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HIDDEN SPRING

A grassroots alliance between Israelis and Palestinians provides water, energy, and hope in the West Bank



IT WAS UNUSUALLY HOT FOR JUNE, and the heat was dry at the desert's edge. The semiarid South Hebron Hills were stubbled with brown scrub and thistles and strewn with bone-colored rock. Though it was not quite summer and not yet noon, my guide, Ahmad S., estimated the temperature at thirty-seven degrees Celsius or, as my mind translated it, almost one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. "Drink," Ahmad, a water lab technician, reminded me. I lifted my canteen to my lips and, without thinking, drained it. A first-world privilege, this—to be thoughtless about water. We were at the ankles of the West Bank, far off the utility grid, in the cab of Ahmad's dusty truck.

Ahmad, twenty-nine, Palestinian, comes from a town northwest of Hebron called Halhul. When I met him he was a newlywed. His new wife had been married once before. Because she was a divorcée, Ahmad's brothers looked on her as used goods but he'd dissented from that point of view and married her for love. With his light-brown skin, gelled hair, gold chain, slim-fitting jeans, and

Nikes he could have passed for one of the Dominican guys in my neighborhood in New York City. But apart from Ahmad's slick look, I found nothing familiar in the desolate landscape. We may as well have been driving on an asteroid. The desert was bewildering to me as a city dweller, and not just because of its harsh quiet and the vast field of vision it offered, but also because of the pitiless way it exposed one to the sun. No buildings to offer cover or shade. No straight lines. Just rolling hills of rubble and saffron-colored dust. I felt jet-lagged, carsick, and ill at ease.

Judea, the right-wing Zionists call this place. The apostle Mark called it "the wilderness." I couldn't comprehend how such barren hills could sustain life. I'd been to Brazil's Sertão, the steppes of New Mexico, and to Andalusia, in Spain, where the spaghetti westerns were filmed. None of those deserts were

Comet-ME's household water systems (above) pump, store, distribute, and filter rainwater for some of Palestine's most vulnerable off-grid communities.

as dry as this. Yet to the north of us grew the vineyards of Mount Hebron, famed for its grapes since biblical times. The foothills to the west extended into Israel. To the east dropped the Jordan Valley, where the storied river, once crossed by the Israelites, bottoms out into the Dead Sea. In Israeli-settler parlance, and according to the Torah, God granted this land to the Jews.

We continued south, drawing closer to the area where the separation barrier peters out like the tail of an undulating snake. I'd say it was a no-man's-land, but there were people in it. From the passenger's side window I spied an Israeli settlement spread out on a bald hilltop like a green mirage. According to the international community, the settlement is illegal. I wondered aloud what would happen if we drove up there. Ahmad asked me if I had a death wish. A Palestinian shepherd, small as a speck, descended another hilltop to lead his flock to a water source invisible to my squinting eyes.

"Throughout history, people always gravitate to the same places, wherever there is water," Ahmad said. "We have limited water here. This, as much as the rest of it, is the root of the conflict."

Close by, just off Road 317, lay our destination—the Palestinian shantytown of Khirbet Susiya, a ramshackle collection of tents, shacks, sheep pens, and outhouses, plus a sad-looking swing set donated by the EU, a leaning dove-cote, and a solar-panel array. There was also a stone monument to Ali Dawabshah, an eighteen-month-old toddler burned alive the previous summer when a firebomb was lobbed into his parents' dwelling, allegedly by a group of masked Israeli extremists. According to Israel, the village of Susiya is illegal. All of its structures are under threat of demolition by the Israeli Civil Administration, the military arm meant to oversee daily life in Palestine.

I wasn't emotionally prepared to confront the picture of the toddler's face inlaid in the monument. Seeing it would have made me miss my own ragamuffins too much—I'm mother to two young children—and it might have caused me to cry. I didn't want my sloppy maternal feelings to delay Ahmad's work. As we rolled past the monument, I turned my attention instead to one of the most prominent of the village's "illegal" structures—a big, white water tank on stilts. Along with the solar panels, the tank was supplied to the people of Susiya by the nonprofit Palestinian-Israeli organization Community Energy Technology in the Middle East (Comet-ME). Comet employs Ahmad, who holds a degree in laboratory science from al-Quds University. Its mission is to supply renewable-energy and clean-water services to some of the most impoverished and marginalized people in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Including Susiya, Comet serves over forty villages in the South Hebron Hills, and beyond. These hamlets are mostly composed of clans of shepherds and farmers who dwell in caves and tents,

living much as their ancestors did for centuries—except that in recent history these people have had the bulk of their land taken away. Even more recently, thanks to Comet, they've enjoyed a taste of electricity.

I knew about Comet because Tamar C., my best friend from childhood, works there in development. Tamar is the sole woman in a small team of quixotic physicists, electricians, and environmental engineers who throw up wind turbines, water tanks, and solar-panel minigrids in the face of a military occupation that has discriminated against Palestinians for the past fifty years. In addition to reconnecting with Tamar, I wanted to better understand the imbalance of power that makes such an organization vital. So there I was, shadowing my friend's colleague in the Holy Land. Ahmad parked on the unpaved, rugged road. We climbed out of the truck.

