

Weekend Edition
October 23-25, 2009

An Interview with Bill and Kathleen Christison

Palestine in Pieces

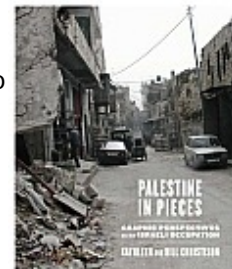
By JEFF GORE

In 1979, Kathleen and Bill Christison retired from the CIA, where they worked as analysts. Ever since then, they've had an unorthodox retirement, to say the least. With only a couple relatively brief interludes, they've dedicated what could have been years of relaxation to fighting perhaps the most uphill battle imaginable: trying to bring the plight of the Palestinians to the public eye. The newest addition to the Christison canon is [Palestine in Pieces: Graphic Perspectives on the Israeli Occupation](#), published in August by Pluto Press. During this decade the Christisons have made a habit of visiting Palestine at least once per year; they returned from their most recent trip earlier this month. Since the couple warned against the potentially endless nature of a conversation over the phone, I elected to send them a few questions via email, which they were gracious enough to answer.

Jeff Gore: Kathleen: In a recent interview with Laura Flanders on GRITtv, you said that based on your travels to Palestine over the past half-decade or so, you believe the situation of the Palestinians “has gotten worse, every year.” Given that the interview was conducted before your latest trip, would you still say this today, considering the downgrade or closure of several checkpoints this year, and, according to the New York Times, “a sense of personal security and economic potential...spreading across the West Bank?”

Kathleen Christison: This is an extremely important question. The supposed closure of checkpoints throughout the West Bank and what is being widely touted as an opening of economic potential are a fiction—a huge scam perpetrated by Israel and the U.S., intended to make it look to the world as though Palestinians are now prospering, that the Palestinian economy is thriving and Palestinian society is now content, all thanks to the beneficence and good will of the Israelis. The media—not just the New York Times, but other print and electronic media and various opinion-molders like Thomas Friedman—have fallen for this scam and indeed have been knowingly participating in it.

The objective is to delude us all, including the Palestinians, into thinking that a new era of peace and prosperity is dawning in the West Bank because Palestinians have stopped terrorism and Israel has responded in good faith by easing restrictions, all in contrast to the situation in Gaza, where all the misery is supposedly the fault of Hamas because it refuses to recognize Israel and refuses to end violence. We are meant to forget that the occupation in the West



Bank and East Jerusalem continues and is continually being reinforced, that Israel launched an unprovoked murderous assault on Gaza early this year, that Israel continues to dominate every aspect of Palestinian daily lives.

In actual fact, things are no better for Palestinians in the West Bank, and in many cases they are worse. We've made two trips to Jerusalem and the West Bank this year, in April-May and October, and we've seen no substantial improvement in the situation Palestinians face on a daily basis. Despite the supposed removal of many checkpoints, most remain, and all can be reimposed at a moment's notice. OCHA, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which has kept careful track for the last several years of Israeli movement obstacles, just issued a report indicating that the numbers of obstacles, which include checkpoints, roadblocks, earth mounds across roads, and gates blocking roads, had been reduced in recent months hardly at all—from 618 earlier in the year to 592 now. OCHA also suggests that there's a good deal of subterfuge in Israeli reporting: although the Israelis promised the removal of 100 roadblocks by the end of Ramadan and issued GPS coordinates for these supposedly vanishing obstacles, OCHA did an on-the-ground survey and could confirm the removal of only 35. In numerous instances, the Israeli GPS locations weren't even in the West Bank.

It's true that there has been some improvement in a few showcase locations. The cities of Jenin and Nablus are rebuilding after the terrible destruction there during the Israeli siege of 2002 and 2003, and there's a bit more economic prosperity. Even in Hebron, which lives under siege from the most vicious of Israeli settlers, some market areas are reopening. The most notorious checkpoint, Huwara just south of Nablus, has been opened up somewhat so that Palestinian cars may now drive through and people no longer have to walk through. But this is classic colonialism, designed to make things just enough better to take the edge off the anger of the colonized: you fill the natives' stomachs and hope they become tame, that they won't want to resist your oppression, that they'll forget that they have no freedom, that they still live under oppression, always at the mercy of a colonialist oppressor who has no intention of relinquishing his domination or ending his exploitation of the oppressed and their resources.

