

Numb about Israel: The invasion of Bethlehem

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

It may have been just a coincidence that the Israeli army invaded the grounds of a Christian-run school in Bethlehem while the American media were focusing their attention on the six-month anniversary of September 11. Or maybe it wasn't a coincidence. Maybe it was another shrewd calculation by a government that knows how easy it is to manipulate American media, especially now that the media have agreed that the world is divided neatly between good and evil.

Whether by coincidence or through careful timing, the military occupation of the Lutheran Christmas Church's Dar al-Kalima Model School suggests that after years of media and political conditioning in favor of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, the American public will even tolerate attacks on Christian institutions in the town where Jesus was born.

After the Israeli army occupied the grounds of Dar al-Kalima as part of its sweep into Bethlehem, Mitri Raheb, who is pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church and general director of the International Center of Bethlehem, attempted to reach the school along with the director of Lutheran schools, Viola Rahib. As they approached the school, the officials were shocked to see that Bethlehem's only "highway," the Jerusalem-Hebron road, was torn up by deep trenches made by Israeli bulldozers.

The Israeli military forces [had] destroyed all access roads and dug deep trenches . . . We are afraid that the Israeli army may use the school as a detention camp for the hundreds of civilians that it has and continues to round up from the neighboring Deheisha Refugee Camp and surrounding villages. . . . As no one is allowed to get close to the site, we do not as yet have a full picture of what is going on . . .

The invasion of Bethlehem brings to my mind the case of the frog in hot water: put a frog into hot water and it will jump, but put the same frog in cool water and gradually turn up the heat, and the frog will adjust to the heat until the water boils. If

you had told the American public 35 years ago that hundreds of Palestinian young men would be rounded up at gunpoint in crowded refugee camps, that they would be blindfolded, stripped and arrested, and that the scenes would be displayed on Arab television for their families to see, the American public would have hopped right out of that hot water with questions of why and how. What has caused the American public to go numb? Why can we no longer see or feel the harsh reality of occupation? Why have we let the water reach the boiling point?

The answer is perspective. The Americans view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a pro-Western perspective that assumes Israelis are good guys who have to do what they have to do. Columbia University professor Edward Said calls this view "Orientalism," the study of non-Western cultures entirely from a Western perspective. Orientalism treats the non-Western world as exotic, dangerous and inherently inferior to the culture of the West.

Although the term is now out of favor, American scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington continue focusing on the exotic and dangerous "otherness" of non-Western nations when they write about the conflict between the West and Islam as a "clash of civilizations." The attacks of September 11 have provided Lewis and Huntington with a convenient template. They and their allies among conservative columnists and other academics can divide the world between the good guys and bad guys, and between good nations and evil nations.

This is a dangerous way for nations to behave. The "Orient" is not inferior to the West, and the West does not have a monopoly on goodness. All people share the same desire for freedom and the right to follow a religious perspective that gives life meaning. Military occupation and military power that assume a moral superiority are deadly delusions. Strong nations are dangerous when they believe that because they are strong, they are superior. But there is a hidden strength in those who will no longer tolerate their lack of freedom, who demand the right to decent treatment, the right to protect their children from military raids in the nighttime and to save them from death from snipers in the daylight.

Occupation is inherently immoral and degrading to both those who occupy and those who are occupied. This is why Palestinians continue to reach out to Israelis and to the Western world with the simple message: Occupation must end. Ghassan Andoni, director of the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement, recently released an open letter to the Israeli public:

Do you still remember what you did when we were quiet, [we] did not resist, [we] appealed with sad eyes to the human inside you and the “good will” of the world? I am sure you do [remember]. . . . What you cannot understand is: you cannot kill the hope and steal the future of a proud nation and expect them to be thankful. No matter how much you are drunk with power, you can never win this war. . . . If we stay quiet you squeeze more and if we resist you do the same. What did you think this would lead us to? The only possible way open to us was to escalate resistance. When you totally close the door for hope and when you blindly increase the brutality of your occupation, you create the foundations for an open war. This was the mistake of all occupiers and it is yours as well.