TODAY'S TASK IN SUSIYA was to test the purity of water drawn by electric pump from a cistern of harvested rain. After the water is drawn it is then held in tanks and distributed through a network of pipes that lead to taps and biosand filters in various tents. This system saves the village women the hours of labor it previously cost them to haul water by hand. Before Ahmad got to work, he took a long drag from his cigarette—one of the last allowed him during daylight hours before Ramadan, which was to begin the next day, or the day after that, depending on the fickleness of the moon. "In the spring, this is the most beautiful place in the world," Ahmad said. He must have read the look of misapprehension on my face. The most beautiful in the world, this place? "It's so calm," he said.

That seemed an odd word to apply to the contested territory of Susiya. The village gives off an air of impermanence, like a refugee camp or a site fabricated after a natural disaster. In the past thirty years it has been displaced multiple times, making it an international symbol for pro-Palestinian activists of how Israel

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maintains brutal control over much of the West Bank. Since the 1995 Oslo II accord Susiya falls under the designation of Area C—disputed land overseen not by the Palestinian Authority but by Israel's military—as does over 60 percent of the West Bank.

In a larger conversation comparing Israeli expansionism to Manifest Destiny in the United States, Tamar described Area C to me as “lawless like the Wild West.”

Susiya has existed since at least 1830, but its Palestinian residents have been locked in a legal battle over land ownership since 1986. That’s when archaeologists unearthed a sixth-century synagogue nearby with Hebrew lettering on its mosaic floor. The Palestinian villagers were evicted, their land expropriated, and the site turned into an Israeli national park run by settlers. Palestinians are prohibited from entering the park—even though its grounds also include the remains of a mosque and the caves that people from Susiya once called home. When Susiyans relocated too close for the comfort of the expanding Israeli settlement (confusingly named Susya, as if to reclaim Susiya), they were again expelled: in the early 1990s, Susiya’s Palestinian villagers were herded into trucks by Israeli soldiers under cover of darkness and deposited fifteen kilometers to the north. Though some families scattered, other stalwarts returned to their land, prompting escalating settler violence.

Susiya’s residents were ousted yet again in 2001 during the second intifada, in retaliation for the murder of a Jewish settler from a nearby outpost—this time under the pretext that the village posed a security hazard. It didn’t matter that the victim’s killer didn’t come from Susiya. Susiya’s caves were packed with rock, its sheds demolished, its cisterns filled with debris, its olive orchards uprooted, its beehives smashed, its fields scorched, its livestock buried alive in bulldozed pens—to say nothing of the shepherds beaten and killed while tending their flocks. Many families fled to the nearby town of Yatta. What had once been a community of about eighty families dwindled to thirty, leaving Susiya even more vulnerable to attack. Under international pressure, Israel’s High Court of Justice stopped the demolitions but never ordered the Civil Administration to concede reconstruction.

These days, the state of Israel claims that the roughly 350 Palestinians who persist in the area of Susiya are trespassers because they’ve erected their tents without the required permits. And yet when villagers have submitted master plans to rebuild their homes and other structures, their requests are systematically denied, as happens throughout Area C—meaning that the people of Susiya live both hand-to-mouth and at the brink of ruin.

“This entire region is under stress,” Ahmad explained while grinding the butt of his cigarette under his heel. “You sleep poorly when each night is spent dreaming of the soldiers who may arrive the next day to crush your house.”

WE FOLLOWED A LINE of laundry strung from the village’s main water tank to a nearby tent. The tent’s canvas walls were held down with tires; its floor was poured concrete. Inside, Ahmad

greeted a middle-aged woman who served us tiny glasses of coffee while three barefoot children looked on from behind a stack of thin mattresses swarming with flies. I handed each of them a ballpoint pen. (Tamar had suggested I pack school supplies.)

“I hope those are magic pens that can write in English,” their mother said dryly in Arabic. I loved her for offering that quip. It suggested that this place wasn’t a dead end. A clutch of chicks skittered about at our feet. Outside—the cry of a rooster, the bleating of a lamb, the blowing of yellow-hued wind.

Ahmad knelt by the family’s water filter and filled a test tube to check for contaminants while chattering good-naturedly about pH balance, microbes, chlorine tablets, and the generally high quality of this water. If all was maintained, he said, the product was as pure as what you would find in the municipalities. “As pure as what they drink in the Jewish settlements?” I asked. I’d heard that the settlers’ untreated wastewater sometimes flushed down from their hilltop septic tanks into the Arab villages, poisoning groundwater and springs.

“Just as pure,” Ahmad said with pride.

