

Diary of a Crossing

Baqiya and Yu'ad

27 Mar 2024

Baqiya and Yu'ad

We are using pseudonyms. The names come from the amazing novel *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974) by Emile Habibi. Read it.



All photos: Baqiya and Yu'ad

5:00: Although our flight is at 1 p.m., we are up at 5 a.m.. I didn't sleep well. We ordered the Uber for 10 a.m. and we are at the airport early. **We** have a bag full of food for the **trip** ahead.

At passport control the border police speak to us in Dutch and are surprised that we don't speak it. They ask us if we're going on holiday to Amman, we nod and smile and give each other a look.

We are grumpy, we snap at each other. We spend the first half hour on the plane deleting photos on our phones, changing our profile names and deleting **stories on Instagram**. At some point the pilot explains **why the flight takes five hours instead of four** – ‘because of the “situation in Israel”’ **he says**.

we

The We is sometimes an I. The I is sometimes a We. The I can also be anyone of us, and it can be none of us.

trip

To get to the West Bank we first must get to Amman airport, then we have to get to the King Hussain Bridge compound, which is open only from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., so as we arrived in Amman at 9 p.m. we had to stay in a hotel until the morning when a taxi took us to the bridge. The bridge is a complex of security and administrative facilities, entering Palestine for the Palestinians is like entering a high security prison compound. On the Jordanian side our bags are checked and then our passports, then we get on a bus which we are not allowed to leave until we reach the Israeli side. On the Israeli side our bags are checked again, and our documents and Israeli re-entry permits are checked, we get a permit to enter, we collect our bags and go by bus to the Palestinian side. There our documents are checked again; we collect our bags and get into a 7-seater van to Ramallah. The journey home cost us 1000 euros each. Compare this to Israeli citizens who travel through Ben Gurion airport, it takes them 6 hours and around 300 euros.

stories on Instagram

We had to delete Signal and Telegram from our phones, and check our Instagram accounts for any posts. Our friends told us that the Israeli soldiers can ask to check your phones and see what we have posted or shared or consumed, it is not only about what we share but who we follow.

One friend told us a story about his friend who was stopped at a checkpoint, the soldiers asked to check his Telegram account, he said he didn't have one, they beat him up, they accused him of deleting it. We were worried. Should we have kept it? Well, we should keep it and not use it as proof of innocence. A Palestinian in Palestine is always guilty.

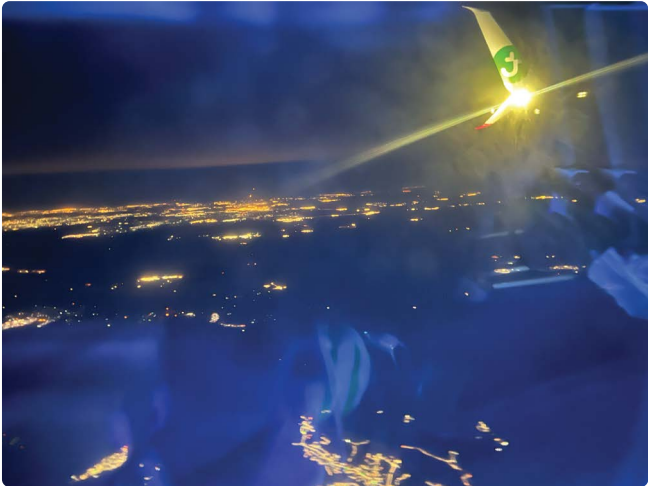
why the flight takes five hours instead of four

On the plane, in the air, the pilot announced the route: ‘we will fly over Central Europe, then the Balkans, then Greece, Crete, then across the Mediterranean to Egypt, over Cairo, Sinai, across the Gulf of Tiran, to Aqaba, and then north to Amman airport.’ So now you don't fly over Palestine/Israel, you fly around it. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has allowed Israeli planes to fly over its airspace, and since then planes have been flying east over the West Bank from Ben-Gurion airport. Every minute a plane flies over our heads, we see them take off or land, loud and clear. But we are not allowed to be on any of them.

Israel

On that flight we were sitting on the left side of the plane. Once we flew north over Jordan along Palestine's eastern borders, looking through the window into the darkness of the night and the light of the awoken towns, it suddenly occurred to us that Gaza is just there, to the west, and if we gaze hard enough we might see it, or we might actually be looking at it, there, unmediated through a screen or transmitted through signals and cables. There, the genocide is actually taking place, in front of our eyes.

he says.



We arrive in Amman. I open my phone; my sister writes that she's on her way to take my mother to hospital in Jerusalem. The taxi driver who took us from Amman airport to the hotel is angry, he talks about Gaza all the way. He says ‘they've humiliated us, the world is conspiring against us, we're all broken’. At the hotel we

are upgraded when we mention that we're leaving early for Palestine in the morning. A gesture of solidarity! We thank them. (Solidarity in the age of neoliberalism always takes the form of money, discounts, funding and donations. This time, money can't reach Gaza, and even if it did, there's hardly anything it could buy.) I venture out to get some sandwiches for dinner, the streets are empty, the air so fresh, I've missed it.

