

# The Link

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## Epiphany at Beit Jala

**By Donald Neff**

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It was two decades ago when I first arrived in Israel. Like many Westerners, and I suppose like most Americans at the time, I was something of an unwitting Zionist in my sympathies. If I did not embrace Israel's history of expansionism, I did not necessarily reject it either. I believed that the Jews deserved a secure state of their own, as the Nazi holocaust had proved, and it followed that Israelis had a right to look out for their own safety.

This included Israel's continuing occupation of three-quarters of a million Palestinians in Jerusalem and the other territories captured by Israel in 1967. Even after eight years, the occupation was being described by Zionists as the "most benign in history" and the American media had little hesitancy in repeating that claim. As a strong believer in human rights, I wasn't comfortable with such a facile slogan. I didn't believe any occupation could be less than evil, a blasphemy against freedom and democracy and ultimately corrupting of the occupiers. But, if an exception existed, I assumed a case could be made for Israel's special needs.

Palestinian rights had never been of high concern to the media or most Americans, especially in the Congress and the White House. Moreover, the Palestinians themselves had shown little talent for making their own case. Their prevailing image abroad was as hijackers of airliners and terrorists at Munich and elsewhere. I was unaware of any credible record of Israeli abuses and the Palestinians

seemed incapable of producing one. In the circumstances, the occupation was troubling, but a distant subject for me.

Of more immediate concern was the strategic contest with the Soviet Union. The Cold War and the Israeli-Arab wars—as opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—dominated the world's attention. The repercussions from the 1973 war were continuing to shake the region. The memory of the nuclear alert declared by Washington at the end of that war was still stark, causing more than theologians to talk seriously about Armageddon.

Henry Kissinger was still shuttling through the region, the ballyhooed "Superman" who had already achieved disengagement agreements between Israel and its two most powerful neighbors, Egypt and Syria—the Soviets' friends. More than at any time before, the United States was being directly drawn into the Middle East. It was one of the top foreign stories of the year.

It never occurred to me at the time how advantageous it was to Israel to portray its problems as arising from a fight against international communism rather than a local issue focused on the dispossession of the Palestinians from their homeland.

This was the rough outline of my mindset when Time

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**Donald Neff served as Time magazine's  
Jerusalem Bureau Chief from 1975 to 1978.**

"For an American living in Israel, the U.S.-Israeli relationship was increasingly raising disturbing questions. They arose not only from government-to-government events but from personal encounters while on my daily rounds in Israel. As the weeks and months went by, small and revealing contacts began forming a far from pretty portrait of the Zionism I had admired and the meaning of its influence on the United States."

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## About This Issue

Donald Neff tells us that *Time* magazine, in the late 70s, paid for its two bureau chiefs in the Middle East, Neff in Jerusalem, Wilton Wynn in Cairo, to meet every six weeks on neutral ground, such as Athens, to insure that each correspondent was exposed to the views of the other side in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This issue of *The Link* is Neff's personal account of his road of discovery from those meetings in Athens to Beit Jala, a small village outside Bethlehem.

He is by no means the first journalist whose integrity in reporting on Israel's treatment of Palestinians resulted in professional blackballing or even physical harassment. (See *The Link*, vol. 21, no. 2, June-July 1988, and vol. 26, no. 3, July-August 1993.) Yet his account may resonate more poignantly with Americans in light of his position as *Time's* bureau chief in Jerusalem with over 20 years of journalistic experience behind him.



**Donald Neff**

Following his tour of more than three years in Jerusalem, Neff returned to Washington, D.C., and wrote three major works on the Arab-Israeli wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973. Most recently, he has written a survey of U.S.-Israeli relations, "Fallen Pillars," which is reviewed on page 13 by Talcott Seelye, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria. All four of Neff's books are available through AMEU's discount book program (see pages 14-15).

AMEU also would like to bring to the attention of its readers a project sponsored by the Palestine Human Rights Campaign of Georgia to purchase the Albert E. Glock Library for Birzeit University. (Details on how to contribute are found on page 5.) Dr. Glock was an American archaeologist on the Birzeit University staff when he was gunned down by an assassin in 1992.

**John F. Mahoney, Executive Director**

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magazine sent me to Israel in January 1975. Although I had been a reporter for more than twenty years and seen my share of the world, I had never worked in the Middle East. My attitude toward the region reflected pretty much the pro-Israel biases of the media and of Americans in general, unleavened by history or sophistication about Zionism.

I was particularly admiring of Israel's army and its stunning six-day conquests of 1967 at a time when massive American forces were bogged down in Vietnam.

With such sympathies, it did not sound strange or offensive to my ears when just before I flew off to Israel a colleague of mine at Time whom I knew as a decent man said: "Don't let the ragheads get you." He laughed and I laughed, neither of us feeling like a racist. It was clear who the good guys were.

And in a way the warning was fitting. Most American correspondents, including Time's, in that period were isolated. Reporters assigned to Israel were confined to the Jewish state and reporters in Beirut or Cairo covering the Arab world could not travel to Israel without losing access to the Arab countries they covered. It was a practical necessity, but an unhealthy arrangement, limiting the reporters' exposure to only one side and by implication making them advocates to some unintended extent.

It was only later that a discerning chief of correspondents, Murray Gart, finally decided that the two chiefs of bureau in the Middle East had to have a chance to exchange views. He provided a budget for me and Cairo correspondent Wilton Wynn, one of America's most insightful reporters on the Arab world, to meet every six weeks or so on neutral ground such as Nicosia or Athens. These meetings were invaluable. They allowed us to exchange ideas that greatly contributed to insights and understandings about this most complex confrontation. Under Wilton's tutoring I began to grasp some of the complexities of the conflict and, more important, the

subtleties, too.

At the time of my arrival in Jerusalem, however, the nature of the story seemed to me simple enough. The Israelis were America's friends, the Soviets were the Arabs' friends, and the Arabs and Israelis were enemies. It did not take invocation of the old Arab proverb—the enemy of my enemy is my friend—to know who were friends and enemies.