I was struck by the mundane way he went about his job, as if it weren’t dangerous. Anything deemed *construction* in the unrecognized villages is considered illegal by Israel, including the water tanks provided by Comet-ME. Indeed, seventeen of Comet’s twenty or so minigrids are under threat of demolition, alongside the homes and structures they power. I wondered at the level of risk Ahmad was undertaking to ensure this most basic need. I was also struck by the coziness of the tent and how easily it would buckle under the force of a bulldozer. I thought of the wolf’s line in “The Three Little Pigs,” a story I sometimes performed for my children before bedtime: “Then I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!” This house was made out of Styrofoam, plywood, brick, and nothing. A sheet divided it in half. Its few possessions were impeccably ordered. A handful of tin pots and a two-burner gas stove. A broom. An *argileh* pipe. An electric fan. And most surprising of all, given the modest conditions—a TV set blaring an Al Jazeera tribute to Muhammad Ali, who had died the day before.

“Ask her what she’ll do when they come to destroy her home,” I begged Ahmad before we left. The woman adjusted her head covering and gestured through the tent opening at an unlikely rosebush growing in the rocky soil, bedecked with bright pink blooms. I intuited that this woman was the gardener. Ahmad translated her answer casually on our way out, as if it should have been obvious: “She says she will stay right here and rebuild.”

In fact, the word she used for her perseverance was *sumud*. It means “steadfastness,” but it’s also a political ideology that developed in resistance to the occupation since the Six-Day War in 1967. An icon of *sumud* often portrayed in Palestinian artwork



In her well-kept kitchen inside the cave her family has lived in for generations, Hajji Nuzha pours fresh sheep's milk into an electric butter churn. This simple appliance, powered by Comet-ME solar panels, saves women in the West Bank hours of labor every day.

is the figure of the mother. With the image of Muhammad Ali flashing on the screen, the idea of the mother appealed to me as a similar source of strength.

The temperature mounted as the morning wore on. We scrambled from tent to tent, followed by a loping, red-eyed desert dog. Ahmad recognized the animal from his last visit but suspected that it had since gone rabid. The dog wasn't frothing at the mouth, but it did look unhinged and toothy, and so we avoided it.

Ahmad went about checking the water meters to estimate daily use. The water crisis is deepening across the Middle East, but here, in the poorest communities, the problem is most pronounced. Ahmad spoke in terms of liters and cubic meters, throwing out statistics like the scientist that he is. The daily allowance for domestic use by a family of five to ten people is no more than two hundred liters, he explained, though the World Health Organization recommends one hundred liters per day for just one person.

Ahmad's figures adhere to a stark and troubling scale that measures not just water consumption but relative human worth.

In the remote communities of the South Hebron Hills, the average person has access to as little as 20 liters of water a day. That's far less than the average Palestinian, who consumes 73, which is in turn less than half of the 183 daily liters consumed by the average Israeli. Meanwhile, the Israeli settlements of the West Bank receive almost limitless supplies of water through Mekorot, Israel's government-owned water company. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported in 2012 that Israel's 450,000 settlers used as much or more water than the total Palestinian population of about 2.3 million.

"IT IS NOT ONLY THAT they have more water than us, but that they have stolen our water," Azzam Nawajaa insisted when we visited his tent. Azzam is a shepherd in his fifties with skin as tough as leather and a sophisticated understanding of the area's inequitable water distribution. He wore a red-and-white-checked *keffiyeh* and his sun-creased eyes blazed when he spoke. The walls of his tent and the water tank outside were festooned with Palestinian flags. Following the Six-Day War the state of Israel banned this flag in Gaza and the West Bank, and a later

law banned political artwork composed of its four colors: black, white, green, and red. Though the ban was lifted after the Oslo accords, Azzam's flags still signified resistance. One of his wives served me a glass of very sweet tea as Ahmad tested the family's water. I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of her hospitality—how many precious milliliters did the glass contain?

"Have you seen how green it is up there by their nice villas?" the shepherd asked me, pointing out of the tent's mouth to the Jewish neighborhood about a kilometer away, one of five satellite outposts comprising the settlement of Susya. Its greenery made it easy to spot, as did the red-tiled rooftops of its homes, its cell-phone tower, and the symmetrical utility poles connecting its overhead power lines. Azzam described Susya's amenities: "They have lush gardens, watered lawns, and irrigated farms." He speculated that they might even have swimming pools. I agreed that it looked like an oasis. In truth, it looked to me like a balmy patch of Southern California dropped into the set of *Mad Max*.

"Have you seen our garden?" Azzam asked by way of contrast. He pointed first at a rosemary bush inside a car tire and then downhill at a stand of parched olive trees growing at strange angles from the rind of the earth. "They get water from an Israeli pipe that is prohibited for us to use," he said. "We don't have water to irrigate our crops. We're forbidden to access twenty-seven of our cisterns since they took our land, and we're forbidden to build new ones."

