one was injured, but the message – not to stray beyond the three nautical miles permitted them beyond their own shore – was sent.

Inland, restrictions are even more debilitating. Zero truckloads for export left Gaza through the Israeli-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing during the week. That's less than the 2011 weekly average of seven truckloads for export. That's much less than the weekly average of 240 truckloads before Israel imposed its blockade on Gaza in 2007. Weekly non-violent demonstrations against border control also take place in Gaza, [such as those in Beit Hanoun for the last three years](#). But it is violent-Hamas-controlled-Gaza that usually makes the news.

The struggle between domination and resistance is not limited to military operations and demonstrations, but extends to quotidian struggles. For instance, an average Palestinian civil servant lacks the security of a steady income. Her employer, the Palestinian Authority (PA), is a

[nearly defunct](#) remnant of the “peace process” negotiations of the 1990s. Her pay may be withheld by the occupying power, such as when Israel retained tax revenues due to the PA last May. Or it may be due to a lack of funding from foreign governments upon which the PA is dependent, as Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad [warned at the beginning of our week](#) in question.

Indeed, the Palestinian Authority has almost no “authority” at all; this misnomer is but one example of the misleading assertions made in the public discourse. This method of obfuscation also applies to the “natural growth” of illegal settlements, the “defensive” nature of the massive Israeli military’s actions, and the “extremism” and “terrorism” of Palestinian resistance.

As such, the dominant power has shaped the discourse to legitimize the illegitimate. To wit, an “outpost” is a settlement deemed illegal by the Israeli authorities, presumably distinct from other settlements, all of which are illegal under International Humanitarian Law. [The Migron outpost in the West Bank](#) was at issue this week. Migron was built a decade ago with money from the Ministry of Construction and Housing, despite its lack of proper permits and its location on private Palestinian property. Yet Migron has more than just funding from the government – it has a close ally in it too; on 27 July, Israeli Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin actively sought the government’s authorization of Migron. That is, he wanted Migron to be not an illegal “outpost,” but a “settlement” which, though illegal under international law, is legitimized by Israeli discourse. Rivlin won’t have his way, as initial compliance with the Supreme Court’s ruling on the outpost began with the demolition of three homes in early September. The operation required 1,000 police officers who fended off 200 angry settlers during the demolition. The settlers proceeded to attack and destroy the local Palestinian mosque.

Settler violence is not usually about settler homes, however. It is usually about Palestinian homes. Such conflicts may take place in parliamentary offices or courtrooms, but they affect ordinary people. During our week in question, fifteen Palestinian Bedouin families packed their bags and tents to leave their homes of 40 years due to continuous settler attacks. [They add their numbers to the 698 Palestinians](#) displaced in 2011 from “Area C” in the West Bank that is under total Israeli control (as opposed to the other portions of the West Bank that are governed by the PA and are thus under less direct Israeli control).

Israeli settlers reign over the land with impunity. During our week, settlers reportedly set ablaze agricultural land belonging to Palestinians in villages within the Ramallah and Nablus governorates, which damaged around 400 olive and almond trees. As the Palestinian fire brigade worked to put out the flames, settlers physically assaulted them. Those scorched trees are but 10 percent of the 4,000 trees that settlers have burned, uprooted, or vandalized so far this year.

A week in the occupied Palestinian territories is not on the minds of the Republican Party candidates competing for conservative hearts in America’s Midwest this month. It will not even capture the attention of those 80 Congressmen who took all-expense-paid vacations to Israel this past summer. But it would be a mistake for policy-makers to think that Arabs have also neglected to pay attention. The nature of the military occupation has always been unjust and unsustainable. It shouldn’t come as a surprise if Palestinians – perhaps re-energized by their neighbors throwing off the yoke of oppression – take matters into their own hands this fall.

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