I had no anticipation of how intellectually tantalizing and emotionally wrenching my exposure to the Middle East would be. Instead of the simple black-and-white conflict I expected, I was entering the most fascinating and challenging period of my life. I was about to be so completely enthralled and fascinated—not to say frustrated, infuriated and utterly astounded—that I would spend the rest of my life trying to understand the Arabs,

Israeli and America's policies in the Middle East.

TIME, APRIL 3, 1978

### WEST BANK

... Perhaps the worst incident occurred at Beit Jala (pop. 8,200), five miles south of Jerusalem. One day last week, residents reported, about 50 Israeli troops rolled up in trucks and surrounded a school. Headmaster Louis Rabbo complained that he was "shoved rudely" by the soldiers when he tried to protest. The troops ordered the pupils, all in their early teens, to close their windows, then hurled beer-can-size canisters of U.S.-made CS anti-riot gas into the packed classrooms. One student, Mohammed Azzeh, 13, was studying Arab literature in a second-floor classroom when a soldier appeared, ordered the windows shut and added, "Don't be afraid." Two CS canisters then went off. The students in second-floor classrooms were so frightened that they leaped 18 feet to the rocky ground below. Ten, including Azzeh, were hospitalized with fractures; several, according to the head of the local hospital, will have lifelong limps. Though military authorities at first denied the incident, it was confirmed to TIME Jerusalem Bureau Chief Donald Neff by a score of local residents. Two days after the event, reports Neff, one classroom still bore the stench of gas. ...

Israel in early 1975 was still a country depressed by the ravages of the 1973 war. Its generals had been exposed as unprepared, its political leadership dishonored and its economy in shambles. So many Israelis left the country after that war that the local joke was about how the last person out should turn off the lights. Tourism was practically nonexistent, hotels and restaurants stood empty and a gray atmosphere lay over the country.

The Time bureau was in Jerusalem and the storied city seemed particularly bleak. The weather was dreary, heavy with dark clouds and what seemed to me like an unremitting drizzle of cold rain. I had thought of Jerusalem as a kind of desert Saigon, so I had packed tropical cottons and light jackets. The result was that I

had never been so cold as in my first days in those unheated, tile and limestone buildings that grace the ancient city.

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***"I frankly thought that the diplomat was exaggerating, drunk or a closet antisemite. I certainly did not believe that the President of the United States had to offer a handkerchief every time tiny Israel sneezed."***

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Like any seasoned foreign correspondent, I took my first task to be to look out for my health and comfort. That is how I found myself shortly after my arrival driving the hilly streets of Beit Jala, next to Bethlehem and just a few miles from Jerusalem. It was my first visit to an Arab town, not because of curiosity about the Palestinians but because it was reputed to have one of the best tailors around. He made me two marvelously warm tweed jackets, leaving me with sunny thoughts of Beit Jala, an image that was to change dramatically three years later.

Henry Kissinger remained the star of the hour in 1975, still basking in the extravagant praise the American media had heaped on him for his step-by-step diplomacy. Now he was about to try to gain Sinai II, a second Egyptian-Israeli agreement. Anticipation was high about how much captured desert terrain Israel would have to give up. The assumption was that since it was only Israel that was holding occupied territory, it followed that it was Israel that would have to make tangible concessions.

Israelis were apprehensive and unhappy. There were bitter comments from Israeli officials and in the Hebrew press that little Israel would not be pushed around, would not be forced to cooperate in its own suicide. I thought such strutting more posturing than real.

While I was familiar with Israel's notoriously Byzantine negotiating tactics, I did not anticipate that a nation of barely 3 million could long stand obstinate against the mighty U. S. This was especially so since only Washington's abundant military supply effort and \$2 billion in emergency economic aid had bailed Israel out of its losses in the 1973 war. Israel literally owed its current strength to America.

Moreover, Israel was now seeking from the United States a staggering increase in its aid to more than \$2.6 billion as well as unprecedented amounts of sophisticated military technology. Its dependency was growing and therefore, I thought, its vulnerability to U.S. pressure.

Such levels of aid were entirely new in the U.S.-Israeli relationship, or any other relationship for that matter. In fact, up to the 1967 war, France had been Israel's major foreign benefactor. So close was the relationship that there still remained small, painted tri-color flags, fading and neglected, on some government buildings when I arrived. France's sudden severing of relations in protest of Israel's launching the 1967 war left the Jewish state without a major-power protector. It was a role the United States had only begun to assume in full in 1970.

The new relationship was instantly profitable for Israel. It saw U.S. aid increase from \$93.6 million in fiscal 1970 to \$803 million in 1975—and was now heading to more than \$2.6 billion in fiscal 1976.

There was thus a fundamental and historic change occurring in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. No one had yet defined its dimensions or its priorities. At a minimum I assumed such dependence would make Kissinger's task fairly easy, or at least not insurmountable.

The diplomatic effort in 1975 was aimed at achieving a small Israeli withdrawal in the Sinai peninsula. It was to be only a limited pullback from territory that no nation, including the United States, believed Israel had any right to keep under military occupation. President Anwar Sadat already had proved his desire for a deal when he had abandoned his previous pledges to link Palestinian rights to the talks and was asking only for the return of Egyptian land. In the circumstances, I thought there should be no problem for Washington to formulate a fair agreement and then nudge both sides to sign.

Instead, Israel acted as though it was being asked to surrender its own sovereign territory, demanding extravagant concessions not only from Egypt but from the United States. As a result, Washington labored away at various proposals to soften Israel's position. In early February the Secretary of State himself flew into the region to personally present a U.S. withdrawal plan to the two sides.

This was my first exposure to Kissinger in action. He swept into a conference hall at the King David Hotel, where he and his entourage

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had taken over a floor or two of suites and rooms, and looked quizzically at the 30 or 40 local and foreign reporters awaiting him. After a perplexed moment, he said with some exasperation: "Where is my press corps?" He refused to start the press conference until the 10 to 15 reporters assigned to him fulltime arrived.