Azzam explained through Ahmad that in Susiya they reuse water for cooking, then washing, then watering plants—not a single drop is wasted. Most years are so dry that there's not enough rainfall to fill the few accessible cisterns and the community must

within the West Bank. Shared water sources in the slowly depleting Western Aquifer Basin have been under Israel's complete control since the Oslo accords. This mountain aquifer is the main source of underground water in both Israeli and Palestinian territories, but how Israel distributes that water is grossly imbalanced. This is what Azzam meant when he said that they were stealing the water—not just on a small scale, but on a staggering one. A recent Amnesty International report revealed that Israel restricts Palestinian access to the aquifer's water while siphoning nearly all of it for itself. And a recent inventory by the United Nations indicates that Israel extracts 94 percent of the water from the aquifer, leaving the Palestinians with a mere 6 percent.

We said goodbye to Azzam. Again, the mad dog. On our short walk to the neighboring tent it stalked Ahmad and me with slow-moving thighs and a stare as blank as the sun.

"We feel despair," a man named Nasser Nawajaa told me inside. He sat cross-legged on an unraveling floor mat and invited me to sit. "I hope we'll find some measure of justice through your pen."

Nasser is Susiya's unofficial spokesperson, an activist accustomed to talking about the local conflict to the international press. He was born some thirty years ago in one of the caves claimed by Israel as part of the archaeological park. As with Azzam Nawajaa—the two men share a surname as part of the same extended tribe—the subject of water consumes him. Our meandering discussion of life under the occupation kept running back to it, like a river to the sea. I felt my lips grow chapped just listening to Nasser talk. He still mourns the cisterns destroyed in 2001 with a fresh hurt, detailing how they were packed with bulldozed dirt, poisoned with rusty scrap metal or the corpses of animals, "raped" by excavator drills operated by the Israeli Military. He spoke about the shameful lopsidedness between Israelis and Palestinians in their basic quality of life.

"For one thousand liters of water, we pay five times what they pay in Israel. Meanwhile, their water-supply company funnels a pipe straight to the settlements through our land," Nasser said. "We asked Mekorot to give us an opening in the water pipe. We told them we'd pay for it, even though it's ours. They said, 'No, you're an illegal village.' They have all the water and electricity they want, even though it's they who are illegal. Let's put aside the international community that says so. Even according to Israel, these outposts are illegal." Nasser referred to the peace treaty reached twenty years earlier in the Oslo accords, after which there were to be no new settlements built. The number of settlers has tripled since that time. "It's illegal for Mekorot and the Israel Electric Corporation to supply outposts like this," he added, "and yet they do it all the time."

I asked Nasser how access to clean water and electricity

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buy water from Israel at a high price. A tanker truck that delivers this water requires a permit and is forced to take long detours to avoid Israeli military checkpoints and roads off-limits to Palestinians, resulting in further price hikes. "Water sucks up a third of our income," Azzam lamented.

Ironically, the water Azzam must buy from Israel comes from



This solar-panel array has served the village of Shaeb al-Buttum since 2011. It provides 2.5 kWh of electricity per day per household—enough to power basic lighting, refrigeration, and appliances such as washing machines, TVs, radios, cell-phone chargers, and water pumps. Like Susiya’s renewable energy system and fifteen other Comet-ME mini-grids in the South Hebron Hills, this system and the homes it powers are under persistent threat of demolition by the Israeli authorities.

through Comet had affected his family. He gushed about how it had made life easier, but emphasized the enormous differences between life in Susiya (the Palestinian village) and Susya (the Israeli settlement). “The revolution of electricity is like a river that can’t be stopped,” he said. “This has given our dark life more light. Our children can study later, we have electric outlets to charge our cell phones, and it’s made a small revolution in the lives of the women. For example, they no longer have to carry water or shake a goat’s gut full of milk for four hours to make cheese. We have electric butter churns now, and the internet.

“But there’s no way to even compare what kind of power we have here versus what they have there. They’re on an electric grid. We’re still begging for permission to crawl out of our caves and work our land when it’s clear they’ll never give us permits to live here. Nobody wants to live in a cave. I’m asking for the right to exist in the twenty-first century, when people have already been to the moon and sent satellites to other planets.”

“What do you do with your anger?” I asked Nasser.

The man looked thrown from his script. “It’s hard to keep it swallowed up inside. For some people it spills out,” was all he could say.

Ahmad admitted to feeling a little low, not because of the conflict in Susiya and throughout the West Bank—though that was cause enough for depression—but because tomorrow he’d start a month of fasting. The fatigue he knew to expect during Ramadan exhausted him already. Impertinently, I asked Ahmad how his body could take it. This was a question I would ask in many different ways of many different Arabs that week in Palestine—though by “it” I meant more than Ramadan.

Ahmad chose his words carefully. “We have resources deep within ourselves like a hidden spring,” he told me. “We draw from this to keep going even when we have no fuel.”

Then, because he could see I was dehydrated, he pulled out a peach, seemingly from thin air, and told me to eat.

