

PETER LAGERQUIST

## RAMALLAH DAYS

ON JANUARY 29th this year a roadside brawl between a butcher from Ramallah and two youths from the nearby refugee camp of Kalandia degenerated into a brief torrent of violence. What began with a murder ended in two days of ostensibly sectarian thuggery—the butcher happened to be Christian and the youths Muslim. The real significance of the affair, however, is the way it has thrown into sharp relief both the growing socio-economic faultlines within this embattled society and the tenuous nature of the authority that Arafat's government wields, even in its seat of power.

Tempers tend to run high at the chaotic traffic intersection that straddles the main road between Jerusalem and Ramallah outside Kalandia camp. Hundreds of Palestinian cars and trucks throng here every day, jockeying for space and a chance to pass through a heavily fortified Israeli checkpoint. Quarrels and minor scuffles are not infrequent, and there is seemingly little to contain them. The Palestinian police are not allowed to operate in this part of the Ramallah–Jerusalem corridor and, beyond the perimeter of their checkpoint, the Israeli soldiers are at best indifferent to the chaos they have created. Yet on most days, an order within disorder reigns here. Taxi drivers who ferry people to and from the checkpoint operate a ranking system, letting those who have waited the longest get first pick of passengers; truckers take turns fitting their lorries into the mêlée and—with an attitude that mixes resignation with customary Arab politeness—drivers cede their place in line to those employing the most outrageous circumventing tactics. The 'line' is, in any case, at best an indistinct concept at Kalandia, held together largely

by accumulated familiarity among people who struggle daily under miserable circumstances just—literally—to get through.

In many ways, it is a microcosm of Palestinian society under Israeli occupation: chaotic and occasionally violent—the violence in some cases significant but often petty—with neither the Palestinian Authority nor the Israeli army wielding much effective authority, when it matters; yet people try to carry on and somehow manage, most days, to hold things together. Ties other than those of officialdom bind them in this pressure-cooker environment. Yet when familiarity attenuates, the tensions built up during seventeen months of violent deprivation can find disastrous expression—as happened on January 29th, exposing overnight the frailty of an order presided over only in name by the Palestinian Authority.

Unofficially, the story is as follows: Hani Salami, a butcher who ran a small store in Ramallah, got into an argument at the traffic intersection with two young men from Kalandia. In the heat of the brawl, Salami produced a knife and one youth was killed instantly, his throat cut. Rumour has it that the boy had taken a metal pipe to the butcher but, as with many of the details surrounding the episode and its aftermath, this is still the subject of debate. What is certain is that the other youth was taken to a Ramallah hospital in a critical condition; and that, as Salami and his family handed themselves in to the local Palestinian authorities, the murdered man's friends and relatives from Kalandia exacted their own revenge, first burning the butcher's house and shop, and then running riot through downtown Ramallah, smashing shops and cafés, many but not all of which were Christian. An assault against a local church was reportedly averted only through the rapid intercession of a cleric from Hamas.

### *Arafat's embarrassments*

These events have already become legend among Ramallah residents, although the Palestinian press, while showering the incident in anodyne affirmations of religious harmony, has skirted its many other implications. The violence was certainly an embarrassment to the Palestinian Authority, for whom sectarianism remains a sensitive issue, particularly during this fractious period. Arafat has always staunchly upheld his status as the leader of a historically secular nationalist movement, courting Christian institutions in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and

encouraging references to the fact that his wife Suha, the First Lady of the Palestinians, is a Christian. So far, he has been largely successful; yet in the context of the growing lawlessness that has enveloped Palestinian society during the Intifada, family and village conflicts are frequent, and sometimes they erupt along sectarian lines. Many local Christians express feelings of insecurity as members of an ever-shrinking minority in a place where militant groups and gangs operate out of sight of the central authority.

Not surprisingly, these insecurities have multiplied over the past weeks. Word has it that on the night of the riot, the mostly Christian residents of the nearby village of Bir Zeit—the butcher's hometown—took to their rooftops with what guns they could find, nervously awaiting the arrival of youths from Kalandia. As it turned out, the violence reaped only one more victim in the ensuing days: the butcher's elderly father, who died of a heart attack upon learning that his son had become a murderer, and his family the quarry of a rioting mob. The reluctance of Palestinian officialdom and newspapers to debate these fears openly aroused suspicion among some local Christians. There may, indeed, be a certain defensiveness about washing the dirty laundry of domestic politics under the eyes of the Western media: Israeli government spokesmen and newspapers have a habit of highlighting purportedly sectarian tensions in the nearby Palestinian town of Bethlehem.