It did not take a reporter to understand why Kissinger was getting the best press of any recent secretary of state. He and "his" press corps were a symbiosis, each feeding off of each other.

Kissinger was a master at manipulating his press corps. His favorites were rewarded with front-page quality leaks, endorsements of their books and a sense of having participated in shaping the nation's foreign policy. Those who occasionally strayed from the Kissinger line were punished by being ignored and cut off from inside tips.

After Kissinger's press corps arrived the Secretary of State revealed his strategy. He was giving both governments three weeks to consider the latest U.S. plan, then he would return to start another of his famous shuttles between Cairo and Jerusalem. The shuttle began on March 8. By March 24—no small amount of time for a secretary of state to devote to one problem in a world of problems—Kissinger admitted failure. He left little doubt that the failure was due to Israel's intransigence and flew home amid mutual recriminations between Tel Aviv and Washington.

The extent of Israel's ability to resist U. S. advice was my first great eye-opener in Israel. I had had little appreciation of the astounding depth and strength of Zionism's influence in Washington. I was stunned that a country completely beholden to the United States could thumb its nose at Washington.

I remember sitting down during this period with one of Kissinger's exhausted aides late at night in a deserted bar and asking him why Washington simply didn't tell Israel it either would compromise or lose U.S. aid. In return, I received a short lecture on the relationship between the White House and Congress. His message, boiled down from its diplomatic niceties, was that Zionist influence in Washington was so great that it was impossible to do anything involving Israel against Zionists' wishes. I expressed some mild skepticism, but the diplomat was firm. Believe me, he said, when it comes to Israel even the slightest problem can be resolved only by the President.

I frankly thought that the diplomat was exaggerating, drunk or a closet antisemite. I certainly did not believe that the President of the United States had to offer a handkerchief every time tiny Israel sneezed.

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## Glock Library Drive

The Palestine Human Rights Campaign of Georgia is sponsoring a drive to raise \$100,000 to purchase the archaeological library of Dr. Albert E. Glock for Birzeit University.

The Glock library is an essential resource for the revival of Birzeit's unique Palestinian Institute of Archaeology, and a must in the effort to appoint a new director to replace Dr. Glock, who was murdered in 1992 by an unknown assassin.

The project has the full endorsement of Birzeit officials as well as Palestinian educators in the United States, including Drs. Philip Mattar, Issa Nakhleh and Ghadi Talhami.

All funds—100 percent—go to the Glock Library Fund. Individuals will receive a certificate of appreciation for their gift. Donations, which are tax deductible, should be made out to: Birzeit University Fund for Glock Library, PHRC, P.O. Box 831072, Stone Mountain, GA 30087.

I began changing my mind when on the same day that Kissinger's shuttle failed, President Ford announced a major "reassessment" of U.S. Middle East policy. It was a White House effort to rein in Israel. To add to its impact, scheduled visits to Washington by Israeli leaders, including Defense Minister Shimon Peres, to discuss the Israeli request for more than \$2.5 billion in aid, were postponed, talks on supplying F-15s to Israel were suspended and the delivery of Lance ground-to-ground missiles was delayed.

But once again, astonishing to me, these moves had no effect on Israel. Quite the reverse. The government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin defiantly refused compromise while the President, instead of being hailed for his political courage, found himself under attack as being anti-Israel and even antisemitic. The attacks were ferocious enough that he felt he had to hold several meetings with Jewish Americans to deny the charge, a show of weakness that did not go unnoticed in Israel. Nor did Israel soften its stance through the weeks and months that Washington pretended to reassess its policy.

In the end, the great reassessment crashed like Kissinger's shuttle. It came about with an amazing display of power by Israel and its American supporters. On May 21, 76 Senators sent a letter to President Ford urging that Washington be "responsive to Israel's urgent economic and military needs." The letter was a major triumph for the Israeli lobby to force the Administration to abandon its reassessment. While Ford kept his silence at the time, he later confided in his autobiography that the letter "really bugged me" because "there was no doubt in my mind that it was inspired by Israel." In fact, later research revealed the letter was drafted in part by Israel's U.S. lobby

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*"Sinai II was an announcement to the world that Israel enjoyed a special relationship with the United States and an influence on Washington unmatched by any other country. The signing . . . and the incredible series of events following it forever changed my life."*

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AIPAC, the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee.

The letter achieved Israel's purpose. It compelled politically weak President Ford, soon to launch a difficult election campaign, to conclude that a return to Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy was the only strategy that could receive congressional support. The broader meaning was that Israel's defiance had prevailed. The fulcrum of the negotiations shifted from Israeli-Egyptian matters to Israeli-U.S. relations.

After this, it became clear that it was no longer a question of what U.S. suggestions Israel would accept but how much Washington was willing to pay. Why America should pay anything toward getting Israel out of a mess it had gotten itself into was a question left unasked. No one bothered recalling a similar situation in 1956 when President Eisenhower was challenged by Israeli intransigence in the Sinai and forced it to withdraw without the United States paying a penny.

The answer to how much Washington would pay in 1975 came on September 4 when Egypt and Israel signed their second withdrawal accord, the Sinai II agreement. The pact provided Israel with mind-boggling levels of U.S. aid, technology and diplomatic support. No country had ever voluntarily given another nation such a bounty of treasure and official support. Over the rest of the decade total aid to Israel

equalled \$1.742 billion in fiscal 1977, \$1.792 billion in 1978 and \$4.790 billion in 1979.

More than money, Kissinger signed a series of secret understandings providing an unprecedented array of commitments, too numerous to enumerate here but soon leaked to the press. A flavor of the extraordinary promises he committed the United States to was contained in one of the secret pledges to "make every effort to be fully responsive . . . on an on-going and long-term basis to Israel's military equipment and other defense requirements, to its energy requirements and to its economic needs." This included a commitment that the United States would support Israel against threats by a "world power," meaning the Soviet Union.

