

Cecilia Sala
I figli dell'odio
(lit. "Children of Hatred")

The destruction of Palestine

Jenin
(p. 55-62)

When I arrive in Jenin, another Israeli raid is about to begin. No one expects it, not even me – raids always start at night, but now it's morning. I am at the edge of town and I have a decision to make: go in or leave. Going into town means being able to follow the events as they unfold, but I also risk getting stuck there without an Internet connection for an indefinite amount of time.

The raid begins the way Israeli raids always begin. The army surrounds the city's hospitals because it is a convenient way to flush out Palestinian militants: just wait for them to bring a wounded comrade for treatment or a dead comrade for the morgue. This practice has an effect: it discourages the wounded, both combatants and civilians, from going to the emergency room during a raid. Then come the bulldozers. The Israeli ones are ironically nicknamed "teddy bears": they are armored vehicles with a large blade attached to the front and their mission is to destroy. They break up the asphalt and check for explosives planted underneath; in one of the latest raids here in Jenin, an Ethiopian-Israeli soldier was blown up by a bomb that was hidden under the pavement. When bulldozers break up the asphalt, they expose the sewers and envelop entire neighborhoods in stench, so girls wearing veils pull them up over their noses as they run by. At such times, Palestinians stop driving, shopping, waiting tables, taking their children to school, doing anything at all, and they shut themselves in their homes without knowing how many days they will have to stay there. Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers move on to the next phase. They cut off electricity and telephone lines, block roads with armored vehicles, position snipers with precision rifles on the top floors of Palestinian homes, and they start shooting.

I have come to Jenin to meet Firas Abu Al-Wafa and, while all this is happening, I am running uphill toward his house. [1] He is a distinguished gentleman in his sixties. Today's battle doesn't concern him, but during the First Intifada, between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Firas made small bombs at home, which he would then throw at Israeli soldiers like the ones who are currently surrounding his building.

Firas' house is one of the buildings that snipers choose to position themselves during raids because it is a good vantage point: it is located high up in the last row of buildings before the refugee camp, which it overlooks. When the soldiers walk inside, they see a poster of an armed militiaman hanging on the wall, so they take a knife and cut the leather of Firas' sofa, letting the foam rubber spill out. Then they use the green wallpaper on the rooms' walls as if it were a large

blackboard and write on it in Hebrew with markers or spray paint. At night, the female soldiers take over Firas and his wife's bedroom to rest in shifts, and the couple have to find another place to stay, which is no easy task in a city under siege during a raid.

Every military occupation of a population that doesn't want you is based on humiliation as well as fear. The way Israeli snipers deface Firas' house every time they set foot in it is an example of this.

Firas offers me a cup of sweet tea and points to a faux leather armchair away from the windows where I can sit down. We begin to talk. He describes Jenin for what it historically is: the most indomitable city in the occupied West Bank. One particular area of Jenin, the refugee camp, was nicknamed "the Wasps' Nest" or "the Martyrs' Capital" in the early 2000s. When we hear the term refugee camp, we often imagine a field of tents, but the reality is different in the occupied territories: they are called refugee camps because they house Palestinians who were expelled from Israel during the Nakba in 1948 but, over the decades, they have turned into real neighborhoods made of buildings and streets. Twenty years ago, Jenin was an anarchic area ruled by local militias in conflict with the Palestinian National Authority (PNA): when the PNA tried to take control, the militias fired on its security forces.

The camp was also the place of origin of many of the suicide bombers who were causing panic in Israeli cities at the time, and where most of the terrorist attacks were organized. Not far from here, in the northern West Bank, they planned the attack on the Park Hotel in Netanya, which took place on March 27, 2002: twenty-five-year-old Abdel-Basset Odeh arrived disguised as a woman, wearing make-up and a wig, and carrying a handbag containing a ten-kilogram bomb, to blow himself up in the hotel's dining room during a seder, the traditional Passover dinner. The explosion killed 30 people besides him and injured 140, mostly elderly Jews, including some Holocaust survivors. It was the deadliest suicide attack in Israel's history and it was claimed by Hamas.

A few weeks later, the Israeli army decided to enter the Jenin refugee camp. At the beginning of April, there was a ten-day battle between the army and local militia factions led by Abu Jandal, who had fought in Lebanon and in the Iraqi army, and was a legend among Palestinians. While Israel isolated the refugee camp, local militiamen prepared the ground by placing thousands of bombs and explosive traps everywhere; they were planted in particular in the homes of men wanted by the Jewish state, because they were certain that the army would search them. Then the battle broke out, street by street: the Palestinians were on one side, with the advantage of knowing the terrain; the Israelis were on the other side, with their Apache helicopters, tanks, and "teddy bear" bulldozers to raze to the ground entire areas of the camp. It became the most difficult battle for the Israeli army since the 1982 war in Lebanon, and it remained etched in everyone's memory here in Jenin.