But this is not the end of it. It is widely acknowledged that the Palestinian police failed to intervene in the destruction; one rumour holds that a local senior police commander with ties to Kalandia actually gave his tacit approval to the incursion, allowing the rioters to pass police barricades on the road leading up to Ramallah from the camp. Many Christians heard this with a mixture of anxiety and confusion, which only deepened when it later emerged that a number of the people involved were local recruits of the Palestinian security forces—a complication that has proved doubly embarrassing for Arafat. But if the violence has starkly revealed the limits of his authority, even in Ramallah, it more fundamentally exposes the PA's inability to deal with the economic and political frustrations that have accumulated over the course of the Intifada. Arafat's already much mistrusted government has grown increasingly remote from its constituencies over the past year—and especially from the embattled refugee population. Most Palestinians seek justice anywhere but with the PA, if they can—even when they

themselves formally belong to it. And when the band from Kalandia wreaked their own form of retribution on the streets, it was along the broadest possible lines—the deep well of socio-economic difference here laced with a sectarian streak.

Sectarian identity as such is not generally pronounced among the Palestinian elite and middle classes; but the common—primarily national—identity that they do share is one that is also determined by professional or class affiliations: the people they know are those they went to school with, work with, meet at cafés. As the Palestinian economy has crumbled under the weight of Israeli closures, socio-economic differences have drastically widened. On the one hand this is illustrated by a growing gap between the poorer working population, who—in some of the predominantly Christian areas of Ramallah in particular—tend to be more strongly organized around communitarian identities, and the remaining middle classes and elites. On the other hand, there is an even starker gulf between the urban centres of the West Bank and the adjacent refugee camps that de facto compose their slums.

### *Ostentation and hardship*

The contrast between the haves and have-nots is perhaps nowhere as visible as around the traditionally Christian city of Ramallah. Seemingly unimpeded by the hardships of the Intifada, an elite continues to live relatively ostentatiously in this city, which became infamous during the years of the Oslo process for its cosmopolitan and freewheeling lifestyle. A cluster of upscale restaurants and cafés still boom with activity every weeknight. The place to be nowadays—a breezy restaurant named Sangria's—opened during the Intifada. Its regular patrons include local businessmen as well as PA and NGO officials; and, while people from both the major Palestinian faiths are represented, Christians are prominent among them—if for no other reason than the fact that they comprise a disproportionate share of the Ramallah middle class. Sangria is hardly a fount of wealth by international standards, but it is the relative term that matters here.

The Kalandia refugee camp, barely ten minutes' drive to the south, has grown so remote from Ramallah since the eruption of the Intifada as to constitute a different world altogether. A few better-off residents built limestone villas on its edges during the Oslo years, but these hide

a poor, jumbled interior of crowded concrete tenements and narrow alleys. There are no glitzy restaurants here. Unemployment and poverty are rife—most of the local men who worked in Israel prior to the Intifada have lost their jobs because of the military blockade. Many families are dependent on work and handouts provided by the UN Relief and Works Agency, which administers the camp on a perpetually bare-bones budget. Because of its proximity to the Israeli checkpoint, Kalandia has also seen a disproportionate number of its population killed or wounded by Israeli soldiers. Twelve deaths and some 700 injuries since the Intifada began make Kalandia's casualty rate among the highest of West Bank refugee camps—at least up to the start of Israel's offensive in the territories this March.

Kalandia has a schizophrenic relationship with the Palestinian Authority. The camp is a stronghold of grassroots elements within Arafat's own faction, Fatah, and has provided numerous recruits for the Authority's security forces. Yet in many other ways it has little to do with Arafat's government. The Israeli army is responsible for security in the zone—designated Area B in the Oslo accords. Joint patrols with the PA took place before the Intifada, but no more. The residents have little love for the formal apparatus of their government, which they feel treats them with a mixture of indifference and condescension; as elsewhere in the Palestinian territories, it is widely despised for its brutality and greed. The Palestinian proto-state provides them with virtually no services, nor does it allow them to be represented in local municipal elections. Official PLO doctrine, as marketed domestically, holds that, until all refugees are accorded the right to return to their former villages in what is today Israel, the camp-dwellers remain the responsibility of UNRWA. To absorb them into local society, asserts the PA, would be to betray the refugee cause.

Yet the refugees themselves have long suspected that this is precisely what Arafat has always intended to do. Conciliatory pronouncements assuring the West of the PA's willingness to be 'flexible' in the implementation of the right of return provoke alarm and outrage in Kalandia. Its residents interpret this language, heard frequently around the time of the Camp David negotiations, as a creeping renunciation of their rights. The camp's crumbling walls are covered with defiant graffiti warning anyone who cares to read that 'Return is an Inalienable Right' and citing UN Resolution 194, which enshrines it in international law.

Marginalized economically, politically and legally, with a future neither in the past nor the present, Kalandia's residents feel they have been abandoned not only by the UN but also by the one government that claims to represent them. The writing on the wall can be read as an open letter to those who play with Kalandia's fate, coded back in their own language.

In many ways the same could be said for the riot of January 29th. Certainly, the tall young man who stormed up the stairs of Ziryab Gallery on that evening seemed furiously intent on making a point. Ziryab is a relatively modest café-cum-art gallery owned by local Palestinian artist Tayseer Barakat, and is known to serve beer and host an eclectic mix of liberal patrons; that evening it lay in the path of destruction blazed by the men from Kalandia. Two of them burst through the door in the early hours of the evening, one brandishing a long wooden stick. He halted for a few seconds, taking in the dimly lit tables and bottles. Then he launched into the room, smashing windows, pots and dangling papier-mâché lamps with desperate blows.