7:00: I've slept very badly for the second night in a row. Breakfast is better than we thought. We eat quickly and rush to the taxi waiting outside the entrance. We're nervous. The streets are empty and we arrive in almost 50 minutes. I needed more time to prepare mentally – suddenly we're there, flies everywhere, people rushing with their bags, trying to be first in line. I'm directed to the women's search room. The guards are all having breakfast, I'm patted down randomly, we fill in the 'white card' with our details and queue again. I give the officer my travel document and my green card. He asks for my Israeli re-entry permit, looks at it, hands it back and tells me to go to the other window to get my passport. We go to the next queue for the bus. Turnstiles! These are new, they must be learning from each other! One of our bags is missing. It's still in their office for an extra check. A young man in front of us is pleading with the officers to let go of his dozen cigarettes, saying, 'Come on, just let

it go, can't you see how tough the situation is?' They do indeed let go after reprimanding him. We get our bags and get on the bus. The bus stops at the exit gate of the Jordanian side and an officer gets in. He asks for our passports and white cards, he takes part of our white cards and checks everyone's passports. We reach the Israeli side.

We argue about whether I should go in without my bags. We hate being separated, but we have different **types of ID**, so it's better that they don't see us together.

We put the bag stickers on all our documents. We go in, I have to pee, I mumble that I'm going to the toilet, Y takes the bags first, I hold them, take the bags from the machines, surprisingly they are not checked. A young 17-year-old Israeli soldier points to the document control window. Y whispers to me to go to the window far away, 'but why is this one empty' I whisper back. We end up at the windows next to each other. The officer looks at me and smiles. I'm breathing fast, nervous, he can see it, he takes his time. He asks me

types of ID

One of us has green, the other blue. The Israeli authorities issue Palestinians different identity cards, and these cards determine their lives. Some Palestinians who have a blue card have full Israeli citizenship, others who are from Jerusalem, have a blue card but are considered temporary residents in the city and are subjects of the Israeli state. Palestinians from the West Bank have green cards, the same as Palestinians from Gaza, the difference is the address section. If you are from the West Bank you are only allowed to live in Area A in the West Bank, if you are from Gaza you are only allowed to live in Gaza. Even though Palestinians live under the Palestinian Authority rule in Area A, they are still subjects to the Israeli military rule.
Do you know what Areas A, B and C are?

if I was alone, Y hears him, he looks at me. I reply ‘no, I’m with him’, ‘but he has a West Bank identity card’. Yes, I reply. ‘Where do you live?’ ‘In Jerusalem.’ ‘Where does he live?’ ‘In Ramallah.’ ‘Do you live separately?’ ‘We meet **once a week** in Ramallah.’ Yu’ad is whispering right next to me: ‘I told you to go to a window far away!’ I feel stupid. Our marriage is registered in Jerusalem anyway, they know. But not the details. Yu’ad says there’s more to talk about when we’re next to each other. Stupid, **I feel stupid.**

We go through the turnstiles into an area with more turnstiles, a guard scans the stickers, ‘your bags have passed security’, out of the turnstiles, we pick up our bags, we queue for another turnstile, a guard checks that our bags match our stickers, out of the turnstiles. We get on the bus to Jericho. The PA officers check our documents, they fill in the information on paper, I think they throw it in the rubbish afterwards, they give us pink slips, the next guard takes the empty slips. While all the guards stage a performance of power, the Palestinian Authority officers are the most blatant. They don’t decide who enters, they can’t ban or allow anyone in or out, we all know – our own public secret – that only the Israelis have the power to do that.

once a week

Green cards holders are not allowed to be in Jerusalem. Blue cards holders have to prove all the time that Jerusalem is the centre of their lives, otherwise they might lose their right to live in Palestine.

I feel stupid

Once, Baqiya called me from Qalandia checkpoint on her way to Jerusalem, saying that she forgot her ID card at home, and that she needs me to pick it up for her and meet her halfway to give it to her, this took around 2 hours due to the enormous traffic. When we finally met, I was furious because she forgot her ID, she replied saying that I shouldn’t get angry with her because she forgot, but angry about the existence of the checkpoint. The checkpoint is the problem not her.

We hurry to find a van to take us to Ramallah. We ask the driver about the checkpoint. He says we should go on the **Moa’arajat road**. The **checkpoint** shouldn’t be too bad. We are stuck there for an hour. I start writing this text on my phone while waiting. I have this urge to **explain** to friends abroad the **absurdity** of the situation, but also to somehow gain time (and labor) from the time they steal from us. The driver tells us how bad the roads are and that they’ve changed **today**. It’s taking much longer. The DCO checkpoint is closed; we have to pass through several villages instead. Not great news. I’m getting nauseous. But it is also nice to see the **Palestinian countryside**. I have a feeling that we won’t be traveling outside of Ramallah **during this trip**.