Sinai II was an announcement to the world that Israel enjoyed a special relationship with the United States and an influence on Washington unmatched by any other country.

The signing of Sinai II and the incredible series of events following it forever changed my life. It would be no exaggeration to say that I henceforth became transfixed with the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

For an American living in Israel, the relationship was increasingly raising disturbing questions. They arose not only from government-to-government events but from personal encounters while on my daily rounds in Israel. As the weeks and months went by, small

and revealing contacts began forming a far from pretty portrait of the Zionism I had admired and the meaning of its influence on the United States.

For instance, one night at a party for visiting American Zionists one of the Americans confided to me that the most painful moment of his life had come during the 1967 war after Israel had deliberately attacked the U.S. spyship *Liberty*, killing 31 Americans. The American Zionist was in the U.S. Navy at the time and said he was torn by the dilemma of whether he could actually participate in a U.S. retaliatory attack against Israel.

As a descendant of 19th century German immigrants who had fought in World War II, I was appalled. My ancestors were of that proud generation of immigrants who tore the family genealogy out of the front of their Bibles so they would not be reminded of their foreign roots. It was an act I admired as a sign of their total dedication and loyalty to the United States. I believed such unambiguous loyalty was the basic strength of America.

On another occasion, an Israeli diplomat who had served in the United States proudly confided to me over lunch that it was common for Israeli diplomatic missions to receive calls from Americans around election time asking which presidential candidate would be better for Israel. One day at the Foreign Ministry I bumped into an influential American

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Zionist, the kind who gets called in by the President and the Secretary of State when tensions mount between Israel and America. He was working out of a ministry office assigned specifically to him, as though he were an Israeli diplomat instead of a private American citizen.

These personal encounters made me more than a little uncomfortable. They raised the question of dual loyalty to a level I had never realized existed. My uneasiness grew when an American Zionist, who became unusually candid one night over drinks, showed me his Israeli passport along side his American passport. I said I had grown up with the idea that Americans could not be citizens of another country. He proudly informed me that was changed in 1967 by the Supreme Court, adding with emphasis that the case had been brought by an Israeli and the swing vote was cast by Abe Fortas.

When I later did research on Fortas, I discovered that he was a Zionist, about which he made no secret, and among his first thoughts when he was unseated from the court had been to visit Israel. There was nothing wrong with that, obviously, but it did indicate an attachment of such personal importance that he should have recused himself from the dual citizenship case. His action, along with four others on the court, had destroyed a 200-year tradition that I had especially valued as a shining symbol of Americans' exclusive loyalty to the United States.

In the 1970s there were still a number of Israelis with concentration camp tattoos on their arms. These fading blue numbers on slack and wrinkled skin were vivid reminders of the horrors of the holocaust. An evening with a holocaust survivor—or sometimes even an impromptu conversation over coffee—was an eerie journey through mankind's

cruelty and his soaring spirit. Surely no place in the world contained so dense an accumulation of the raw experience of man's struggle and suffering.

Yet, as my tour extended into years, I could not ignore a disturbing blindness in some of even the most gentle Israelis. They did not seem to see the Palestinians all around them. Nor did they seem to see the degradation and injustice imposed on them by Israeli rule. In general, this was just as well because when most Israelis did notice Palestinians their reaction to them was one of loathing or fear that quickly could escalate into violence. I had not seen such an instinctive hatred of another people since living among Southerners many years earlier.

"Filthy Arab" was the routine and most printable description uttered by Israelis. Mindless and violent attacks against Palestinians were not rare, particularly in flashpoints like the West Bank city of Hebron.

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***"Yet there was not the least hint of sympathy or guilt, or even irony, about the fact that immigrants from Europe were now living in the home of Palestinians, a people who had had nothing at all to do with the Nazi holocaust."***

Palestinians were forcefully kept out of Jewish areas after nightfall, facing arrest and worse if they were caught on the street, and there was no question of any of them being welcomed in restaurants, hotels or other public facilities. Their access to decent jobs was almost nonexistent, except at the lowest levels as farm hands, construction workers and trash collectors. Their cars were issued license plates of a different color than Israelis, and their identity cards clearly marked them as not being Israelis. These were ironic reminders of the yellow stars Nazis forced Jews to wear so they could be differentiated from other Germans.

I had trouble giving credence to such blind prejudice because it seemed to me almost unthinkable that a people who had suffered so much could be so unfeeling toward another people. No doubt that was why it took me so long to recognize the reality around me. It was many months before the daily witness of my eyes and ears began to work its way into my consciousness.

In the end, and with all the goodwill in the world toward Israelis, there was no escaping the brutal reality that Palestinians were treated like a lesser form of humanity, to put it mildly. Although their housing was insufficient and overcrowded, Palestinians were strictly denied housing in Jewish areas. At the same time, some of the most desirable homes in Jerusalem and elsewhere that were originally Palestinian now were occupied by Israelis.

The enormity of the displacement of the Palestinians hit me one night while I was having dinner with an Israeli couple I was especially fond of. Theirs was a saga that would have been from a story book almost anywhere else. She was a German Jew incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp and he was an Israeli from

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Austria serving with the British forces who liberated the camp. He returned for her after the war and they took up married life in Israel.

They were among the most charming and sophisticated couples I had ever met. And she was one of the best cooks, so an offer of dinner at their house, conveniently located near the center of Jerusalem, was always welcome. At one point, over an after dinner brandy before flames of olive wood in the fireplace, she remarked that, of course, the house had originally been Palestinian.

She said it without the slightest shred of compassion, this woman who herself had suffered so much. True, after what she and her family had been through, the loss of a home was not the worst fate. Yet there was not the least hint of sympathy or guilt, or even irony, about the fact that immigrants from Europe were now living in the home of Palestinians, a people who had had nothing at all to do with the Nazi holocaust.