A month later, Yasser Arafat came to Jenin and compared the resistance in the refugee camp to the Battle of Stalingrad, the most famous battle of World War II, but also the bloodiest in history with its two million deaths. "This is Jeningrad," [2] said the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). What he meant was that, regardless of the blood that would be shed by its inhabitants, Jenin was the city that would never surrender to occupation. "It is the capital of violence, militancy, and Palestinian resistance to occupations throughout the ages." Firas was there that day. When he tells me about the speech given by the man who remains his

idol, he changes his posture, puffs out his chest, raises his chin, and speaks in a tone that is both emotional and triumphant.

Firas was still young at the time of the Second Intifada, but he didn't take part in that guerrilla war, either. He had ended his armed struggle a few years earlier, in the 1990s, when he was arrested by the Israelis and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, but he didn't serve a single day. What saved him was dialogue, and the Oslo Accords of August 1993. Firas was granted amnesty. From that moment on, after being spared fifteen years in prison and being given his freedom and the chance to build a life for himself, he started to believe in negotiations. He believed in Yasser Arafat, who signed those agreements by shaking hands with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin – just before he was killed by extremists and the peace process died with him in the midst of Ben-Gvir's celebrations.

As an adult, Firas has been trying to teach this lesson to his son: that talking to each other is useful, that diplomacy can work, that if it weren't for diplomacy, he wouldn't even have been born, because “Dad would have been in prison instead of with your mother.” Even though it might not seem like it, even though the Oslo Accords have now failed, even though the armed struggle is more pronounced and disturbing than ever, the moment when Arafat and Rabin shook hands was when a Palestinian nation came closest to existing. Not when Hamas blew up a group of elderly Jews at the Park Hotel in Netanya. Firas has no respect for Hamas, in the sense that he considers them politically inept.

He starts telling me again about his son, a skinny, angry teenager who listens to him rant about Arafat and diplomacy in respectful silence, lying on the sofa, and would never dare to interrupt his father. But he doesn't believe a word of what he hears. Samih hasn't experienced the enthusiasm of the peace process, only the rubble left behind by its failure. He doesn't trust diplomacy, he trusts M-16s. And he hides his three assault rifles in a safe place a kilometer from his home.

The raid that started as I was climbing up the hill to reach Firas' house is intended to flush out and kill the comrades of his son Samih's *katibah*, his battalion. His son died last year at the age of nineteen, with his rifle in his hand.

On the day Samih was killed, the army entered Jenin to search for a Hamas militiaman who had shot two Israelis in Huwara the week before. The attack triggered mass violence perpetrated by settlers against Palestinians, with houses and cars set on fire, a hundred people injured and one dead. The army commander responsible for the area called it “a pogrom.”

The last image we have of Samih has become famous, it went viral on social media and appeared in international newspapers: he is straddling a window, wearing jeans, a blue shirt, and a balaclava, holding onto the ledge with one hand and firing an assault rifle with the other, while someone inside the house holds him by the belt to prevent him from losing his balance. Everyone saw his photo, so Palestinian armed groups competed to claim Samih as one of their own. The al-Quds Brigades (the military wing of the Islamic Jihad movement in Palestine) say he was a militiaman with the Jenin Brigades, which are linked to their group. [3] There is even a song about him: “The people ask: Who is that, the masked man in the picture? / That is our hero Samih Abu Al-Wafa, the legend. / He appeared with his weapon from the window, with his masked face. / The lion of the ambushes, Martyr commander Samih Abu Al-Wafa.” [4]

Firas didn't expect the thousands of unknown kids who showed up at his son's funeral and congratulated him "for bringing a resistance hero into the world," because, he says, he knew nothing about Samih's double life. He listened to those flattering words quietly, in the awkward silence of a father who only realized who his son really was and what he really wanted when he recognized the Blundstone boots he had given him in the now famous photo.

There are two huge photos of Firas' dead son hanging on the walls of his house. The first is his martyr poster, the classic image created to commemorate Palestinian militants killed while firing at Israelis: a photomontage of the boy in front of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The second photo is more explicit: it's Samih with his three rifles.