The "model cities" in Jenin and Nablus and the "model checkpoints" such as Huwara are the exceptions in the Palestinians' grinding life under occupation. Movement from one area to another is still severely restricted. Most West Bank Palestinians still cannot visit Jerusalem. Those who have work permits to enter Jerusalem must still wait for hours in endless lines to enter the city and pass through multiple security checks, including biometric checks that leave a record of when they entered the city and whether they have exited by the end of the day. Israeli settlements continue to be built and expanded on confiscated Palestinian land. The road network connecting the settlements to each other and to Israel, on which Palestinians may not drive, continues to be expanded, cutting off increasing numbers of Palestinians from each other. Palestinians are still harassed and physically attacked by aggressive Israeli settlers. Olive groves and other agricultural land continue to be confiscated, destroyed, burned, either by settlers or by bulldozers clearing land for more settlements or for the Separation Wall. Construction of the Wall is proceeding, cutting off more Palestinian land from its owners.

Non-violent protesters who demonstrate regularly against the Wall continue to be shot and killed or imprisoned. While newly trained, spiffily uniformed Palestinian security forces patrol city streets during the day, Israeli forces control the night and

therefore control the entire territory. They conduct middle-of-the-night raids in villages throughout the West Bank, arresting young Palestinian men on suspicion merely of being Palestinian, beating or even shooting anyone who resists. In Jerusalem, where the Netanyahu government is currently concentrating its harshest oppression, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians continues quite openly. Palestinian homes continue to be demolished for no other reason than that they are in Israel's way—in the way of the Wall's advance, or of the next new or expanding Israeli settlement, or of Israel's efforts to depopulate the land of Palestinians and create a Jewish majority. Palestinian families continue to be evicted from their homes so that Israeli settlers can live in them.

The catalog of horrors is long, and it is not ending, despite the hypocritical claims by the New York Times and others of an increased "sense of personal security," despite all efforts by Netanyahu and the Obama administration to make us think peace has come. The occupation continues, and more harshly than ever. As Israeli journalist Amira Hass recently put it, the occupation "completely shrinks people's lives," and this has not changed.

JG: What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a white Westerner traveling in the Occupied Territories?

Kathleen & Bill Christison: Although we feel very comfortable among Palestinians, and have always felt very welcome, at the same time we always feel some embarrassment because we're there basically as voyeurs watching other people's misery. In fact, we feel we're helping by bringing the Palestinians' story, the facts of the occupation and what it means for Palestinian daily lives, to public attention in the West, but it's still hard to get away from the feeling that we're invading other people's privacy by watching them line up at checkpoints and taking pictures of them, or watching them sob as their homes are demolished. Or, as happened to us once, talking to a man scheduled for surgery in Jerusalem who had been waiting for days for an Israeli permit to get into the city and who cried as he told us his story and asked us to take a picture of the medical certificate that attested to his need for surgery and should have provided his entrée to the city. We've told his story, but we knew, and he knew, that we couldn't do anything to help him and that we would ultimately be able to go home to our comfortable lives in the U.S. while he waits—waits for his permit, waits for his freedom, waits for a decent life.

This is the principal reason, incidentally, that we've decided we won't take any royalties or other profits from our new book, but will donate them to organizations that we feel most benefit the Palestinians. No book on the Palestinians will ever make much money in the first place, sad to say, but the idea that we personally should make any money because we've been witness to other people's misery is unacceptable to us.

JG: I've always thought that the strongest argument for the two-state solution -- and against the one-state solution -- was Michael Neumann's assessment of Israel as unwilling to "abolish itself." On the other hand, Kathleen, you've written critically about Neumann's remarks and advocated a single democratic state in Palestine. Ruling out any precipitous fall in American power, any miraculous surge in power of the Palestinian governing body, or God forbid, any catastrophic regional war, in what scenario can you envision Israeli Jews consenting to a binational secular

state; to changing their flag, national anthem, even the name of their country?