### *Anger of the camps*

There was a sense of bewilderment in the assault. Remonstrating, two waiters managed to calm him down momentarily and asked for an explanation. The young man replied in short, pained sentences, shaking his head violently. It looked as if he might have been crying. With a shrug he then plunged further into the room, and took a few more vicious swipes at the remaining windows and tables. Mustering some combination of intimidation and reason, the staff finally pushed him out. Every window had been broken by then, and all but a few of the half dozen guests had fled. A chic handbag lay overturned on the floor, spilling its contents. Stranded in the devastation, an agitated waiter tersely recapped the argument with a sentiment that seemed to encompass both himself and the assailant: 'He's angry. There are no civil rights here!'

He didn't say whose rights. And ironically, in the heat of retribution, the fact that Barakat is a Muslim appeared to have made little difference to the angry youth from Kalandia. In fact, whatever its religious or sectarian nature, the violence seemed to have been directed primarily at any symbol of Ramallah privilege that crossed the path of the refugees. The downtown shopkeepers certainly took no chances second-guessing their motives. Within minutes of the first news of trouble, the commercial

centre of the town had been shuttered. The police, meanwhile, were not just late in responding—they never arrived. In the immediate aftermath of the violence it was difficult to spot a single blue uniform in downtown Ramallah. Instead, a few units from Arafat's presidential guard, Force 17, were dispatched to a few targeted shops, along with members of his largest security apparatus, the Preventive Security services. Ironically, as was later established, some of the people who had participated in the riot had in fact been members of these forces.

If Arafat's gesture sought to emphasize his personal commitment to the protection of inter-sectarian order, its effect was also to offer stark proof of the growing ineffectiveness of the PA's authority in Palestinian society. Before the Intifada, occasional fights waged between neighbouring village youths in downtown Ramallah used to bring the PA onto the street in force—with the police and as many as two or three security forces (Arafat has a total of thirteen at his disposal) congregating rapidly at the site of trouble. Such massive shows of force have since become rare, in part because they are dangerous. Overt popular defiance of the PA has grown more common, particularly following its crackdown on local militant groups after September 11. When the PA shot dead three Hamas sympathizers at a Gaza demonstration late last year it drew tremendous criticism from within its own ranks. These have, in semi-private capacities, increasingly joined the armed militias operating in the West Bank. In this capacity their adherence to official PA policy and dictates often wears thin—much like Kalandia itself.

In Ramallah, there is still simmering discontent with the PA's jailing of the general secretary of the PFLP, a Marxist-Leninist faction within the PLO that took responsibility for the assassination of the right-extremist Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi, in a tit-for-tat response to Israel's assassination of one of its own leaders a few weeks before. Long politically marginal, the PFLP has boosted its credibility during the Intifada by overtly joining the armed resistance against Israeli occupation. The PA's credibility meanwhile has waned steadily even as Fatah's own military wing has become increasingly active. In addition to being perceived as feeble and irresolute, Arafat's government continues to be dogged by charges of corruption, bolstered by the relative privilege that its senior officials continue to enjoy in Ramallah.

To the most marginal segments of Palestinian society—the refugee camps politically the most prominent among them—these are signs of a government both indifferent to their needs and brazenly enriching itself at their expense. Their alienation found an easy outlet: during the first month of the Intifada, a number of liquor stores were attacked in Gaza—all owned by Christians. Premonitory of recent events in Ramallah, this was seen largely as a rebuke to the world of privilege and hedonism that the PLO's senior cadres imported into the impoverished Strip during the Oslo peace process. Indeed, alcohol again became the target for Kalandia's wrath on the day after the riot. Prevented by police barricades from entering the city in force, they instead attempted to burn an arak factory on the outskirts of town.

This turned out to be the last of the trouble. A large demonstration held the next day after Friday prayers made a point of stressing Palestinian national unity and religious harmony, with local Hamas and Islamic Jihad members being particularly vocal on this point. Israeli assaults on Ramallah and its environs continued but the ensuing weeks have been quiet on the domestic front, reserved mostly for more debate and rumour-mongering. Much of the damage has already been repaired—shop windows replaced, smashed interiors cleared away. On that very weekend, Sangria had its busiest night in months, booming out disco music into the small hours of Sunday morning. As they get on with their lives, most Ramallah residents, whether Christian or Muslim, would probably rather agree to forget the incident as quickly as possible. Yet the divides that it briefly exposed run not through this relatively well-off town on the hill, but between it and the huddled masses below, over whom Ramallah and the PA float like the tip of a sinking iceberg.

---

Other articles in this series include Georgi Derluguian, 'A Tale of Two Cities' (NLR 3); Yang Lian, 'Return to Beijing' (NLR 4); Robert Wade, 'Showdown at the World Bank' (NLR 7); and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'America in East Asia' (NLR 12).