I was still mesmerized enough by the heroic version of Israel's history not to challenge my hosts. But the seed had been planted. I began to wonder: What right, really, did European Jews have to Palestinian homes or, for that matter, to Palestine itself? Was this conflict about two people with an equal right fighting for the same land, as the Zionist slogan had it, or a premeditated scheme by foreign immigrants to displace the legitimate local majority population?

It was thus by fits and starts, between long periods of numbness, that I slowly became aware of the Palestinian dimension of the conflict. As time passed and the new U.S.-Israeli relationship settled into a state of intimacy, I made it my business to get around the occupied territories more, meeting Palestinians and

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glimpsing life through their eyes. My interest doubled with the arrival in the White House of President Jimmy Carter, who became the first—and only—president to call Jewish settlements illegal and speak out on Palestinian rights.

This greater exposure to the Palestinians did not lead me to any sudden revelations. A large part of the reason is that it was so difficult to grasp what was really going on in the occupied territories. This was because it was almost impossible to determine who was telling the truth between two bitter enemies. While some Palestinians angrily complained about the cruelty of the occupation, Israeli officials insisted with great sincerity and persuasiveness that the occupation was as humane as it could be.

They denied confiscating Palestinian land, although new settlements were

going up all the time in the occupied areas. They claimed the Palestinians were far better off economically than they would have been under Jordanian rule, although the sorry state of Palestinian villages displayed desperate poverty. They insisted the military government of the occupation respected Palestinians' rights, although increasing numbers of arrests in the middle of the night without charge or trial told a different story. So too did the blowing up of Palestinian houses and the forceful exiling of others who were deposited by their captors in the Jordanian desert or the mountains of Lebanon.

They even insisted that security forces acted only to keep the peace, although it seemed to me the fatal incidents were increasing. Hardly a week seemed to go by without another killing, six in one memorable day that became known as Land Day. But nobody seemed to be counting or care.

Such contradictions put a reporter in a particularly awkward situation. Lacking documentation or credible witnesses, a reporter is hard put to challenge the official word of a government. The difficulty was greatly compounded by the lack of documentation or reliable information about the occupation itself, which was still less than a decade old. In fact, looking back it is hard to believe how little had been published up to the mid-1970s on the Israeli-Palestinian aspect of the conflict going back to the turn of the century. As far as I knew, there was almost no objective research on the Palestinians available to the general public. The *Journal of Palestine Studies* had only begun publishing several years earlier and I was not yet aware of the level of its scholarship or the reliability of its research, nor was it popular reading in Israel.

What was printed in English for the most part reflected the Zionist view.

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The prevailing picture in America of the Israelis was that of heroic pioneers right out of the Paul Newman movie "Exodus" depicting the struggle as against fanatical Arabs and an inhospitable desert, which through their hard labors they made bloom. Menachem Begin and his clique of terrorists were largely ignored or explained away as a lunatic fringe group. Israel was, the Zionists proclaimed, a "light unto the nations." The Palestinians were lumped with the general mass of Middle East Arabs and denied status as a separate people—in Golda Meir's memorable words, they "did not exist."

Without hard documentation and credible witnesses, these stereotypes were almost impossible to shatter. This was so even though my eyes confirmed for me every day they were cartoons of reality. Yet I could not completely shed the stereotypes, not in my own thinking, much less in stories fit to print.

Ultimately my breakthrough to reality was aided enormously by an unexpected source, the United Nations. Since the 1967 occupation, the General Assembly had become unusually active in challenging Israel's practices and affirming the rights of the Palestinians. Resolutions passed by the General Assembly over the years affirmed the Palestinians' status as a separate people with "inalienable rights," including the right of self-determination and the right to struggle for their freedom.

I have to admit that these resolutions had mainly escaped my notice. In part this was because of my involvement in other assignments, but largely I believe because Israel had been so successful in its efforts to discredit the United Nations among Americans.

Zionists hated the U.N., charging it was prejudiced. In fact, it was the only major institution that actually knew

what was going on in the occupied territories and dared to speak out. Israel's reaction was not to change its occupation practices but instead to undermine the credibility of the United Nations itself. In this, of course, it was helped by the many other foes of the world body, but Israel's contribution should not be underestimated. By the mid-1970s, the United Nations had essentially ceased to be taken very seriously by the American media.

Interestingly, although Israel lost no chance to denigrate the United Nations, Israel itself did take it seriously. As a result, whatever the United Nations did received prominent and critical attention in Israel. My exposure to what was going on in the United Nations opened up a documentary record on which I could rely.

Israeli scorn of the U.N. turned into

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***"But nothing influenced me more . . . to reconsider my original bias than the leak to the Hebrew press of a top secret government report outlining how Israel could rid itself of some of its Palestinian citizens and make the lives of those remaining more miserable than they already were."***

rage towards the end of 1975 when the General Assembly passed a resolution saying that Zionism was a "manifestation of racism and racial discrimination." The United States and Israel strongly condemned the single-line statement in the resolution and declared they would never acknowledge it. (In fact, the United States, prodded by Israel, managed to get it rescinded in 1991.)

The resolution was no surprise to me since numerous Israelis had left no doubt to me that Christians, Muslims and other non-Jews were not welcome in the Jewish state. But passage of the resolution provoked me to ponder the broader implications of the exclusive nature of a Jewish state—as opposed to a democracy open to all. It had a powerful influence on my evolving attitude toward Israel.

There were other events that aided my education. One was a rare divergence by the State Department from Israeli policy around the time of the U.N. racism resolution. The State Department publicly declared that the "heart of the conflict" in many ways was the Palestinian dimension, adding: "The legitimate interests of the Palestinian Arabs must be taken into account in the negotiating of an Arab-Israeli peace."