A FEW DAYS LATER I went with Tamar to the Comet headquarters for the *iftar* meal, during which Muslims break their fast. A dozen coworkers sat together at a table covered with a cheap cloth, awaiting sundown so that they could eat. Palestinian and Israeli guys alike, they shared the belief that access to electricity and water is

COMET HAS ERECTED 10 SMALL WIND TURBINES, OVER 900 SOLAR PANELS, AND NEARLY 200 HOUSEHOLD WATER SYSTEMS IN ITS EFFORT TO HELP PALESTINIANS.

a basic human right. In contrast to the stark divisions between Susiya and Susya, this gathering struck me as a true expression of accord.

The festive mood swelled in the countdown to nightfall. The cool air was perfumed by lavender shrubs growing beyond the veranda. Our shadows grew elongated like figures in an El Greco painting, and then they were gone: twilight, the magic hour. “Is it time yet? Can we eat now?” asked twelve-year-old Yusuf. He sat at the table next to his father, Ali A., a shepherd from one of the off-grid communities Comet services, a place called Tuba. Ahmad consulted his watch and then the slip of moon in the indigo sky. He clapped his hands. He looked so much more energized than he had at the end of our day in Susiya. His eyes twinkled like the stars that were starting to show. It was time.

Ahmad uncovered dishes of mouthwatering Arabic salad with tahini, grape leaves, soup, kibbe, and roasted chicken. Like a *maitre d'*, he brought out a platter of lamb and served it with flair. The other project managers and technicians were in equally high spirits as they broke their fast to dig into the feast, make toasts, and joke with one another in Arabic and English. *Habibi*, they called one another — “my darling.” Is there another word on Earth as tender as this? Even as an outsider, I felt inside their circle. Yusuf felt at ease enough to joke that by my age I should have five sons at home, not just the one. Through Tamar, I ribbed the boy back. “Why?” I joked, “so I could have four more like you to smack in the head for telling me how to live?” I tugged that rascal’s earlobe and he grinned.

Comet’s Israeli cofounders, the physicists Elad O. and Noam D., were smiling too. There was cause to celebrate, though this cause wasn’t the express reason for tonight’s *iftar* meal. In the eight years since Comet first electrified Susiya it had largely succeeded in its mission to electrify the South Hebron Hills. That is, most of the so-called cave dwellers in this part of the West Bank were now connected to an alternative energy source — the wind or the sun. Since 2008, Comet has erected 10 small wind turbines, over 900 solar panels, and nearly 200 household water systems like the ones I’d gone to check with Ahmad, serving approximately thirty-five hundred Palestinians, in its effort to help them remain on their land. While continuing to upkeep these existing systems, Comet is expanding its reach beyond the South Hebron Hills to establish new ones. This expansion offers an alternative to the state of Israel’s: it strives not to take but to give, not to extinguish but to illuminate.

Earlier that day I sat in on a planning session about how to provide energy and water to a previously unserved community. Tamar asked me to keep the community’s name a secret, off the Civil Administration’s radar. Inside Comet’s concrete two-room headquarters, which had the feel of a bunker in spite of its conference table and projection screen, Elad showed the team a slideshow graphing peak-electric-consumption loads. They discussed how many kilowatt hours per family per day they could realistically provide. The community in question is semiurban, different from the rural cave-and-tent-dweller communities traditionally served by Comet. Working in a semiurban community brings with it a set of new challenges — most notably, the higher expectations the community will have of its minigrid. The residents will likely want more power than Comet can supply. Comet provides modest energy services, an average of two to two-and-a-half kilowatt hours per family per day. (The average American household, by contrast, uses thirty.)

For all the nuts and bolts about generators, hard stops, and photovoltaic arrays, it was hard not to consider this conversation’s biblical overtones. We were in the Holy Land, after all, and these guys were deciding how much power to bestow. Maybe because I felt a little lost in all the kilowatt talk or because of the dreaminess of the landscape, my mind wandered to Genesis. “And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.”

The engineers seated at the table weren’t gods, of course, but men. Men having a philosophical and practical argument. For the moment they disagreed about how the money for the electric service in the new community should be collected. Comet is a unique NGO in that it is also a sort of utility company. The people Comet serves pay electric bills and the money is deposited into a savings account, to be used ten years or so down the line to replace the batteries. “It’s to prevent a swamp of donor dependency,” Tamar

explained. “And it gives people a stake in their energy grid.”

Whereas Noam felt that a local committee should be established for collecting the funds, Elad believed that the residents would consider Comet more of an authority if each family paid Comet directly, the way they’d always done. Wasseem A., Comet’s maintenance manager, would go door to door or tent to tent every other month to give each household a prepaid meter card in exchange for fifty to one hundred shekels. As I listened to the conversation about payment method evolve, I wondered, would the organization someday risk becoming more bureaucratic as a function of its growth?

“I don’t see Comet as an electric company but as a social project,” insisted Noam, a contemplative man in his sixties with a short gray beard, professorial wire-rimmed glasses, and a hand-rolled cigarette. Elad, on the other hand, said Comet was the closest thing to an electric company these people were going to get. Twenty years younger than Noam, Elad is a ruggedly handsome man whose Eastern European roots extended to Uruguay before

leading to Israel. The men seemed to reach a compromise: there would be a community committee, but Wasseem would be on it and Comet would have a stake. Noam felt satisfied by this arrangement. But he stressed that “if you want to empower somebody, you give them the power.”

