

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Ramallah's Mean Streets

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RAMALLAH, West Bank — Walking the streets lined with yellow taxis and street vendors, you can smell roasting sweet corn wafting from every corner. But among those who work here, the aroma conceals a prevailing atmosphere of despair.

I waved down a taxi. The moment I got in, the driver started to talk about his long hours — as though he had been waiting for someone, anyone, to vent to.

The cabdriver, a father of seven named Abu Jamal, spoke through pursed lips, a cigarette constantly between his fingers. Outside, a squad of the Palestinian Authority's security forces paraded with their guns. Things have changed: Instead of feeling safe, people in Ramallah resent them.

"I work from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. Can you imagine?" You hear the same complaints reiterated constantly in the coffee shops, cramped homes and narrow alleyways around here. It's hard to know how to react anymore, except with silent nods of assent.

Everyone seems to work like this. There are no laws to protect workers' rights and wages are pitifully low.

"Are you in university?" the cabdriver asked. Before I got the chance to answer, he went on: "You know, my children are bright. But when it was time for them to go to university, I kept praying that they would fail. How am I supposed to pay for their studies? It's difficult enough to feed and clothe them."

Birzeit University is 15 minutes from the city center. Tuition costs about \$1,000 per semester. In September of last year, Birzeit students went on strike, closing down the university for a month to protest the high fees and lack of student aid.

The West Bank has seen a steep rise in economic growth since 2010. Ten miles north of Jerusalem, Ramallah acts as a capital for the would-be Palestinian state being groomed by the Palestinian Authority. And there is prosperity — for some.

The economic development has acted as a magnet for migrants from neighboring towns and villages who come to Ramallah in search of jobs and education. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the population of Ramallah grew by nearly 16 percent in 2010 alone. But for most, the struggle to make ends meet has become more and more arduous; the unemployment rate is stuck stubbornly above 18 percent.

Abu Jamal's route took us through the local market. Once, this district was alive with vibrant colors and a noisy serenade of customers haggling with the sellers. Now, people moved mechanically, carrying half-empty bags.

While we were at a stop light, I watched a woman of about 50 negotiating with a man over some tomatoes. A younger woman implored, "Mama, enough. Don't even try; they're going to ruin anyway." She was talking about the fruit, but Abu Jamal echoed the sentiment: "This whole place is rotting."

He lowered his voice. "And the P.A. isn't doing anything to help. We're barely making enough money to make ends meet, while they fixate on appeasing the occupation."

The Palestinian Authority spends 27 percent of its budget on its security forces, turning the territories into a virtual police state. Within my circles, people say that if Israel doesn't arrest you, the P.A. will. "You think you're safe because you're in Ramallah?" they joke. "The P.A. is preparing a nice big file on you to turn over to the Israelis." Beneath the black humor is a loathing of the Palestinian Authority, for its complacency over the occupation and its disconnect from the people.

Abu Jamal was still venting. "You think there is no money? There is money. The P.A. has money. Look around you, it's everywhere: the fancy cars they drive to the villas they build." He shook his head. "It's going to explode, we're all going to explode."

Abu Jamal's cigarettes, probably his only luxury, cost about \$7 a pack. Although the Palestinian Authority set a minimum monthly wage in 2013 of about \$370, it has done nothing to enforce it, and the average income for self-employed workers like Abu Jamal may be as low as \$240. In fact, the P.A. is constantly in arrears with wages for its own work force — though this is a recurring theme for West Bank employees generally.

To justify their existence, our officials fly around the globe collecting symbolic signatures for the recognition of a Palestinian state. Meanwhile, people in the West Bank struggle to afford basic necessities. As the ink dries on those petitions in Britain, France, Portugal and Sweden, the region itself is sinking.

The taxi turned into my neighborhood. This street used to overflow with kids playing and laughing, but they've grown up to find that they were robbed of their future. A few groups of young men hung around, smoking and staring off into the distance.

Ramallah was quiet. What else can it be when to protest is to risk finding yourself in a jail cell?

Staring at a large poster of the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, holding a paper stamped “U.N. BID 194,” Abu Jamal muttered, “they’re building a state for bones.”