Another milestone came in mid-1977 with the publication by The London Sunday Times of a major expose about torture of Palestinian prisoners by Israeli security officials. The newspaper reported that torture was "systematic" and "appears to be sanctioned at some level as deliberate policy." Israel indignantly denied the charges. Nonetheless the Times stuck by its report and it had the result of touching off other investigations. (Over the years other reports produced such overwhelming evidence that Israel eventually had to admit their truth. Instead of changing

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***"My final revelation, my epiphany, so to speak, came in March 1978 . . . [I heard reports] that Israeli troops had just conducted a cruel campaign throughout the West Bank against Palestinian youth. Many Palestinians had suffered broken bones, others had been beaten and some had had their heads shaved."***

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the practice, however, it then passed a law making some torture legal, probably the only country in the world to have a law sanctioning torture.)

But nothing influenced me more up to 1978 to reconsider my original bias than the leak to the Hebrew press of a top secret government report outlining how Israel could rid itself of some of its Palestinian citizens and make the lives of those remaining more miserable than they already were. It had been co-authored in 1976 by Israel Koenig, Northern District (Galilee) Commissioner of the Ministry of Interior and became known as the Koenig Report.

The report was so diabolical it was hard to believe it was authentic. It warned—correctly, as it turned out—against growing Palestinian nationalism and suggested a number of cynical ways Palestinians of Israeli citizenship could be kept subordinate or even got rid of. These included examining "the possibility of diluting existing Arab population concentrations;" "giving preferential treatment [in the economic sector, including jobs] to Jewish groups or individuals rather than to Arabs;" encouraging Arab students to study difficult scientific subjects because "these studies leave less time for dabbling in nationalism and the dropout rate is higher;" and encouraging Arab students to study abroad "while making the return and employment more difficult—this policy is apt to encourage their

emigration."

Despite massive protests by Palestinians demanding the authors' firing, the government maintained the report was merely the personal opinion of two middle-rank officials and not official policy. Koenig remained in his post and a short time later his co-author, Zvi Aldoraty, was recommended by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as his candidate for appointment as director of the Labor Party's Arab Department.

For me the Koenig Report was a watershed. My stories increasingly began focusing on the occupation and the sly and brutal ways Israel employed to undermine the Palestinian community. Some of my stories were based on information and leads I received from a valiant Palestinian woman, Ramonda Tawil. A wealthy, sophisticated Christian from Ramallah, she became something of a one-woman Palestinian press center in the late 1970s. (One of her daughters, Suha, married Yasser Arafat many years later.)

The stories Mrs. Tawil had to tell were usually unimpeachable since many of them centered on her own maltreatment by Israeli military authorities. She was imprisoned and abused several times, placed under house arrest and otherwise brutally and repeatedly harassed because of her outspokenness. Since it was clear what was happening to her—there could be no doubt she was under house arrest—Israel had to admit it was acting against her, thereby

providing reporters a rare solid basis for stories about Israel's occupation practices.

My final revelation, my epiphany, so to speak, came in March 1978. It began with a telephone call from a freelance reporter, a courageous American who had become interested in the plight of the Palestinians and was close to Ramonda Tawil. She reported she had heard reports that Israeli troops had just conducted a cruel campaign throughout the West Bank against Palestinian youth. Many Palestinians had suffered broken bones, others had been beaten and some had had their heads shaved. Some of the victims were in Beit Jala hospital.

When I repeated the report to my staff, all of them Israelis, they reacted with horror and indignation. The whole group, a secretary, a teletype operator, two stringers, a photographer and two other correspondents, cast doubt on the story. They all declared that it was unthinkable because "that is what was done to us in the holocaust."

About this time one of my best friends, Freddie Weisgal, stopped by. He was the nephew of one of Zionism's important theoreticians, Meyer Weisgal, and a former human rights fighter in the United States before moving to Israel after the 1967 war. His vision of developing a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians early dissolved in disillusionment. Like most American immigrants, who were not large in number, his ideas about living

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together with the Palestinians were not taken seriously by the Zionist establishment comprised of Eastern European Jews. As a result, he whiled away his time playing chess and the piano, trying to eke out a living selling Hebraic art and artifacts to American tourists. He was the funniest, liveliest and dearest man I had ever known.

He said something like, "Aw, come on, Don, you know Jews wouldn't do anything like that." He was agitated and indignant, which wasn't all that unusual for him. But there was an underlying tension too. By this time the bureau was in great agitation. Everyone seemed to echo Freddie's indignation. My god, one or another of them muttered or shouted at one time or another, that is what Nazis did to Jews. It was impossible to think of Jews doing that to anyone.

"All right," I said to Freddie, "let's go to Beit Jala and check it out."

We drove in the chill gathering of darkness. We went into the small hospital and a young Palestinian doctor who spoke English soon appeared. Yes indeed, he said matter-of-factly, he had recently treated a number of students for broken bones. There were ten cases of broken arms and legs and many of the patients were still there, too seriously injured to leave. He took us to several rooms filled with boys in their mid-teens, an arm or leg, sometimes both, immobile under shining white plaster casts.

The doctor had a professional, no nonsense air about him, so as he interpreted I felt I was receiving exactly the story as the victims related it.

They all said that for reasons unknown to them, Israeli troops had surrounded their two-story middle school while classes were underway. In several classrooms on the second floor, the students were ordered to

close all the windows. Then the troops exploded tear gas bombs and slammed shut the door, trapping the students with the noxious fumes. They panicked. In their rush to escape they fled from the rooms so fast that some of them went flying over the balcony to the asphalt and stony ground below.

About the third time we heard the same story, I noticed Freddie's face. It was gray and stricken. He was shaking his head and wringing his gnarled hands. "Oh, man," he said, "this is too much. I'm getting out of here." And he left, taking a bus back to Jerusalem. Afterwards, he never talked about Beit Jala.

My Israeli photographer, who had followed in his own car, was not looking much better. But he dutifully continued taking pictures of the

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**"When I . . . handed my story to the telegraph operator there was a deep silence. I was back in my office for some minutes before the silence was broken with shouts and curses, even sobs. Members of my staff upbraided me, furiously charging the story was false and unfair, a libel against the state of Israel. "**

injured boys.