After dinner, on the veranda, his tone grew wistful as he reminisced about Comet’s early days. “Susiya is completely different today than it was ten years ago,” he said. “At that time the people were very vulnerable. Activists would stay the night to protect them from getting beat up or evicted. They were at the bottom of the barrel, looked upon as uneducated. Now they’re building their position in life. They’ve learned how to sell their story. Usually, after you install energy, the first thing they’ll do is buy a TV. It doesn’t matter that I’m not in favor of that choice, or that I dislike when they squabble over who’ll get hooked up first, who gets the first fridge, or the eventual air conditioner. It’s their choice how to develop themselves. This is our belief. On this point, Elad and I agree.”

Comet-ME’s electricity rooms house the batteries and electronics of the mini-grids, which, with careful maintenance, provide power to over thirty-five hundred people in the West Bank’s off-grid villages.





This makeshift study in the Palestinian village of Tuba provides a motivated young resident with a place to prepare for his *tawjihi*, or matriculation, exams. It is lit by an electric lamp powered by a Comet-ME system; until recently, students weren't able to study after sunset.

Tamar added that Comet didn't get into issues of gender inequality, either. As a woman, this stance was sometimes hard for her—she smiled awkwardly at me, for example, when one of Comet's technicians, Moatasem H., a young Muslim man, wouldn't shake my hand on meeting me—but she also felt it wasn't her job to make others accept her way of thinking. "Empowerment means letting people live their lives as they choose to live them," Noam repeated, "even when giving people tools to argue means they may argue with you." I understood we were no longer just talking about electricity, infrastructure, or social justice. We were talking about free will and its brightest corollary—hope.

AS WE ATE DESSERT, two Palestinian cousins from Yatta, just up Road 356 from Comet headquarters, crossed into Israel and shot up a café in Tel Aviv, killing four Jews. "Oh no," Tamar said scrolling through her news feed over breakfast the next morning at her apartment in Jerusalem. Her face was ashen.

"What happened?" asked her younger daughter, Magali, immediately on alert. A loaf of fresh bread sat untouched on the table.

Tamar put away her phone, unsure for the moment what to say. Her two daughters, seven and eleven, attended a progressive bilingual Arab and Jewish school called Hand in Hand, which

had recently been defaced and set afire by Israeli hoodlums who disapproved of its pacifist mission of coexistence and equality. (Hebrew graffiti on the walls included the right-wing shibboleth "You can't coexist with a cancer.") Tamar had to be careful about how she introduced more trauma into her girls' lives. Everyone here was suffering from trauma, Arabs and Jews alike. It was Tamar's sincere wish, and her lifework, that her kids grow up to love their neighbors. I cherished her for that mission. I hated that there were so many barriers in her path.

As Tamar readied Magali and her big sister, Nina, for the school day, I took a peek at the news on her phone. One of the victims was our age—thirty-nine—and a mother of four. Her name was Ilana Naveh. I couldn't help imagining this woman's forsaken children. Who would sing to them at bedtime, braid their hair, kiss their bruises? As for the killers from Yatta who'd robbed them of her touch, I supposed it was as Nasser had said: some bodies can only swallow so much rage before it comes spilling out.

Tamar's boss, Elad, acted unfazed by the news of the attack in Tel Aviv, either because he's inured to the violence that incites such crimes or because of his scientific disposition. To Elad, that Thursday was like any other day. He had a job to do: standard maintenance checks of Comet-supplied power systems in the

South Hebron Hills. As on Ahmad's water-testing rounds, I was allowed to tag along.

Once again I felt carsick on our drive from Jerusalem into Palestine and down the West Bank's rangy spine. But this time I also felt unsafe, as if I were entering a war zone. Israel's immediate retaliation for the attack in Tel Aviv included the deployment of two more battalions to the West Bank, numbering hundreds of troops, and the freezing of eighty-three thousand travel permits granted to Palestinians in the West Bank. Palestinian families were prevented from gathering in Israel during Ramadan and hundreds of relatives of the attackers were no longer allowed to work in the country. I looked out the window at the black smudges on the landscape where settlers had set fire to the crops of Palestinian farmers, not necessarily as payback for the previous night's act of terrorism, but just as a matter of terrorist course. I asked Elad a serious question: If Comet's work installing solar-power grids and clean-water systems for Palestinians in Area C was illegal in Israel's eyes, then what was the level of risk? It was a personal question masquerading as a journalistic one. I wondered: How endangered was my friend Tamar?

"Legal schmegal. You're asking the wrong question," the physicist answered brusquely. Elad reminded me of Harrison Ford in *Star Wars*, in part because his son's Chewbacca action figure sat on the dashboard and in part because he enacted his mission with the supreme confidence of a swashbuckler. "We're not in a land of logic," he said. "The one thing that's illegal here is the law itself."

