

After the assault: Report from the Jenin Camp

by [Marthame and Elizabeth Sanders](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

Jenin—the name comes from the Arabic and Hebrew words for “garden.” As Moses was leading his people across the Jordanian desert, no doubt they dreamed of a place like this—green and fertile in the springtime, a place where olive and almond trees proliferate. The Palestinians who live in the refugee camp in Jenin have now been refugees longer than the Israelites wandered in the desert.

In early April the Israeli army entered Jenin Camp with tanks, armored personnel carriers, bulldozers, infantry and attack helicopters. After a week of fierce fighting and a week of “mopping up,” they left, having tackled the “terrorist infrastructure” to their satisfaction. They left behind a trail of destruction and a multitude of questions.

After the army left, we went to the camp with students from the Arab-American University of Jenin to help translate for journalists and aid workers. The city of Jenin bears the marks of war—lampposts and utility poles hunched over at distressing angles; crushed, burned-out cars. Barely a wall stands that doesn’t bear some hint of the utter devastation.

We had visited Jenin Camp before, in March, and had seen a makeshift grave at the entrance to the camp. Six young men had been killed, but because the route to the cemetery was dangerous, they had been buried in a traffic circle. Young people from the Palestinian Christian village we call home had visited Jenin to bring candles to the mothers of the camp’s *shaheeds*, the national martyrs. These days, Palestinian make little distinction between those who went off to Haifa with explosives and small bits of metal strapped to their bodies, those killed defending their town from invasion, and those who put themselves within range of a sniper as they leaned out of a window to get better reception on their cell phones. All are *shaheeds*, and posters of them plaster the walls of the West Bank and Gaza.

The first thing we noticed on entering the camp is that the makeshift graves are gone—bulldozer and tank treads cover them, the bodies missing. Nearly every home in the camp has been affected. The walls that face the main street have been sheered off to make room for the tanks.

The stadium-sized heart of the camp is now a moonscape of cement, steel bars, and remains of clothes, dishes, furniture and toys. Chunks of concrete hang from the perimeter buildings like freeze-frame snowflakes. On the second story, families sit and drink tea, looking at the destruction below, the walls of their homes gone. Life must continue. Meanwhile, the 800 families whose homes were at the epicenter of this destruction have nothing left but bits and scraps. Here and there, we see an odd item—a child's toy, a broken piece of furniture, a baby stroller, a strip of clothing. Bulldozers move here and there, digging at the earth. Children play. Adults—most of them older people—pick with their hands through the grit of their former homes. Some stare down through the wreckage into their second-story apartments, hoping to find something.

Medical volunteers wearing latex gloves and paper masks sift through the dust. They pick up parts of bodies and carry them to a plastic body bag. The smell of death is inescapable.

Apart from the dust, you immediately notice the silence. Arab culture is not quiet. Sounds fill the towns and villages—from the mosque's call to prayer to the church bells to the hawking of *souq* vendors. Arabs are proud of their noise. But there is little of it here—a sign partly of reverence, partly of shock, partly of anger.

We stop with a journalist to interview Laila, 15, whose family members were holed up in one room for a week as the Israeli army set up a base in their house. Most of the damage done to them—they live on the perimeter—ironically is from Palestinians firing at the Israelis. They talk of the moment when they left the house after a week in close quarters. "Like new life," says Laila's father. But it was an ephemeral emotion. They saw the kindergarten he used to run turned to twisted metal and powder. Bullet holes punctuate murals of children at play. Laila has kept a journal since day one of the Al-Aqsa intifada. Her thoughts are noticeable for their total lack of emotion or feeling. To live here is to cope, and to cope is to go numb.

Most of Jenin Camp's residents originally lived in villages near Haifa. In 1948 they, and more than 700,000 others, were driven out of their villages and cities. Many

spent the next several years wandering, not permitted to return home to what became Israel, and not especially welcomed by neighboring Arab states. The United Nations stepped in to create the camp near Jenin and others like it, providing tents to house the refugees. In the late '50s and early '60s, residents began to build more permanent structures, usually one-story mud homes. Over the decades, these mud huts have become several-story cement and corrugated tin complexes, bursting at the seams to accommodate the growing population.

Refugees who remember their pre-1948 villages remember them as gardens and paradises. After an earlier Israeli invasion into Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus, we spoke with an old man, his house in ruins, about his old home, now subsumed by Tel Aviv's suburban sprawl. His eyes lit up. "Watermelons," he said, stretching out his hands as far as they would go, "Like this! And when you cut them open, 'Yea, Lord' was written on the seeds. I swear!" His tale is familiar—the taste of the strawberries, the size of the tomatoes, the number of sheep and camels and goats are vividly evoked by the refugees. The memories have grown into legends, describing an Edenic paradise for which they yearn.

For 50 years, those who left their homes—joined now by their descendants—have been playing that fateful moment of flight over and over again in their heads. Amidst the crowded squalor of the camp, these memories are the hope to which they cling.

Israel has refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing in creating the problem. For refugees in the West Bank and Gaza, the 1967 war brought even more hardship and denial of their human rights, as Israel's illegal occupation of Arab lands began. The camps were centers of fierce resistance to the occupation during the first intifada (1987-1993). The Israeli army encircled Dheisheh Camp, near Bethlehem, with a tall fence with only one gate, where soldiers required papers from anyone wanting to enter or exit. Israel turned the camp into a West Bank ghetto.

The arrival of the Palestinian Authority initially brought high hopes, but as the Oslo process languished, it was clear that the PA provided a lot of talk, a little infrastructure and very little improvement in living conditions. As the talks continued and as both parties looked to push the "right of return" off the negotiating table, refugees and their descendants lost hope that their squalid living conditions would improve. This hopelessness and anger became a breeding ground for military wings of political parties such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Recently, most suicide bombers have come from the camps, and Jenin was no exception.

What is certain now, as you view the center of the destruction in the Jenin Camp, is that something is buried beneath the rubble—perhaps corpses and explosives, but also the dreams and hopes that two peoples can live together. The folly of trusting in military solutions becomes painfully obvious.

In Jenin people are trying simply to sort out what happened and what will happen. They are trying to survive, to find their relatives and count their dead. But calls for revenge are being heard from amidst the wreckage. When people have nothing to live for, they can easily find something for which to die.