KC: I have to say I object to the premise of Michael Neumann's argument—that we should or should not pursue one or another solution simply on the basis of whether it meets Israel's desires. I think, on the contrary, that we should pursue a solution for no other reason than that it is just, for both Palestinians and Israeli Jews. A two-state solution—which at its very best would give Palestinians a state in less than one-quarter of their original homeland and at its most likely would give them a non-viable, non-contiguous state in little pieces constituting quite a bit less than one-quarter—is simply not just. I recognize that realists like Michael disdain “dreamers,” as he's called one-state advocates, as naïve and maybe other-worldly to be talking about unrealistic, impractical concepts like justice. But I don't think, first of all, that it's really so naïve or even futile to advocate and work for justice—justice does prevail on occasion. And, secondly, I think perpetrating gross injustice is ultimately totally impractical and cannot endure: a two-state solution, to my mind, is so grossly unjust—not to say also unlikely because Israel doesn't want that either—that it is also impractical.

So my preference, if we're faced with a situation in which Israel is not willing at the moment to “abolish itself” but is also not willing to give the Palestinians anything, not even a non-viable, cantonized state, is to work for the most just solution, which is a single democratic state in which Palestinians and Jews would live as equal citizens with equal access to the instruments of government and a constitution that would guarantee the equality of everyone. (I would not, by the way, call this a “binational” state, which I see as a state that maintains some de jure separation between the two peoples. This is something I fear would perpetuate the power imbalance and perpetuate Jewish domination of Palestinians. Although nothing would be easy for the Palestinians no matter what solution is pursued, a single integrated state with constitutional guarantees of equality would more readily assure them of some kind of political and economic parity.)

Those like Michael who argue on the basis of what Israel would not want to do are arguing from the premise that might makes right, that might makes a reality that we cannot counter, and that simply because the powerful party in this conflict doesn't want something, it won't come to be and none of us should even speak about it. This is absurd. Who would have expected in the mid-1980s when liberals throughout the world were fighting a seemingly futile battle of sanctions against apartheid South Africa, that the very powerful white leadership of that country would decide in the next few years to “abolish itself”? Who would have expected at that same time that the very powerful Soviet Union would “abolish itself”?

My crystal ball isn't clear enough to be able to lay out a precise scenario, but I believe that Zionism and the racism and injustice inherent in it simply cannot endure and that Israel will collapse of its own weight at some time in the future, hopefully in our lifetime. No empire has lasted in history, and gross, systematic injustice does not last either. I also give Jews greater credit for having a conscience, for caring about justice and caring about the injustices perpetrated against the Palestinians in the name of world Jewry, than Michael or others like Uri Avnery do, who criticize us one-staters because we don't seem to realize, as they say, that Israeli Jews will always want to screw the Palestinians if they all live in the same state. I just don't buy that. If white South Africans and Soviet appatchiks could relinquish power voluntarily and non-violently, then I believe Jews will ultimately be led by their consciences to do the

same.

My bottom line is, I don't think we can or should shut our mouths about a just peace settlement—or, even more importantly, deliberately limit Palestinian options by refusing to speak about the possibilities—simply because Israel might not happen to like it, which is what I see as the principal argument of the anti-one-staters.

JG: Similarly, in your travels, what impression have you gotten from Palestinians as to which solution they advocate?

KBC: It's hard to make a definitive judgment on this, but it is fair to say that support for a one-state solution is growing among Palestinians. Polls of Palestinian opinion still show this support in the minority, but growing. Many Palestinians whom we've talked to still favor two states and specifically reject one state, either because they fear Jewish political and economic domination in a single state or because they are closely enough connected to the Palestinian Authority that they are unwilling even to think of any alternative to the PA's official support for two states, which is the position that gives them entrée into negotiations and whatever favors are bestowed by the U.S. But an increasing number of our acquaintances now more explicitly favor one state. They are increasingly dissatisfied with the PA's position and its acceptance of the two-state solution, all of which they see as collaboration with the Israeli oppressor and a betrayal of fundamental rights in return for no benefit whatsoever for the Palestinians.