Moa’arajat

Moa’arajat road also means the twisted road, it is one of two roads that connects Ramallah to Jericho. It is a mountainous curvy and steep. People take it when the other main road is closed, which is faster and safer. Moa’arajat road is more beautiful and has less settlers on in, it goes through Palestinian villages and towns. This time of the year it is very green and lush. We miss seeing hills and extended landscape. I was happy that we were taking this road.

checkpoint



explain

The questions resonate: What is art in the time of genocide? Is it possible to discuss the role of art in such a world? Is there anything that art can say that has not already been said?

A friend in Ramallah said there is nothing art can say or do right now, that artists should become activists, learn how to survive properly without electricity, water and food. Learn how to forage, make fire, how to connect wires for electricity, how to connect to the internet in a genocide, first aid, how to clean a wound

without medicine, how to print on a momograph, tell stories to children, learn to farm, know which grass to eat. She said the West Bank is next, we feel it. Another artist said ‘even when sheep are slaughtered we usually don’t do it in front of the other living sheep’. He felt like a sheep watching another sheep being slaughtered, knowing that he is next.

absurdity

I almost have an imposter feeling when i chronicle to people the things one goes through in Palestine, I even hear paranoia in my own stories about the unbelievable collective punishment tactics used against the Palestinians daily, until I read David Graeber’s text ‘Hostile Intelligence: Reflections from a Visit to the West Bank’ (*International Times*, 2015). It’s sad that a famous writer could affirm one’s own lived experiences.

today

People told us that they haven’t managed to do anything since that day. That day. That’s what people call it now: that day.

Palestinian countryside



During our visit we picked khobezeh. It grows all over the West Bank. By the roadside, in the hills, under trees, always after the rain and the sun. The eastern Mediterranean is famous for spring in the middle of winter and the fluidity of the seasons. I thought about how such a plant came to be part of Palestinian cuisine. People gather it among other plants and eat it in different ways. The land is never far away. My mother fries it with olive oil, some onion, salt and pepper and eats it with bread. A friend says she adds garlic, another friend says with sumaq and olive oil.

Khobezeh sounds like khoboz, which is the Arabic word for bread. I wonder if they are related.

Khoboz is rare in Gaza now, people are starving, Israel has bombed all the bakeries and barely allows wheat in. Now people have to invent ways of making bread if they can find the wheat. We saw many videos of people making their ovens out of cans and DIY ovens, burning wood and material they could collect from destroyed homes and from felled trees. The Eltiqa group of artists wrote that their gallery was bombed by an Israeli tank missile, the gallery was looted by residents, they were looking for things to burn, no one touched the electrical equipment, but the paintings and furniture were used to make fires for heat and to bake bread. They wrote that they were sad to see the artworks destroyed, but then they wrote that people’s lives are more important than art. Isn’t the frame of the painting more important than the canvas in times of war and genocide? What is art in times of genocide?

during this trip



11:52: another checkpoint at **Yabrud village**.

12:25: still stuck at the checkpoint, a white butterfly passes by. We can't manage to see the end of the traffic.

12:38: We can finally see the checkpoint. Yu'ad takes a photo of the soldiers, the driver tells him not



Yabrud village



to: they'll see you, better not take a picture of them. Yu'ad returns his phone to his pocket. The soldiers are checking one blue car vehemently, its passengers have been made to squat on the ground while the soldiers points at them with their guns. We're closer, one of the men can't be older than 15, a child. I stop typing and put my phone in my pocket. **The December sun warms my face.**

13:05: We cross. We see a soldier tightening plastic handcuffs on one of the young men as we finally pass. While we're passing through the narrow streets of Ein Yabrud village Y is discussing the rest of the route with the driver, and whether there's going to be another checkpoint. They talk about how tough this road was back in 2002 when it first opened. It was during the second Intifada, checkpoints were everywhere and Palestinians couldn't travel on the main roads. This road was originally a side road for donkeys to go up hill, taxi drivers began using it to move between villages and later it became a kind of official road with asphalt, it is still hard, very steep.

The December sun warms my face

The sun is amazing, it is warm here. At night it is a bit chilly. It is December. It should be cold now. But luckily this year it isn't. A friend said: I hope it doesn't rain this year, the sky shouldn't drop rain and bombs at the same time.

14:00: We **arrive home**. It's been 32 hours since we woke up in Amsterdam.

arrive



home

There is a collective sorrow, an overwhelming sadness. We have never seen a city engulfed with such sadness in our life. We don't think we will ever move beyond this sadness... and anger.