Case in point was the highway we drove on. Though Elad and I could ride freely in his car with Israeli plates, the road was riddled with dozens of military checkpoints that slowed travel for Palestinians. Other roads in the West Bank were cut with trenches, obstructed by earth mounds or concrete blocks. All of this fragmentation was in the name of security—to defend the Israeli settlements that are themselves illegal according to international law.

"Try to look local," he advised as we approached an impromptu checkpoint somewhere close to Yatta, where traffic was being closely monitored. Local? We were in Palestine. What did he even mean? To look more Israeli? "Less like a journalist," he clarified, "more like a mother." He told me to put away my notebook and pen, smile, and wave nicely at the soldiers. I did, and we sailed past without incident. It would not have happened so smoothly had we been Palestinian.

More soldiers were stationed with armored personnel carriers at a road that led to Yatta ("population eighty thousand, infrastructure zero" was how Elad described the hometown of last night's gunmen). I spied a front-loader tractor dumping a hill of dirt at the crossroad as collective punishment for the murders,

so that no one else from Yatta could leave. Thousands would suffer for the actions of two. Not only this road, but Yatta's every entrance and exit was blockaded. A curfew on its citizens had also been imposed. Israel was cracking down hard. By the following week, Mekorot would cut off the already spotty water supply to Yatta and the rest of the West Bank. This in a blistering heat wave, during the holy month of Ramadan. Innocent people would die. People were already dying.

"I advise you not to stare," Elad said casually as we drove past the blockade. I found his tone disconcerting at first. He seemed almost dismissive of the human drama of life under siege and irritated by my concern, lest it get in the way of his work. Unfazed by a stone block shaped like a grave marker and etched in Hebrew, Arabic, and English DANGER, FIRING AREA, ENTRANCE FORBIDDEN, Elad took a sharp turn onto the steep and bumpy dirt road. But the danger I feared was from the Israelis who didn't want Palestinian villagers to be empowered—not by Comet, and not by me writing about Comet. The road through the firing zone (where Israeli-military training takes place, sometimes with live ammunition) led us to a remote hilltop community that Comet had finished hooking up to a solar minigrad only two weeks before. "Our story is not one of suffering but one of concrete deeds and actions accumulated over time," Elad said tersely, getting out of the car.

Elad checked the charge controller and battery system in a shed that contained a ganglion of cables that fed the villager's concrete homes. He pointed out a nearby illegal Israeli outpost called Lucifer's Farm, which had a security tower and a buffer zone; a pickup truck he suspected of smuggling Palestinians over the border; and another settlement, Havat Moan, whose residents are infamous for using slingshots to attack Palestinian children on their walk to school. He gestured to the solar panels installed by Comet, which the settlers had not yet broken and the Civil Administration had not yet dismantled, explaining how their mount angle could be changed to follow the sun. Through his careful performance of these routine tasks, I could see Elad was at heart a romantic.

THE NEXT STOP was a place called Abu-Qbeita, named after the extended family of people living there. The compound of the Abu-Qbeita family fell in an interstitial area called the seam zone, which sits between the separation barrier and the Green Line. "Don't look for the Green Line," Elad said of the armistice border set after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. "You won't see it." We were in Palestine, but for all practical purposes we were not: the separation barrier weaves like a drunken squiggle, moving back and forth over the Green Line.

With our Israeli license plates we sailed through the checkpoint the Abu-Qbeitas must pass to get in and out of their home.

The Israeli settlement of Metzadot Yehuda has encroached right up to their property line, backed up against the fence. Last January settlers threw rocks that broke some of the solar panels Comet had put up. The culprits were kids, Mahmoud Abu-Qbeita told me in simple English, while troubling a string of prayer beads in his hands outside the community's electricity shed. What he didn't mention was that his son Osama had been struck in the head by one of the rocks. Elad was checking the copper coils of the transformer in the shed for heat loss. He reported that the damaged solar panels weren't producing as much energy as he'd hoped. While he continued to check the system for flaws, Mahmoud and I talked on his terrace.

I felt saddened by the poverty of our surroundings. An oil drum filled with trash. An upended rusty grocery cart. Plastic jugs. A deflated soccer ball. A blue wash bucket. Astroturf. Ramadan lights strung in a thirsty-looking fig tree. Squint, and we might have been in an Appalachian trailer park. By contrast, the settlement on the other side of the fence looked like a well-serviced Floridian retirement community. Mahmoud and I sat

on the back seat of a car being used as lawn furniture and contemplated the sunbaked hills.

Mahmoud is a shepherd in his late fifties. Like others, he, too, complained about the lack of access to his grazing area and to water. But for him, the occupation's biggest aggravation was the checkpoint—the daily indignity of having to show a permit to go anywhere or to come back again. The Kafkaesque procedure wore on him. It could take fifteen minutes or three hours to pass, he said, depending on the whims of the soldiers on duty. There were over a hundred different categories of permits. A permit to go to the doctor, to the mosque, to study, to visit family. Different permits for women, for men, for the elderly, for the youth. A separate permit for your tractor, for your goats. They could take your permit, if they wanted to, without explanation, because bureaucratic evil is random.