Much of Palestinian thinking is formed more around the possibilities than strictly on the basis of preferences, which is to say that as long as the two-state solution was the only alternative held out to the Palestinians, support for this option was quite high, but the more the possibility of a one-state solution is talked about—and, of course, the more the likelihood of a real, independent Palestinian state ever being formed in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem has receded—the more Palestinians are willing to think about and advocate a single state. As it has become clearer and clearer to the Palestinians that Israel under its current leadership has no intention of ever withdrawing from the occupied territories and no intention of allowing Palestinians any sovereignty in Jerusalem, support for a single state in all of Palestine has grown. More importantly, Palestinians increasingly recognize that their demand for the right of return is ultimately incompatible with a two-state solution, in which only limited numbers of refugees, if any, would be allowed to return to their homes and land inside Israel and the vast majority would have to be accommodated inside the tiny Palestinian state. It's unlikely that an enduring peace settlement will ever be forged that does not address and provide a fair solution of the refugee issue and the right of return.

JG: In my recent interview with Jonathan Cook, he spoke highly of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement, saying that in his view, "there is no way to end the occupation unless Israelis are made to see that they will pay a heavy price for its continuance." Would you agree with this? If so, how would you respond to criticism about harming "innocent" Israelis with a blanket boycott or sanctions? Or is there even such a thing as an "innocent" Israeli when it comes to the issue of Palestinian suffering?

KBC: We do indeed agree with Jonathan on the wisdom of BDS and the notion that Israelis must be made to pay a heavy price for continuing the occupation if there's to be any hope of ever ending it. As to whether "innocent" Israelis might be harmed by

a blanket application of BDS, we would ask where one should draw the line on what harms Israelis. Does it harm innocent Israelis to cut off or cut back U.S. aid to Israel—which would be the ultimate sanction? Under a long-term ten-year agreement, the U.S. gives, not lends, Israel \$3 billion of military aid every year—in cash, at the beginning of each fiscal year—plus additional increments of economic aid and loan guarantees on a year-by-year basis. Aid of this magnitude and given under these terms obviously greatly helps the Israeli economy. It also gives Israel virtually total impunity to commit whatever atrocities it wants against the Palestinians without fear that the U.S. will cut it off. So if we're worried about harming individual Israelis, we have to worry about the guy in an electronics shop who is harmed economically because he no longer gets the subcontract for some airplane or tank part, but we also have to worry about the innocent Palestinians—the literally millions of innocent Palestinians—in Gaza particularly, but elsewhere as well, who are being killed by those airplanes and tanks and other military equipment that Israel uses with the impunity granted it by the U.S. If blind justice weighs these two groups of innocents and the harm done to them on her scales, we believe she would conclude that the “innocent” Israeli is after all not so innocent.

Although it may be clearer how the scales should balance when we're talking about military aid, the same factors must be weighed when we deal with boycotts of non-military products and academic and cultural boycotts, and we think the same conclusions must be reached: ending Palestinian suffering at Israel's hands is a more worthy, more just objective than saving the economic hide or the jobs of any Israelis. Maybe you're right that there is no such thing as an “innocent” Israeli when it comes to Palestinian suffering. In a democratic state—democratic at least for Israeli Jews—all Jewish Israelis are responsible for the injustices and the killing and the atrocities visited upon the Palestinians. They elected the governments that have carried out these policies and actions; they have failed to put an end to them; they live in a state established on the suffering and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians over 60 years ago. We Americans are just as responsible for the killing and atrocities visited by U.S. forces on Iraqi and Afghan civilians and in past eras on civilians in places like Vietnam, and we would not claim that sanctions against the U.S. were unfair, even if these caused us to suffer personally. Perhaps this should be the criterion: that innocence lies in greater measure with the people being oppressed and bombed and occupied, and we must be more concerned with ending harm to them than with causing incidental harm to individuals in the oppressor-occupier nation.

JG: In your [new book](#) you briefly compare Israel's treatment of the Palestinians to the U.S.'s treatment of Native Americans. That said, I was wondering if you had an opinion on how to respond to one of the peskier questions addressed specifically to Americans that nobody seems to be able to answer. The question is: what right do I have to criticize Israel as a “colonial” or “settler” state when I am a descendant of colonists and settlers myself, enjoying the spoils of theft from an indigenous people?