After Samih spent years quietly listening to Firas talk about diplomacy, being respectful even when he disagreed, now it's Firas who quietly listens to his son while looking at his photos. But he still disagrees with him. "Because we need to relearn how to talk about politics here, because that is a choice that doesn't work," he tells me fervently as we talk in the dark. Palestine will truly exist as a state, he continues, when Palestinians will have convinced the international community: Germany, Italy, China, Switzerland, Canada, and the United States must be convinced with a political plan. "Although young people might consider diplomacy to be outdated, or worse, naive, it is much more naive to think that Israel can be defeated militarily."

And even though Jenin might as well be Jeningrad, if being indomitable also means being politically immobile, then "it is useless and insufficient."

The fact is that older people who think like Firas are becoming increasingly rare in Palestine, just as in Israel there are fewer and fewer people like Seidemann and Baskin who believe in a political solution. The ball has been passed to the disappointed and the uncompromising, to young people with guns, just as in Israel it is being passed to young people in the hills.

On this side of the separation barrier, people like Firas (who aren't pacifists but realists, who want to talk about politics) are being replaced by those who say they no longer want words, but actions – acts of violence on the ground, to counter the facts on the ground caused by the occupation. Even Ghazi Hamad, the most conciliatory member of Hamas who has been talking to Baskin for the last twenty years, is now appearing on television to say that October 7 was only the beginning. On the other side of the wall, in Israel, those who cheered the death of the last Israeli leader who wanted peace, such as Ben-Gvir, or made plans to blow up sections of the highway in response to the decision to dismantle the settlements in Gaza, such as Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, [5] are filling government positions. Neither side wants peace or security: they both want everything, *from the river to the sea*.

Notes:

1. Cecilia Sala, "Nella capitale della militanza palestinese, Firas vorrebbe parlare di politica," *Stories*, ep. 622, Chora Media, September 2024.
2. Brian Whitaker, "Anger as Arafat shuns camp," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2002.

3. "Jenin Battalion announces the martyrdom of eight of its resistance fighters," alquds.com, July 5, 2023.
4. Nan Jacques Zilberdik, "Fatah glorifies dead terrorist as 'model of heroism', small child salutes him," *Algemeiner*, October 5, 2023.
5. Sabrina Tavernise and Ronen Bergman, "Israel's existential threat from within," *The Daily*, in *The New York Times*, September 18, 2024.

The collapse of the Iranian Axis

Evin

(p. 134-141)

I land in Teheran with a regular journalist visa to report on this new world into which the Iranian regime has been plunged by recent events and where it no longer feels safe. On December 12, I am sitting cross-legged on my bed, with a microphone in my hand and a duvet over my head – the sound engineers at Chora taught me to do this to prevent ambient noise from being recorded. It is important for the episode that my voice be heard clearly. The episode contains interviews with two experts on Iran's nuclear program and discusses the possibility that Israel will bomb Iran at some point with Donald Trump's help. The episode will never be aired.

A notification appears on my iPhone. The message says that the Pasdaran I am supposed to meet shortly has decided to cancel the interview at the last minute. He isn't just anyone, his name is Kazemi Qomi: Suleimani had chosen him to lead the Pasdaran's Quds Force when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. He claims the reason for canceling our appointment is that there is no wind today and the city is too polluted – many offices and schools, in fact, are closed. I smile. Kazemi Qomi is not the type to be stopped by smog. I smile and a moment later there's a knock at my hotel room door. "I don't need anything, thank you," I say in English from under the duvet. There's another knock. I pull back the duvet, get up, and open the door. I look into the eyes of two men – one well-built and dressed casually, the other in a jacket and Korean-style shirt. They are not wearing uniforms or displaying any badges. They don't say anything at all. But the guy in sportswear closes the door behind him, picks up my phone from the edge of the bed and puts it in his pocket, saying, "Sit" – the only word I will ever hear him say.

I start sweating and it doesn't smell like me. Kazemi Qomi wasn't afraid of the smog, he was afraid of being seen with someone his friends were about to throw in jail.

To enter the women's section of Evin Prison, you have to pass through a metal detector and step on the two flags underneath it: the American flag and the Israeli flag. In a large room before the maximum-security wing, they strip me, search me, make me do the traditional naked squat, and check my throat and ears. The men who kidnapped me from my hotel room have already taken my computer and my two phones; they are now checking and cataloging the rest of my belongings. They hand me a pair of underpants, a dark blue uniform, rubber slippers, and two blankets covered with hair and body hair from those who came before me. They take my glasses. When I ask them to leave me my contact lenses, I get down on my knees: "I could kill myself by breaking the lenses of my glasses, but not by breaking my contact lenses!" I say in English. Nobody answers. They put a hood over my head. When I arrive in the isolation cell, they remove the blindfold, but I still can't see anything. Not that there's much to see: it is empty. There is an intercom next to the closed security door: you have to ring the intercom to go to the bathroom, they explain to me. A masked guard arrives, blindfolds you, and accompanies you to a squat toilet.

