

# Palestine: a self-imposed prison

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Hayaat loves her grandmother, Sitti, who always reminisces and sings about her previous home and their life before the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. In an effort to restore Sitti's health, Hayaat and her friend, Samy, set out on a journey to the other side of the wall to bring her a gift of Jerusalem soil. This children's book exchanges the customary propaganda for Palestinianism for a search for the truth. This is my eighth children's book review.



## Another one-sided novel alleging hardship in Palestine

Thirteen-year-old Hayaat is the heroine in *Where the Streets Had a Name*, by Randa Abdel-Fattah. She lives with her Mama and Baba, siblings – older sister Jihan, 7-year-old brother Tariq, 3-month-old Mohammed – and 86-year-old grandmother, Sitti Zayneb. The family is preparing to shop during the two-hour respite from the curfew imposed by the Israeli government.

Not explained was that the Israeli army sometimes places refugee districts in the West Bank and Gaza under army curfew as “collective punishment” and “environmental pressures” after a terrorist attack or when they are unable to control population unrest in the streets. We learn nothing of the Israeli victims who are seriously maimed or killed, or of the families left to grieve, but this family is inconvenienced as they rush to the store, each with a list of items by aisles, load the car and return home in time. The Israelis “confiscated our land,” Sitti laments, and the family of seven must manage in a smaller apartment in a poor Bethlehem neighborhood.

## Half-truths

Additionally, Hayaat's school is closed for the curfew's duration, and she is tired of comments about her face – the contorted skin she sees in her mirror. Her older sister Jihan is engaged to Ahmad, an Israeli Arab from Lod, who found a reception hall for their wedding in Ramallah, the West Bank, where he works and where they will live as a couple. They grumble about the roadblocks and checkpoints that could delay their timely arrival at

the wedding, but similar conditions exist worldwide to maintain security from interlopers and terrorists. In the case of Israel, it is to ensure that Palestinians are unarmed and not bent on a killing spree.

The West Bank is Judea and Samaria, part of what the Israelis re-captured when they defended themselves against the unlawful siege and blockade of Israel by Egypt, Syria, and Jordan's armies in 1967. Despite the rhetoric, according to international law, this land is not "occupied," but "disputed." Inasmuch as the territory never belonged to Palestinians or to any sovereign nation, Israel cannot be an "occupier." The territory's ultimate ownership is to be determined by agreement. Further, the "1967 borders" were only the demarcation of an armistice line, the final border to be established by agreement.

## **Bringing hardship on themselves**

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Hayaat enjoys spending time with Baba, hearing his stories of their vast property in Beit Sahour, the olive trees, and the harvest. He speaks of the mountain, home to many Christian sites, and the time before the Israeli "settlements" (a term used to delegitimize Israel's legal housing) and bypass roads were built.

Her only friend is a boy, Samy, who doesn't seem to mind her scars; they are kindred spirits and share their stories. Samy's father had been dragged from their house by Israeli security services and imprisoned these past seven years. He was a terrorist, and the boy often acts out at school, angry that his father chose activism over fatherhood. He said, "He traded me for the cause." His mother died of a heart attack and Samy lives with an aunt and uncle. Hayaat tells Samy that she overheard her Mama speak about a deaf boy who had been killed by a bulldozer that was flattening his house. The author failed to explain that it is Israel's policy to destroy the terrorist's family home – sometimes seen as a deterrent; the death was an unfortunate accident.

## **The false – and true – narratives of the 1948 War**

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At home, Hayaat listens to Sitti reminisce about her home in Jerusalem, and the war of 1948, the fighting everywhere. She was terrified of the Zionist fighting forces and pressed to leave, adding "200 men, women and children were massacred."

Perhaps Sitti does not know, but surely the author who undertook this narration does, that the Palestinian Arabs proclaimed jihad against the Palestinian Jews in November, 1947, just before the partition vote, and in defiance of the Palestine Commission's resolution. There were massacres and death throughout. No doubt the Jews were also ill prepared and terrified when 1,000 armed Arabs descended upon the communities in northern Palestine, as were the British who turned over their bases to the Arab legion, leaving the Jews to suffer severe casualties and devastating defeat. The trapped 1,500 to 1,600 women and

children were entrusted to the Red Cross. At this point, the Haganah, a paramilitary group of immigrants, was renamed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and succeeded in stopping the Arab offensive.

## How Israel came to own Palestine – at great cost

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With minimal help from the West, the Jews won with sheer determination and their purchased or smuggled crude British Sten guns, French 65-milimeter howitzers and other leftovers from World War II, as well as fighter aircraft supplied by Czechoslovakia. Iraq promised, “It would be a war of annihilation,” but the Arabs wound up with less territory than was originally offered, which they’d refused. The cost to Israel was enormous, with \$500 million in expenditures and the death of 6,373 Israelis, one percent of their 650,000 Jewish population. An additional estimated 12,000 Jews were killed by Nazi sympathizer and Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Amin al-Husseini in 1950.