I talked to them all, and there could be no doubt about what had happened to them. Still, I wanted to see where the attack had occurred. The school was just up the hill. It was dark by now, but I had no trouble with a flashlight finding spent tear gas canisters with Hebrew lettering littering the playground.

The doctor had told me that similar incidents had been reported at other Palestinian towns, including Beit Sahur and Bethlehem. However, my weekly deadline was looming and I did not want to go chasing all around the West Bank simply to duplicate what already was clear.

This meant I would not discover the full extent of the Israeli actions. But at this point I was more determined to nail down the aspect of the story that had so upset my staff and astounded me—the cutting of hair. I had to admit to myself that I found it almost too bizarre to believe that Israelis would actually inflict on another people this most humiliating symbol of the holocaust. On the other hand, my experience told me that Israeli hatred of Palestinians might make anything possible.

I returned to the bureau to find most of the staffers still there, expectant and anxious. To their horror, I displayed one of the used tear gas canisters. I told them there was no doubt about what happened.

One of the reporters with excellent military sources and of whom I was extremely fond, drew me aside and in confident tones assured me the story was not true. He had checked with his best sources and they swore to him that it had not happened. I held up the canister. He rolled his eyes and left.

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The next morning at Ramonda Tawil's house I met several of the young men who had had their hair shorn. They had not been shaved but clumps of hair were missing from their heads as though roughly cut by a knife.

They said they had been picked up by Israeli troops for no obvious reason and were ordered to do exercises and pick up litter and weeds, some of them through most of the night. They had heard, they added, that similar scenes had taken place all over the West Bank.

As with the victims in Beit Jala, their stories were entirely believable. I was determined to do a story. But I was nagged by a certain uneasiness. I was not aware of any stories about the incidents in the local media. Yet two days had passed. Surely other reporters must have heard of Beit Jala or one of the other incidents that had apparently swept all over the West Bank.

I decided to seek further confirmation from an objective third party. I called one of the few Western diplomats I knew who in the past had proved willing to discuss Israeli occupation practices, albeit on an anonymous basis. We had lunch that same day. To my disappointment, he said he was not able to confirm any details. But then he said the embassy had heard that Israeli troops had recently gone wild, adding: "There is a widespread feeling that we haven't seen this kind of repression here for years, if ever."

His vagueness and refusal to let me use his name left me not as satisfied as I would have liked to be with the level of evidence I could present my editors. Non-attributed quotes are never as strong as those with names attached. Still, his confirmation that foreign diplomats were aware that Israeli troops had gone wild clinched it for me. Even if my editors would not know the source, I did and I trusted him.

I returned to a sullen and nervous bureau where hanging in air was the question of whether I was going to do a story. I announced I was.

When I walked out of my office several hours later and handed my story to the telegraph operator there was a deep silence. I was back in my office for some minutes before the silence was broken with shouts and curses, even sobs. Members of my staff upbraided me, furiously charging the story was false and unfair, a libel against the state of Israel. I stood my ground. In response, the telegraph operator firmly announced she would not send such a story. The others seemed in agreement.

I suddenly had a sympathetic understanding of Captain Bligh. As the complaints continued, I reminded the staff that I had used a Telex many times in Vietnam and if it came to that I could now. Short of destroying the machine or shooting me, there was nothing they could do. Reluctantly, the story was sent and I left the bureau relieved to be by myself.

Time gave the story prominent play and it evoked outrage by Israeli authorities and American Zionists. I had anticipated that. My growing concentration on the occupation had already resulted in resentment from some of my colleagues at Time in New York and anger from prominent Zionists, who did not hesitate to lodge their complaints with Time Inc. executives, especially those on the business side. After Beit Jala, the complaints became shrill. The upper levels of Time's editors were bombarded by complaints from Zionists, and a group of them demanded to meet personally with Time Inc.'s editor-in-chief to complain about my coverage. That was a mistake since Hedley Donovan was not one to bow under such pressure.

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local Arab high school, ordered the students to shut the windows and then tossed cans of U.S.-made anti-riot gas into some rooms. A number of students leaped out of second-floor windows to escape the choking gas; ten were hospitalized with various fractures, some crippling.

As a consequence of an incident that shook all of Israel in late March, Defense Minister Ezer Weizman last week abruptly removed Brigadier General David Hagoel, 49, as chief of the 2,200-man Israeli occupation force on the Jordan River's West Bank. At the same time, the commander and deputy commander of the Bethlehem military district, a lieutenant colonel and a major, were ordered to be court-martialed for "an infringement of existing orders."

The Beit Jala incident gained national attention in Israel when it was reported by TIME Jerusalem Bureau Chief Donald Neff, who was the first journalist to investigate the episode. A spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces, citing a "thorough" probe of the matter, heatedly maintained that there was "no truth whatsoever" in TIME's account. Israelis accepted that explanation. The Tel Aviv daily *Ma'ariv* implied, falsely, that Neff had never visited Beit Jala.

Weizman's move stemmed from an episode involving Israeli forces on the West Bank who were overzealously cracking down to discourage Arab protests against the incursion into South Lebanon. At Beit Jala, a village five miles south of Jerusalem, a group of soldiers entered the

But Weizman diligently pressed his own probe. It both confirmed Neff's report and showed that the officers concerned had tried to cover the incident up. . . .

**FALLEN PILLARS**

U.S. Policy Towards Palestine and Israel Since 1948

**By Donald Neff**

Institute for Palestine Studies, 350 pp

**Book Review by Talcott Seelye**

The author is best known for his definitive books on three Arab-Israeli wars: "Warriors at Suez," "Warriors for Jerusalem," and "Warriors Against Israel." This book, "Fallen Pillars," fully measures up to the high standards set by his trilogy.

What Neff sets out to do in cogent fashion is to examine the six pillars of United States policy regarding the Palestinian-Israeli dispute and to show how they have "fallen" over the years. These pillars are: arms, borders, Jerusalem, Israel, refugees, settlements and Palestinians.