I notice that there is no cot, no mattress, and no pillow in the cell. But there is a bloodstain on one of the short walls, I can see it clearly if I get close to it. I haven't cried yet – not because there is no reason to, but because my head and heart have been filled with nothing but survival instinct for hours now, thankfully. I can't bear everything that bloodstain represents, says an emotion that surfaces for half a second, immediately dispelled by the efficiency of the survival instinct, which goes as follows: in which corner of the room is the bloodstain least noticeable? The obvious answer is that the place where the bloodstain is least noticeable is right next to it. I sit there.

From that moment on, I won't see anything. When I am in solitary confinement, it's because I don't have my glasses and there is nothing to see. When they move me outside, even just to go to the bathroom, and when they interrogate me, it's because I am hooded. To avoid falling or bumping into the walls, I have to grab the end of a stick they hand me and follow whoever is holding it.

There is this great enemy in prison: emptiness. Not the one in the room, but the one in your head, which are connected, however. You can't do anything in a cell, they are made that way on purpose: you can't do anything that would engage your synapses and briefly distract your thoughts from the fear you feel. You can't sleep: you have a neon light shining on you twenty-four hours a day, there is no cot, no mattress, and no pillow. They do it that way on purpose. You have to be afraid. That is why they don't tell you what you are accused of, why they deprive you of sleep, why they prevent you from measuring the passing of time and create the perfect physical environment for the human mind to generate monsters. You have to lose yourself in the fear you feel.

The goal is to break you, to turn you into an empty shell, so they can then fill you with whatever is useful to them. Making you confess to a violent crime, for example, if you are a dissident and they want to send a message, because they need it as a pretext to hang you: there is a large crane in Evin that serves that very purpose. Making you confess that you are a spy, for example, if you are a hostage and they want to exchange you for one of their own who has been accused of serious crimes abroad. Making you name other people, if you are someone who organizes parties or protests.

I already know Evin from what others have told me. Because I interviewed people who went there before me, because I studied cases similar to mine. I am lucky in one regard: there are no surprises. And unlucky in another: the precedents I know of are not happy stories. I already knew that the walls would be faded yellow. I knew they wouldn't give me a lawyer – not until they got what they wanted from me, whatever that may be. I knew they gave the inmates some dates to eat a couple of times a week, and I waited for them. I knew that I should never confess anything under any circumstances, as I was told by Abbas and all the Iranians I know, who, for one reason or another, fear the system that governs them, even those who are part of it. And I knew that this was the only thing I had to be able to do. "This is the only blunder that I'd never forgive you," I told myself, realizing that I had said it out loud – the only words in Italian that I ever spoke in Evin.

I can only hear my neighbor when the guards leave the hatch in my cell door cracked open. She occasionally takes a running start in a space that is two meters long to slam her head

as hard as she can against the reinforced door. I have no experience and am unable to contemplate the prolonged physical pain that results from inflicted or self-inflicted torture, which is why my greatest fear in isolation is going mad.

To avoid this, I set myself a few simple goals. The first is to obtain a book: the Koran in English. They must have it in an Islamic Republic prison, I think, and they can't deny it to me, I delude myself for the first two days. Then I realize they aren't going to give it to me, but I still keep asking every guard who accompanies me to the squat toilet.

Time never passes when you do nothing: you never get tired and you never fall asleep, so the time you spend waiting, lost in fear, becomes twenty-four hours every day. I spend the nights in my cell rereading the ingredients of the bread in my lunch bag over and over again, counting my fingers, counting my steps – one day I took more than a thousand steps in a two-meter-long space. Above all, I spend my time obsessing over what they might have found on my laptop and iPhone to use against me in the next interrogation. The chats I have with my Iranian sources and with my most interesting Israeli sources (which are also the most dangerous in this context) are protected. They don't appear on my phone when scrolling through the conversations on Signal or WhatsApp; you have to know the names under which I saved them and manually type them in to find them. Moreover, to open them, you have to type in a code that is different from my iPhone's unlock code. I bet that they won't find the protected conversations and I respond accordingly during the interrogations, which take place once a day and can sometimes last for ten hours. If they don't actually find them, my answers are consistent with what they collected on my devices and everything is fine. If they do find them, I'm screwed. I spend my sleepless nights in Evin with this doubt on my mind.

“If you lie to us, you will never get out,” is the premise the inquisitor uses to try to convince you. His voice sounds familiar at this point, we have spent over sixty hours together; but I don't know what he looks like because I am blindfolded and facing the wall during every interrogation. And at the end of each session, I have to sign my statements with my fingerprint, dipping my right index finger in blue ink.

