

PALESTINE 10 Dec 2009

## What Did The Palestinian Say To The Policeman?

By Liz Galinovic

**Before Liz Galinovic travelled through Palestine, she didn't expect to find the locals laughing**

It's 10pm on a Wednesday in Beit Sahour, a small town in the West Bank not far from Bethlehem. Two Palestinians offer to show me a place where we can chat over a few beers. We turn left onto a dirt road and bump along into a darkness that reveals only faintly the shape of rubble formations along the side.

The place is Oush Grab, a stretch of land formerly occupied by an Israeli army base. Years of negotiations finally resulted in the Israeli government handing the land over to the Beit Sahour municipality. The municipality embarked on an ambitious project to transform much of the land into an attractive recreation area for young people and families.

"See up there ... see that fire? That's the Israelis."

About 20 metres from the side of the road perched on the top of a small hill is a square concrete building in complete darkness. Complete darkness, that is, aside from the large fire burning ominously on the roof. Lashing viciously at the sky, a companion explains the fire is a warning. "To let us know, 'we are here and we are watching you'."

This is the first clear indication that there's an Israeli military presence around Beit Sahour in the several days since I've arrived. This country, despite its pretty face, does not allow you to forget its problems for long. It's a reminder which has the desired effect on the mood of my local companions as we now bounce along the bumpy road in silence.

We are stopped at the entrance to a car park and a man leans down to speak to the driver. A barrage of jovial laughter follows. All three exchange rapid-fire sentences in Arabic that produce yet more laughter. I ask to be let in on the joke.

"We have to pay to get in," my friend says nonchalantly. What's so funny about a door charge?

"It's not really a door charge," he says. "They are collecting money to build a proper road over the one we just drove down. The funny thing is they've been collecting money for two years for nothing because the Israelis won't let them build a road."

And they all start laughing again. But I can't help thinking, that's not funny.

This is my introduction to the Palestinian sense of humour, a formidable characteristic of this proud and hospitable people. In this land, everyone has a story to tell. Sad, terrifying, humiliating tales while away hours. But it is amazing how many stories end with a punch line and a volley of laughter.

"One night I was driving home from work and I passed a house where the Israeli soldiers were arresting a woman for terrorism or something." The narrator waves his hand over the reference to terrorism as though it's not an important part of the story. "The soldiers stop me and take me out of my car. A girl about 19, ties my arms behind my back, she ties my legs together, blindfolds me and makes me sit down. So I sit there waiting, wondering what they will do to me. After an hour, a Palestinian comes up to me and asks me what I am doing!" The listeners slap their thighs vigorously.

A man is dragged from his car by soldiers, tied up, blindfolded, left there in fear for no reason other than being Palestinian in the wrong place at the wrong time and they think it's hilarious.

These jokes extend across Palestinian life; their own government and law enforcement providing ample opportunity for light relief. "Shit! Everyone! It's the Palestinian Police," a friend exclaims one evening as we drive to the Dead Sea. The car's passengers turn rigid for a moment and I begin to feel a heat wave climbing up my throat. Ten seconds later everyone collapses into laughter. "Don't worry about the Palestinian Police," they laugh, "these people are idiots."



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Liz Galinovic is a freelance writer with a degree in Middle Eastern Politics and Cultural Studies. She travelled solo through Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian territories to see with her own eyes what she had only read in books and seen on television. Her arts, entertainment and satire pieces are published regularly in the street press of Australia's capital cities.

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The approaching Israeli checkpoint does not get the same response. Four people in a brand new flashy car taking an evening drive immediately tense up as the approaching white and blue flag billows in the wind. It's interesting to watch slack spines straighten as if yanked by a magnetic force.

The car stops and lowers its windows so that the three young soldiers can see inside. In Hebrew, the two groups engage in what seems to be a playful conversation — with smarmy undertones. It seems friendly enough but the fact that the soldiers want to know whether we are Muslim or Christian reveals the ugly reality of the confused and threatening nature of this country's confused and threatened society. "Neither," a friend responds, "I'm a communist." The soldier smiles with mild confusion but the Palestinians burst out laughing.

There has been talk about introducing GPS tracking systems into the cars of Palestinian people, a concept many find hilarious. One man performed a GPS impersonation to his own delight and that of his friends. "What will it say? 'You want to go to Jerusalem. Do you have an Israeli or Palestinian ID card? You have a Palestinian ID card. Don't waste your time, turn around and go home now.'"

Palestine is a fabulous place to visit. The landscape is breathtaking and anyone who grew up on Bible stories will find it hard to suppress the flutter in their hearts as they look out over the mountainous panoramas. You can — almost — get around without noticing anything but the beauty of the land and its friendly inhabitants. However, just as you are beginning to wonder what all the media noise has been about, someone points an AK47 at you as you wander through a market place.

Defiantly, the Palestinian people manage to keep laughing. They are proud of who they are and will welcome you with generosity and hospitality. And with characteristic good humour they will continue to laugh at themselves. It is their medicine.

An old Palestinian joke goes like this:

When the End of Days comes, Allah, examining his domain for a place for the Palestinians, instructs his second in command to place them in heaven.


"But Allah, heaven is full."

Allah contemplates this for a moment before declaring, flippantly, to place them in hell.




"But Allah, hell is also full."

"Argh," grumbles Allah, "Then build them a refugee camp in between."

And the laughter breaks out again.

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