“This racist treatment angers me most for my children. I worry how it will affect them,” Mahmoud said soberly. As the mother of black children in America, I thought I knew what he meant. I worried about how structural racism would screw with my own kids’

A caravan of camels searches for water in the South Hebron Hills. The region receives less than nine inches of rain each year.



heads—how, in all likelihood, it had screwed with them already.

Mahmoud is the father to seven sons and five daughters. The youngest boy is three and the oldest has a child of his own. The children must go through the checkpoint every school day, their backpacks searched for weapons by soldiers. Those under twelve have no memory of moving through the world without being patted down. Mahmoud has taught them how to be polite, to comply with “the law” so that they don’t get hurt, just as my husband and I will soon enough teach ours. Mahmoud’s children have noticed that the settlers pass freely, without ever being checked. Mahmoud indicated the place where he wished to build a house for his son Bilal, twenty-three, who was recently married. But Mahmoud was ordered to stop building or the structure would be demolished. He didn’t even bother to apply for a permit. It would only be denied, or lost in the Civil Administration’s confounding bureaucratic pipeline.

“Did Bilal decide to leave after that?” I asked.

“No,” he said. Mahmoud was adamant. “Others have left for Yatta. But not my family. We’re staying right here.”

I admit I found the man’s obstinacy distasteful. Why would anyone willfully choose amputated possibility, jeopardy, squalor, the short end of the stick? By this point, I’d made the requisite occupation-trauma-tour stops. I’d been to the Qalandia checkpoint, where Palestinian men crossing the border into West Jerusalem to perform cheap labor are forced to wait in line for hours to show their permits, herded like cattle through cages topped with concertina wire. I’d been to a casbah in Hebron where market sellers attempt to protect their wares with a canopy of mesh from the spoiled eggs, urine, bleach, and trash hurled from the settler buildings above. I’d visited the home of a man in Nabi Saleh who kept on his coffee table the tear-gas canister that exploded in his brother-in-law’s face, killing him. If I’m honest, what I really wanted to ask Mahmoud as we sat on his dismal veranda was this: Why the hell would you raise your children here?

Though it was a version of a question I sometimes asked myself, I stopped short of putting it to him. I recognized the privilege in my judgment. I couldn’t presuppose he had the freedom or luxury to find a better place to go. Instead, I asked him warily if he was talking about *sumud*—the word for steadfastness used by the mother I’d met in Susiya.

Mahmoud confirmed it was *sumud* that made him stay, but not only that. It was also that he loved his land. “Look,” said the patriarch, sweeping his arm grandly over the view. I still couldn’t see it, the beauty of the South Hebron Hills that he and Ahmad referred to. Maybe I was too distracted by the threat of the settlement just over the fence line, or troubled by the attacks, or drained by all I’d witnessed that week. Maybe I was dehydrated, or lost, or helpless, or homesick, but all I felt in that moment was bleak.

“Do you actually believe the occupation will end in your children’s lifetime?” I asked.

“I doubt it,” shrugged Mahmoud. “But we’re staying.”

Three of his sons had come out to play. What a consolation that in every far-flung corner of this fallen world children discover ways to play, and in so doing lift it up again. The boys climbed onto an old red motorcycle parked in the yard next to the electricity shed, where Elad continued industriously checking the power. The vehicle was pointed in the direction of the chain link fence. Its dusty seat was ripped. Its kickstand sank into the soil so that it leaned heavily to the side. The oldest child sat listlessly in the seat, staring straight ahead at the settlement. The middle child pulled the throttle, pretending to drive while making a motor sound with his lips. The littlest child flipped the useless engine switch. In his hand he held a stick as an imaginary tool. I saw what he was doing with it and smiled in spite of myself. Admirably, heartbreakingly, he meant to fix the broken thing. And who was I to think he couldn’t? 🐾

Whereas I did not desire

WHEREAS I did not desire in childhood to be a part of this but desired most of all to be a part. A piece combined with others to make up a whole. Some but not all of something. In Lakota it’s *onspa*, a piece or part of anything. Like the creek trickling behind my aunt’s house where Uncle built her a bridge to cross from bank to bank, not far from a grassy clearing with three tipis, a place to gather. She holds three-day workshops on traditional arts, young people from Kyle and Potato Creek arrive one by one eager to *participate*. They have the option my auntie says to sleep at home and return in the morning but by and large they’ll stay and camp even during South Dakota winters. The comfort of being together. I think of Plains winds snow drifts ice and limbs the exposure and when I slide my arms into a wool coat and put my hand to the door knob, ready to brave the sub-zero dark, someone says be careful out there always consider the snow your friend. Think badly of it, snow will burn you. I walk out remembering that for millennia we have called ourselves Lakota meaning friend or ally. This relationship to the other. Some but not all, yet our piece connecting;

— Layli Long Soldier