## An illicit journey for – soil?

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### Easy Plugin for AdSense by Unreal

Sitti explains that they fled and could not return to her old neighborhood until after the 1967 War, only to find her home occupied by a Jewish family, Holocaust survivors. Known also as the Six-Day War, it was initiated by the Arab states of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Again, Israel won and re-captured the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Grandmother was of that warring population and permanently displaced, but the Palestinians are adamant about wanting Israel. Therefore, when Sitti collapses and is taken by ambulance to the hospital, Hayaat devises a plan. She tells Samy that she wants to get Jerusalem soil from the other side of the wall to make her grandmother happy.

And so begins Hayaat and Samy’s journey to Jerusalem, with money “borrowed” from Jihan and an empty hummus jar to collect Jerusalem soil for Sitti. They meet several people along the way, including Wasim, a dirty boy from Aida refugee camp, who speaks of one day playing with a famous soccer team; a cab driver who helps the children, knowing they are illegals with blue passes; bus passengers David and Mali, the story’s requisite young Jewish couple against the occupation, who block bulldozers and dine with Palestinian families; and the checkpoint’s young Israeli soldiers who search cars and bags, delaying some passengers while allowing others to pass. Hayaat does feel some humiliation, but she understands their need to search for weapons and explosives.

## Jumping the wall

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They continue their adventure when the driver stops suddenly in front of a six-foot-high, barbed-wire wall. The children exit the bus and follow two others who jump the wall to enter Jerusalem illegally. While on their own, they meet Yossi, an Israeli cab driver who

often helps to smuggle people into West Jerusalem. When they reach a roadblock protest, Yossi tells them to jump out and lose themselves among the crowd of protesters.

With the noise of a grenade and smell of tear gas used to quell the crowd, she faints to the triggers of a repressed memory of soldiers, a bulldozer, and homes breaking and falling. She has a flashback of her old friend Maysaa falling to the ground, hit by the rubber-coated bullets used to disperse the people, and feels again her own face oozing blood. She awakens as Yossi carries her to his cab, Samy beside them. Yossi fills Hayaat's jar with soil and uses his cell phone to call her family to assure them that the children are safe in Jerusalem and he will drive them home.

## **Palestine can have no hope when its leaders deny hope to others**

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The family welcomes them and Sitti is again sitting in her bed, singing about her homeland. With the next news report about another curfew, the family readies their pots and pans to resound in solidarity. With the TV announcement about the latest bombing in Tel Aviv, Baba says "revenge does nothing." As the family dresses for Jihan's wedding, Hayaat assesses what she has learned – that she wants to live as all human beings do, to be "a free people with hope and dignity and purpose."

Hope alone cannot bestow freedom to a people who deny others theirs. Hayaat's own people invented demonstrably false slurs that the Jews live well at the expense of the Palestinians, and that killing is permissible. Their differences are also cultural. The Jews returned to their land of malarial swamp and desert, sacrificed blood and treasure to restore their history and ancient language, and toiled to create a successful country, whereas the Arabs, after losing the war they began, were made to abandon their original heritage (Egyptian, Lebanese, Syria, Transjordan, Iraq) and replace it with the false identity of "Palestinians," and a victimhood mentality. When they accepted the world's donations, they were robbed of their pride.

Palestinian leadership keep their own people subjugated, their children emotionally focused on envy and weaponized for revenge. This book reveals that they are surrounded by anger and death, with only Baba's one-time reflection on the consequences of their actions.

## **Palestine is indeed a self-imposed prison**

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It is not the soil of the land that would bring dignity to the Palestinians, but the freedom to live and make choices for themselves. The Arabs have been given a scapegoat, Israel, and countless excuses for their failures, which become self-fulfilling prophecies. Were they told that their opportunities are endless, that they must earn their own wage by building their country, homes, businesses, creating services or products, they would increase their

purpose, pride, and individual wealth. Instead, the masses are raised in conformity, rigidity, illiteracy, and fear. They sacrifice their own lives and wellbeing to continue Mohammed's revenge – a ceaseless condition of discontent.

To her credit, Abdel-Fattah reveals that the previous generation perpetuates the vengeance. Grandmother has confessed her envy of those who live better than she, and we glimpse the trait in Hayaat. Sitti expresses her bitterness and anger against the UN, the Arab countries, and their traitors. The traitors remain undefined, but they must include the Arabs who began the wars as well as those who offered no sanctuary to the dispossessed, those who were abandoned and left for pawns. She reveals that her son-in-law, Baba, had had bad things happen to him (TK: he has learned lessons from his acts of retribution). His generation includes Samy's imprisoned father, whose political activism destroyed his own family.

### **A clue to the problem?**

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We learn of Hayaat's past when she fainted in the Jerusalem crowd, relived her trauma and the death of her friend. It may well have been the girls' deeds that resulted in the demolition of their homes.

This story appears to be teaching that the Islamic system, with its lust for what belongs to others, keeps them in a constant state of dissatisfaction. The numerous clues and lessons to be learned exist for the reader, but they may be too obscure for the designated audience of teens and young adults.