



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'In Gaza, a nemesis of Hamas', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 17/06/06.

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All the American airports I have visited are similar. You are led off the plane and go downstairs, into a large windowless, stagnantly airless room on ground level, or perhaps below. The room is well lit, but the sensation of being so tightly sealed-in makes one feel how pitch black and suffocating it would be if the lights went out. There are several rows of parallel barriers through which the queue of bleary-eyed passengers slowly snakes in single file, until it bunches up before the customs booths. A slow, steady litany of rubber stamps crashing down upon paper, a sharp report that punctuates the steady grumble of noise in this place where people have to wait their turn patiently grinning and bearing their impatience, for one is always amiable in the presence of customs personnel. Thereafter, one enters a ceiling-less hall where one picks up one's baggage. It has a ceiling, of course, but this is lost in the blackness of ventilation ducts and ordinary ugliness hidden in the fathomless murk by the strong, downward lighting illuminating the bags whirling along the conveyors. One ducks and swings inwards to grab the handle and apologises to whichever fellow being one has inadvertently shoved from their catch. Then one looks ahead with supreme confidence as one walks under the green *Nothing to Declare* sign, through the grubby antechamber and past the apathetically Zen customs guards. The exit hall is invariably a low room, with banks of telephones and money changers and heavy duty WCs. At the further end the glass facade and untiring sliding doors vibrate to the endless comings and goings of taxi cabs on the road beyond.

When one leaves America, there is actually architecture, a secular cathedral of glass and high structure which takes one to the Duty Free. The loudspeakers warn you that the charitable organisations harassing you for money at the bottom of the escalators have no affiliation with the airport. One leaves America through a comfortable lounge, but one enters America through the basement.

In line before me was a Frenchwoman, talking with passion to a group of people. She was pulling large sheets of paper with black calligraphy from her bag, showing them. One of the papers dropped, and I leaned down, instinctively, to pick it up. It was covered with the word 'peace', written in many languages, it was very beautiful. And I knew who she was! An artist called Clara Halter who had made a work on the promenade at Armon Hanatziv in Jerusalem, facing the golden stone ramparts of the Old City. It was called the Tents of Peace, little structures covered with cloth printed with the word 'peace' in fifty languages. It had been part of a cultural season, a gift from France's Micky Mouse Foreign Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy. They had also organised a fireworks display off Tel Aviv Beach, that had caused the most monstrous traffic jam the city had ever known; everyone had come to see it. But the French had no similar largesse for the Palestinians. The Israeli Military were quick to oblige, though, organising their own fireworks display on Gaza Beach.

I wanted to ask Clara Halter if she had seen the Separation Wall from there; looking carefully one could pick out a short section amongst the Palestinian neighbourhoods it split in half. I wanted to ask her if she had walked across the Hill of Evil Council beyond the promenade, down into the annexed village of Jabel Mukaber, from where one might see the wall in all its glory. It must have got a dispensation from the planning authorities, because all construction in Jerusalem is sheathed with stone, but the wall is bare concrete. I wanted to ask her if she had travelled on the road from Jerusalem to Ramallah, to which the wall runs parallel, and upon which an anonymous engineer from the Public Works Department has also done some artwork, a *trompe l'oeil* of arches behind which blue sky and a virgin green field had been painted: no more Palestine, the people had volatilized. I wanted to tell her that both peoples consider themselves victims of the other, but that the symmetry ends there, for Israel is a sovereign state and Palestine is in a state of submission. That writing 'peace' in fifty languages in sight of the wall is vain when peace is unilateral and acts on the ground carry out dispossession.

I picked up the paper and handed it to her, I said 'Salaam Aleikum, Madame Halter'—'Peace be with you'. Her alarmed look changed to a smile, she thanked me. So much I desired to say, I felt as blunt as bricks. The queue was slowly absorbed. Clara Halter's passport was stamped and she disappeared.

The entry form was slowly crumpling in my grip, my Oslo passport somewhere in my bag, who knows where, everything had been thrown in. I thought of Maestro and his Google tee-shirt, the night before of a lifetime before. I recalled, now, the slogan it bore: 'Don't search. Find'. I thought of setting my bag down and digging for my passport, but the thought went away. I was going no further, there was no entry visa in my passport—the document invented by the Oslo Agreement for travelling Palestinians with the disclaimer that it in no way represents a nation. I would go before the customs personnel, hold up my palms, they would put me on the next flight back to Jerusalem.

I was before the customs officer. 'Your passport, sir.' I retrieved it. He inspected it a long while, I could hear him typing on a keyboard. He addressed me: 'Just a minute, sir'. He must have pressed a buzzer, suddenly I found myself wedged between four large, uniformed individuals.

The customs officer was talking into the phone. His face smirked. 'Hello, Homeland Security?' he asked, his eyes inspecting me with steady contempt. 'I think we've hooked a big one for you!'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Joseph Rabie.*