KBC: This is indeed a difficult question to answer, and there is for sure a measure of hypocrisy in criticizing Israel without also rectifying our own nation's sins. But we don't believe that one injustice, even when perpetrated by our own country, imposes an obligation to remain silent about another injustice or requires that we stop working on Israel's injustice until we've resolved the United States' unjust policies. In fact, having acquired a conscience about what our country did, and continues to do, to our own native population has given us, we feel, a bit more moral authority from

which to demand that the United States stop giving Israel the means—the political, military, and economic support—with which to commit a similar atrocity against the Palestinians.

We all pick our battles in this life, and we happen to have picked support for Palestinian rights as our battle. We did this initially from a position of considerable—and, we would acknowledge, shameful—ignorance about the history of U.S. treatment of Native Americans, but our focus on the Palestinians has helped open our eyes to the Native Americans' situation, and we're now more conscious of the need to work for justice for both peoples. If we personally continue to devote more of our attention to the Palestinians, this is because it's a more easily resolvable situation and because we've already invested 30-plus years of our education and work in it. But to repeat, whatever inequity exists in our own allocation of attention, whatever hypocrisy exists in demanding of Israel what the U.S. has not done for its own native population, does not put any obligation on us to give Israel carte blanche to continue its oppression unopposed.

JG: Kathleen, in the GRITtv interview you described losing interest in the conflict for a few years before returning to it due to its "haunting" nature. Could you describe that in more detail, or in other words, what has compelled you to keep writing on behalf of the Palestinians for three decades, despite their situation growing increasingly worse over that time period?

KC: Maybe it's precisely because the Palestinians' situation has grown worse that I've been so "haunted" and so compelled to continue working on this issue. Although I had worked on the Palestinian question for several years before Bill and I left the CIA in 1979, I never actually met a Palestinian until the late 1980s, when I began interviewing Palestinian Americans about their attitudes toward Israel—which ultimately led to my book *The Wound of Dispossession*. It was only by doing these interviews, and doing a lot of reading on the history of Palestine-Israel, that I really learned the Palestinian story. And I was and continue to be shocked at how horribly that story has been distorted in the United States and the rest of the West. For me—and for Bill too—it's been a kind of crusade to bring this story to greater public attention. The Palestinians are such a graceful people and the injustices perpetrated against them for six decades and more have been so horrific—and so deliberate—that we both feel we can't give up.

JG: For those who don't have time or means to visit Palestine, but want to help the Palestinians, what would you suggest is the best thing that they can do?

KBC: This may be the most difficult of your questions to answer. The usual route, talking to one's congressmen, is an almost totally futile pursuit on this issue. The Israel lobby, in all its aspects, has Congress so sewed up that it's almost impossible to get any attention if one is talking about Palestinian rights or demanding concessions from Israel or advocating anything other than the current so-called international consensus on two states. We both think that at the popular level in the U.S. there's been an upsurge in support for the Palestinians and a greater willingness to criticize Israel. This has been particularly true since Israel's assault on Gaza early this year. But so far this change in viewpoint hasn't reached up to the political level, meaning in the administration and Congress, because there simply aren't enough people willing to mobilize, visit congressmen, write letters to the editor, etc. But this

is what's needed. We need to educate ourselves on the issue so that we can educate others, join whatever solidarity organizations exist in our areas, gain some political muscle by increasing our numbers, work together, lobby congressmen in numbers, write letters to the editor, force the media to pay attention to what's happening on the ground, call out Israel's supporters everywhere for their moral blindness, sign on to the many petitions and letters to politicians that circulate on the internet. In general, make ourselves known, make our position known, and make noise!

Jeff Gore is a freelance journalist based in Athens, GA. He is a frequent contributor to the Athens weekly Flagpole Magazine and has also written articles for Dissident Voice and The Comment Factory. His journal of his summer spent in Palestine can be read at holylanddispatches.blogspot.com. He can be reached at jgore00@gmail.com.

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