In the case of arms, the United States has gone from a policy in the 1950's of refusing to sell any arms whatsoever to Israel to one of providing an almost limitless supply of the most sophisticated weaponry. The rationale (or rationalization?) used for the latter during this reviewer's tenure in the State Department was to make Israel feel secure enough to make concessions for peace. Of course, this did not happen: the stronger Israel got the more hard-lined it became.

Examples of retrogression in U.S. policy are the current Administration's positions of calling the West Bank "disputed" rather than "occupied" territory, acquiescing in Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, and no longer considering Jewish settlements as "illegal" or an "obstacle to peace," but rather just "a complicating factor." Indeed, Neff points out that the Clinton Administration has indirectly funded the construction of Jewish settlements.

Whereas the U.S. originally interpreted the seminal United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 as calling for an Israeli withdrawal from the entire West Bank except for

"minor border rectifications," as time went on the U.S. position shifted to one of advocating only "substantial" Israeli withdrawal and, more recently, to taking no position on the extent of withdrawal.

Neff describes the overwhelming domestic pressures that eroded U.S. policy positions. He reveals that even in President Wilson's day Zionist arm-twisting was effective: Justice Brandeis, a close friend of Wilson's, induced the President offhandedly to support the Balfour Declaration.

Here are some of the quoted comments by top American officials themselves concerning the successful efforts of the Israeli lobby:

*The past record suggests that Israel has more influence with the U.S. than the U.S. with Israel.*—Undersecretary of State Webb, 1949.

*I am aware how almost impossible it is in this country to carry out a foreign policy in the Middle East not approved by the Jews.*—Secretary of State Dulles, 1957.

*One of the main problems I faced . . . was the unyielding and shortsighted pro-Israeli attitude in large and influential segments of the American Jewish community.*—President Nixon, 1978.

*I cannot [exercise major pressure on Israel] because it would be a personal political suicide for me.*—President Carter, 1977.

And Neff reports that even President Truman conceded privately that he did not have the political strength to stand up to Israel.

In only one instance—regarding the Palestinian "pillar"—did United States policy ignore Israeli views, although belatedly, and go forward. This was in 1975 when the State Department publicly recognized the Palestinians as a separate people having rights. Yet, to this day, the U.S. refuses to agree to a Palestinian state.

• *Talcott Seelye is former United States Ambassador to Syria.*

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*(Continued from page 12)*

In fact, Time under his editorship was far in front of the rest of the media in printing stories revealing some of the dark sides of Israel's occupation and it continued to do so.

The atmosphere in Israel was even

harsher. The Jerusalem Post printed a cartoon of Time under a headline saying "Time, Slime." I was attacked to my face as an antisemite and shunned by some. One day as I was entering a restaurant with an Israeli official, he spotted Leon Uris at a table with some people and said he wanted to

introduce me. Uris was a long time propagandist for Israel—the author of "Exodus," among other novels—and owned a home in the Tel Aviv area. As we approached his table, still unseen by him, we could clearly hear Uris mention my name in a highly

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unflattering way. My diplomatic friend smoothly changed course and we sat down without meeting Uris.

Around the same time strange things began happening to me. One day my mechanic reported that the front tires of my car were so over-inflated that they could blow out at any time. How did it happen, he wanted to know, that the tires had twice the pressure they should have? I didn't have the slightest idea. But I couldn't help musing that it would be an effective way to harm someone.

Another time my third-story apartment was broken into, the only time that had ever happened to me anywhere in the world. It almost certainly was the work of ordinary thieves. But still it spooked me. The old terrorist Menachem Begin was now prime minister and anything was possible. And no other apartment in the large building had been broken into.

But mainly my worry centered on the disturbing fact that the story had not been picked up by The New York Times, which was the morning newspaper read by Time editors. They relied on it as the newspaper of record, a reliance not always justified when it came to Israel, certainly not during this period when its editor was A.M. Rosenthal. He was a fanatical Zionist, as his later career as a columnist has revealed.

I was in that unenviable position that reporters dread most. While there is nothing like the joy of getting an exclusive, some exclusives become too exclusive. The implication of a scoop that nobody else prints is that other reporters have looked into the story and found it too flawed to be worthy of publication. The continuing silence by the Times cast mounting doubts about my story. My situation became more uneasy as the days and then weeks went by.

And then a miraculous thing happened.

Ezer Weizman, the father of Israel's air force and an upright man, personally took the matter into his own hands. As defense

minister, he appointed a commission to investigate the matter. It found the Beit Jala story true. When he was presented with the findings, Weizman did a thing that had never happened before. He publicly fired the military governor of the West Bank, Brigadier General David Hagoel, for abusing Palestinians. It had taken more than a month. But, needless to say, the ending was enormously satisfying, a forthright action that to this day gives me hope that Israel may still have a chance to become the nation it professes to be.

Shortly after Weizman set the record straight I left Israel. I was, quite frankly, worried about my personal well being under a Begin government and I was drained by Beit Jala and heart-broken and discouraged by the display of prejudice and unprofessional conduct of my colleagues covering the story, whom I had admired. Not only would they not have used the story if it had been up to them, but after Weizman's confirmation some of them confided to me that they had known in their hearts from the beginning that the story was true.

This amazing confession struck me as the worst example of bad journalism and ugly prejudice I could imagine. The experience left me highly skeptical about the wisdom of employing reporters in areas where they are partisans.

After three and a half years, my last act in Jerusalem was to throw a going away party for myself and a welcoming party for my successor. It was just as well that I cast it as a welcome party for him. Otherwise I'm not sure many Israeli guests would have attended. This was confirmed to me when Teddy Kollek, the mayor of Jerusalem with a reputation in America as a champion of Palestinian rights, arrived. He did not smile. "I am not here to see you," he declared, turned his back and sought out my successor.

On that graceful note, my tour in Israel ended—but not by any means my interest.

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The original *Link* issue used this page to list books being offered for sale at discount prices by Americans for Middle East Understanding. Please consult AMEU's book catalog elsewhere on this website.

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