The first time I heard the voice of my inquisitor, I was in a barracks or a military base, I wasn't in prison yet. I made a desperate attempt and told him I was sure that the Corps to which he belonged had a code of honor. I was sure that if he was questioned by a foreign country's intelligence services, he would protect the people he worked with. I was only a journalist, but we also had a code of honor: to protect our sources. It obviously didn't work.

I know that there are two other hypotheses to explain why I am here besides the crime of propaganda against the Islamic Republic, the crime for which journalists are arrested in Iran: they are either interested in my business trips or I am a hostage. But I also know that once they get you – whatever their reason might be – they drain you. They want everything you can give them about Iranians, about the persons they consider of interest in Italy (where their children go to school, for instance), about the trips abroad to countries where the Pasdaran are present and to the ones that the Pasdaran consider enemies. The problem with any strategy you can adopt to resist a series of interrogations is that after seventy-two hours without sleep, you are no longer sure of your behavior or your memories. After seventy-two hours without sleep, you are no longer in control.

The man interrogating me knows this and tries to convince me that I have done things I never actually did. That I have said things I never said. That I have known an Iranian named Jafar since I was fourteen years old and that I have been exchanging information with him for half my life. I spent a week of sleepless nights wondering if I had already gone mad, to the point of not remembering a man I have known for half my life.

On other sleepless nights, I am afraid of being contagious, scared that my mere presence here has already ruined the lives of some of the Iranians I have met. I have a waking nightmare, a hallucination: I see Abbas, the twenty-four-year-old with whom I had dinner the night before my arrest; he walks into my cell to tell me that it is my fault if they are hanging him tomorrow, just as they had hanged his cousin two weeks earlier. I need a simple path to follow through the confusion in my head, so I decide to always deny everything. It seems like the best option for other people and for me. If I speak, I might contradict myself: my sleep-deprivation-induced memory lapses are real, but they might seem suspicious. Always denying is an easy principle that you can hope to remember even when you are under the influence of sedatives or hallucinations.

One day, when I was feeling like an empty sack, a masked female guard said to me, "You're a good prisoner," slightly lowering her mask with two fingers. She said it in the same tone my mother used when I was a child and had a sleepover at my friends' houses, telling me "Well done" after asking me if I had made my bed that morning before going to school. Then, as she was closing the security door behind her, the masked guard added "Pray," pointing upward: to the sky beyond the ceiling. This would have been the warmest moment of my entire imprisonment, if I hadn't stumbled upon an orange cat one day: a long-haired Persian and the only non-threatening life form I encountered in Evin. One morning, they put a hood over my head and the end of a stick in my hand to guide me so I don't fall, and they make me cross the courtyard like this. There, something warm gets in my way, then I feel the vibrations of purring against my calves as it rubs against me. Peering down at my toes from under the hood, I find the little critter looking up at me from below.

A few days later, my mother says in front of some cameras that I would be a soldier and that she would be one, as well. She adds that I don't have a bed, I don't have a mattress, and I don't have a pillow. There is no way for me to know about her interview, because I don't have access to information from outside. But, during a phone call where I was only allowed to say "I'm in prison and I'm not hurt. The Islamic judiciary is handling my case," my mom had taken the opportunity to ask me a few yes-or-no questions: Do you have a bed? No. Do you have a mattress? No. Do you have a pillow? No. During the phone call, I couldn't talk about my prison conditions and I definitely couldn't talk about the interrogations. And, in a way, I didn't. I just said "no" three times. All I could say was "I'm in prison and I'm not hurt. The Islamic judiciary is handling my case," and then "Merry Christmas," (which I said on December 26 because I had lost track of time) or "Happy New Year" (which I said on the 1st thinking it was the 31st but, in that case, it was fine anyway).

When the news "no bed, no mattress, no pillow" became public, the men who had kidnapped me saw it, got angry, and I received my punishment inside Evin. They took me on a tour to the hanging crane, where they removed my hood and said "This is what we do to spies." A punishment that resulted in an unhealthy heartbeat and a nervous reaction that I believe is what they call panic, in the clinical sense; for the first time since I was inside, it prompted me to

agree to be sedated by scary strangers in white coats and face masks, even though I had promised myself that I would always refuse sedation, by any means necessary.

When I woke up, still under the influence, I told the masked guard: "I know that 'in isolation' means I have to be alone. But does it apply to cats? Or, in accordance with the rules, could you lend me the cat from the courtyard and let him stay here with me in my cell for a while?" The guard laughed.

Now, I have an orange cat at home.